

## TRIBES IN COLONIZATION : A STUDY OF NAGAS

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Colonization was not the simplest form of power showcasing with arms and politics but it was the power to sustain and establish a new era. A colonial conquest was made happen by cause of the imposed cultural technologies and cultural forms that classified the native style of living as 'traditional' and 'ancestral'. According to Nicholas B. Dirks, "colonialism was itself a cultural project of control" (Cohn 1928: ix). The term 'tribe' was in usage only after colonization- the pre-class society never engaged the term whereas the post-colonial society used the term loosely. Ruling of chieftain societies like tribal communities required power over landscapes like hills and forests. Colonizers were in full throttle to culturally control the land and the people in it. It was mentioned by Cohn that the prime reason for the superior mentality of colonizers over tribal communities was their half nakedness.

Nagaland was recognised as an Indian state in 1963 which spreads in the eastern side of North-East India. "The hilly terrain of Nagaland is covered with green forests and it forms an irregular plateau with elevated ridges and peaks." (Bareh 1970:1). Nagaland is a proud state that inhabits sixteen tribes altogether. Initially people lived in villages as their resident and forest as their hunting ground. They used both forest and plains for transportation. In earlier days, head-hunting was an important practice among Nagas, as the number of kills determine the status of a Naga warrior. Due to their traditional practice, the colonizers were scared of the customs and tried to bring them under their rule, to which naturally Nagas opposed. Their resistance to British can be seen in earlier battles like Battle of Khonoma that took place in 1879 and after a long struggle, on 27 March 1880, the peace treaty was signed between the Nagas and British colonizers. The British government banned few cultural practices like head-

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hunting, tiger-hunting, inter-clan and inter-tribal raids. Among various Naga clans, British was not welcomed whereas few suppressed to their power for survival.

Colonization, in the case of Nagas was certainly an undertaking to regulate the culture. In Kire's novel *Sky is my Father*, how colonization took over Nagas is narrated by the author through the Battle of Khonoma. In the following sections, the paper inculcates the exploration of pre-class society of Nagas described in the novel, a discussion on the role of colonization and its impacts focusing proselytization.

### **Objectives**

The study involves following objectives: (i) Exploration of key text: the study analyses the pre-colonial Naga society and lifestyle by interpreting the novel *Sky is My Father* by Easterine Kire to understand the original culture of the Nagas. (ii) Analysis of social and cultural changes: it helps in understanding the role of colonialism played in Nagas' lives. By analysing the role of colonization, the changes that happened in Nagas can be studied through the involvement of various reasons like proselytization. The aforementioned objectives help in fulfilling the prime task of the paper.

### **Perceptions on tribes: Pre-colonial society analysed in Easterine Kire's *Sky is My Father***

The initial part of the novel pictures the pre-colonial and pre-class society of Nagas. The novel explores the Angami villages, their customs and practices, valour, taboos, rituals and other cultural elements are focused. The work also deals with the ecological landscape of the Angami villages and delves into them "far and wide as a warrior village" (Kire 2018: vii). Kire elaborates the day-to-day life in an early Angami village where people gather together as a clan in a village and perform their duties. The writer describes the rituals performed during events in the village like a feast of merit (title-taking ceremony), tiger killing, *terhase* (ritual to make peace with spirits), marriage, funeral, housewarming, *genna* (no work day- an important taboo), *sekranyi* (sanctification festival), *therhu ?nyi* (harvest festival), *thekranyi* (feast of age-group) and *Kelipie* (folk singing event for harvest). The novel also depicts the superstitious aspects in the pre-colonial

society like Tekhumevimia (weretiger), Kirhu ?pfumia (women with powers to hurt people and plants), Geisu (chicken sacrifice). The work discusses about the social institutions like Morung andkichu ?ki. All these incidents were narrated coherently in the novel using the major and minor characters like Levi, Kovi, Vipiano, Peno and Keviselie. The latter part of the novel moves with Battle of Khonoma as its focal point. After the battle and peace treaty, the novel captures the influence of colonialism as well.

Nagas lived a cultural life and withheld their cultural practices and respected it before colonization. Kire describes the Naga hills as rich in vegetation, where the villages that are sandwiched between the hillocks, are "Hidden from human view by the mountain barrier" (Kire 2018: vii). Through the narrative style of the novel, it shows how Kire embrace her land, because the author personifies the hills and addresses it as "she". Kire embraces the early lifestyle that was practiced by her ancestors and picturesque it. She in the novel declares, "The cultural life that sustained the village is recorded in this novel in minute detail." (Kire 2018: xv). The culture of Nagas that was upheld by them delineated the sense of honor and their deep love for freedom; the freedom was deeply embraced by each Naga and it drove men to act in repulsion on any sort of threat to their land like invasion. Naga people oppressed the British and their attempt to suppress their love for freedom. Nagas lived a life of freedom, honor, respect and love which altered after colonization.

In the pre-colonial era, Naga villages were full of quaint style of living. Kire in her novel states how proud Nagas were of their old lifestyle. She states, "Ah, the old ways are good..." (Kire 2018: 1). To highlight the early culture of Nagas, in the novel, Kire emphasis usage of the traditional elements like cookware in a kitchen, method of cooking, usage of natural ingredients, houses, medicines and practices, attire and weapons. Nagas were warriors who were proud of their heroic deeds; special mourning houses were built to mourn for the warriors of their villages, especially who lost their lives while protecting their village. Victory over other villages were considered as their heroic deed but not to shame to others. Kire in the novel describes that Naga women were very confident in the valour of their men, "so confident were they that their men would repulse us and protect them." (Kire 2018: 5). Naga men characteristics were praised highly by

Naga women. This shows the social traits of Nagas.

In the novel, Kire highlights the importance of cultural education in Nagas. Education in the earlier era was culture oriented. Naga social institutions like Morung or Thehou, teaches young Nagas about the cultural values, traditional practices, handy medicinal herbs, weaving, fishing, rituals, customary laws, etiquettes, agriculture and religion and these were common lessons for both young Naga men and women. Spear practices, hunting, war tactics, stories on heroic deeds of ancestors, head-hunting were specific lessons for young Naga men. Nagas had an educational institution with dormitories like kichu ?ki, where youngsters used to stay for their night lessons. Both Naga young men and women used to have different dorms, where they were monitored by their parent (their mentor). Dorm classes were classified according to age-group system of Nagas. "Each age-group had a parent and the dormitory was a long bed hewn out of a single log on which ten to fourteen boys could sleep." (Kire 2018: 31). In Naga tribal communities, before preparing for any event, like rituals, raids, hunts, marriage, feast, sacrifices were made. Chicken sacrifice was used to initiate the event and also to study the omen. "they killed a young rooster and noted that its right leg was crossed over the left in death. it was good fortune casting." (Kire 2018: 43). Such sacrificial beliefs, omen pronouncement, protection prayer, listening to dreams were common events in their day-to-day social and cultural life.

In such culture rich Nagaland, the Nagas embraced their original culture, as they give importance to nature and environment. Nature was respected and pagan worship was prioritized. For natural elements, names were given and they were worshiped. Naga culture was originally preserved via folklore and folksongs. The stories on animism and paganism were passed on from generation to generation through oral tradition. "The customs, beliefs, values, and opinions of Naga society were handed down from their ancestors to posterity by word of mouth or by practice since the earliest times... From birth, children are taught through stories and legends about survival, endurance, and respect for nature and all mankind." (Ngakang 2011:np). Oral tradition is the custom of Naga culture. Importance of folklore and folksongs can be seen in Thehou, the social and educational institution of Nagas.

Perceptions on tribes before colonialism is based on their own culture and beliefs. The culture that tribes followed before the intervention of colonialism is well narrated in detail by Kire.

### **Impact of colonialism**

To study the role of colonialism in a tribal community, it is important to analyse it from anthropological point of view. In anthropological terms, diffusion is the process of culture changes from one cultural trait to another, either through natural process or organized and well-planned process. Diffusion is the possible outcome of colonialism; when colonized people were introduced to new culture, traits, and beliefs, their existing way of living and beliefs were questioned. People adapted to the new life was laid before them but they value the original culture in terms of respect to one's beliefs. In this discussion a question arises about the origin of diffusion, whether colonialism is the sole reason for its existence. To answer from anthropological point of view, the anthropologist Clark Wissler provides the audiences with few options for the origin of diffusion, they are physical and natural barrier, intermittent distribution of traits, migration, religion, conquest and discipline, war and militarism. (Wissler 1932:128) Among the options, colonization is interlinked with religion, conquest and discipline, war and militarism. In a coherent manner, when colonization takes place, it is followed by proselytism, war and military power. This paper focuses only on the diffusion process through proselytism.

### **Can savages be civilized?**

When proselytism happened, "For more than a century, Western colonial and missionary agents sought to 'civilize' the 'savage' Nagas." (Thong 2012: 896). Colonization and proselytization went hand in hand and concluded Nagas as savage and barbarians without a way of living. In Naga culture, proselytization raised questions among Nagas, because the goal of missionaries was to civilize the savage and barbaric tribes. In the novel, the protagonist Levi questions their lifestyle when he was imprisoned in British jail, where there were no genna days and sacrificial rituals but he chose to believe his way of living and not wayward from it. Nagas believed, "If you honour the spirits, they will bless you, if you defy them, you will learn how mortal man is." (Kire 2018: 50). As colonizers and

missionaries were ignorant of their living style and beliefs and they did not agree upon them, which made them to implement their living style and beliefs. "The pronouncement that Nagatraditional myths, sacred stories and ways of knowing were pagan,irrational and primitive caused not only a sense of cultural confusion,but also served to invalidate the cultural values and practises that thepeople relied upon for guidance and strength in life." (Thong 2012: 897). The period of cultural confusion and invalidation of Naga culture was referred as 'dark period' in the timeline of Nagas. (Shikhu 2007: 46).Colonialism reduced the value of human beings. The lust to control made the invaders to underestimate and tarnish the image of the Nagas. To colonizers Nagas were the ignorant ones and to missionaries they were "those savage wilds" (Clark 1907: 15).

The question 'can savages be civilized?' can be attempted to answer from an outsider and observer perspective. The tribal communities treasure their own style of living and they lead their life according to their own beliefs and it was the invaders responsibility for the case of misconception."Tragically,many of the early missionaries also treated Naga culture andtraditional practices as 'pagan' and 'evil' and to be shunned." (Chasie 2005:256)Along with the colonizers, "missionaries felt that spreading the gospel to these people was of great importance, and actively tried to erase their beliefs... They believed that converting native people...was of such dire importance that they felt justified in...converting them. This did much damage not only to those directly impact by the hostility, but to the generations of lost culture and tradition of native religion..." (na 2020: np).

Kire says that the intervention of missionary totally changed the Naga society, as the new religion's place of worship "is central to new Naga society. It is in many ways, the new morung." (Kire 2019: 205)

### **Westernization is salvation?**

Colonizers and missionaries used the strategy of implementing westernized education method and western social traits, in plan to influence the culture. Many Nagas opposed the idea of westernization as it did not approve of their way of living. For the involvement of westernization, missionary played a major role. In the novel, the protagonist Levi's second son Sato, who was influenced

by western culture, desired to attend modern school. When he attended western school, his Naga cultural beliefs were overpowered by the missionary teachings in the school. Due to this case of missionary involvement, Kire records the consequences like family disputes, decline of followers in Naga pagan worship, loss of unity among Nagas and cultural loss. When Sato declared his lack of faith in Naga beliefs, it created chaos in his family, as it angered his father Levi, a proud Naga warrior, dismembered his own son from his family. Nagas were not deprived of social changes but they wanted to withhold their own culture. Levi was not against his son getting educated from his colonizer, because his Sato was "Almost eleven by the time his father agreed to let him live in Kohima, and attend the Mission School run by the white man..." (Kire 2018: 116); but Levi was against his son adapting the colonizer's culture.

Colonialism and proselytization divided Nagas into two groups: villagers and townies, converts and non-converts, literate and illiterate, primitive and modern, backward and westernised. This disruption caused on the balanced life of Nagas concluded illiterate and non-convert villagers as primitive and backward. It brought communal clash between the groups among Nagas by eroding the traditional and cultural consciousness. According to Terhuja, the notion of westernization was deeply engraved in the minds of Nagas because it was considered as the mode of escapement from getting tagged as backward and primitive. Colonialism and proselytization have colonized and altered the minds and lives of Nagas.

An objective to be remembered is that, Naga faith and beliefs were passed down through generations using folklores, folksongs, myths, dances, ceremonies and rituals. Among these culture rich Nagas, conversion was not an easy option, because it was against their ancestral teachings. In the early days, the Nagas converts were excommunicated by the non-convert village elders. In the novel too, Kire discusses such incidents taking place in Naga history. "There was great hostility in the village community against the small band...excommunication meant that they were cut off from all links with their old village." (Kire 2018: 128).

Conversion to a different faith led people to attain a lack of ancestral

teachings. When the teachings and world notions of Naga ancestors were based on their cultural beliefs, the new faith directed upon westernization, did not fulfil the Naga decorum. But, westernization attained through colonialism and proselytization was considered as the means of development by few Nagas. K.S. Zetsuvi adds, all these social and cultural disruptions marked the shaken foundation of the future Nagaland. Naga writer Chasie commented that, "The advent of the British and exposure of the Nagas to the outside world, turned Naga society upside down and ushered in profound changes that would leave indelible scars that could never be erased." (Chasie 2005: 255).

Westernization introduced education system, opportunities for government employment, posh style of living, new modernized houses, westernized fashion sense and modern thinking. In spite of all the benefits introduced by westernization, Naga original culture was declined in followers and people forgot their own customs and beliefs. People dwelling in town areas, especially converts, did not felt the necessity to learn about their original culture. The young newly educated are likely to turn away from their land and desire a western life, whereas the material prosperity might create cultural and spiritual renaissance. (Elwin 1961:101)

## **Conclusion**

Colonialism and Proselytization resulted in cultural loss. Nagas were not afraid of changes but they were concerned about losing their original self and culture. Nagas' way of living, cultural beliefs, traditional values were not new because such customs and beliefs can be seen in many tribal communities across the world like Igbo. The paper's motive is to depict the role of colonization and proselytization in the lives of Nagas. The paper intended to cogitate how these changed the Nagas and how it distanced them from their original culture. and the paper has successfully fulfilled these objectives by incorporating the Naga literary novel.

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