



Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion

**A Clash of Worldviews:
The Impact of the Notion of Progress on Naga Culture, 1832-1947**

Tezenlo Thong
tthong@rmcumc.org

Introduction

A worldview necessarily exists in every culture and serves as a conduit through which “reality” is perceived. It develops under the milieu of a world in which it exists and is shaped by the vicissitudes of events.¹ Put it differently, every culture operates from a particular worldview. The worldview then determines the way individuals perceive and relate to one another and the

¹Wilhelm Dilthey, *Dilthey's Philosophy of Existence: An Introduction to Weltanschauungslehre*, trans. with Introduction, William Kluback and Martin Weinbaum (New York: Bookman Associates, 1957).

world around them. “The worldview of a group of people,” writes Doug Hewitt, “underlies every aspect of their life – their language, social system, religious beliefs, even the way they go about their daily life.”² As such, the importance of a worldview cannot be overstated, because our worldview inevitably influences the way we think, perceive and act.

A Clash of Worldviews

The contact between the Euro-American West and the colonized peoples, no less the Nagas, beginning with the era of European colonization and continuing today in an age of globalization, has not simply created a clash but has had grave cultural, political, physical and psychological consequences for the colonized.³ Where a people’s worldview is undermined or replaced, especially when done rapidly or by force, the people experience cultural disruption, dislocation and trauma.⁴

²Hewitt, “A Clash Of Worldviews: Experiences From Teaching Aboriginal Students,” *Theory Into Practice* 39, no. 2 (2000): 111.

³I will use third person pronouns with reference to Nagas. However, I am a Naga, born and raised in Nagaland, and a product or victim of the social transformation of the very culture that I am writing about. So, besides the insights gained from my interviews with Naga elders during the course of my research for a doctoral dissertation in 2007, I also drew out of my existential experience and reality as a Naga. With reference to the Nagas, the footnotes are thin, because there are hardly any extensive studies done by the Nagas themselves. In this sense, this paper is “seminal.”

⁴Michael B. Salzman, “Cultural Trauma and Recovery,” *Trauma, Violence, and Abuse* 2, no. 2 (2001): 172-191.

Consequent upon the contact with the West, the Nagas and their worldview were dismissed, stereotyped and demonized.⁵ As a result, today much of their worldview has been skewed, altered or replaced by their colonizers' worldview. Naga cultural and political structures and perspectives have been gradually eroded. Henry Balfour rightly expressed his fear that “an overdose of civilization is likely to have disastrous effect” on the Nagas.⁶ I will examine the impact of the imposition of Western worldview, especially relating to the notion of progress. Emphasis will be given on how the perception of an absence of progress among Nagas led to the implementation of “progressive” projects by Western intruders that transformed the Naga way of thinking and living. Arguably, there are some post-Western colonial factors contributing to the present Naga predicament, but the scope of this exploration is limited to the Western colonial period between 1832 and 1947.

The Notion of Progress in a Modern Western Worldview

The idea of progress is a modern Western notion that life is always improving and advancing toward an ideal state as exemplified by the Marxist idea of a classless society or Francis Fukuyama's idea of “the end of history.”⁷ It is a vital modern concept which underlies

⁵In general, I use “West” to refer to the “Euro-American” West. In a limited sense, I use it to mean the worldview of American missionaries and British colonial administrators and military personnel who represented their cultures in the Naga Hills.

⁶Balfour, “Presidential Address: The Welfare of Primitive Peoples,” *Folklore* 34, no. 1 (Mar. 31, 1923): 17.

⁷Fukuyama has posited the Western liberal democracy as “the end point of mankind's ideological evolution” and “the final form of human government.” To be fair, he does not believe that the form of

geographic explorations, scientific and technological inventions, as well as the harnessing of nature in order to increase the ease and comfort of human beings'. The term was coined and attained high political and religious value in the West, often being used interchangeably with notions of development, civilization, modernization, westernization or industrialization.⁸ Today, because of its widespread use and seemingly obvious connotation, "most hold it unconsciously and therefore unquestionably."⁹ Nonetheless, when the idea is examined under closer scrutiny, "it becomes elusive in its meaning, application, and moral evaluation."¹⁰

The notion of progress is crucial for understanding the modern Western worldview, because this progress-orientation permeates all aspects of life and "raises virtually all of the fundamental intellectual issues of our time."¹¹ It has come to serve as "a criterion of all activity"¹² and has been crucial in generating change in economic, institutional, and political spheres in both the Western and westernized world.¹³ Indeed, the notion of progress not only informs most dominant modern narratives, but it is also essential to Western-inspired

democracy as we know today is perfect, but he believes that it has the potential for perfection. See Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

⁸With little regard for their technical definitions, I will use the terms interchangeably in this paper.

⁹Sidney Pollard, *The Idea of Progress: History and Society* (New York: Penguin, 1968), x.

¹⁰Timo Airaksinen, review of *Progress and Its Discontents*, by Gabriel Almond, Marvin Chodorow and Roy H. Pearce, eds., *Isis* 74: 3 (1983), 422.

¹¹Bruce Mazlish, "Progress: A Historical and Critical Perspective," in *Progress: Fact or Illusion?* ed. Leo Marx and Bruce Mazlish (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 7.

¹²Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Millennium and Utopia: A Study in the Background of the Idea of Progress* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949), 1.

¹³Norgaard, *Development Betrayed: The End of Progress and a Co-evolutionary Revisioning of the Future* (London: Routledge, 1994), 49.

worldviews. J.B. Bury and Robert Nisbet, arguably the two most well-known authorities on the subject, share this view. Bury refers to the idea of progress as “the animating and controlling idea of western civilization.”¹⁴ Nisbet concurs saying, “no single idea has been more important than...the idea of progress in Western civilization.”¹⁵

The Notion of Progress and Colonialism

The notion of progress and colonialism are inseparably intertwined and the two forces co-exist symbiotically. On one hand colonialism is an offshoot of the notion of progress. Richard Norgaard has argued, “Belief in progress provided the justification for Westerners to expand the geographical domain of modernity.”¹⁶ This idea of progress buoyed Europe and provided the spirit, confidence, and impetus to undertake exploration and adventure in search of *El Dorado*. An ideology of progress served in that context to promote “violent aggression by justifying colonialism through claims that Western civilization is the epitome of all that is desirable.”¹⁷

On the other hand, the idea of progress came to the colonized with colonialism. Put differently, colonialism served as the conduit that carried and delivered the notion of progress from the West to the colonized world with the firm belief that this “Western style of progress

¹⁴Beard, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry Into Its Origin and Growth* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1932), vii.

¹⁵Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 4.

¹⁶Norgaard, *Development Betrayed*, 52.

¹⁷Leonard, *Women, Technology and the Myth of Progress* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), 180.

was possible for all.”¹⁸ The idea was “imperialistically imposed on the rest of the world” and is now being sold “to colonized peoples as ‘development.’”¹⁹ According to Crawford Young, the idea was carried to the colonized world “in the baggage trains of imperial conquest beginning in the fifteenth century.”²⁰

Nagas and Their Contact with the West

The Nagas consist of about forty ethnic groups, numbering approximately three million people.²¹ Their homeland, known as the Naga Hills during the British colonization, is bordered by India in the southwest, China in the north and Myanmar in the east.²² Politically Nagas live in a number of colonially segmented regions within India and Myanmar. The Nagas in India alone live in four different states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. In Myanmar, they inhabit the provinces of Sagiang and Kachin.

¹⁸Vandana Shiva, “Development as a New Project of Western Patriarchy” in *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, ed. Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990), 190.

¹⁹Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia & God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 174, 199.

²⁰Young, “The Idea of Progress in the Third World,” in *Progress and Its Discontent*, ed. Gabriel A. Almond, Marvin Chodorow and Roy Harvey Pearce (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1982), 87.

²¹The political fragmentation of Naga homeland makes it difficult to ascertain their population. The restrictive situation in Myanmar prevents anyone from knowing the approximate number of Nagas in that country. So the total Naga population can only be at best a “guess-estimate.”

²²I use “Nagas” simply in a way that most contemporary Nagas describe themselves and aspire to be politically, geographically and culturally.

The British first invaded the Nagas in 1832.²³ For decades, the British troop undertook numerous military expeditions into Naga territories, inflicting considerable damage and suffering on the people.²⁴ It has been termed “one of the most violent chapters in the history of British conquest of the sub-continent.”²⁵ The British occupied the Naga Hills until 1947 when the Naga homeland was arbitrarily divided and transferred to India and Burma (Myanmar).

The first encounter between Western missionaries and the Nagas took place in January 1839, when an American Baptist missionary named Miles Bronson went to the Namsang Nagas in what is now Arunachal Pradesh.²⁶ However, this mission did not succeed and was terminated two years later. In March 1872, E.W. Clark established a mission station among the Aos at Molung.²⁷ Subsequently, missions were started among other Naga tribes. The American missionizing enterprise was significantly truncated with India’s independence in 1947. Under the mandate known as the *Assam Disturbed Areas Act, 1955*, the Indian government summarily expelled all foreigners including the last American missionary, Robert Delano, from Nagaland

²³James Johnstone, *My Experiences in Manipur and the Naga Hills* (Delhi: Cultural Publishing House, 1983 [1896]).

²⁴Asoso Yonuo, *The Rising Nagas: A Historical and Political Study* (Delhi: Vivek Publication House, 1974).

²⁵Sanjib Baruah, *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 104.

²⁶H.K. Barpujari, *The American Missionaries and North-East India (1836-1900)* (Guahati: Spectrum Publishers, 1986).

²⁷Joseph Puthenpurakal, *Baptist Missions in Nagaland: A Study in Historical and Ecumenical Perspective* (Calcutta: Firma KLM Private Ltd., 1984).

and imposed restrictions on all foreign citizens seeking to enter the region.²⁸ This restriction remains in effect to this day under the *Restricted Area Permit (RAP)* act.²⁹

For more than a century, Western colonial and missionary agents sought to “civilize” the “savage” Nagas. When they forced their “civilized” culture on the Nagas, the Nagas suddenly found themselves ignorant and powerless against the arbitrarily imposed paradigm. Many of their age-old traditions became outmoded. The Nagas found themselves at the mercy of the colonizers who had knowledge and skills of this new way of life. While ignorance of the new paradigm disempowered the colonized, knowledge and familiarity of it afforded power and authority to the colonizer. The pronouncement that Naga traditional myths, sacred stories, and ways of knowing were pagan, irrational, and primitive caused a sense of cultural confusion and served to invalidate the cultural values and practices that the people relied upon for guidance and strength in life.

For over a century the Nagas directly suffered the brunt of Western civilization. Not only were they colonized and proselytized by Western agents, the two World Wars had direct impacts on their life and modern history. During World War I, British colonial administrators recruited more than two thousand Nagas to serve as members of the “Labour Corps” in France.³⁰ During

²⁸L. Kari Longchar, “‘The Missionary Position’ and the Nagas,” *Morung Express*: http://www.morungexpress.com/write_wing/nagas478.html [Accessed 1 February 2010].

²⁹Reisang Vashum, *Nagas’ Rights to Self Determination: An Anthropological-historical Perspective* (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2005).

³⁰J. H. Hutton, *The Sema Nagas* (London: McMillan and Co., 1921), 173. Mr. Hutton was one of the British administrative officers in the Naga Hills during this time and was instrumental in recruiting the Nagas.

World War II, the Naga Hills witnessed one of the fiercest battles between the allied forces and the advancing Japanese army.³¹

The Colonial Perception of the Nagas

It is important to understand the perception of Nagas by Western intruders because their desire to impose the notion of progress and implement “progressive” projects stems from how the Nagas were perceived. Albert Memmi calls this colonial perception a “mythical portrait of the colonized”³² without which “the presence and conduct of the colonizer... would be shocking.”³³ The Nagas were subjected to a plethora of colonial stereotypes over the course of their extended colonization. The British and the Americans were peoples of their time who thought that their own cultures represented the pinnacle of cultural progress. Conversely, they relegated all colonized cultures, especially the indigenous cultures, to representing the lowest stages of cultural progress.³⁴

Such colonial perceptions were not simply mental images. They had serious consequences as they often lead to the implementation of colonial projects that had considerable effects on the colonized. The colonial perception of the Nagas as illiterate, savage, barbaric, and

³¹After the war, the British government built a War Cemetery in Kohima, the former British headquarters and the capital of present-day Nagaland, with 2,337 graves and memorials to the soldiers who laid down their lives. Although many Nagas fought alongside the British and lost their lives, not a single grave-stone bear a Naga name.

³²Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 79.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ninian Smart, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1995), 13.

lacking in progress led to specific actions that aimed “to raise the savage to a higher level.”³⁵ In the following pages, I present some of these colonial perceptions and how such perceived images led to progressive projects specifically aimed at raising the Nagas culturally to a “higher level.”

“Very Low in the Scale of Civilization”

One thematic connection between the agents of colonialism and proselytization is the assertion that the Nagas were uncivilized, barbaric and pagan in their entire way of thinking and living. One colonial writer described the Nagas as “very low in the scale of civilization” and deserving of careful study.³⁶ Another recommended a study of the Naga languages because, “they represent the characteristics of the earliest pre-historic periods.”³⁷ Consequently, a main goal of the British administration, as outlined by one officer, was “the introduction of civilization and Christianity among a large class of people at present hopelessly buried in barbarism and superstition.”³⁸

The missionaries were no better in their judgment and derision of Nagas and their culture. This should surprise no one, because Christianity and civilizing the “savage” went hand in hand.

³⁵Henry Balfour, “Presidential Address: The Welfare of Primitive Peoples,” *Folklore* 34 (1923): 17. Mr. Balfour visited the Naga Hills for three-month in 1922 and his presidential address was replete with his concerns for the welfare of the “primitive” Nagas.

³⁶Gertrude M. Godden, “Naga and Other Frontier Tribes of North-East India,” *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 27 (1898): 9.

³⁷Hyde Clark is quoted in S. E. Peale, “The Nagas and Neighbouring Tribes,” *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 3 (1874): 481.

³⁸*Bengal Judicial Proceedings* 18, no. 123. This refers to a correspondence between two British military officers, Mr. Vincent and Mr. Butler, dated September 10, 1852. Both led military attacks against the Nagas.

As Tink Tinker has rightly noted, civilization was considered a prerequisite for proselytization.³⁹ It was believed that civilizing the “barbarous” natives would prepare them to grasp and embrace Christianity. The Naga Hills was then referred to as “the wilds of barbarism”⁴⁰ and the people as “those savage wilds.”⁴¹ The missionaries also hoped that “the Nagas, once civilized and Christianized, will make a manly, worthy people.”⁴² Having perceived the Naga Hills as “the paradise of the head-hunters,”⁴³ where “heathenish darkness and ignorance reign supreme,”⁴⁴ the mission to the Nagas began essentially as a strategy for colonial pacification and civilization. This dark and prejudicial perception of the Nagas led to intense and passionate desire to “civilize” them.

Additionally, the Nagas have been depicted as warlike, incessantly engaged in headhunting until pacified by the “civilized” West. This narrative conceals or eclipses the inhumane treatment the Nagas suffered in the process of their civilization. The traditional Naga society was by no means idyllic, but the contention that “war is normal; peace is abnormal”⁴⁵ for them is without a doubt a colonial construct which functioned to justify colonial atrocity against the Nagas. These colonial misconceptions therefore necessitated Western agents bringing

³⁹Tinker, *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

⁴⁰Clark, *A Corner in India* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1907), 15.

⁴¹Ibid., 32.

⁴²Ibid., 45.

⁴³Alva Curtis Bowers, *Under Head-Hunters' Eyes* (Philadelphia: The Judson press, 1929), 194.

⁴⁴Mary Clark, “Assam,” *Baptist Missionary Magazine* 77, no. 5 (May 1897): 191.

⁴⁵J. P. Mills, “The Effects on the Naga Tribes of Assam of Their Contact with Western Civilization,” in *Tribal Peoples and Development Issues: A Global Overview*, ed. John Bodley (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1988), 71.

progress to the Nagas and supplanting heathen Nagan culture with the “advanced” scientific and Christianized culture of the West.

The construction of a colonial portrait both drove and informed the process of colonizing the mind which in turn precipitated change and conversion among the Nagas. Colonization of the mind, according to Fanon, is “the emptying of the native’s brain of all form and content” and “by a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it.”⁴⁶ It is the incarceration of the colonized mind or the captivity of the same.⁴⁷

This process of “civilization” cannot take place as long as the colonized subjects remain proud of and attached to their cultural heritage and identity. In order to sever the subjects from their culture and to produce change and conversion, it is necessary to constantly inculcate in the colonized mind that their culture is evil, savage, irrational and deficient.⁴⁸ Once the colonized mind comes to believe that their way of life is illogical, deficient, unsophisticated and barbaric, the process of civilization and conversion becomes possible or even inevitable. The incessant Western message stating the inferiority and savagery of the Nagas and their culture became a drumbeat that echoed within the Naga psyche, such that the people internalized the colonial

⁴⁶Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Tran. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 210.

⁴⁷John Hawley, “Colonizing the Mind: ‘Leo Africanus’ in the Renaissance and Today,” in *Colonial and Postcolonial Incarceration*, ed. Graeme Harper (New York: Continuum, 2001), 53-66.

⁴⁸See Eduardo Duran and Bonnie Duran, *Native American Postcolonial Psychology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

image. Embedded in their psyche, the colonial portrait became the image through which the Nagas identified themselves, further causing self-negation and self-alienation.⁴⁹

As a result of the colonizing of the mind, many contemporary Nagas callously and indiscriminately use colonial portraits in speaking of their ancestral past. For example, in a political manifesto, entitled *The Bedrock of Naga Society*, a section of Naga politicians argued that the “main ‘contact’ between villages [before the British era] was through the savage practice of headhunting.”⁵⁰ Similarly, the theme for the 125th anniversary celebration of the advent of Christianity in Nagaland in 1997 was “From Darkness to Light.” On the same occasion, S.C. Jamir then Chief Minister of Nagaland asserted, “The little Naga world presented almost one unbroken scene of midnight darkness on all sides. A remedy was urgently needed to save them. In the fullness of God’s own time, the Light of heaven appeared on the scene to save the Nagas.”⁵¹

The above examples represent the attitude and mind-set of contemporary Nagas on the “pagan” culture of their ancestors. This self-demeaning internalization of the “dark” and “barbaric” past will undoubtedly engender hatred against one’s own cultural identity and values. Consequently, identification with the past becomes shameful and degrading and jettisoning or distancing from the past becomes liberating and provides a sense of having made progress.

⁴⁹Aime Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*. Tran. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Press Review, 2000), 43.

⁵⁰*Agenda: Bedrock of Naga Society*; a booklet published in 2001 by the Nagaland Pradesh Congress Committee (I).

⁵¹Wendy Ryan, “12,000 profess faith in Nagaland at strife-laden 125th anniversary,” *Baptist Press*, Dec. 10, 1997, <http://www.baptistpress.net/bpnews.asp?ID=4586>.

“No Religion”

For the “civilized” West, religion represents a major factor in determining a people’s stage of civilization. Having a religion signified a characteristic of progress. An absence of it entailed barbarism and natural state.⁵² An English military officer argued that the Nagas “had no religion; that they were highly intelligent and capable of receiving civilization; that with it they would want a religion, and that we might just as well give them our own...thus mutually attaching them to us.”⁵³ Bronson, the first Western missionary to the Nagas, claimed, “they have no caste, no religion, of any form.”⁵⁴ Another pioneer missionary asserted that the Nagas “have some crude and indefinite conceptions of a Great Spirit, and an evil one; farther than this, they have no religion.”⁵⁵ Considered not having any form of religion, the Nagas were characterized as “demon worshipers.”⁵⁶

⁵²David Hume claims that polytheism/idolatry was “the first and most ancient religion of mankind” and asserts that “the savage tribes of AMERICA, AFRICA, and ASIA are all idolaters.” He argues that in “the natural progress of human thought,” idolatry is the earliest form of belief and the idea of the “perfect Being” is the last. Hume, *The Natural History of Religion* (New York: MacMillan, 1992), 3-6.

⁵³Johnstone, *My Experience*, 43-4.

⁵⁴“Journal of Mr. Bronson,” *Baptist Missionary Magazine* 21, no. 2 (February 1841): 29.

⁵⁵“Mission to Assam: Letter from Mrs. Clark,” *Baptist Missionary Magazine* 52, no. 2 (February 1872): 50.

⁵⁶Sidney Rivenburg, “Historical Sketch of the Angami Naga Mission,” in in *The Assam Mission of the American Baptist Missionary Union. Papers and Discussions of the Jubilee Conference Held in Nowgong, December 18-29, 1886* (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1887), 85.

The categorical denial or rejection of the existence of religion was accompanied by serious consequences.⁵⁷ Hilary Carey argues that the “denial of Aboriginal religion was an essential part of the process by which Australia’s indigenous people were disappropriated of their land.”⁵⁸ Ultimately, the most horrid consequence of the denial of Aboriginal religion was the basic denial of humanity to the Other, because it was popularly thought that the “brutish savages, which by reason of their godless ignorance, and blasphemous idolatry, are worse than those beasts.”⁵⁹ Thus, “when the idea of progress was at its height, ‘primitives’ were regarded as savages, brutal, and heathen, and their disappearance was thought generally to be a good thing.”⁶⁰

As it was understood then, “civilization was white and Christian and everything else was barbarian.”⁶¹ Western Christianity was equated with civilization, and the process of civilization entailed christianization. Writing to Jenkins who was a staunch supporter of the mission enterprise among Nagas, Bronson wrote, “I regret to say that I feel almost discouraged about the

⁵⁷Hilary M. Carey, *Believing in Australia: A Cultural History of Religion* (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1996).

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 26. Also, with regard to Africa, see David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in South Africa* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1996).

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 15. Understood as beasts or worse than beasts, it was thought, following Thomas Hobbes, that “to make covenants with brute beasts is impossible.” See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 14:22 (April 1651).

⁶⁰Shelly Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and Other Tales of Progress* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 49.

⁶¹Roger Osbrone, *Civilization: A New History of the Western World* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2006), 5.

Nagas becoming a reform – civilized – and Christian people.”⁶² Norman Etherington argued that Western missionaries, like their explorer counterparts, “arrived in regions barely touched by Western influences, preaching the superiority of Western religion, technology and cultural practices.”⁶³ Consequently, it was thought, “missions made possible ‘the triumphs of reason over ignorance, of civilization over barbarism and of benevolence over cruelty and oppression.’”⁶⁴

Christianity was inextricably interwoven with Western civilization and progress. So, more than anything else, the cultural disconnection caused by conversion to Christianity created an identity crisis and cultural alienation among the Nagas. In their attempt to rapidly convert and transform the Nagas, “the missionary instilled in the converts a negative attitude towards Naga culture.”⁶⁵ A.K. Ray argues that the missionaries “sought to sweep [Naga culture] away at one stroke, and replace it with something that is entirely foreign.”⁶⁶ Similarly, Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf regretted that rather than bringing the Naga culture and Christianity into harmony, the missionaries set them at opposite poles. As a result, “[S]eeing his own customs condemned by the missionaries, [the Naga] learnt to despise his own tribe and cultural inheritance.”⁶⁷

⁶²Barpujari, *American Missionaries and North-East India*, 262.

⁶³Etherington, *Missions and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 4.

⁶⁴Andrew Porter, *Religion Versus Empire: British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 92.

⁶⁵Abraham Lotha, *History of Naga Anthropology (1832-1947)* (Dimapur: Chumpo Museum, 2007), 46.

⁶⁶A.K. Ray, “Change: The Law of Life” in *Naga Society: Continuity and Change*, ed. N. Venuh (New Delhi: Shipra, 2004).

⁶⁷Furer-Haimendorf, *The Konyak Nagas: An Indian Frontier Tribe* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 49.

This perspective, that Nagas did not have any religion, led to intense proselytization. The 2001 Census of India reports that 98.5% of native Nagas in Nagaland identified themselves as Christians.⁶⁸ Consequently, once a foreign religion, Christianity has come to so thoroughly dominate in Naga society that indigenous religious practices are considered uncivilized and “satanic.” Christianity is no longer the foreign interloper but deeply interwoven into Naga thought and expression. It has in fact become the culture of the people so that one who does not profess to be Christian is now considered a “second class” citizen. Consequently, contemporary Nagas share a westernized Christian culture that mirrors the West. For example, instead of singing Naga music and playing Naga musical instruments in church, Naga Christians sing Western hymns and play guitar or a piano. Because of these westernized practices, Naga traditional songs, dances, and musical instruments have long been discarded.

The difference of perceptions of religion between the Nagas and their invaders is crucial for understanding the clash of worldviews. In the West, religion is institutionalized and represented by grandiose and majestic cathedrals or buildings. It is hierarchical in polity, where professional priests govern the institution. Christianity has a rigid time for preaching, teaching and worship and its own prescribed symbols and literature such as the Bible, hymnal and, in some cases, the book of discipline. None of these applied to the Naga understanding and practice of religion, which led to the misunderstanding that the Nagas did not have a religion.

In complete contrast to Western understanding of religion, what constituted “religion” among Nagas was not a dogma or a set of established beliefs. Rather, it was a way of life. Life experience in its entirety was religious. In other words, for the Nagas religion permeated all of

⁶⁸http://censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/SCST/dh_st_nagaland.pdf.

life. As such, every Naga was a deeply religious being and the thought of oneself as an atheist, agnostic, skeptic, unbeliever or non-religious person did not exist.⁶⁹ And yet, no religious institution or priest/pastor existed from where or whom the Nagas learned about the divine being. There was no designated worship place, literature, creed or a religious expert to help delineate such beliefs.

For the Nagas religion was not an account of one person's life and teaching as it is in the case of Christianity, rather, it was represented by the communal life, wisdom and experience of a group of people over a long period of time. Unlike Christianity, Naga religion did not have a missionary tendency and did not gain followers by conversion. Instead it was passed on to successive generations through oral narrations, myths, songs, rituals, dances and ceremonies. As such, conversion was understood as a total rejection of one's own community and tradition and was viewed with great seriousness. Conversion caused so much tension and conflict within the family and village as "early Naga converts were even disowned and exiled from their village communities."⁷⁰

"Illiterate Savages"

The notion that literacy denotes a higher level of civilization and rationality remains deeply engrained in modern consciousness. It is often assumed that attaining literacy signifies

⁶⁹Correspondingly, John Mbiti made a similar observation: "God is no stranger to African peoples, and in traditional life there are no atheists." John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi: Heinemann Publishers, 1985), 29.

⁷⁰Charles Chasie, "Administrative and Social Factors: The Change in Naga Society," in *Naga Society*, 132.

passage from barbarism to civilization. As Judith Marshall contends, literacy is not simply about language, its meaning and skills or grammar and syntax, but about social status and class “where schooling was signaled as the way to bridge the distance between ‘savage’ and ‘civilized.’”⁷¹

Some European writers have divided human history into successive periods based on the discovery of writing tools.⁷² For example, Walter Ong divided history into periods characterized by orality, writing, printing, and electronic communication.⁷³ For Lewis Morgan, humanity did not reach the status of civilization until the invention of phonetic alphabet and writing.⁷⁴ This view assumes that the “Modern Age” began with the emergence of the printing press, and any culture that has not achieved the stage of printing is still backward. By the sixteenth-century, the notion that linguistic progress in English literature was a mark of civilized progress began to emerge in Europe.⁷⁵ By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was thought that “the use of letter is the principle circumstance that distinguishes a civilized people from a herd of savages, incapable of knowledge or reflection.”⁷⁶

⁷¹Judith Marshall, *Literacy, Power, and Democracy in Mozambique* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), xv.

⁷²D. H. Green, “Orality and Reading: The State of Research in Medieval Studies,” *Speculum* 65, no. 2. (April 1990): 267.

⁷³Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen, 1982), 2-3.

⁷⁴Lewis Morgan, *Ancient Societies* (London: MacMillan & Company, 1877).

⁷⁵Jack Lynch, *The Age of Elizabeth in the Age of Johnson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 137.

⁷⁶Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. I. (New York: Harper Brothers, 1896), 218.

This linear view of history sees the period of orality as the earliest, as well as the most backward, stage and therefore negates non-literate cultures while affirming and favoring the literate culture. Rosalind Thomas has rightly argued that this kind of view has not changed much; it is expressed only differently today. She argues, “We regard higher literacy rates as desirable and lack of literacy a sign of backwardness.”⁷⁷ She added that we see literacy “as essential for civilization and democracy.”⁷⁸

Since the pre-colonial Nagas had a non-literate culture, both the British and the Americans could disparaged the Nagas because the absence of reading and writing in their culture. For example, P.H. Moore, an American missionary to the Nagas and other hill peoples wrote, “Vague, unreliable and contradictory verbal traditions of their origin will taunt you.”⁷⁹ Another English forest officer echoes this sentiment in referring to the Naga oral tradition as “vague and obscure.”⁸⁰ Still another colonial officer argued that “no regular Government can be expected to exist amongst wild uncivilized tribes who are ignorant of the use of letters or the art of writing.”⁸¹ Coming into contact with the “illiterate” Nagas from a culture that highly valued reading and writing, the Western representatives felt at liberty to introduce what was thought to be the elementary components of Western civilization, namely reading and writing, to the Nagas

The effort to civilize the non-literate Nagas was a cooperative enterprise between the British colonizers and the American missionaries; they both took education of the Nagas to be a

⁷⁷Rosalind Thomas, *Oral Tradition and Written Record in Classical Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 1.

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹P.H. Moore, *Baptist Missionary Magazine* 82, no. 5 (May 1902): 172.

⁸⁰P.D. Stracey, *Nagaland nightmare* (London: Allied Publishers Private Limited, 1968), 21.

⁸¹A.J. Moffat Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam* (Reprint Guwahati, 1982 [1854]), cxlii.

means to an end. While the missionary's goal of education was to effect the conversion of "demon worshipers," the aim for the British colonizers was the pacification of "wild headhunters." When British officer Jenkins, who has been referred to as "the originator of the mission," invited the American Baptists to undertake the project of proselytizing the natives, he also offered financial assistance for establishing a school and purchasing a printing press.⁸² Bronson's work among the Nagas was enthusiastically supported by British officials including pioneer tea-planter, Charles Bruce.⁸³ Yet while both nations had a stake in fostering Western education, the project of education and evangelization was overseen primarily by American missionaries.

On December 23, 1839, in his attempt to establish the first school among the Nagas, Bronson argued that "it could now no longer be said that the Nagas had no books."⁸⁴ At first the Nagas showed little or no interest in receiving education and resisted attempts to "civilize" them. They reacted with either indifference or resistance saying, "Who wants religion from a foreigner, and who will alter the customs of their fathers to receive books?"⁸⁵ More than forty years later, Mary Clark wrote, "These savages naturally do not appreciate the value of schools."⁸⁶ Similarly, W.F. Dowd charged the Nagas with "ignorance and indifference to higher things." He wrote, "The boys and girls are limited in capacity by the inheritance of centuries of savage life, and

⁸²William A. M. Gammell, *A History of American Baptist Missions in Asia, Africa, Europe and North America* (Boston: Gould Kendall and Lincoln, 1849), 217.

⁸³H.C. Mabie, "Beginnings of the work in Assam and the Early Missionaries," *Baptist Missionary Magazine* 81, no. 6 (June 1901).

⁸⁴Barpujari, *The American Missionaries and North-East India*, 239.

⁸⁵"Journal of Mr. Bronson," *Baptist Missionary Magazine* 61, no. 2 (February 1841): 25.

⁸⁶Mary Clark, "Naga Mission," *Baptist Missionary Magazine* 67, no. 7 (July 1887): 265-266.

their progress is slow.”⁸⁷ After more than a century of being “schooled” in a Western approach to education, however, the Nagas today can boast of a literacy rate higher than the Indian national rate.⁸⁸

Such a drastic paradigmatic cultural shift has had definite and negative consequences on the Nagas. The transition from an oral to literary culture resulted in the loss of much of the history and tradition of the Nagas. The introduction of a Western conceptualization and approach to education served to transform the non-literate Naga culture and paved the way for westernization and modernization. For the educated Nagas, their attachment to White people through education and employment created alienation from their own community and culture. They tended to consider themselves a class of their own, with superior knowledge and achievement. Education enabled them to pursue non-traditional means of livelihood, causing disinterest in and detachment from participatory cultural practices such as festivals, rituals, ceremonies and other social activities.

It also paved the way for levels of “cultural illiteracy” amongst the Nagas, whereby educated Nagas became ignorant of Naga history, cultural values and practices such as songs, dances, story-telling, distinctive traditional craft making and subsistence living. The introduction of Western print culture generated a change of attitude and perception towards Naga history and culture, and the subsequent neglect and eventual loss of much of it. With the imposition of

⁸⁷Dowd, “Typical School in the Hills,” *Baptist Missionary Magazine* 85, no. 1 (Jan. 1905): 19.

⁸⁸According to the report of the *Census of India* (2001), the overall literacy rate of India is 65.38% and is 67.11% for Nagaland. In the 1960s, the literacy rate of Nagaland remained at a mere 19% percent, much below the Indian national average.

Western education, many Nagas came to understand their own oral traditions as simply stories laden with incoherent and falsely make-up tales.⁸⁹

“Lawless People”

Having a complex legal system is crucial because it provides justification for invasion, land appropriation, and many other atrocities that otherwise cannot be carried out “legally.” A complex legal system also signifies progress. A lack of it reflects “civilizational incompetence.”⁹⁰ Hence the perception of Nagas as a “lawless people” had crucial implications because it led to justification for the use of force to bring “progress” to them. Thus, in the scheme of colonialism, legal discourse “was central to the ‘civilizing mission’”⁹¹ and “served to redeem the West’s genocidal imposition of its superior civilization.”⁹²

Katherine Biber has noted that, “law always constructs an Other. It draws boundaries around itself. Everything within the boundary is within law’s jurisdiction. Everything outside the boundary is lawless.”⁹³ Considered outside the boundary of the imperial law, the British deemed the Nagas as a “lawless people,” which provided the justification to undertake military expeditions into the Naga Hills in order to bring the “lawless” Nagas to within the purview of the

⁸⁹For example, a Naga writer has argued that “history without a proper [written] source is no better than mere oral tradition or myth.” Bendangyabang Ao, *History of Christianity in Nagaland: A Source Material* (Mokokchung: Shalom Ministry, 1998), viii.

⁹⁰Piotr Sztompka, “Civilizational Incompetence: The Trap of Post-Communist Societies,” *Zeitschrift fur Sociologie* 2 (1993): 118.

⁹¹Sally Engle Merry, “Law and Colonialism,” *Law and Society Review* 25, no. 4 (1991): 890.

⁹²Robert Williams, Jr., *The American Indian in Western Legal Thought: The Discourses of Conquest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 7.

⁹³Katherine Biber, “Cannibal and Colonialism,” *Sydney Law Review* 27, no. 4 (Dec. 2005): 625.

British law.⁹⁴ James Johnson who led one of the British numerous “punitive expeditions” into the Naga Hills wrote, “We had been forced into the hills by the lawlessness of the Naga tribes, and we ought to have made them bear their full share of the inconveniences attendant on our occupation....”⁹⁵ “Lawlessness,” however, does not mean the Nagas did not possess any system of law. It only means the Nagas were outside the realm of the imperial law.

Additionally, the claim that the colonial administration with the help of the missionaries brought cessation to the practice of headhunting among the Nagas remains a dominant narrative in colonial literature. As one British anthropologist puts it, “...before the Pax Britannica stopped them they were headhunters to a man....”⁹⁶ This idea of finally having “pacified” was perceived as an attainment of progress. However, the fact that “headhunting” raids occurred mostly in the British tea plantation settlements as retaliation for land appropriation was, and remains, undisclosed and unknown to many.

Such imperial law, its mandate and application, utterly contradicted the traditional Naga understanding and practice of law. The traditional Naga legal system presumed a non-violent means of enforcing the law. Thus, traditional Naga society never had any law enforcement agencies such as Western and westernized societies have, let alone a standing army. No policing or prison system existed. In contrast, one of the first things the British administration did was to set up prisons. Under the English law, Naga “criminals” were tried and sentenced to prison. Those who in the judgment of the British committed serious crime were exiled to British prisons

⁹⁴John Butler, *Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam* (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1855), 111.

⁹⁵Johnstone, *My Experience*, 148.

⁹⁶Ursula Graham Bower, *Naga Path* (London: John Murray, 1950), 1.

in Andaman Islands.⁹⁷ Thus, the proliferation of an external mode of statutory law and its associated policing agencies and prisons in modern Naga society is an obvious project of progress implemented by colonial agents.

As a stateless society, the concept of a Western-style legal system remained almost absent in traditional Naga culture.⁹⁸ Communally accepted customs, not laws, served to guide social behaviors and conducts. In this sense, the traditional Nagas were a “lawless” people or “minimalists” as far as repressive law and its enforcement agencies were concerned. The custom, not law, served as the modality for common behavior and enforced internally the regulation of personal and communal moral conduct. In other words, the traditional moral conscience and values served to buttress the moral actions of the people. Rules were hidden below the surface, interwoven in culture, and were implicit in behavior and deeply engrained in the habit. To such a “lawless” society, the British introduced their imperial law which was thought empower the attainment of progress.

“No Government”

Some Western scholars have argued that societies have evolved from stateless societies to chieftainship to social classes and sophisticated state societies.⁹⁹ This evolution of a political system was then thought to be a sign of evolution from the depths of savagery to civilized

⁹⁷Clark, *A Corner in India*.

⁹⁸Stanley Diamond has noted that “law is symptomatic of the emergence of the state” and is an instrument of civilization. See Diamond, *In Search of the Primitive: A Critique of Civilization* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1974).

⁹⁹Martin van Creveld, *The Rise and Decline of the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

nation-states or “civil” government. It is important to note that the British and American intruders thought that no form of government existed among the Nagas. One colonial officer argued, “no regular Government can be expected to exist amongst wild uncivilized tribes who are ignorant of the use of letters or the art of writing.”¹⁰⁰ Similarly, an American missionary to the Nagas also asserted, “the wild men not infrequently come from across the border and beg the English official to take them under his government and protection, for he knows...that he cannot govern himself.”¹⁰¹

One of the reasons for failure to see any form of “civil” government among the Nagas by Westerners was the absence of institutionalized authority, hierarchy and class structure associated with civil government and “democratic” politics in the West. For the colonizing mind it was hard to conceive how systematic ordering of social relations could be maintained without the institution of civil government.¹⁰² The failure to see a Western-style hierarchical structure led to the misconception that no civil government existed among the Nagas and, as a consequence, the imposition of the Western structure of government to a formerly stateless society. J.P. Mills, who served the British administration in the Naga Hills (1916-1938), lamented the destruction of the native system of social organization as “the great loss of the tribe” and believed that “it is impossible to revive it.”¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰Mills, *Report on Assam*, cxlii.

¹⁰¹S.A. Perrine, “The Value of the Wild Men of India,” *The Baptist Missionary Magazine* 81, no. 6 (June 1901): 213.

¹⁰²J.H. Hutton, *The Angami Nagas: With Some Notes on Neighbouring Tribes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).

¹⁰³J.P. Mills, *The Rengma Nagas* (London: MacMillan, 1967), 140. What Mills calls “chief” is a mischaracterization, which should be termed “elder”.

Nothing comparable to western partisan politics or hierarchical structure of government existed in traditional Naga society. The most common form of ordering society among the Nagas could be termed as “democracy by consensus.”¹⁰⁴ This practice reflects the communitarian virtue that was highly valued among the Nagas. Consensus, however, did not mean that every villager participated and consented in the decision-making. It meant a willingness and readiness to set aside differences and cooperate for the sake of the larger whole. The communal practice of charity and sharing eliminated the need for an impersonal institution to provide welfare services. So no political institution or government entity existed to which the Nagas were required to pay taxes or look up to for social welfare. The needs of the community members were taken care of by fellow community members, not by an institution. As such, the establishment of a Western-style “adversarial” democracy, bureaucracy associated with civil government and partisan politics has had disquieting effects and dire consequences on a once consensus-seeking community.

In its effort to subjugate the Nagas effectively, the imperial administration established a centralized system of power and control. The British established their district headquarters and sub-divisional offices in strategic places in the Naga Hills, from where a handful of White personnel exercised control over the Nagas.¹⁰⁵ The traditional Naga system of social ordering was a people-centered and decentralized form of governance. In other words, in the Naga

¹⁰⁴Some African scholars have made a distinction between the traditional African “consensual democracy” and the Western-imposed “adversarial democracy.” For further discussion, see K. Wiredu, “Democracy and Consensus in African Traditional Politics: A Plea for a Non-Party Polity,” in *The African Philosophy Reader*, ed. P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux (London: Routledge, 1998), 374-82.

¹⁰⁵See Marcus Franke, *War and Nationalism in South Asia: The Indian State and the Nagas* (London: Routledge, 2009).

system, the people were sovereign. In contrast, the Crown is supreme or sovereign in the British imperial system. The superimposition of a centralized and hierarchical structure of administration represented a strategy aimed at increasing government revenue and political monopoly over the Nagas. This new power paradigm became one of the most potent factors in effectively controlling the Nagas. Until then, the majority of Nagas had never known or experienced a strong and repressive hierarchical and centralized administration. So, this Western paradigm of power pyramid not only affected them in the past, but also is responsible now for the buildup and misuse of power and misappropriation of public funds. The system accumulates unrestrained and excessive power in the hands of a few, who then blatantly disregard the will of the people with impunity.

Worlds Apart

It is not an understatement to assert that the worldviews of the Nagas and the Euro-American intruders were worlds apart. For example, the origin and development of the notion of progress had no place in the discourse on Naga culture. It had no equivalence in their language and mentality. Progress as it is understood today was one of the colonial legacies and can be understood only after a period of interaction with the West. Traditionally, the Nagas understood their culture as static. Therefore, tradition was revered as sacred, strictly observed and meticulously handed down from one generation to another. Change or progress was considered an anathema and a threat to societal order. Conformity to social norms and customs was valued and taught and crossing social boundary was highly discouraged.

Writing about the Aboriginal peoples of Australia Veronica Strang argues that “traditional Aboriginal cosmology was predicated on the assumption that, following the example

of the ancestral beings, people would live in the same place in the same way for ever.”¹⁰⁶ In the same way, this notion of living “in the same place in the same way for ever” regulated the way Nagas lived out their daily lives, and the way they envisioned and planned their future. Some differences between the philosophical views of traditional Nagas and the West will be discussed briefly here.

Unilinear Worldview Vs. Cyclical Worldview

Unlike most non-western worldviews, Euro-American worldview is not only linear but also unilinear in that the Euro-American progressive trajectory of history was thought and presented as the history of *all* human beings, which impeded an understanding of multiple trajectories of human history.¹⁰⁷ Outside the progressive unilinear history of the West, no history was thought to be capable of existence, as Hugh Trevor-Roper has asserted: “Perhaps in the future there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none. There is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness.”¹⁰⁸ Maurice Godlier argues that the notion

¹⁰⁶Veronica Strang, *Uncommon Ground: Cultural Landscapes and Environmental Values* (New York: Berg, 1997), 89.

¹⁰⁷Matthew Johnson, *Archaeological Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999).

¹⁰⁸Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Rise of Christian Europe* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1965), 9. For a similar view, see Hegel’s *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956).

of history as a unilinear continuation of a biological evolution “propelled man to the summit of nature and Western man to the summit of history.”¹⁰⁹

In the West, views of time and history consonant with ancient Jewish and Christian understandings has had significant influence on the unilinear view of history. In western Christianity this view was popularized by Augustine (354-430 CE) who presupposed a unilinear history. “To Augustine, history takes its course, not in cycles, but along a line. That line has a most definite beginning, the Creation, and a most definite end, the Judgment.”¹¹⁰ By the Medieval Age, the Church’s theology has come to affirm the past as leading to a future desirable goal of salvation.¹¹¹ Time was now thought of as not only linear but also non-reversible, “proceeding from the events in *Genesis* to the axial moment of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection and from that point on to the final consummation.”¹¹² This notion of linear history also “presupposes the unidirectionality and irreversibility of history”¹¹³ towards an end-point and informs the assumption that civilized human beings can move forward, but not backward.¹¹⁴ Charles van Doren calls it “irreversible ameliorative change.”¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁹Maurice Godlier, *The Mental and the Material: Thought Economy and Society*. Trans. Martin Thom (Norfolk: Verso, 1986), 3.

¹¹⁰Theodor E. Mommsen, “St. Augustine and the Christians Idea of Progress,” in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12, no. 3 (1951): 355.

¹¹¹David Spadafora, *Idea of Progress in Eighteenth Century Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 85.

¹¹²Warren Wagar, ed. *The Idea of Progress Since the Renaissance* (New York: Wiley, 1969), 65.

¹¹³James Connely, “A Time for Progress?” *History and Theory* 43 (October 2004): 414.

¹¹⁴Connely, “A Time for Change?” 414.

¹¹⁵Charles Van Doren, *The Idea of Progress* (New York: Praeger, 1967), 7.

Perceptions of time differ across cultures and has an inevitable influence on people's understanding of their everyday life, values and attitudes towards daily routines.¹¹⁶ The linear and unidirectional conception of time, which has come to dominate the cosmology of contemporary Nagas, was foreign to traditional Nagas. The traditional Naga cultural construction of time or their human experience of time in their specific geographical location differs greatly from the temporal and linear concept of time in Western thought. Time was not so much about succession of chronological years, months or weeks, but thought of as a series of events experienced in one's personal life and space as well as through the life of the community for generations.

A couple of things may be mentioned here with regard to the traditional Naga concept of time. First, a traditional Naga understanding of time was backward-looking rather than forward-looking. For traditional Nagas the past is ahead and the future behind, which indicates a reverse of the past-present-future Western linear concept of time.¹¹⁷ The Naga compound word *ashi-seng* is used to mean "future." *Ashi* could mean later or afterward and *seng* means behind or back.¹¹⁸ Thus, in contrast to a linear Western view of time, the future literally means that which happens after or behind. What has already taken place, i.e., the tradition of the ancestors, lies ahead. Thus, tradition was the reference point of decision-making and action for the present. Change or

¹¹⁶Aleksandar Janca and Clothilde Bullen, "The Aboriginal concept of time and its mental health implications," *Australasian Psychiatry* 11 (Supplement 2003): 40, 41.

¹¹⁷This was true of most non-Western cultures. For example, with regard to African cultures Mbiti wrote, "*Actual time* is therefore what is present and what is past. It moves 'backward' rather than 'forward'; and people set their minds not on future things, but chiefly on what has taken place." Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 17.

¹¹⁸This is a Rengma Naga word, one of the many Naga languages.

progress was understood as deviation from tradition and tantamount to destruction or dismantling of social structure. To be socially useful and constructive was, therefore, to follow the age-old tradition with precision and exactitude.

Second, as oppose to the linear and chronological concept, the traditional Nagas perceived time as being cyclical. The traditional year consisted of a cycle of eleven lunar months that revolved around agricultural activities. Time was understood as “a composition of events” (to use Mbiti’s words), and their world was not ruled by the clock.¹¹⁹ As a non-literate culture, an individual’s birth, death or age was remembered around events or experiences, not in numeral figures. The perception of time in relation to clock or calendar was unknown; instead, time was perceived in relation to the experience of social events. Thus, time was qualitative rather than quantitative. The modern conception of quantitative time or time as succession of years, months, weeks, days and hours, however, has come to dominate the thought and activity of the Nagas today, even among those who have had no modern education and continue to engage in subsistence economy. Obviously, the difference of worldviews of traditional Nagas and Western intruders were worlds apart, causing a clash between the two.

Anthropocentric Worldview vs. Cosmocentric Worldview

Another area of difference between the Nagas and the West is the perception of Nature. In the West, the worldview has been for most part overtly anthropocentric, more specifically the belief that human beings are mandated by God to have dominion over nature.¹²⁰ In the Hebrew

¹¹⁹Kemaghu Tep, interviewed by the author, December 9, 2007.

¹²⁰Keohane, “The Enlightenment of Progress,” in *Progress and Its Discontents*, 27.

Bible, and therefore Jewish and Christian theological traditions, “human beings are placed hierarchically between God and Nature, with dominion over the latter.”¹²¹ Keohane asserts that in all the different expressions of the idea of progress, “an anthropocentric perspective allows the affirmation that progress is occurring.”¹²² This presumed cosmological schema presents a vision of “God who is no longer located in Nature, but in a ‘far away’ Heaven.”¹²³ “Nature [was then] put at the service of progress,”¹²⁴ and it was thought that Nature would receive “the dominion of man as meekly as the ass on which the Saviour rode.”¹²⁵

In the West, the progress in the form of human conquest and manipulation of nature in an unprecedented manner was thought to be divinely sanctioned and enabled.¹²⁶ It was and is believed that excessive or high consumption and surplus production surpass sustainable and zero-growth economy. Pradip Prabhu observed a common characteristic among the Nagas and other so-called “tribal” peoples in India with respect to their simplicity, contentment and non-accumulative culture. He noted that accumulative greed did not fit them in their philosophy, a philosophy “which has kept [them] free from the unseemly greed for material possessions.”¹²⁷

¹²¹Strang, *Uncommon Ground*, 264.

¹²²Ibid., 38.

¹²³Ibid.

¹²⁴Richard White, “The Nature of Progress: Progress and the Environment,” in *Progress*, ed. Marx and Mazlish, 123.

¹²⁵Ralph Waldo Emerson is quoted in *ibid.*, 124.

¹²⁶Franz Boas, *The Mind of the Primitive Man* (New York: McMillan, 1911), 1.

¹²⁷Prabhu, “In the Eye of the Storm: Tribal Peoples of India,” in *Indigenous Traditions and Ecology: The Interbeing of Cosmology and Community*, ed. J.A. Grim (Cambridge: Harvard Press, 2001), 57.

This view and practice of a harmony and cooperation with, not in competition against, nature stems directly from their worldview.

In the Naga worldview, *ayi* (land or earth) is considered Mother Earth that sustains all life. The Nagas believed that *ayi* is female and *atsang* (the sky) is male, and they complement each other in the nurturing of life.¹²⁸ Furthermore, the Nagas had an oral narrative explaining that the spirit, human being and tiger once belonged to the same mother.¹²⁹ However, conflict arose among the three and the mother was killed, which also resulted in a permanent hostility between the three. In the myth, the human being represents humanity; the spirit signifies extraterrestrial beings; the tiger represents the animal and plant kingdom; and the mother symbolizes the Mother Earth.¹³⁰ The death of the mother resulted in chaos, alienation and disharmony. This worldview subverts anthropocentrism and human domination and rather strives to strike a proper balance between human beings and other beings around them. The Naga scholar Wati Longchar argued that in the Naga worldview, the land not only holds together the clan, village and tribe, but “also unites the Supreme Being, spirits, ancestors and creation as one family.”¹³¹

In contrast to this worldview, a Western anthropocentric worldview privileges human beings above all other beings. The domination and manipulation of nature could therefore be

¹²⁸Senthang Kath, interviewed by the author, December 9, 2007.

¹²⁹Wati Longchar has this myth told among the Ao Nagas in a slightly different version. See Longchar, *The Tribal Religious Traditions in North East India: An Introduction* (Jorhat: Eastern Theological College, 2000), 106.

¹³⁰Ibid.

¹³¹A. Wati Longchar, “Dancing with the Land: Significance of Land for Doing Tribal Theology,” in *Doing Theology with Tribal Resources: Context and Perspective*, in ed. A. Wati Longchar and Larry E. Davis (Jorhat: Tribal Study Center, 1999), 123.

thought to be the attainment of progress. Elisabet Sahtouris claims that when Darwin's theory of evolution through natural selection of the fittest appeared, the industrial age in England was well under way and therefore the theory was well received. The rich industrialists in England, in particular, adopted the evolutionary theory as a part of their worldview and "took Darwin's theory as evidence that their way of life – industrial competition – was the most natural and the surest way of human progress."¹³²

Conclusion

Every culture evolves over generations. Likewise, social systems take ages for their evolution. Tampering with the long established and deeply rooted customs was apt to be dangerous and was traumatic for the Nagas. The rapid imposition of a foreign cultural system, that has taken generations to evolve, to an entirely different people group in a completely different cultural and geographical setting within a short span of time, has been destructive and disorienting, to say the least. Traditionally, Nagas were self-sufficient, autonomous and did not have any extensive contact with the world beyond their immediate neighbors. The material simplicity of the Nagas and their close connection with nature were understood to be signs of backwardness and a lack of progress. Although the idea of progress may have been beneficial to western societies, it has been destructive to the Nagas and others indigenous peoples. As such, the myths of progress and development need to be refuted, confronted and resisted.

With reference to Naga society in the aftermath of the Western invasion, Chasie observed that the Naga society was overtaken by the swift current of modernizing events, presenting the

¹³²Sahtouris, *Earthdance: Living Systems in Evolution* (Iuniverse Inc., 2000).

Nagas with no opportunity for an informed process of choice for change. “As a result of these sudden changes and difficulties in coping with them,” Chasie continues, “the Nagas emerged from the colonial period confused and unsure of themselves – only to find themselves engulfed in another violent conflict with the new Government of India.”¹³³

In the absence of traditional system of social ordering, the colonial paradigm left behind by the imperial agents continues to serve the colonization of the Nagas as they continually depend on Western knowledge and technology for the organization and “civilization” of their society. The supplanting of the long-evolved Naga cultural systems with Western cultural values and practices, and the consequent penchant for mimicking the West, have misplaced the Naga society to the point where the Nagas are neither competent in traditional skills nor in Western knowledge for the ordering of their life. Obviously, no culture can remain entirely isolated; however, a blanket adoption of any alien way of life is unwise and bound to be flawed.

The traditional practices of Nagas who, over countless generations, evolved a pattern of life, well adapted to their social needs and to the landscape in which they live, are in the process of gradual abandonment for want of “progress.” The need of the hour for Nagas, therefore, is to identify and reclaim the bedrock principles rooted in their traditional culture. These moribund traditional bedrock principles and practices when revived will work better for them, because these long-evolved traditional values are time-tested and developed for optimum benefit and advantage for Nagas in their rugged and ecologically fragile land and can help to serve as an

¹³³Chasie, “Nagaland in Transition,” in *Where the Sun Rises When Shadows Fall: The North-East*, ed. Geeti Sen (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 257.

alternative to an alien lifestyle and patterns of life which they have but obscure and scant knowledge.