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Khachungla Tangvah
Research Scholar, Department of
Anthropology, North Eastern
Hills University, Shillong.

Religious beliefs and practices of the Pnars of Nangbah village in Jaintia Hills district, Meghalaya

Khachungla Tangvah

Abstract

Although religion takes, sometimes radically, different forms in different societies it can be said that all cultures known to man foster a belief in the supernatural. Thus religious beliefs and practices are believed to be present all over the world and in this paper I will look into the religious beliefs and practices among the matrilineal society of Jaintias, specifically in Nangbah village, which is one of the oldest settlements and also the biggest village in the Jaintia Hills district of Meghalaya. What makes this location particularly interesting for the study of religious beliefs and practices is the presence of both Christianity and Traditional religion, called Niamtre. Christianity, in turn, is further divided into different denominations present in the village. Indeed in this village, I find relatively large numbers of villagers practicing different rituals and fostering different religious beliefs yet living together in the same geographical area. The issue which I will address in this paper is the diversity of religious beliefs within the village and the different rituals and religious practices which are performed by different groups of people. The second issue of this paper is based on the fact that over the past hundred years Christianity has replaced the local religion, which is called Niamtre, the dominant religion in the research area and with this background an attempt has been made to look into the forces of change and continuity. Or in other words, what kind of changes in society, culture and customs have come together with the advent of Christianity in the region. In this study, Researcher also makes an endeavour to study on the mutual relations between them in the village.

Keywords: Advent of Christianity; Belief; Change and continuity; Christianity; Culture; God; Religion; Religious practices; Ritual; Traditional religion- Niamtre

1. Introduction

Although religion takes, sometimes radically, different forms in different societies it can be said that all cultures known to man foster a belief in the supernatural. This belief can take the form of a world-religion like Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism yet it may also be in the shape of what is usually called animism or traditional religion. All societies have something which anthropologists can identify as religion yet defining religion is very difficult because it is probably true that no single belief is shared by all people of the world. Despite this multiplicity of religious beliefs every culture has some kind of social structure or order that helps them to order their society and provides them with meaning, unity, peace of mind, and the degree of control over events they believe is possible.

Religion can be examined as a social thing with the society as its base. This experience than lead as to two things: first, a social group is symbolized by the ideas and practices, which are religious in nature and secondly the association as a group under the umbrella of ideas and practices that helps for an effective binding of a group socially. Thus, we can say that society harbours religion. Religion is concern with the supernatural dimension or force, places or any other sacred thing adhered by a group of people living society: that is a bridge between the ethereal and the real world. It is therefore more or less a coherent system of beliefs and practices. Such experiences as have been explained has the sacred aspects, which inculcate confidence, obtain sanction from the group for certain experiences and finally give birth to a religion. There are certain questions to which man has no answer. Moreover, there are certain troubles and contingencies that a man and group has to experience as a member of society. Religion, in many ways, can be said to be the result and the sum total of the successes met in the attempts to counter the contingencies. Religion is thus one aspect of society which is directed to fulfil all the meta-physical and spiritual dimensional needs and provide solution to all this problems and that is the reason why it is a central part of culture.

Religion is a part of life of all communities and it must be analysed in the backdrop of the environment in which the tribal communities lead their life. In tribal societies,

Correspondence:
Khachungla Tangvah
Research Scholar, Department
of Anthropology, North
Eastern Hills University,
Shillong.

Faith is both practical and strong. This is due to the reason they have many things at stake, as they live in the unpredictable atmosphere of nature. In addition, the resource and techniques they possess are quite inadequate to meet the contingencies of their life. This helpless situation tends to bend before the supernatural powers from which they can derive strength and assistance to tide them over the different period of life (Scharf, 1970).

Religion is regarded as one of the most important activities of man as a member of the society. E. B. Tylor (1871) in his *Primitive Culture*, defined religion as 'a belief in spirit being'. Radcliff Brown (1945) in religion and society, define religion as 'an expression in one form or another of a sense of dependence in a power outside ourselves, in a power of which we may speak as a spiritual or moral power'. For him, the crucial expression of this sense of dependence was ritual. Durkheim (1915), in his 'Elementary forms of Religious Life', defined religion as 'a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things', This is to say, things set apart and forbidden-beliefs and practices which unite into a single moral community called a church for all those who adhered to them (Scharf, 1970). According to Durkheim, society makes religion "God is Society" that religion has grow out of social experience of man. It is proceed as a byproduct religion beliefs and practices. Clifford Geertz's perception of religion is as depending on the peculiar characteristics of man as creature without clearly defined instinct, and with strong exploratory intelligence of how he sees religion as a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long lasting moods and motivation in man by formulating concepts of a general order of existence, and clothing these conceptions with such aura of factuality that the mood and motivation seems uniquely real (Geertz, 1973 and Scharf, 1970).

A central aspect of religion, either traditional or Christian is the practice of rituals. According to many theories, ritual usually involves different forms of action from everyday life. Within the context of Christianity, eating a piece of bread during Holy Communion is different eating bread at any other time of the day, the later is not a ritual whereas the former is considered as a ritual. Difference between them has to do with the meaning attached to it. There is assumed to be a purpose, function and a meaning behind ritual action (Mitchell, 2008:490). It is often argued that rituals are either "supporting social structure by directly representing it, or legitimizing social authority by concealing it. Thus ritual's social role is either to bolster, or conceal, the prevailing social order" (Ibid: 490). A Central theory in studies of rituals is Van Gennep's 'rite of passage' (1960). He distinguished three kinds of rites of passage: separation, transition and finally rites of incorporation. He argued that rites of separation are most important in funeral ceremonies that transition rites may be central in pregnancy, betrothal or initiation and those rites of incorporation often take prominence in marriage ceremonies (Barnard and Spencer, 2008:490).

When one explores the ethnographic literature on Meghalaya the first full fledge monograph seems to be the one written by Gurdon on the Khasi people. Gurdon book provides systematic account of the people of Khasi-Jaintia, their

manners and customs, their ethnological affinities, laws and institution, religious beliefs, folk-lore, theories as their origin and their language. The author described the religion of the people as animism or spirit-worship, or rather the propitiation of spirit both good and evil on certain occasions, principally in times of trouble. He writes that "the Khasis have a vague belief in a God of Creator, U Blei Nongthaw". Gurdon also commented on Christian conversions which according to him were a good thing. He writes very positively on those Khasi-Jaintias who have converted: 'Khasis of the interior who have adopted Christianity are generally cleaner in their persons than those of non-Christian' (Gurdon, 1907:6). Reviewing this book is an important source of getting ideas and information on Khasi-Jaintia's religious beliefs and practices. However we also have to be critical as Gurdon was not an anthropologist but an administrator and his views on the Khasi-Jaintias were probably not neutral but biased in favour of colonial rule and the work of Christian missionaries.

Christianity is the most intently missionary of the great world religion and that it has influenced the social and cultural lives of many of the people's anthropologists have studied. A lot has been written about conversions to Christianity and changes in the social structure and customs that have come along with it. Indeed the impact of missionaries on North-East in general terms but certainly also in Jaintia Hills is very significant. Together with colonial expansions came often the arrival of missionaries and they have been important parties in the encounter between the West and the people throughout the rest of the world. However many of the hill tribes were initially not interested in Christianity. Syiemlieh has written about the Seng Khasi who resisted the missionary activities in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. 'The Seng Khasi, which were witness to the jealous efforts of missionaries propagating the faith and were concerned that numbers of khasis were converted to Christianity. The Seng Khasi which remains an active religious group has over the years been able to retain the primal Khasi religion that most other tribes were not able to' (Syiemlieh, 2005:147). Syiemleah states further that Christianity has made a tremendous impact in North-East India.

2. Field Site

Religious beliefs and practices are thus believed to be present all over the world and this paper is an empirical study of religious beliefs and practices in the Jaintia Hills and specifically in Nangbah village, which is one of the oldest settlements of the district and also the biggest village in the Jaintia Hills district of Meghalaya. Nangbah village is situated in the district of Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya in North East India. It is 12kms north of Jowai town, the administrative headquarters of Jaintia Hills and 63kms south of Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya in India. It is a beautiful hill station with its green hills interspersed by terraced paddy fields and surrounded by the perennial Myntang River. The village is located on a semi-table land type, where from a peak, a bird's eye view of the village can be seen all through. There is a "stone-garden" known as *Iaw Musiang* which is beautifully situated right in the heart of the village. There monuments and monoliths are erected by the

village ancestors. This place has been a centre of traditional religious rites known as *Pam Iaw Musiang* which ought to be performed periodically by every *Dalloi* (Chief) who is the head of the institution (Traditional religion): not less than three times during once tenure. Though the origin of the village cannot be exactly trace yet it can be said that it is atleast as ancient as the existing monuments and monoliths itself. The present weekly market held in Jowai known as *Iaw Musiang* was originally held at this *Iaw Musiang* of Nangbah village.

The people of Jaintias are a matrilineal society. What makes this location particularly interesting for the study of religious beliefs and practices is the presence of both Christianity and Traditional religion, called Niamtre. Christianity, in turn, is further divided into different denominations present in the village. Indeed in this village, I find relatively large numbers of villagers practicing different rituals and fostering different religious beliefs yet living together in the same geographical area. The village is around 1100 households. Agriculture is the main source of income where rice is chiefly cultivated. Besides rice, potato, maize, beans, peas, cabbage, mustard leafs, chilli, pumpkin etc. are grown.

3. Niamtre (Traditional Religion)

Traditional religion is termed 'Niamtre' in local usage. The word 'Niam' means 'religion' and 'tre' means 'origin'. Thus, the people who follow the original religion are called 'Niamtre'. The religion of the *Hynniewtreps* people is commonly known as '*Ka Niam U Hynniewtreps*'. The *Niam* is believed to have been given by God from the beginning of time. However over the years a number of the *Hynniewtreps* have adopted other religions like Hinduism and Christianity. Those *Hynniewtreps* who have adopted different world-religion have often ceased to perform and stopped to take part in the religious rites and ceremonies of the traditional religion. At the same time, a significant numbers of Niamtre remains and continue the practices of associated rituals and religious practices. The traditional religion does not have any written script it is based mostly on oral tradition. There are various ceremonies and rituals associated with this religion. At present there are about 450 Niamtre houses. Niamtre is based on certain concepts which I will briefly elaborate.

Concept of God: The *Niam* of the *Hynniewtreps* believe that there is only one God. He is the supreme god and the creator of everything. He is also believed to be the most powerful and almighty. The supreme God is called the '*U Blai Kynrad*' in local dialect. *U Blai Kynrad* is considered a male god. Besides the supreme God they also believe in numerous gods. The *U Blai Kynrad* plays a smaller part in the religious life than to many lesser powerful gods, which are of more immediate importance. According to their belief there are two sections of gods i.e. (1) god at the above (heaven) and (2) god at the earth. *U Blai Kynrad* is belief to have presented in both the sections; there are also numerous gods who are empowered by *U Blai*, the followings are the most important among them:

a) **Ka Syiem Synshar:** The main function of *Ka Syiem Synshar* is to create human beings and to lead and sustain them in the earth.

- b) **U Bihsakurom:** Its main functions are to protect the human being from any sicknesses, diseases, wars, dangers and temptation from anything and also to lead human beings into heaven when he/she is dead.
- c) **Blai Shnong Blai Thaw:** Its main function is to assist *Ka Syiem Synshar* and *U Bihsakurom* and to look after human productions and human activities like trade, agriculture--seed sowing, to protect the field from any damages from germs or natural calamities, to get good harvest.
- d) **Blai Iung Blaisem:** Its main function is to look into human's health and to sustain human being by being healthy and to live a long life. This god is worship by the clan.
- e) **Ka Syiem Bok Ka Syiem Rwiang:** This god is worship by individuals for their own benefits. For instance, if someone is sick again and again and never recovers after treatment, then this kind of ritual is conducted. Another example is trade i.e. if someone is failed in business or trade consistently.

4. Characteristics of the Niamtre: Main characteristics are based on the following three pillars:

1. To earn righteousness- *Ban Kamai ia ka hok*.
2. To know the relations from mother's and father's side- *Ban tip kur tip*.
3. To know god and man- *Ban tip-briew tip-Blei*.

Man should always lead a righteous, honest and truthful life. He should practice justice (*kahok*) in his words and deeds. He should know and love god and his fellow human beings. He should also know and respect his relatives both from the mother's and father's side. According to the traditional religion a person alone is responsible for his/her own actions; no one can share the burden of his/her sins.

4.1 Niamtre Rituals: *Hynniewtreps* offer different types of animals such as pig, bull, goat and cock during ritual sacrifices. The most important among these animals is the cock. Apart from these, the *Hynniewtreps* also perform egg divination (*Ka shat pylleng*). Rituals sacrifices are not an everyday practice but largely depend on specific circumstances. It is being performed by making a commitment with gods to sacrifice a cock or any other sacrificial things with the expectation of getting something in return from their gods or goddesses. They also do sacrifices when they have achieved something with the belief that their prayers have been answered by god. A lot of preparation is required before any rituals are performed. Broadly there are three kinds of rituals, namely:

1. Personal rituals: It is a daily prayer which every individual does to give them strength, to stay healthy, to protect them from dangers, troubles, injuries, to have good relationship with others, to be good to others and so on, usually there is no sacrifices made in personal rituals.

2. Clan rituals: Clan rituals may be performed inside the house and outside the house or within the compound. Some clan rituals which are performed inside the house are:

(a) *Kyrtein Kyrta*, which is performed during day time, (b) *Seinjait Blai Syiem* is performed in the evening, (c) *Ram Lakhon*, which is conducted at mid night, (d) *Blai Iung Blaisem* is performed in the morning, (e) *Kpong Pyrtuh* is also performed at noon. *Syiem pyrthat*, *Pyngkat Syrwet* and *Iaiong Iangit* clan rituals are performed outside the house but within the compound of the clan. Clan rituals performed both inside and outside or even in any place which belongs to the concerned clan are; (a) *Knia Blai Syiem* is performed by clan to become wealthy. If somebody wants to become rich, he/she needs to perform this ritual. (b) *Byn ien duwan* is conducted for blessing them to live a long life by having a good health so that the clan population is growing and increasing sustainably. (c) *Siang Blai Iung*: the main purpose of this ritual is to bless them with abundant food.

5. Village ritual: During the spring season, the village used to perform one ritual called *Knia Lyngdoh*, 'knia' means 'sacrifice' and 'lyngdoh' means 'priest'. This ritual is the most important ritual among all the rituals in the village. It is held only once in a year for four days. Bull or cock sacrifices are made in this ritual.

(a) *Mushai*—it is performed in the first day of *Knia Lyngdoh*. On this *Mushai* day only males have to go to *Khloo Lyngdoh* sacred grove and performed the rituals. Women are taboo to go to the grove, even the *Ka Lyngdoh* (female priest), who is the hereditary priest is not allowed stepping into the grove despite of her many days preparation. During my fieldwork I was refrain from observing the actual ritual, since no alternative left I asked my male field guide to take video for me and then visited the place only after the rituals had over. This ritual is performed in such a way that the Male *Lyngdoh*, *Dolloi* (chief), *Besans* and elders have to sit in a circular position. The bull is kept in the centre of the spot and the Male *Lyngdoh* has to kill the bull by shooting with one arrow. After which the blood of the bull is left to flow or spread all over the spot and then the meat is cut into pieces and distributed among all the 14 clans by the *Besans*. This ritual does not completed in the grove itself, they came back to the *Ka Lyngdoh's* (Female Priest) house and cooked some portion of the meat in her house where at least a piece of meat is reached to all the people in the village who are *Niamtre*. After the completion of the rituals, women folk especially the young women played various traditional games such as 'Sakhaiat' in local dialect.

(b) *Muksoo*—it is performed after two days gap from *Mushai*. In this *Muksoo* ritual all the male members went to another sacred grove called *Mulang* and performed the ritual. This ritual end at the spot itself. The women folk stayed at *Ka Lyngdoh's* house and joyfully playing the traditional rotating games right from morning till evening.

6. Function of Ka Lyngdoh's or Female Priest: Female *Lyngdoh* is hereditary but Male *Lyngdoh* is chosen from the *Lyngdoh's* clan. If the youngest *ka lyngdoh* is dead then the elder female from the particular family from *Lyngdoh* clan

would take the place. The *Ka lyngdoh* has to follow strict characteristics; she should be righteous, she cannot commit any sins nor do anything taboo. She gets high respect from others. She is more responsible and has a higher status than the male *lyngdoh*. Before the actual rituals, tremendous preparations are required. For *Knia Lyngdoh* ritual, the *Ka Lyngdoh* needs to prepare for at least one month. Usually every rituals starts at mid-night and continues till the morning of the next day. All the pre ritual preparations are done in the *ka lyngdoh's* house and she alone did all the preparations like grinding rice, brewing rice beer, and carrying water in the night and so on. Before the ritual, she has to endure various sanctification processes for herself. She is abstain from eating meat for a month; she can only have dried fish and vegetables, she is refrain from sleeping with her husband for a month and she also cannot talk to anybody for one night just before the *Knia* ritual.

7. Traditional games and sports: From time immemorial the villagers have been practitioners and admirers of games and sports. Right from the elders and youngsters down to the children, all enjoy playing different types of games and sports. Most games practiced in the village are of outdoor variety played not only for honour or championship but also for amusement and pleasure even simple fun. It is held during day or night either at *Iawmusiang* or *Ka Lyngdoh's* residence. Games and sports generally take place after the rituals. Most of the traditional games and sports have religious links and are held during festival such as *Knia Lyngdoh*, *Pam Iawmusiang* and so on. Some of the most important traditional games and sports are worth mentioning here:

(a) **Sakhaiat:** It is a Traditional Swing Game, which is played on the first day of *Mushai* festival.

(b) **Knia Lyngdoh:** Here all the girls were gathered in *Ka Lyngdoh's* residence or *Iaw Musiang*. This game is played only by the virgin girls. Although the game might be played by few young girls, they were surrounded by a huge crowd of people. On this day all the girls have to come with traditional attire. They wear all kinds of traditional ornaments which are considered costliest for them. Through their dresses and ornaments one can observe wealth possession. In this game, T—shape structure made of pine wood tree in which the vertical pole is dug under the ground. From both side of the horizontal end, two girls were clinging on both sides where in the middle a cock is place. Then one after another two young boys push to rotate or swing the structure.

(c) **Ka Latan-Tylle: ka latan –tylle** or a tug-of-war is usually held after the *Knia Lyngdoh*. It is held between the localities. The significance of the game is that if the team of the northern side wins, the northern side paddy field will have a bumper harvest and vice-versa.

The reasons for the association of games and sports with rituals are: firstly, games and sport or merry making is a sign of expression of joy and happiness after performing successfully all the rituals and practices. Secondly, it is a social expression of a community that it leads in peace and harmony.

The afterlife: The Niamtre also believe that life does not end with death. According to them, with the end of this earthly life a new life is open. This is the life where the Niamtre always desire and long for as it is the life with god, eating betel nut in the house of god means to be happy with gods forever.

8. Christianity

According to Christian teaching, God is the creator, and the redeemer, who is not limited in one place or time. He is the creator of all mankind. Christian holds the faith that Jesus Christ, the son of God, the redeemer of the world in who alone human beings are saved by grace through faith. And in accordance with faith revelation of God which he made, being himself God incarnate, Christians worshipped one God Father, Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. The Christian firmly believes that Jesus Christ was the son of God, and was crucified to wash away the sins of human kind and therefore, the Christians pray to Him for forgiveness. They accept the Holy Scriptures of the Old Testament and New Testament as the inspired words of God, as containing all things necessary for life and salvation. Christians believes in the concepts of heaven and hell. The theory of Heaven and Hell is perhaps the contribution of Christianity. According to the Holy Bible (John, 3:16), it is written that "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life". Whoever believes in God Jesus Christ will go to Heaven, and those who does not believe and obey the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ will go to hell. Christian believes in life after dead i.e. eternity.

9. The Advent and the growth of Christianity in Nangbah village:

The first missionaries to Khasi-Jaintia Hills were Thomas Jones and his wife of Welsh Mission, who arrived on 22nd June, 1841 at the village of Sohra (Cherrapunji). Hence, this day is considered to be the 'Red Letter Day' in the history of Hynniewtreps people (Jyrwa, 1980). The first task of the missionaries were to learn the language of the people and with the assistance of two young men, U Duwar and U Jungkha enable Mr and Mrs Jones to learn the language. They then put down the language to a Roman alphabet and thus in no time they could communicate the gospel in the language of the native orally and through writings. In this regard, Thomas Jones and his wife are considered as the founder of the khasi-Jaintia literature. Due to paucity of workers, the missionary's labour were confined to Sohra and its adjacent villages for decades. Although the Welsh Mission established its station at Nangbah village in 1861, the origin and the history of the Presbyterian Church can be traced back from Welsh Mission in 1841. The first Christian missionary to Nangbah was Mr. Thomas Jones and his wife of the Welsh Mission. It was basically a Presbyterian Mission. According to the report submitted by Thomas Jones II to the General Secretary of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Foreign Mission in 1861-1862, there were 300 households at Nangbah village (W. Thubru, 1989). The schools were used as a medium for spreading the gospel message through learners. In 1880 there were four persons who had openly declared their allegiance with Christian faith. In 1886, the numbers of converts increased to 19.

Toward the end of 1886, there were 118 hearers. According to the History of Nangbah Presbyterian Church, 1889, the construction of the Chapel was completed on May 1887.

10. Present Churches at Nangbah village: The history of Christian missionaries in the village goes long way back. Over the course of the last one hundred years different missions have influenced the village which is reflected in the present situation in which there are five churches belonging to five different denominations established in the village. Among the Christian churches in Nangbah, the Presbyterian Church is the oldest and has the largest number of followers. As per the Presbyterian Church statistics 2009 there are 305 houses and 1765 church members including children. Roman Catholic Missionaries came much later. Catholic Missionaries came to Nangbah in 1907. According to the 2009 annual statistics of Roman Catholic Church Nangbah, there are 220 houses, 890 church members and 498 children below 18 years. The Church of India came a few years later in 1913 and they claim that they have followers of 110 houses in the village. The Seventh Day Adventists came comparatively late and is about 15 houses and around 90 members of which their doctrine is followed. The Full Gospel Fellowship came to Nangbah rather recently and seems not yet fully established in the village.

The above description reveals that within a single village, there are multiple churches. Although, as a whole Christianity is set apart from Niamtre, it would be wrong to say that the practice of Christianity in the village is uniform. Even though they all share a Christian faith there are clear differences in beliefs and ways of worship between them. On the contrary, different denominations are found supportive toward the village in general.

11. Sacred Place

The sacred places in Nangbah can be mainly grouped under two heads namely the *Niamtre* ritual places and the churches of those who are converted into Christianity. While the sacred places of the former are spread all over the village and those of the latter are built in specific localities dominated by them. At the sacred places of *Niamtre* there are no human creations like buildings; they are only natural spot. At present there are 13 sacred groves. Some of the sacred places are encroached by human settlement and urbanisation etc. Among the sacred groves, it may be noted that *Khloo Lyngdoh* is a virgin forest maintained as a sacred grove. The *Knia Lyngdoh* ritual which is the most important ritual among all the rituals in the village is held in this grove.

Tables showing sacred places of *Niamtre*

I	Place	Deities worship	Name of the ceremony
1	<i>Mookyrdup</i>	<i>Ka Mookyrdup and U Ksan Syiem</i>	<i>Pam Iaw Musiang</i>
2	<i>Kyllang</i>	<i>U Kyllang and Syiem Myntang</i>	"
3	<i>Iong Thulein</i>	<i>U Iong Thulein</i>	"
4	<i>Iaw Musing</i>	<i>Ka Blai Iaw Musiang</i>	"

Pam Iaw Musiang is usually performed in the month of February to March. It is believed that these gods will protect the people from all kinds of evils, diseases and calamities and brings prosperity on them.

II	Place	Deities worship	Name of the ceremony
1	<i>Ringein</i>	<i>U Syiem Ringein</i>	<i>Thoh Lyngdoh</i>
2	<i>Khloo Lyngdoh</i>	<i>U Syiem Ryngkaw</i>	<i>Knia Lyngdoh</i>
3	<i>Mulang</i>	<i>Ka Blai Wari and U Ram Shillong</i>	„

Thoh Lyngdoh is performing in the month of April before seed sowing. It is believe that these gods will protect the seeds from being eaten by insects and make them sprout and grow well. The biggest village ritual is held in khloo Lyngdoh which is considered as the virgin forest.

III	Place	Deities worship	Name of the ceremony
1	<i>Kyndong</i>	<i>Ka Ryngshyndi, Ka Syiem Sgni, Ka Syiem Synshar, U Biskuram</i>	<i>Khe—Liur</i>
2	<i>Kyndonglapen</i>	<i>U Pyrthat, U Syrwet, Ka Iaiong</i>	„
3	<i>Moomala</i>	<i>U Pyrdang Shnong, U Phoor Shulla</i>	„
4	<i>Moopasdoh</i>	<i>U Sang Long, U Sangma</i>	„
5	<i>Mysndier</i>	<i>U Iale, Ka Kupli</i>	„
6	<i>Um Musiang</i>	<i>U Ram Shillong, Ka Blai Wari</i>	„

Khe—Lier is performing in the month of September before harvest. It is believed that these gods will protect the paddies from being damage by the insects and natural calamities and bestow good harvest. Apart from the above, the *Myntang* River is considered to be very sacred. The hillock where the dead bodies are cremated is also considered sacred place. There are also places which are specific to the respective clans where they perform their clan rituals.

12. Change and Continuity

One important historical aspect of change among the Pnars of Jaintia is their massive conversion to Christianity. To the missionaries education was a hand maid of evangelizations. Actually an argument can be brought forward that the massive conversion to Christianity could only place because they were accompanied by educational, health and employment facilities which missionaries arranged for the local people (Lamin, 1990, Lyngdoh and Henia, 2002). Impact of the West brought far reaching changes in every aspects of Khasi-Jaintia society. The rapid progress of the evangelizations adversely affected the followers of the *Ka Niam* (traditional) as well as the adherents of the Sanskrit religion in the hills (Dutta, 1982). With no exception Christianity has a great impact upon the people in Jaintia Hills, particularly at Nangbah village. I will briefly dwell upon the changes related to the advent of Christianity in the following areas:

i) Language and Literature: As stated earlier there was no standard literature among the *Hynniewtreps* prior to the advent of Christianity in the region. This was one of the major reasons why the many groups speaking varieties of local dialect living in the hills of Khasi-Jaintia, as a result of this, there exist a sense of disunity. Thus a common identity had not developed in the community until the establishment of Christian faith. When the Welsh Mission introduces the Roman script by using the Sohra (Cherrapunji) dialect as the standard language, it brings a sense of unity among the people.

ii) Education: The coming of Christianity brought a great transformation in the socio-religious life of the people of Nangbah. The Christian missionaries had brought not only to bring them new faith, but also educate them by all means in order to transform their socio-religious life. Having possess standard language and literature paved the way for educational structure as introduced by the Christian missionaries and churches. Women education, undertaken by the missionaries brought significant changes in the status of women. When education was introduced at Nangbah village, parents strongly opposed the education of their daughters and religious sanction was added to their opposition. As historical evidence available, they were not successful in their resistance, eventually women's education in the village flourished. As a result, women started taking up leadership in the society, which was debarred for centuries.

Besides missionaries, education is also brought by various others agencies such as government as well as non-governmental, peoples connectivity with outside world by means of modern development such as media, television, radio etc. and by the movement of the individuals from the village to towns and cities brings changes in the religious beliefs and practices. Some young people of the community after coming in contact with different communities and religions with different ethos and wider world view changed their beliefs in superstitious, traditional beliefs and customs. Unlike the uneducated the tendency of diversion from traditional beliefs and practices is more likely to be happened with the educated people because they are more accessible in the outside world.

iii) Occupation: Through education and other factors like urbanization and industrialization, many people go to urban areas because of jobs and education. People begin to change their occupation from simple agriculturalist and other occupations other than cultivation in the village. They came into contact with different people. As such their contact with outside world has led to change in their religious beliefs and practices.

iv) Mass media: Mass media is also a term used for dissemination of information, ideas and entertainment by the used of technological media such as radio and television, film, the press, the publication and advertising. They continue to co-exist with important traditional media such as folk dance, drama and puppetry. All these influences lead to changes in traditional beliefs.

v) Medical Facilities: Christian missions were pioneers in the area of medical services of the people. It began in a humble way but in due course the service was upgraded in the level of well-established hospitals rendering services to the people irrespective of class, caste and religious persuasions. A venture of this kind is not encouraging, at least in its initial stage, because of people's firm beliefs in the role of evil spirits for the appearance of all sorts of human ailments and sufferings. However, once they saw the effectiveness of the medicines given by the missionaries the local people began to go for such medicines distributed free of cost. In this way, medical mission has significant influences upon the traditional worldviews and superstitions (Snaitang, 2009).

Presently, however the number of Niamtre has reduced, according to the village secretary there are about 450 Niamtre houses in which Niamtre religion is followed. Niamtre beliefs are much older than Christian beliefs in the village yet, literature on Christianity in North East India, and the interviews which I have conducted, suggests that the advent of Christian has caused a significant changes in the region in term of education, mindset, customs, traditional beliefs and marriage practices, etc. Christianity has had a profound impact upon the culture and religious belief of the people in Jaintia Hills. Its long history notwithstanding Niamtre has gradually been replaced by Christianity as dominant religion in Nangbah. Indeed, the number of Christianity has surpassed that of the traditional religion. By interviewing people I found four main reasons for conversion. The main reasons are:

vi) Marriage: This conversion happened for love and individual benefits. The elders' sisters are usually more likely to convert than the youngest daughter (Ka Khadduh) who is the heir of the family property and also responsible for religious rites. For example, during my short stay in the fieldwork, there was a marriage between a girl from a strict Niamtre family and a man of Christian and thereafter which she converted into Christianity.

vii) Taboo: Taboo is the unwritten law of the primitive society. It aims to limit an individual to the norms of the society; it avenges itself when violated. Among the Niamtre, it is often that if anyone committed something against the religious laws and orders which is taboo, he or she gets converted into Christianity. For instance, Mr. X of Niamtre committed sins against their religion and therefore he was converted Christianity.

viii) Inability to perform required rituals: In Niamtre (traditional religion) every ritual is followed by animal sacrifices like bull and cock etc. They are compelled to sacrifice animal for any sanctification or blessing from gods or goddesses. In some cases inability to perform the required religious rituals, the people of Niamtre converted into Christianity. When they do not find anything to sacrifice to their gods in the form of animals like goat, cock, bull etc. in their day to day rituals. They were resort to conversion to get rid themselves from these sacrifices. Some are converted into

Christianity in order to get aid from different Christian missionaries.

ix) Self-Motivation: With the advent of Christianity people have been impressed by the lifestyle of the Christian people living around them in terms of education and various ways of their livelihood. Thus people are tends to convert because of one's own understanding.

13. Conclusion

Modernization, often associated with Christianity, and with it the establishment of school, medical clinics and also development works like the construction of roads, electricity and other infrastructural projects are also playing a role in the disappearance of many of the sacred groves which are associated with Niamtre. Despite the various development and changes brought in by the advent of Christianity and modern civilization there are still a significant number of strong believers in Niamtre. Research finding reveals that about 40% of the populations consist of the followers of Niamtre. Their persistence in their traditional belief and practices associated with Niamtre are not likely to vanish. I also observed that many people who argue to be Christian seems to combine their practice of Christianity with certain practices associated with Niamtre. For example, some people avoid being in the house of a person who worships the Ka Taro, who is the spirit of wealth, because they believe that they can, despite their conversion to Christianity, still be harmed by the Ka Taro.

In this paper, I have argued that although Niamtre is much older in the region to Christianity over the course of the past about hundred years Christianity has gradually replaced Niamtre as the dominant religion. Indeed, in Nangbah village, Christianity outnumbers those who follow Niamtre. However, Christian beliefs and practices are not unified in the village but different denominations have firmly established themselves in the village. At the same time it is not always easy to clearly demarcate Christianity from Niamtre as people following one may continue to follow some aspects of the other religion. In terms of social cohesion I found that although mutual relations in the village are generally cooperative, it seems that people belonging to the same religious groups are having more intimacy and supportive relations with each other than exists between people belonging to different religious groups.

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