

Christianization of the Aimol Tribal People of Manipur and its impact on the Aimol Society

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Abstract: *The Aimol tribal people are an indigenous tribal community in the state of Manipur, India that has its own culture, tradition, language, social norms, aesthetics, beliefs and history. They are one of the smaller tribes of Manipur. The Aimols are classified under the Tibeto-Burman family of Mongoloid racial group and language group. The main objective of this paper is an attempt to shine light on the history of the arrival of Christianity among the Aimol people and its impact on the Aimol tribal society. This study was conducted in Manipur across the settlement of the Aimol community. The methodology is a descriptive approach through colonial records, oral history, maps, folklore, myth, oral traditions, music, interviews, exploration and field study. This paper is among the few written on the Aimol tribe and needs further research and investigation. Hopefully, this paper will facilitate further interest, research and study among the literary world.*

Keywords: Aimol, Tribe, Religion, Culture, Community, Change, Christianization

Christianity in Manipur was first introduced by a British man named William Pettigrew. He was born on 5th January, 1869 in Edinburgh, Scotland. From 1894 onwards, he worked with the 'American Baptist Foreign Mission' Society. He was inspired to travel to Manipur and follow through with his missionary work there. He finally landed in Manipur on 6th February, 1894. Reaching Imphal, William Pettigrew opened a school 'Pettigrew School' in Imphal. There he taught Bengali and later taught Manipuri after learning and writing Meitei primers, grammar, basic arithmetic and English-Bengali-Manipuri dictionary. After some time, the Political Agent Major Maxwell told William Pettigrew to close down the school but he was allowed to stay in Imphal.¹ While his first attempt at evangelizing the people at Imphal valley became futile, he turned his head towards the hilly regions of the state which was predominantly settled by

hill tribesmen. Therefore he shifted his direction to the hilly region and moved to the Ukhrul region of Manipur. It was in Ukhrul that his missionary work was successful and fruitful.

Introduction of Christianity among the Aimol People

The arrival of Christianity among the Aimol people did not happen exclusively to the tribe but rather collectively among the Aimols and its kindred tribes known as *Riam/Rem*. The collective tribes of *Riam/Rem* consist of six tribes namely Kom, Aimol, Chiru, Koireng, Kharam and Purum. These *Riam/Rem* tribes share cultural, tradition and lingual similarity among them. They also share the common culture and history. In other words, *Riam/Rem* tribes are of the same ancestry and are kindred tribes.² Therefore, influence of Christianity approximately reached each *Riam/Rem* tribes at the same time. The circumstances and factors that gave way for the foundation of Christianity and its impact among the Aimol people and the *Riam/Rem* people can be attributed to a number of favourable conditions. They are -

1. The Modern Missionary Movement gave momentum and propulsion for the growth of Christianity in Manipur. Other than William Pettigrew, other missionaries like U.M. Fox and Dr. Crozier played a very important role in spreading the gospel especially among the hill areas of Manipur and conversion of tribesmen. The literary contribution of William Pettigrew and the translation of the Bible in different languages made things easier for the *Riam/Rem* tribes. The gospel became much easier for them to understand and accept. Thus, translation of the Bible and hymnals to the local *Riam/Rem* dialects became a successful catalyst for the conversion of Riam tribes without much difficulties and hindrances.
2. The educational contribution of William Pettigrew in which *Riam/Rem* students like Teba and Longkhobel Karong were trained to write their own and also other languages further the mission of conversion among the *Riam/Rem* tribes.
3. Teba Karoung and Longkhobel Karoung, local tribesmen contributed immensely to the foundation, growth and conversion of the *Riam/Rem* people. They both received education and training from the Pettigrew Mission School and graduated in 1912. After completion of their studies, they were given approval to practice evangelical work.³ From 1913 onwards, they both set out to preach and propagate the gospel in hill areas of Manipur. Longkhobel Karong return to his native village of Makokching (Sardar Hills) and established a church in 1917. On the other hand, Teba Karoung established a church in Sengpanjar Village (near Moirang) in the year 1915.⁴ The whole village of Sengpanjar embrace Christianity. Thus, the contribution of these two pioneers paves the way for the evangelisation of the rest of the *Riam/Rem* people. They also pave the way for the foundation of the Kom Rem Baptist Churches Association

(KRBCA).

4. The Mission Centre in Kangpokpi town and the establishment of new schools lured in many *Riam/Rem* enthusiasts for training in the field of literature, evangelism, nursing and other field of interest. William Pettigrew mentioned in a report dated May, 1931 that a good number of *Riam/Rem* people were working with the American Baptist Association. These new graduates were passionate and full of enthusiasm. They served as a catalyst for spreading Christianity directly or indirectly. They took their knowledge and expertise to their respective villages or wherever they went thus helping to propagate the new faith.
5. The founding of Manipur Baptist Association also gave impetus to the expansion of Christianity among the *Riam/Rem* people. Many evangelists working under this association put effort to establish new churches across villages in Manipur. The effort of the Manipur Baptist Association made a huge impact on many *Riam/Rem* villages. The mass movement of embracing the Christian faith in the hill areas of Manipur created a domino effect. When one village converted to the new faith, the neighbouring villages also feel the need to embrace the new faith and thus followed suit. Also, when village chiefs accepted the new faith, it is likely that the whole village would convert whether they liked it or not.
6. The founding of Kom Rem Baptist Churches Association (KRBCA) also brought many *Riam/Rem* villages to the new faith. The Association sent missionaries, preachers and evangelists to villages of all the tribes of *Riam/Rem*. This mission proved to be a very successful. Today almost the entirety of the *Riam/Rem* people subscribe to the Christian faith. The formation of KRBCA was a watershed moment in the history of Christianity among the Aimol and the *Riam/Rem* people.⁵
7. The advent of Christianity and its impact on the Aimol tribal society has brought a new era which would bring about a new long lasting change among the Aimol community. The new religion adopted in the early the 20th Century would come to define the outlook, traditions, cultures, lifestyle and politics of the Aimol people.

There are fourteen churches under Aimol Baptist Association in Manipur. Also there is one Catholic Church.⁶ They are -⁷

1. Aimol Khullen Baptist Church
2. Aimol Chandonpokpi Baptist Church
3. Aimol Ngairong Baptist Church
4. Aimol Tampak Baptist Church
5. Aimol Chingnunghut Baptist Church
6. Aimol Khomajai Baptist Church
7. Aimol Kumbirei Baptist Church
8. Aimol Satu Baptist Church
9. Aimol Unapal Baptist Church

10. Aimol Khudengthabi Baptist Church
11. Aimol Khodomphai Baptist Church
12. Louchulbung Baptist Church
13. Tuikhang Aimol Baptist Church
14. Kha Aimol Baptist Church
15. Tuikhang Aimol Catholic Church

Impact of Christianity and its influence on the life of the Aimol people

William Pettigrew introduction and propagation of Christianity in Manipur would change the cultural landscape of Manipur especially among the indigenous hill tribes of Manipur. Christianity gave rise to transformation of many traditions of the Aimol people of Manipur. It can be said that various socio-cultural aspects of the Aimol tribe have undergone drastic changes with the Aimol people conversion to Christianity. The Aimol people practised animism before their conversion to Christianity but despite their strong animistic belief system, the Christian missionaries were able to convince and convert the Aimol people to the Christian faith. The old religion practiced by the Aimol people was full of rituals, sacrificial practices, superstitions and fear. They would spend a lot of their time in festivity and performing rituals. When the missionaries came, their Christian message of freedom from fear, superstitions, rituals and evil spirits was very appealing to the Aimol people. There was a wave of conversion of the Aimol people in the early part of the 20th century. However, there was also confusion, divisions, disagreement and dissent among the Aimol people at the beginning of the introduction of Christianity among the Aimol community.

The whole Aimol community slowly but gradually accepted Christianity and this event became the most significant period in the cultural history of the tribe and its path into the future. It was a period of transformation among the Aimol people not only religion wise but society. According to M.M. Thomas, 'for the tribal people Christianity came as a liberator from spiritual and social demons'. According to Elwin, 'Conversion to Christianity has made other changes: the stress on personal salvation has introduced a new individualism in the place of former community spirit'. Contribution of Christianity towards the process of modernization of the Aimol people is also momentous. The early missionaries thought that the tribal people conversion to Christianity and Christian style education will lead to the development of the tribal community. The native's conversion to Christianity was expected to stop their old ways of life, practices, rituals, etc. and slowly and gradually eradicate from their life. According to F.S. Downs, 'This new order ushered in a period of tremendous change. Christianity provided the means whereby the people of the region were able to accommodate themselves to the new world brought by the British.'

Christianity had its impact on the Aimol people in various dimensions. The Christian missionaries made the deepest impact on the Aimols since they were

most closely in contact with the people. In fact, the forerunners of change among the Aimols beliefs and way of life were the missionaries and not the administrators. However, while the Christian missionaries made a great impact on the Aimol community, they were also responsible for the disappearance of many aspects of Aimol culture and traditions. Aimol folk music, folklore, folkdance, festivals and many other social events were considered as undesirable and taboo by the Christian missionaries and also by the new converts. Nevertheless, the advent of Christianity among the Aimol people of Manipur marks a landmark event in the history of Aimol people. It marks a tremendous change on the tradition tribal society. Christianity brought change in various aspects of the society like education, health care, personal development, modernisation, women education, social life, ideals and aspirations, political awareness, etc. Some of the most important changes and impact brought by Christianity on the Aimol people are -

Religious Transformation of the Aimol People

In order to comprehensively understand the impact of Christianity on the Aimol culture, one need to be acquainted to the old Aimol cultures and ethos. The traditional form of religion practiced by the Aimol people is 'Animism'. The Aimol people religious life mainly consists of attributing divine energy to worship of nature, worship of ancestors and natural elements. They believed in the fear of spirits, witches, sorcerers and witchdoctors. Their lives revolve around the supposed activities of the spirit world. They believe every sickness or misfortunes are the result of the malicious activities of an evil spirit and good fortune is because they have performed the right rituals or done the right appeasement to the evil spirit. They would consult a priest in order to avoid misfortunes, sickness and afflictions.⁸ Taboos and gennas were a common feature of the Aimol traditional religion. For example, it is forbidden and considered a taboo for a person belonging to the clan of 'Kamsakoi' or Village Chief to touch or eat goat and tigers meat.⁹ Therefore, the Aimol society was full of superstitions and taboos. The Aimol people believed in the supreme God called 'Pathian'. They believed that 'Pathian' possessed unparalleled power. There were also many gods and goddess, spirits whom the Aimols believed existed before the dawn of Christianity in their lives.¹⁰

Despite their strong animistic belief system, the Christian missionaries were able to convert the whole Aimol population slowly but gradually. Today close to a hundred per cent of the Aimol population practice Christianity. With the acceptance of their new faith, the Aimols gave up their tribal ways of life like brewing and drinking wine, superstitions, rituals, sacrifices and also stopped observing their tribal festivals, songs and dances. Their moral and religion was gradually replaced by the Christian principles. They were taught to respect and follow the teaching of Christ and that Jesus Christ was their only way to life, salvation and heaven. In their old traditional faith, an Aimol life was full of fear

and innumerable superstitions, sacrifices to the spirits, practice of divination and omen. Thus today almost all their ancestors' religious rituals and practices have disappeared among the Aimol tribal community. Michael Oppitz pointed out that, 'It is almost 135 years now, so every social, cultural, economic and even political system is completely changed by the Christian pattern'.¹¹ In the present life of an Aimol society, social occasions like weddings, birthdays, child christening, house warming, anniversaries, birth and death, etc. are all performed and observed in line with Christian faith. In other words, their worship systems, dressings, community life, structure and their world view are all based on the Christian norms and standards.¹²

Socio-Cultural Changes in Aimol Society

One of the noteworthy impacts of Christianity on the Aimol people is the transformation from primitive tribal and pastoral society to relatively modern way of life. The Christian missionaries brought in radical change and transformed the social and cultural life of the Aimol people. W.F. Ogburn observes that 'all social change takes place through the medium of ideas giving primacy to the ideological factor of social change'.¹³ When the Christian missionaries came to the Aimol people with education, medicine and healthcare the Aimols were intrigued and fascinated by this modernity. They were immediately attracted by these aspects of modern lifestyle since the Aimols had lived their whole life in a primitive tribal way of life. The Christian missionaries also gave the people important and valuable lessons on hygiene, cleanliness, education and medicine based on science and encouraged them to abandon and renounce their old habits, customs and superstitions. They were also told that their old ways were detrimental to their new found religion and their future. Also prior to their conversion to Christianity the Aimols lived a life of constant economic and social uncertainty as they were at constant conflict with either neighbouring villages or with other tribal groups. Hence their new faith brought them relative peace and harmony in their village and society. In the ancient days they had no separate place for cattle, pigs, and fowls, they all lived together in the same house. But today the condition is entirely different. Today in an Aimol village, they have arrangement for separate stables, poultry and pens, houses are equipped with modern fittings, bathrooms, lavatories, the style and mode of living has changed greatly.¹⁴

According to Sinha, 'Christianity has provided the tribal Christians with a new sense of identity, a window to the modern world and an affiliation to the larger Christian world religion'. In regards to social and customary traditions like marriage, birth, funerals, etc. have been replaced by biblical norms and rules. Dances and folk songs performed during socio-cultural events in the pre-Christian era were either banned or outlawed though in some cases they were modified to conform to the rules and teachings of Christianity. Traditional festivals are observed but without the traditional rites and rituals. Today

integrated form of traditional songs and dances are performed with sensibility to their Christian faith to preserve the identity and integrity of the Aimol tribe.¹⁵ Marriages were also very complicated in the pre-Christian era. With the advent of Christianity, marriages are held in a much simpler and organised manner. Marriages today are held mostly in a church presided over by the local Christian pastor or priest. Alcohol which used to be served during engagement and also weddings has been replaced by tea or communal feast. In regards to clothing, the Aimols experienced a significant change in their attires. The Aimols have a number of traditional dresses worn by males and female members in their daily life. The traditional attires of the Aimols mostly include a cloth used to wrap around the body called 'Puanvong' for women and 'Diar' for men, a shawl called 'Puansi' for both men and women, a turban or headdress called 'Lukowm' and a cloth belt called 'Kowngkhit'. They also wore tribal ornaments made from stones, plants and animals parts which to them had spiritual connotation. But with the arrival of Christianity, people were prevented from wearing these ornaments. The weavings with conspicuous designs and colours and the dyeing of clothes and dresses for religious ceremonies were all discouraged. Nevertheless the Aimols still wore their traditional clothing and attires however they have been modified and influence by western clothing. Lastly, their traditional houses and premises had also undergone significant modification and transformation. But at the same time the Aimol tribal people are also trying to preserve their culture and heritage. Nevertheless, the Aimols were undoubtedly influenced by an external force that penetrated amongst them resulting in several constructive socio-cultural transformations. The Aimol tribal people had been virtually transformed traditionally, culturally, socially, educationally, economically and religiously.¹⁶ Thus, introduction of Christianity brought a great transformation in the socio-cultural life of the Aimol society.

Educational Fervour among the Aimol People

When the Christian missionaries came to Manipur, one of their primary focuses was literacy. They learnt that if the tribal people were to worship God, they must be able to read and write. Therefore, missionaries in the tribal region of Manipur first focus on education and school projects as literacy among the tribal people would make it easier to propagate Christianity. Education has always been an integral part of the missionary movement and education was considered as one of the best tools for evangelism and conversion. Thus school and modern education was introduced wherever the missionaries went.¹⁷ The Christian missionaries put their best foot forward and exerted themselves in the first place to educate those people who did not even know or understand the necessity and importance of literacy. And the English education imparted by the Mission school began to pay off in more than one sense.¹⁸

Before the introduction of modern education to the Aimol people, the Aimols have neither written knowledge nor any written records. They only spoke their

dialect and any historical records of their past was solely derived from oral history, folksongs and legends. Therefore the first thing the missionaries did was to translate their tribal dialects in writing in Roman scripts. William Pettigrew became synonymous with regard to the growth of education in Manipur but this was also the means he employed to spread the Gospel among the people. He believed that the Gospel would bring conviction in their heart to come to grips with reality and give up their superstitions. Earlier the Aimol youth were imparted an informal and traditional education in the village dormitories. The Aimol young men were primarily given lessons by the village elders and priests on their tribal way of life, their responsibility towards their family and community, survival skills like hunting, fishing and foraging, etc. They were also given lessons on their tribal religions and social protocols. The education imparted to women on the other hand was strictly restricted to being a good daughter and a wife. They were mostly taught to weave and perform household chores. With the introduction of modern schools, the traditional method of imparting education was slowly replaced. Christianity and modern education went hand in hand among the Aimols. The first converts among the Aimol people became pioneers of education for their people. They also shaped the educational perspective to a different level with a focus towards higher education at the level of the university. It can be concluded that without Christianity, modern education would not be able to succeed among the Aimols and vice versa. Christianity and modern education also contributed to the development of literature and writing, hymns and poems, etc.¹⁹ Thus, it is true that the missionaries laid the foundation of modern education among the Aimol people. The educational progress would have never been the same if not for the ground-work laid by the missionaries. In the words of B.D. Sharma, 'It is education more than anything else that shapes the new tribal society. In some tribal areas, particularly in the North-East, education played a big role in moulding the natives. A beginning was made by the missionaries as early as the eighteenth century'.²⁰ Gangmumei Kamei mentions that western education is a vehicle of social change.²¹ Today, the Aimol society highly value modern education as the pillar that would uplift their community. Education has also enhanced their integrity, dignity and self-determination. Modern education has also help and strengthens the community to be prepared for any challenges faced in the contemporary world.²²

Aimol Women Empowerment and Participation

Human history shows that man dominates the world of expression to outsiders at different levels of interactions. The females, being a dominated group are expected to express their life experiences in a male defined model. But the women's life experiences cannot be expressed through such male dominated model. So the women do not get any medium to express their views and they get muted. The status of women in society remained a significant reflection of

the level of social justice in that society. The Aimol tribal community is a very patriarchal society. The family, social system and the culture of Aimol society is male dominated through and through. As the head of the family, a man controls the family properties, wife or female members of the family, children, finance and social welfare of the family. The life of an Aimol woman before the arrival of Christianity was confine to her house. Women were taught and expected to be committed only to their families and household chores. They were not encouraged to think in the wider interest of the society. In most cases, they were expected and required to remain quiet in any matters in the society. Also as women they have very few choices they can make. Their life was mostly limited to child bearing and taking care of the family at home. The Aimol society wanted women to be loyal to the family more than pursuing their individual interests. She was expected to give her absolute priority to her husband.²³ Moreover in the old days education for women was uncommon. S. Manickam is of the opinion that, before and at the beginning of the 19th century, the position of the Indian women was pathetic. He further states that the advent of a son was welcomed with great happiness,²⁴ whereas the birth of a girl baby was apparently not counted as a blessing.²⁵

V.S. Azariah said that, 'Christians were everywhere the first to break the shackles in which the women were bound and set them free to know and understand the world.'²⁶ He further says that, 'the education of a single girl means the uplifting of the whole family.' In the life of an Aimol woman, Christianity became the channel of change and progress in their social status. S. Manickam points out that, Christian missionaries were the ideal pioneers in the sphere of female education. Arthur Jeyakumar also says that, 'Christian Missions were pioneers in the field of women's education.'²⁷ Samuel Jayakumar also shares an opinion that, 'Female education brought dignity and identity to future wives and mothers'. He further states that, 'a girl who had been educated had a remarkable influence in her home village'.²⁸ Therefore, after taking into account all the facts provided by various scholars and intellectuals, we can come to the conclusion that the life of an Aimol woman change for the better after the adoption of Christianity. Education helps an Aimol woman to contribute towards her family financially, helps in educating her children; contribute towards her village and society and thereby garnering respect not only from her family and village folk but more importantly, the men folk. The new found social and educational fervour also paved the way for Aimol women to participate in village movement and ministry. Today, many Aimol women work and serve in many Christian ministries. They have shown and proven their capability by their sheer hard work and determination. According to Sakhi M. Athyal, 'Indian women faced several obstacles in their ministry. People questioned their intellectual abilities; women were called 'water buffaloes', but they proved themselves as capable of learning, growing and serving just as men.'²⁹ To conclude the narration, Aimol women though still have a long way

in their strife for equality, they have never come closer. Today, there are families where the women of the house are sole earners of the family and thrive in every walk of life. Aimol women have become doctors, nurses, teachers, scholars, preachers, missionaries, social workers, and Govt. officers. Thus, it can be rightly said that all these are due to the efforts of Christian missionaries and their contribution to women education and women empowerment.

Conclusion

According to the ethnologies language of the world, 17th edition (2013), the Aimol language is included among the endangered having less than 6000 speakers worldwide as per the 2001 census. Therefore, this research paper will be a concerted effort to document the Aimol history and preserve the heritage of the Aimol people. The tribal culture and ways of life of the Aimol community have been eroded and distorted by modernity and foreign values. Though slowly fading amidst the arrival of Christian proselyte and adoption of Christianize cultural assimilation, the Aimols still preserve many of their traditional tribal customs and traditions. The old laws and practices are regarded as important elements to their solidarity and identity. Therefore, a sincere and earnest effort has to be put to revive and preserve the history of the Aimol tribe. Thus, it is our duty to unearth and bring consciousness of the Aimol people to the world. Moreover, this study would help bring the culture of Aimol people not only to the State of Manipur but also India and beyond.

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