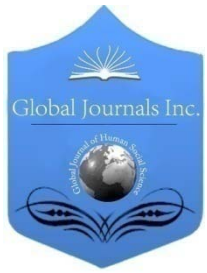
Volume 15 Issue 22
Originally issued as C3



Global Journal of human-social science: C
Sociology & Culture
Volume 15 Issue 3 Version 1.0 Year 2015
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals Inc. (USA)
Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

Christianity and Indigenous Practices: A Brief Sketch of the Baites of Manipur

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GJHSS-C Classification : *FOR Code: 220401*



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Christianity and Indigenous Practices: A Brief Sketch of the Baites of Manipur

Chungkhosei Baite

Abstract- Baites, like other tribal societies, had indigenous religious belief system. Embracing of Christianity has brought tremendous changes, not only to religious belief systems, but also to socio-cultural and educational life of its people. This owes to British colonial administration and Christian missionaries. While the impact has been largely positive, there is lurking concern amongst the tribesmen of having lost the traditional values and the life world.

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I. Introduction

Baites are a least and officially unrecognized tribe in India who were scattered in the northeastern states of India, Sagaing and Chin province of Myanmar (erstwhile Burma), with a high concentration in Manipur. They are sparsely settled in four hills district of Manipur, viz. Chandel, Churachanpur, Senapati and Ukhrul. Christianity has made a tremendous change in the lives of the Baite tribes of Manipur especially in the field of indigenous religious practices, Socio-culture tradition and educational sphere. The influence of Christianity is reasonably remarkable and at the same time there are positive and negative impacts. Conversion to Christianity freed the Baites from bondage of blind faith and superstition. It is also because of conversion and subsequence adaption of western education system or western culture implanted by the Christian Missionaries in the mind of the tribesmen they are enlightened with modern way of life and at the same time moral degradations like immorality, drug abuse, filthy fashion, disrespect towards the elders, etc. triumph in the society. The influence of Christianity is so great that the younger generation of the Baites do not know about their traditional socio-cultural values. This paper intends to throw lights the indigenous religious practices of the Baites, the coming of Christianity in Manipur and how far Christianity has brought changes on their traditional religion or belief system and socio-cultural life. Though the focus of the paper is on the Baite tribes residing in Manipur, it may equally apply to their counterpart residing in other regions mentioned above.

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II. Indigenous Belief (or Religion) of the Baites

The Baites, before conversion to Christianity, used to believe in the existence of a Supreme Being called the *Chung Pathen*. The *Chung Pathen* is the creator, the sustainer and the sovereign over all things – visible and non-visible – in heaven and earth, with power over all human beings, and among the Baite society. The Baites worship *Chung Pathen* in the form of *Doi Bom* (magical box). It is made up of a cow's skull, one bamboo (as big as finger and 12 inch length), tied together with ropes and kept inside a bamboo basket. The *Doi Bom* lie hanging on the post erected for the purpose in front of every Baite house. Every household in a village have one *Doi Bom* each. Nobody is allowed to touch the *Doi Bom*, except the village priest at the time of performing rites and ritual sacrifices or offerings.

Once in a year, the Baites perform rites of *Ahkang Tha* (killing white cock) to appease the Supreme Being in front of *Doi Bom* so that good health and wealth will be showered on the family. To commemorate this occasion, the priest will sacrifice a white cock, which should not have any spot or any coloration. The sacrificed cock is cooked wholly, along with the bones. The family elders eat only the head portion of the cock and the flesh is consumed by the priest. All the bones are kept inside *Doi Bom* till the next sacrifice in the year to come.

Like many other tribes or communities, the Baites believes in the existence of various lesser spirits. These spirits may be categorizes as benevolent and malevolent. Benevolent Spirits are believed to be less harmful, depending on how they are treated. Some of them are *pugao-pagao* (ancestor-spirit) – shower of blessings and fortune to the family, *khuanu* (village-female deity), *Khuavang,* (village deity) - shower of village fortune, etc. It is primordial believed that these spirits are sources of blessing of family and villages if they are treated well. Therefore, rituals and sacrifices are performed at the time shifting to a new village, new house and at beginning of cultivation every year to appease these spirits. Malevolent spirits are harmful in all respects. Some of them are *Gamkao*, *Gamhoisie*, *kaosie*, *kaomei*, *Maltong*, etc. *Gamkao* is a harmful spirit which can cause serious illness to the person who meets such spirit. *Gamhoisie* is an evil spirit that causes

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trouble to human being. *Kaosie* is believed to be a greedy spirit. It can enter in a person and converted such person into a different personality, voice, the behavior and strength. Such spirit can be released only when it is appeased with what it wants. *Kaomei* is an evil spirit which flies at night like a fire-fly in a much bigger volume of fire-ball. *Maltong* is believed to be a dangerous spirit which can bring misfortune and even physical death. As these spirits have immense strength and power of bringing sickness, misfortune, misery and even physical death to human being unless treated with due respect, rites and ritual sacrifices are performed by village priest once in every months to appease them.

Sickness within a family is viewed as a punishment by these spirits who are unhappy with a family or some of its members. When a person gets sick and if it is feared that the cause of the sickness is due to offence committed upon the spirits then the village priest (*Thiempu*) is usually requested to appease the spirits. For such rituals, red cock, a suckling pig, a dog or a Mithun, depending on the seriousness of the sick, is slaughtered as the offering. The spirit is offered with a portion of the animal killed – it could be the liver, the head or legs of the animals thus sacrificed, combined with one or two cups of *Zu*. The remaining portion of the meat and *Zu* are consumed by the family and the priest. In some cases the priest fights against the spirits.

It is traditional belief among the Baites that sickness is caused by spirit who enters the body. Or it may be that the spirit is being caught in the soul of the body. In such cases the priest recites a verse to drive away the spirit. These verses are handed down from one generation to another. In this way offerings are done to appease or drive away the spirit that causes sickness. Today, the traditional belief and worship of *Doi Bom* and the practices of performing rites and ritual sacrifices to the benevolent as well as malevolent spirits are completely abandoned as a result of the tribesmen converting to Christianity.

III. Advent of Christianity in Manipur

Christianity made its foray into Northeast India for the first time in 1894. It was Reverend William Pettigrew who came from American Baptist Mission and preached the gospel in Manipur. He arrived at Imphal on the February 6, 1894. He came under the Ministry of Arthington to evangelize the Meiteis of Manipur. Before entering Manipur, he stayed at Silchar. During his stay at Silchar, he learnt Bengali and Manipuri languages from Yanmajoy Singh, a Manipuri residing there. Soon after his arrival in Manipur, he immediately started a Lower Primary School at Moirangkhom at Imphal, named after him: the Pettigrew Lower Primary School. In the beginning he collected eighty boys mostly the children of government officers as students of this school. After six month the orthodox Meiteis did not allow him to continue the school fearing their children will be proselytized to Christianity. So Maxwell, the Political Agent of Manipur suggested him to work in the hill areas, where people were projected as savage and wild, and where practice of head hunting was still prevalent. Pettigrew then went to Kuki village of Senvon in the southern hills and requested the chief of the village, Kamkholun Singson, to allow him start a school in the village. As the chief refused Pettigrew went to the north and reached Songjang village near Mao Gate in the present Senapati District. There Pettigrew asked Sani Kopani Mao to purchase a land to start his work or Mission. So, Kopani called sixteen chiefs of Mao together and discussed whether the request of the missionary deserves merit. The chiefs unanimously refused the request and asked Pettigrew to leave the place immediately. After being denied permission to start a missionary school again, Pettigrew went to Ukhrul and set up a school and made it a mission centre. But he hardly found students as the parents were not willing to send their children to school. Ultimately British Political Agent Maxwell intervened during his visit to Ukhrul where he called all the chiefs together and ordered the chiefs to send their sons to school. By this time, Arthington Ministry has stopped supporting Pettigrew. Nevertheless, the American Baptist Mission continued to support his Mission work.

In 1897, Pettigrew could convert twenty boys to Christianity. Slowly and gradually the number of people embracing Christianity increased. Pettigrew felt the need to shift his Mission centre to Kangpokpi with the help of Dr. Grozier in 1919. After shifting his mission centre, the spreading of gospel was proliferated. Soon after, the first Kuki Baptist Church was established at Tujang Vaichong village in 1926.

In the year 1908, Welsh Mission started missionary work in Northeast India. Robert Wattkin along with his wife sailed from London on October 4, 1908 and stationed at Aizawl, the capital of Mizoram. There they established a medical centre which became the centre for evangelizing the people. In March 1910, he reached Senvon village in Manipur with his team at the invitation of Kamkholun Singson. On his way back to Aizawl, two Vaiphei young men, namely, Thangkhai Vaiphei and Lunpao Vaiphei confessed their faith in Christ. They became the first fruit of Wattkin's hard labour. From Aizawl, Wattkin sent three students, namely, Savawma, Vanzika and Taitea to begin permanent work at Senvon. They arrived at Senvon in May 1910 and there they established a school. Very strangely, Wattkin was dismissed by his colleague at Aizawl mission station on charges for being a disobedient worker. Since Wattkin was dissociated from the Welsh Presbyterian Mission, he founded a mission called Thado-Kuki Pioneer Mission. As a result of their work, around 70 persons become Christian.

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The first Kuki Church was established in 1913 (Welsh background). In 1913, Wattkin sent pastor Dala from Aizawl to take charge of organizing the Church in Manipur. But he was ordered to leave Manipur by the Political Agent of Manipur. This action was taken at the request of Mr. Pettigrew who protested that Manipur was an American Baptist Mission field. Later it was decided to draw a boundary between the American Baptist and Welsh Presbyterian areas at Manipur Cachar road. So Wattkin shifted his mission headquarter from Senvon to Tinsung village. He also changed the name of his mission to North East India General Mission (NEIGM) from Thado-Kuki Pioneer Mission in 1924.

In 1926, a dispute broke out within the NEIGM over the use of funds. Therefore, Wattkin left NEIGM and formed Indo-Burma Pioneer Mission (IBPM). After the division of NEIGM and IBPM, the former inherited the larger proportion of mission property. It includes churches, school, office building which belongs to the Paites, the Hmars and the Thado-Kukis and headquarter at old Churachandpur. In the meantime home Board of Welsh Mission sent Reverend Dinwiddie to visit the NEIGM headquarter in Manipur. Unfortunately, he died of cholera at Champhai village in Mizoram and was buried at Aizawl Missionary Cemetery. A note inside his diary was found after his dead. It reads: "the basic need of NEIGM is Bible school." Thereafter a bible school was established at Lakhimpur and named after him as Dinwiddie Memorial Bible School. Later, the school was shifted to the Headquarter of NEIGM at Nehru Marg in Churachandpur in 1990. Before shifting to Churachandpur the NEIGM have changed to Evangelical Congregational Church of India (ECCI) in 1986. Now the ECCI is affiliated to Evangelical Fellowship of India and its constituent members are Evangelical Organization Church (EOC), Kuki Christian Church (KCA), Evangelical Synod Church (ESC), Evangelical Assembly Church (EAC) and the United Evangelical Church (UEC).

The Baites embraced Christianity only in 1944. The first Baite who became Christian was Jamsho Baite of Aiga Pural Village (a remote hilly village in Manipur north). Now, almost all the Baites are Christian. At first the Baites were associated with the Thadou-Kukis and was a constituent member of the North East Kuki Baptist Association Manipur (NEKBAM). The Baites in Manipur South District (now Churachandpur) were also associated with the Convention Church and Revival Church. Some of the Baites were also in Roman Catholic Church. There are five Baite ordained father and three nuns in the Roman Catholic Church in Manipur.

After a long association with the Thadou-Kukis in NEKBAM and other church or association, the Baite people felt the necessity of forming their own Christian church for the Ministry of God. Consequently, a meeting was held at Seimunjang village in Churachandpur district under the tutelage of Pu Thongjathang Baite on October, 1973. The meeting discussed the imperatives to establish a separate church for the Baites and agreed on the name of the Baite church.

The meeting unanimously agreed to form Eastern Manipur Baptist Association (EMBA) and second meeting was held at Boljang Tampak village under Tengnoupal District (now Chandel District) on March 7, 1974. Finally, the setting up of the Baites' own Christian Church was declared in a meeting of the Eastern Manipur Baptist Association (EMBA) on October 16, 1974 at Chingphei Village in Ukhrul district.

In the following year, the Baite people sought affiliation of their church the EMBA to the Manipur Baptist Convention (MBC). After sometime, the Baites decided to retract affiliation of their church from Manipur Baptist Convention and instead affiliated to Evangelical Congregational Church of America. So, in the year 1986, the Baites submitted an application to Evangelical Congregational Church of America, Myartown for direct affiliation of their church. However, the application was returned to Evangelical Congregational Church of India (ECCI). On April 3, 1987, the leaders of Evangelical Congregational Church of India considered the application for the recognition or affiliation of Eastern Manipur Baptist Association. The leaders resolved that the application would be accepted if the Eastern Manipur Baptist Association fulfills the following terms and conditions: (i) Doctrine statement of Evangelical Congregational Church of India (ECCI); (ii) Local church administration to be under the leadership of the elders; (iii) Baptist conversion should be submersion as well as sprinkle; (iv) Lord's supper should be administered by ordained pastor alone; (v) marriage notice for two weeks; (vi) Ex-communication period to be at least for one or two month, and (vii) Regular and full tithes collection from members.

The leaders of the Eastern Manipur Baptist Association sat an emergency meeting on April 28, 1987 to discuss the terms and conditions given to them for recognition of their church. After a long discussion, the meeting resolved to change the name of their church the Eastern Manipur Baptist Association (EMBA) to Evangelical Church of Manipur (ECM). Thus, EMBA was changed to ECM and got an affiliation to Evangelical Congregational Church of India (ECCI) on May 1, 1989 at Grace English School, Sugnu. After a decade of association with the Evangelical Congregational Church of India, the Baite people abandoned their own denomination and merged to Presbyterian Church of India (Mizoram Synod). Again after five years of association with the Presbyterian Church of India Mizoram Synod, the Baites formed their own denomination as Eastern Manipur Presbyterian Church (EMPC). Now EMPC has its head office at B. Phaicham village in Churachandpur district of Manipur.

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IV. Influence of Christianity on the Baites

When Christianity made its foray in the tribal areas of Northeast India in general, and Manipur in particular, most of the tribes began to abandon their old faith and embraced Christianity. The Baites too, abandoned their old primordial religion or belief and accepted Christianity. As the Baites are the people who offer sacrifices to the demons or the evil spirits both benevolent and malevolent they did not face difficulties in converting to the Christian faith because there are striking similarities in the nature of worship and ritual feasts between Christianity and indigenous practices. Every conversion to Christianity (as religion) was presumed to be setting oneself free from the oppressive hands of the evil spirits or the Satan. The Baites regarded Christianity as their own religion and are distancing from anything that has connection with their traditional religion. In the old belief system of the Baites, superstition, taboos and fear of certain place, big trees, dense forest, and other unnatural places as the abode of evil spirit are common. The coming of Christianity upturned the whole belief and the worldview. For many people death was no longer a horrible thing because the torture of the soul on its way to heaven or *Piel gal* by the *Khulsamnu* (evil Goddess) is no more there, rather the Baites can now hope for heavenly bliss and resurrection. After converting to Christianity the Baites have realized the futility of performing rituals and seeking blessings, throwing grand feasts to get into heaven and for good health.

The coming of Christianity has brought great changes in the traditional socio-cultural life of the Baites. Before converting to Christianity the *Sawm* used to play an important role – both on the events relating to life and death. With the coming of Christianity the institution of *Sawm* is gradually disappearing from the Baite life. Several organizations, mostly Christian-centered, such as Christian Youth Societies, youth clubs, the churches, and the schools are becoming the nodal of all social activities. Christianity also brought great changes in the role and the position of women in the Baites family. Traditionally women were treated as a mere economic helper as well as housewife. But today women are playing a great role in the religious, social, economic and political matters apart from engaging in domestic services and duty as housewife.

There is no more traditional feast and festivals, particularly *Chang-Aih*, *Sa-Aih*, *Chon* and *Lawm Zuneh*, though some festivals such as *Chavang Kut*, *Mim Kut*, are observed till today. But people pray to God in place of offering some sacrifices to the unknown god or some spiritual beings. Traditional *Zu* which used to be heavily consumed during such festivals have been abandoned and is replaced by tea and cake. Celebration of Christmas has replaced the traditional Baites festivals.

Traditional Baites houses made of bamboo splits with wooden posts and decorated with the skulls of the animals is slowly disappearing. According to the old customs the dead body used to be buried in the courtyard of the houses, but today dead body is buried at village cemetery or a cemetery reserved for this. Traditionally the Baites divides death into two kinds: *Thise* (unnatural death) and *Thipha* (natural death). *Thise* is buried outside the village and *Thipha* in the court yard of the houses. With the adoption of Christianity, the categorization of death into *Thise* and *Thipha* has disappeared. This distinction is no longer in use and all dead receives equal attention of the church irrespective of the nature of death.

The old tradition also predicates that a man has to marry the daughter of his maternal uncle, whether they have affection and love for each other or not. Since the coming of Christianity, this custom is no more in practice. Now almost all the marriages among the Baites are of personal choice, and love marriages are the trend. Even the selection of mate can be from other tribe or community. In the old Baite tradition if a husband dies, the unmarried younger brother of the deceased husband is bound to marry the widow. But since conversion to Christianity these old customs are discarded and traditional clan exogamy has become less rigid. It has become prestigious and fashionable for young couple to marry and be blessed in the church. The custom of killing many animals for the events and drinking of *Zu* is being replaced by only tea party. Christian marriage shows the difference: of being spiritual, economical and sociable. Marriage is solemnized by the pastor.

The Baite males traditionally keep their hair long, combed back and tied in the knot on the nap of the neck. But now, all men cut their hair in western style. As soon as men become Christian he is supposed to cut his hair. The traditional dress of Baite women consists of kilt-shaped piece of red cloth reaching from below the navel to half way down the thigh called *Nihsen*, and over the breast another sheet is worn reaching up to the knee. The hair is worn long and parted in the centre, the two parted portion are plaited across behind and brought round over the front of the forehead, where meeting ends are tied together making a very pretty coiffure. Today no women of the younger generation used *Nihsan* and have such traditional hair style. Beside there are Baite students who go out to other places for higher education. Contacts with other communities and civilization have broadened the mental horizon of many Baites. Ironically, exposure to other culture also brings forth new things: both good and bad. Adoption of western dresses and even dance are widely in practice.

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V. Concluding Remark

The study finds the socio-religious and cultural changes among tribal of Manipur in general, and Baites in particular, are the handiwork of western Christian missionaries. Christianity has brought light of life among the Baites who are once in darkness by worshiping unseen spirits. It has also brought hope for resurrection and eternal life in heaven after physical death. But there are certain drawbacks of this otherwise much appreciated trend. The influence of Christianity is so great that the younger generation of the Baites have no knowledge of the rich Baite tradition – customs of marriage, sacrifices, traditional youth organization and many other practices.

The real challenge before the Baites lies in judiciously intermingling the Christian values and worldviews with the traditional practices. Every tradition has its own weaknesses and strength. Total assimilation of an external religion and worldview, as well as a total discarding of one's tradition, culture and worldviews, are both extreme forms of social transformation. To make judicious choices of social and cultural transformation is always a difficult task. This challenge lies not only before the Baites, but also among different tribes and communities of Manipur, including the majority Hindu Meiteis.

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