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## SPECIAL SECTION

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# Colonial rule, Christianity and sociocultural (dis)continuities among the Sumi Naga

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In this article, I explore contemporary identity construction processes among the Sumi of Nagaland, Northeast India by analysing the continuities and discontinuities in socio-cultural custom that have been effected by a number of agents of social change in the course of the twentieth century. With a particular focus on the history and contemporary significance of Baptist Christianity among the Sumi, this article demonstrates that even though Christian conversions have entailed certain discontinuities in the socio-cultural traditions of this community, a number of continuities have persisted and come to shape the ways in which contemporary Sumi identity is being reconstituted. This article argues that as a result, Christianity should not be viewed merely as a major agent of socio-cultural change among the Sumi but as an intrinsic part of their contemporary identity and a vital constitutive part of a 'new tradition' that is currently in the making: one, which is creatively embedding Christianity within a solid substratum of cultural reproduction. In so doing, this article opens up new ways in which we can think about the effects and legacies of missionary activity in Northeast India.

It is curious that the large and important Sema tribe [...] should have attracted so little attention during the early [colonial] period

Elwin 1969: 371

This acute observation with which Verrier Elwin starts his introduction to his short entry on 'The Sema Nagas'<sup>1</sup> in his edited volume *The Nagas in the nineteenth century* (1969)

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<sup>1</sup> A note on nomenclature: the ethnonym 'Sema' was codified in colonial writing and was in widespread use until recently, when it was replaced by the ethnonym 'Sumi' as an indigenous term by which the 'Sema' denoted themselves. In reality, both ethnyonyms are currently used interchangeably, but since 'Sumi' is considered the more politically correct one, I will retain it throughout this article. Necessarily, any discussion of earlier written sources on the 'Sema' will be used without correction.

poignantly indicates the general scarcity of written accounts (both in the colonial and post-colonial period) on one of the most numerous and geographically dispersed Naga 'tribes'.<sup>2</sup> The diverse peoples inhabiting the Indo-Burma borderlands came to be known as 'Naga'<sup>3</sup> in the early nineteenth century when the first British military officers-cum-administrators, surveyors, topographers and explorers surveyed the area for its geostrategic location between the newly discovered tea gardens in Assam to the north, the Kingdom of Manipur to the south and Burma to the east. Soon after that, the first accounts of the 'exotic' Naga customs, political and social organization, religion and languages started appearing in the form of field diaries, reports, memoirs and articles that seem to have generated significant interest among readers in Britain and the wider world (cf. Butler 1855, Peal 1874, Johnstone 1896). While 1832 is considered the official year of first colonial contact between the British and the Naga, it took the British several decades to start consolidating their rule in the Naga areas. In 1878 they established their headquarters in Kohima (Angami Naga area) with a sub-division in Wokha (Lotha Naga area), and the separate Naga Hills District within the British Province of Assam was established in 1881. In 1888 another sub-division was established in Mokokchung (Ao Naga area) (Elwin 1961: 24). Within these administrative arrangements, the growing number of Sumi villages that fell under the administrative and political control of the British in the ensuing decades were divided between the Kohima division and the Mokokchung division. As the effective border of the Naga Hills District kept moving further east and ultimately came to be designated at the Tizu River, by 1906 all Sumi villages on the western bank of the river came under direct British administration whereas all Sumi villages on the eastern bank of the river remained within the so-called 'unadministered Naga areas' until 1947 (Sema 1992: 22-6).

It is clear that the presence of the British Raj and its administrative and military structures in the Naga-inhabited areas has had a profound impact on changing worldviews, modes of life and customs among the Naga, even if some of their lands might have remained outside the scope of direct political control. The British introduced a number of innovations which had multiple implications for the political, economic and socio-cultural life of the Naga. In political terms, the British introduced new forms of

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<sup>2</sup> Whereas the term 'tribe' has been largely discarded in anthropology in favour of 'ethnic group' in an attempt to overcome the Eurocentric bias implied in it, its use in India is distinctive because it is a legal category of the Indian Constitution (Scheduled Tribes). The members of the social groups that are recognised in this way, such as the Naga, are entitled to certain privileges (government jobs, university places, political representation) within the system of positive discrimination offered by the reservations policy. Inasmuch as the Naga themselves subscribe to the term 'tribe', it will be retained throughout the present article without further qualification, while recognizing the ethnographically contingent status of its use anywhere, including in India.

<sup>3</sup> 'Naga' is a generic ethnonym of foreign origin, which is used to denote a number of tribal groups in Northeast India and Northwest Burma, which share discernible cultural and linguistic affinity. Prior to being designated as 'Naga' in the years of initial contact with the British, these people usually referred to themselves by the names of their respective villages.

political organisation in the offices of *gaonbura*<sup>4</sup> and *dobashi*,<sup>5</sup> which transformed power relations and the construction of authority in Naga villages. Another political innovation was the establishment of courts of law as a supreme judicial authority, which started settling disputes habitually settled by the village councils (Ao), the village chiefs (Sumi) or the whole community (Angami). In economic terms, the British introduced a money economy, which gradually substituted the local barter economy and had serious implications for the transformation of economic relations and modes of accumulating wealth. Another major impact of British colonial rule over the Naga was the prohibition of the religious and cultural practice of headhunting,<sup>6</sup> which was widespread among all Naga tribes as an institutionalised way of achieving social status and prestige based on one's ability to kill 'enemies'.<sup>7</sup> With the strict enforcement of the ban on headhunting among the administered Naga tribes, trade and other relations between Naga villages thrived as it became safer to travel, and stronger alliances were formed. However, the prohibition of headhunting had crucial implications for the socio-cultural and religious practices of the Naga: the role of the boys' dormitory (or *morung*) as a focal point of community life gradually diminished, numerous symbolic artistic forms related to headhunting fell into a gradual decline (e.g. woodcarvings, house decorations, ceremonial dress and ornamentation, body tattoos etc.), and the ceremonies, feasts and customs associated with headhunting were gradually neglected, to varying degrees.

It should be noted, however, that such socio-cultural transformations do not appear to have been the explicit agenda of successive British administrators in the Naga Hills as they were more often than not genuinely interested in Naga cultural practices, which they described in a number of papers and reports. Necessarily, and in line with the prevalent spirit of the day, the information provided in these early accounts was often marked by what would now be considered a patronizing attitude characteristic of the Victorian era and its mission to 'civilise' the various tribes encountered by the British in India. Nonetheless, British administrators appear to have been sympathetic outsiders in positions of power who introduced a number of protective policies in the Naga Hills.<sup>8</sup> These policies, even if not entirely altruistic but driven by broader political interests, undoubtedly motivated by the geostrategic position of the region, enabled the Naga to preserve control over their lands and customary practices in times when large sections of

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<sup>4</sup> *Gaonbura* - a village headman appointed by the British.

<sup>5</sup> *Dobashi* - an Assamese-speaking Naga who acted as an interpreter and intermediary between the British government and Naga villages.

<sup>6</sup> Headhunting was premised on the notion that bringing the head of a killed enemy to one's village would bring prosperity to the whole community in the form of many children, abundant crops and numerous cattle (cf. Hutton 1965, Mills 1926).

<sup>7</sup> This category was loosely defined and shifted on a regular basis as villages formed and broke alliances.

<sup>8</sup> The most prominent ones among these were the 1873 Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation (the Inner Line Regulation) and the 1880 Frontier Tracts Regulation II, which broadly guaranteed that the Naga areas would be administered differently from the rest of British India, and that Naga land ownership and customary practices would be protected against outside influences.

the tribal population of Central India were being deprived of their ancestral lands and subjected to great exploitation in huge land alienation scams, as described most eloquently by Fürer-Haimendorf (1982) and Padel (1995), among others.

While ‘civilising’ the Naga was certainly an important aspect of British colonial policy in Northeast India, arguably the biggest agent of socio-cultural change were the American Baptist missionaries who established their first permanent mission stations in the lands of the Naga in the 1870s, and initiated the process of Naga conversions to Baptist Christianity. As conversion rates gradually increased in the following decades and the Naga began to articulate and experience their identities in Baptist Christian terms, many aspects of ‘traditional’<sup>9</sup> Naga culture started losing their prominence and symbolic value. At the same time, the forceful incorporation of the lands of the Naga into the Indian Union in 1947 and the subsequent decades of Naga armed struggle for their right to self-determination and independence have certainly left an indelible mark on the experiences and identity constructions of generations of Naga.

One often hears the argument that the Naga were drawn too quickly into the vortex of world affairs and Western modernity by the collective operation of all these power actors, and that they have lost much of their cultural heritage in the process. Drawing on extensive periods of ethnographic fieldwork in Nagaland and archival work carried out at the Pitt Rivers Museum (University of Oxford), the Nagaland State Archive in Kohima (Nagaland) and the mission centre of the Council of Baptist Churches of Northeast India (CBCNEI) in Guwahati (Assam),<sup>10</sup> the present article will present a contextual analysis of some of the major transformations and (dis)continuities that Sumi society has experienced since the beginning of the twentieth century, and especially as a result of Baptist mission work among them. The article will start by reviewing the available knowledge about this ‘large and important’ tribe, to borrow Elwin’s words above, in the early colonial encounter. It will then proceed with a discussion of the dynamics of conversion among the Sumi and the several mass movements that are recorded to have occurred within this community. The article will then offer some general highlights on the contemporary significance of Baptist Christianity to Sumi self-ascriptions and identity constructions, and

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<sup>9</sup> The terms ‘traditional’ and ‘tradition’ have been used throughout this article to denote the pre-Christian (Sumi) Naga religion and culture with the clear understanding that precepts, customs and ritual practices change over time and are always in a process of creatively making, re-making and influencing each other. With this necessary qualification, the terms will be used without quotation marks hereafter.

<sup>10</sup> In addition to the ecclesiastical archive of the CBCNEI, I also consulted the online editions (1873-1909) of the *Baptist Missionary Magazine* published by the American Baptist Missionary Union and accessed via the Oxford University Library Services. However, despite the availability of a wealth of information on missionary strategies for converting the Naga, general reflections on and experiences of missionary work in the Naga Hills and personal correspondence, not much information on the Sumi was contained in these resources, undoubtedly due to the later beginning of American missionary work among them. It is acknowledged that a future research project will benefit immensely from an extended stay at the archives of the American Baptist Historical Society in Atlanta, Georgia (USA) where more relevant information on the Sumi is bound to be found.

discuss how this is inter-related with ongoing grassroots projects of reviving and preserving some 'good' aspects of Sumi cultural heritage that have been demonized in the course of earlier conversions. In order to weave all these aspects together, this article will seek to demonstrate that while Christian conversions have indeed effected a number of changes and discontinuities in the socio-cultural traditions of the Sumi, much more has remained as a substratum of cultural reproduction than conventionally acknowledged even by the Sumi themselves. As a result, I suggest that it is analytically more fruitful to view Christianity not merely as an external agent of change, but as an intrinsic part of contemporary Sumi identity, an indigenous form of religious expression and meaning-making, which is being firmly embedded in Sumi socio-cultural tradition and history.

### **Early colonial accounts on the Sumi**

As Elwin rightly observes, written accounts from the colonial period dedicated specifically to the Sumi are scarce. They feature briefly (as 'Sehmah') in the second lecture given by Colonel R.G. Woodthorpe to the Royal Anthropological Institute and published in its Journal in 1882 as 'non-kilted Naga' (along with the Ao, Lotha and Rengma Naga). Woodthorpe was typically interested in physical appearance, matters of personal hygiene (or perceived lack thereof), village layout and fortifications, the ritual treatment and disposal of enemies' heads, etc. His account is understandably generic and often describing a vague 'Naga' category. There is also some brief mention of the Sumi in Robinson (1841) and in Mackenzie (1884); the latter reproduces a paper written by Captain John Butler in 1873 in which there is the following short text on the Sumi: 'North and north-east of the Angami we come upon the "Sehmah Nagas", regarding whom we at present know very little beyond the fact that they possess five villages on the left bank of the Doyeng, and probably extend across to the other bank as well' (Mackenzie 1884: 85). This indicates that in the first few decades of the colonial encounter the British knew very little about the Sumi. Despite these sporadic contacts, however, the Sumi are listed as one of the 'four races' inhabiting the Naga Hills District of Assam, alongside the Angami, Lotha and Rengma Naga in the 1881 Assam Census Report (Mackenzie 1884: 549).

The 1891 Census of India, compiled by A.W. Davis, then Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills (1891: 246-8) and reproduced in full by Verrier Elwin in his *The Nagas in the nineteenth century* (1969: 372-6), provides the most comprehensive information available at the time about the Sumi under the rubric of 'The Sema Nagas'. The report starts by explaining that only nine Sumi villages are reported to be within the administrative control of the British, with seventy villages (or more, as the data is not conclusive) lying beyond the administrative boundary. It then details information on geographic location, physical appearance and dress, hereditary chiefs, village site,

marriage customs, funerary customs, origin of the tribe, religion, village customs and general remarks. These sections are of varying lengths ranging from two-three short sentences to longer paragraphs of ten-fifteen sentences or more. Davis starts by noting that the people in question called themselves 'Simi', but were known to the British 'by their Angami name of Sema' (Davis 1891: 246). It is noteworthy that throughout their rule in the Naga lands the British have chosen to retain this foreign ethnonym when interacting with or writing about the Sumi instead of using indigenous names such as 'Simi' or 'Sumi'. I hold this to be an indication of the general lack of familiarity and close contact with this tribe in addition to parochial colonial attitudes. Davis then proceeds with his description of which I will only present certain highlights here. He notes that the Sumi differed from all other known Naga tribes in that their villages were governed by hereditary chiefs who had numerous wives. He also observes a particular type of migration and village settlement among the Sumi whereby the elder sons of village chiefs left their ancestral villages in order to establish villages of their own. Thus, Davis concludes, 'Sema villages are small as compared with the villages of the other Naga tribes' (1891: 246). He also points out the particular Sumi custom of disposing of the dead by burying them just outside the house. He closes this census entry by noting: 'The Semas are the most barbarous and savage tribes with which we have yet come into contact in these hills' (1891: 248).

While these early descriptive accounts on the Sumi offer some important, albeit rudimentary, information about their culture, religion and lifestyles, they are necessarily fragmentary in scope and patronising in tone. Moreover, the information provided in them should be treated with caution, as Elwin warns us, because they contain a lot of factual errors and misunderstandings of custom and were sometimes 'heavily marked by personal bias', some being no more than 'obviously guess-work' (Elwin 1959: xv). Moreover, they were general accounts which lacked ethnographic detail and often confused the names of villages and tribes, or simply used the generic 'Naga',<sup>11</sup> which makes it difficult to determine which Naga tribe they were discussing.

This tradition of British colonial writing changed in the early twentieth century with the publication of a series of ethnographically rich classical monographs on the Naga written by erstwhile colonial administrators of the Naga Hills. These include *The Sema Nagas* (1921a) and *The Angami Nagas* (1921b) by John H. Hutton, and *The Lhota Nagas* (1922), *The Ao Nagas* (1926) and *The Rengma Nagas* (1937) by James P. Mills. *The Sema Nagas* remains the most comprehensive and authoritative account of Sumi customs, culture and religion to date. It follows the conventional structure of all classical monographs from this period, namely general notes on habitat, cultural affinities, origins,

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<sup>11</sup> Elwin warns that the indiscriminate use of the term 'Naga' to denote a hillsman or a tribesman has caused much confusion, especially since the people whom the early authors called 'Naga' are not always classified as such nowadays (Elwin 1959: xxxii). And, as already mentioned, they did not ascribe to the term themselves in the years of initial contact with the British.

appearance etc.; domestic life, including village site, house layouts, art, livelihoods etc.; social life, including social organisation, marriage rules, property, dispute settlement etc.; religion; language, and folklore. The monograph confirms the validity of some of the information about the Sumi that is found in the 1891 Census of India entry, especially in relation to inheritance and settlement patterns, village sites and layout. In addition, Hutton provides a wealth of comparative material that I found useful in my own work – e.g. naming rules, ritual celebrations of traditional festivals, marriage and funerary rites etc. Prior to writing this monograph, Hutton toured the Sema country extensively in his capacity of Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills stationed in Kohima. His field diaries from this period provide very rich information about the way of life of the Sumi, their material culture, religion and customs as well as a chronology of the inter-village disputes (incl. some disputes between administered and trans-frontier Sumi villages) that Hutton had settled and the various judgements he had passed. The diaries also contain rich photographic material on various aspects of Sumi material culture, e.g. textiles, grave decorations, house decorations, Y-shaped wooden posts commemorating feasts given by men of prominence to the whole village (described in the anthropological literature as ‘feasts of merit’) as well as many personal photographs of village chiefs and other dignitaries in full formal attire.

Despite its undoubtedly great ethnographic value, Hutton’s monograph and tour diaries about the Sumi should of course be treated critically as historical documents representing the perspective of a sympathetic outsider writing from a position of power. Maybe inadvertently, *The Sema Nagas* helped create and reinforce an image of Sumi tradition based on Hutton’s conception of what it meant to be a Sumi by accentuating some cultural features and neglecting others. In line with the prevailing ethos of the colonial ethnographic tradition, his writing also idealised an imagined ‘golden past’ and promoted the image of the Sumi as a ‘noble savage’ whose ‘authentic’ culture was threatened with impending extinction in its sustained contact with Western modernity. Despite some well-justified criticisms of his approaches and conclusions as well as his choice of often derogatory descriptive terms, however, Hutton remains very well-respected within the Sumi community.<sup>12</sup>

### **Baptist Christianity among the Sumi**

The first foreign missionaries arrived in the Province of Assam in 1835, inspired by the missionary zeal of the Second Great Awakening in America and at the invitation of Captain Jenkins, then Commissioner for Assam (*Baptist Missionary Magazine* Jun 1901: 207). These were American Baptist missionaries belonging to the erstwhile American

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<sup>12</sup> For a contemporary critique of J.H. Hutton and his legacy among the Sumi, see Chophy (2015). For a critique of Hutton’s practice of collecting Naga artefacts, see Ngully (2015).



Baptist Missionary Union.<sup>13</sup> From the American missionaries' point of view, the Assam mission was to serve as a strategic outpost to aid in reaching the Shan of northern Burma and southern China, but that project was never carried out (Downs 1992: 70). Instead, from their mission stations in Assam the American missionaries came into contact with Naga tribes inhabiting the hills surrounding the Brahmaputra valley, and it was the Naga conversion story that would become one of the greatest successes of American Baptist missionary activity overseas.

The first permanent mission stations with resident American missionaries on Naga soil were established in the Ao area in the 1870s and in the Lotha and Angami areas in the 1880s (cf. Downs 1992: 82). Soon after that the first two mission schools were opened at Impur (Ao area) and Kohima (Angami area). By contrast, because of funding problems and their remoter geographical location in the interior of the Naga Hills, the Sumi did not have a resident American missionary until the late 1940s. The absence of American missionaries, however, did not hamper conversion work among the Sumi: initially, they received the Gospel from itinerant Ao evangelists from the north and itinerant Angami evangelists from the south. Students and teachers from the mission school at Impur, for example, are reported to have undertaken regular evangelising trips during vacations and at weekends to different Sumi villages, where they sang, preached and gave 'an example of the Christian life', which might have influenced some Sumi families to send their children to school (Ao 2002: 36). In this way, Sumi boys started joining the mission schools in Impur and Kohima and, having completed their studies there and returned to their home villages, they became the first Sumi school teachers and evangelists.

The official birth year of Christianity among the Sumi is held to be 1904 when Ghopuna and Ghosuna, *gaonburas* of Ighanumi village, were baptised by Revd Rivenburg in Kohima. In 1906 Revd Dickson became the first American missionary to be given official licence to work among the Sumi, and he briefly toured some of the Southern Sumi villages from Kohima before his return to America in 1908. He was succeeded in the duty to preach among the Sumi by Revd Bailey and Revd Longwell in Impur and Revd Tanquist in Kohima. In November 1928, the ABFMS passed a formal resolution to open a new mission field for work specifically among the Sumi, but it could not designate any funds to sponsor it, and no work actually commenced (Anderson 1978: 29). Finally, in 1936 Revd Anderson was assigned to supervise mission work among the Sumi and was placed in charge of building a Sumi mission centre at Aizuto in Zunheboto District, the traditional headquarters of the Sumi. Although Revd Anderson resided at the new

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<sup>13</sup> The Union was established at the beginning of the nineteenth century under the name of the General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States for Foreign Missions. In 1845, as a result of the Civil War and the growing dissension within the Convention on slavery-related issues, the Southern Baptists split away to form the Southern Baptist Convention. Baptists in the North restructured their programme as the American Baptist Missionary Union. In 1910 it was renamed the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society (ABFMS), and since 1973 it has been operating under the name of the American Baptist Board of International Ministries (Brackney 1990).

mission centre briefly from 1949 to 1950, the first permanently resident American missionary for the Sumi was Revd Delano, who served in the newly established Aizuto mission station from 1949 to 1955; his family was also the last American missionary family to leave the Naga Hills when the Indian government expelled all foreign missionaries from the turbulent Naga areas.<sup>14</sup>

Many evangelists from different Naga tribes are acknowledged to have made an invaluable contribution to early conversion work among the Sumi (cf. *NBCC Platinum Jubilee Souvenir* 2012 and Anderson 1978: 29). However, by far the greatest credit for Sumi conversions is owed to the Sumi themselves. With only sporadic external support, as obvious from the above discussion, within the first three decades of the twentieth century Sumi conversions gained much momentum through a grassroots Christian movement. Pioneer Sumi evangelists such as Ashu Kushe of Chishilimi village,<sup>15</sup> Inaho Kinimi of Lumami village<sup>16</sup> and Revd Yemhi of Lazami village<sup>17</sup> have gained an almost legendary status among the Sumi because of their contribution to spreading the Gospel. These individuals, together with many others who remain in the memories of their respective fellow villagers, contributed to a mass movement of the Sumi to Christianity in the 1920s and 1930s, which is recorded to have happened in a rather distinctive way: without sustained American missionary work, without mission funds, despite very poor connectivity between Sumi villages and opposition to preaching the Gospel on the part of non-Christian Sumi.

While touring Sumi villages in those early years, the American Baptist missionaries witnessed and documented this 'spontaneous movement' of the Sumi towards Christianity. According to Revd Tanquist, '[t]he way this genuine Christian movement was started among the Semas with practically no direct influence from without, and the way it has progressed in spite of gross neglect on our part as a Mission, is a marvellous thing indeed. [...] The Sema work is conducted in true 'faith mission' style. The money has been coming, we hardly know from whence' (Minutes 1936: 41). Similarly, Revd Anderson also writes of the immense promise of the underdeveloped Sumi mission field:

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<sup>14</sup> This expulsion was the result of security concerns shared by the new Indian government that the American missionaries in Northeast India could be connected with the nationalist struggles of the hill tribes in the changed geo-political environment of the 1950s.

<sup>15</sup> Ashu Kushe is remembered as the first Sumi prophet (*tungkupu*), who converted not through any human preacher but through his direct encounter with God in a dream in 1922. He spent his life working as an itinerant evangelist to Sumi villages and made a contribution to spreading Christianity among neighbouring Naga (see Chishi Swu 2004).

<sup>16</sup> Inaho was a *dobashi*, who was notorious for persecuting Sumi Baptists and American missionaries until he had a Pauline experience and converted in 1927. He was one of the leading activists in the creation of an independent Sumi Baptist Association in 1929 and spent most of the rest of his life as an itinerant evangelist (*NBCC Platinum Jubilee Souvenir* 2012: 188-9).

<sup>17</sup> Revd Yemhi became the first ordained Sumi pastor in 1926 (*NBCC Platinum Jubilee Souvenir* 2012: 193).

The Semas are the most fruitful of our Christian Communities in the Assam Baptist Mission fields but they have not received the attention they deserved during the past year. [...] We must concentrate on teaching this great mass of new Christians the word of God and on establishing churches in their villages. During the last ten years, the increase in membership has been on mass movement proportions. In 1925 we had 500 Sema Naga Christians; now we have 6,500 and more are coming. (Report 1936: 43)

Whereas early Naga conversions are usually attributed to missionary strategies in translating the Gospel, the provision of medical services at the mission stations and the establishment of mission schools which provided opportunities for social mobility and government employment (cf. Joshi 2012, Downs 1992, Eaton 1984), this mass movement among the Sumi that Revd Anderson talks about can also be understood in the context of Sumi social organisation that previous colonial sources had described in some detail. It can be plausibly suggested that Christianity also spread among the Sumi through their kinship networks and especially through the conversion of village chiefs that often entailed the conversion of their whole families and clans. In this way, being a Christian gradually came to be associated with prestige and authority (for a detailed discussion of conversion motivations among the Sumi, see Angelova, forthcoming 2017).

The second wave of mass Sumi conversions to Baptist Christianity in the 1950s coincided in time with arguably the most turbulent period of Naga political history, which witnessed the extension of Indian sovereignty over the erstwhile British dominion in the Naga Hills. As the Naga resisted this process and advanced claims to their right to political independence, the Indian government deployed thousands of military and paramilitary personnel in the Naga Hills in an attempt to suppress the Naga nationalist movement. In the course of the ensuing armed hostility, the civilian Naga population suffered unprecedented acts of violence, loss of human life and mass destruction of material culture (for a detailed account, see Maxwell 1980, Haskar and Luithui 1984, Iralu 2009), which created an environment of precarity and fear. Among the Sumi these experiences were exacerbated by the fact that after the expulsion of Revd Delano and his family from the Naga Hills in 1955, the young Sumi Baptist churches were left to cater for themselves without foreign support and guidance. As the churches strived to consolidate their membership and sustain their fellowship amidst this general feeling of loss and a lack of direction across the Naga areas, the 'miracle of [evangelical] revival came like a wildfire', according to my elderly informants. The revival spread spontaneously and quickly among all Naga areas in the late 1950s, and it was during this revival that many Sumi committed themselves to Christ. These later conversions were undoubtedly the result of the spiritual fervour of these times, but they can also be seen as a political statement of resistance to the oppression of the Indian nation-state, especially since the Naga nationalist movement was increasingly being conceptualised in Baptist Christian terms. In the mid-1970s, influenced by a worldwide charismatic revival wave, another great evangelical revival spread across Nagaland, which brought

about a renewed focus on world evangelism and missionary outreach in Naga Baptist churches. My elderly informants narrated that this revival began in a highly charged way with what they described as an ‘unprecedented outpouring of the Holy Spirit’ that saw thousands of people recommit their lives to Jesus amidst abundant stories of miraculous healings and prophecies and visions coming true. These two evangelical revivals have had a decisive impact on Sumi conversions as the community firmly declared its commitment to Christianity, in its Baptist conservative or more charismatic varieties.<sup>18</sup>

The Baptist church currently has the most members among the Sumi and has emerged as one of the most powerful institutions in their society. In its age- and gender-specific departments (children’s, youth, women and general department) it encompasses all community members, at least officially, thus providing a sense of belonging and a stable network of social support while at the same time ensuring the involvement of the whole community in its activities and collective worship. The church building is the most prominent building in Sumi villages and a focal point of community life. The annual programme of each church department is interspersed with various activities and events which aim to engage the community not only in regular worship but also in other forms of sociality which strengthen the feeling of group cohesion and fellowship. The church in the village where I resided, for example, conducted regular Sunday school classes and organised an annual Vacation Bible School and a picnic for the children; the young people were engaged in regular Saturday evening services, but also took part in an annual retreat and a Music Night Show, among others; and the adult congregants attended general Sunday services in the morning and evening while a special service for women was conducted on Thursdays. In addition, numerous prayer programmes, special celebrations and of course the normative community celebrations of Easter and Christmas saturated the church programme. The other Baptist churches that I visited in different Sumi villages had similarly rich annual programmes for their young and adult congregants.

Through such varied activities and pedagogical strategies, Sumi Baptist churches not only transmit Christian knowledge cross-generationally to their young members, but also create certain dispositions in them in order to prepare them for a life of active devotion and service, which is highly esteemed in Sumi society. In the process of socialising children and young people as religious persons, the church instils and nurtures in them a certain form of religiosity which, through sustained religious instruction and ritualised practice, over time becomes an embodied religious habitus in the sense that Mauss (1979) and Bourdieu (1977) use the term. As a result, Sumi children and young people learn to internalise and enact accepted forms of socio-religious practice throughout their lives. Recent anthropological work has similarly argued that religiosity is not an inherent

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<sup>18</sup> For a more detailed discussion of evangelical revivals among the Sumi, see Chishi (2003) and Angelova (2015); for a general account of evangelical revivals across Nagaland, see *NCRC Souvenir* (2012).

characteristic of human beings; rather, it has to be taught, learnt and reiterated through various pedagogical strategies and ritual behaviour (cf. Berliner and Sarró 2007, Luhrmann 2012). This, in turn, guarantees that the majority of the community members participate in the various events and services organised by local churches, that Christian morals are inculcated and that Christian knowledge, drawn from the widely reiterated Bible stories, is passed down the generations. By engaging everyone in such regular forms of fellowship, the Baptist church has become inextricably interwoven into the fabric of Sumi social life, and its ritualism permeates private and public events in clearly observable ways. For example, all life-cycle events in the life of a Sumi individual – naming ceremony (*Aje kuku*), marriage, funeral – are structured like church programmes and feature an invocation prayer by the village pastor or another church executive, accompanied by mass prayer by everyone present.

### **Baptist Christianity and socio-cultural (dis)continuities**

Historical conversions to Christianity among the Sumi have undoubtedly entailed the demonization and prohibition of many core aspects of their traditional culture, such as headhunting and all ritual observances, songs and dances related to it,<sup>19</sup> many of the elaborate house decorations, the practice of drinking of rice-beer (a staple to Naga diet), polygamy, among others. In the early years of Christian conversions, a Sumi would be excommunicated for performing such cultural forms, participating in the celebration of calendrical rites and tribal festivals or drinking rice-beer. Such instances of ‘backsliding’ and ‘reverting back to heathen ways’, as abundantly documented in missionary correspondence, were a major concern in this period. Indeed, severing ties with and distancing oneself from the ‘old’ religion and culture was promoted as a value in itself that was crucial to the experience of conversion as many young Sumi churches sought to establish themselves and strengthen their membership. Realities on the ground were, of course, often more complex. Touring some Sumi villages in 1947, W.G. Archer, erstwhile sub-divisional officer in Mokokchung, observes that the seemingly mass conversion of the Sumi to Baptist Christianity has had varying degrees of impact on their traditional way of life. He notices that Sumi men of prominence continued to decorate their houses in traditional fashion, with many of them still adorning their houses with *mithun*<sup>20</sup> skulls and woodcarvings. But, he writes, ‘instead of performing certain prescribed gennas [i.e. ritual prohibitions], a Sema, wishing to put up carvings must now give two or more big feasts at Christmas. When he has done this, he proclaims the fact through carvings in exactly the same way as was done in earlier times’ (Archer 1947).

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<sup>19</sup> Headhunting was one of the first cultural practices that was banned by both the American missionaries and the British colonial authorities.

<sup>20</sup> *Mithun* (*Bos frontalis*) - a type of semi-domesticated buffalo, which is still widely reared by the Naga. In the past it was used as a sacrificial animal in ritual ceremonies; nowadays, it is slaughtered for important community feasts such as Christmas, tribal festivals and weddings.

Such practical accommodations to the precepts of the new religion have been common among Naga converts as continuities of socio-cultural custom survived in various guises.

The contemporary study of conversion in anthropology is often accompanied by analytical discussions of issues of rupture, radical discontinuity with the past and a total culture change induced by mission Christianity's version of modernity (cf. Robbins 2004, Engelke 2004, Keane 2007). It is indeed often the case that the foreign missionaries who worked among non-Christian communities, such as the Naga, wittingly or unwittingly set out to effect a total change in culture among local populations by condemning and demonizing many aspects of their traditional culture as antithetical to their Christian understanding of morality and truth. Contrary to such totalising discourses and practices perpetuated by foreign missionaries and their local converts, however, and as the above example demonstrates, very often continuities of social and cultural custom have been maintained to a greater extent than initially anticipated. Therefore, in some cases it seems analytically more useful to interpret conversion not as a rupture, but as an ongoing process in which some earlier cultural ideas and practices might be suppressed but others survive to inform the trajectory of the local form of Christianity into the future (cf. Cannell 2006, Hefner 1993, Mosse 1999). In discussing Sumi conversions, therefore, I prefer to analyse religious change first and foremost as a matter of a changed sense of belonging and a new alignment of loyalties in the changed socio-political order to which the Sumi had to adjust in the late colonial and post-colonial periods.

This re-alignment of loyalties and re-articulation of identities among the Sumi and other Naga often involved symbolic acts of severing ties with their 'heathen' past, which might appear as ruptures. This usually took the form of a public burning of one's traditional insignia. My elderly informants remembered, for example, that during the First Great Revival of the 1950s Sumi Christians were told to throw away and burn all their traditional insignia (e.g. spears, headgear, loincloths, shawls, *mekhlas*,<sup>21</sup> jewellery etc.) for its alleged satanic qualities, with the urging that 'you are Christian now, leave everything that was before', denounce your past as head-hunters and, most importantly, repent. As a result, much of Sumi material culture appears to have been physically destroyed by over-zealous Sumi Christians in this period.<sup>22</sup> The magnificent *Ashothi chipa*, *Achikuhu chipa* or *Tamla chipa* necklaces, for instance, which were made of several lines of tubular cornelian stones and ivory and were passed down as heirlooms within families, are very hard to find in Sumi families nowadays. Most of them have been 'lost' in the past, as one elderly informant lamented:

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<sup>21</sup> *Mekhla* - a woven wraparound skirt worn by Naga women, which bears tribe- and status-distinctive designs.

<sup>22</sup> Admittedly, much cultural heritage has also been lost as a result of the burning of Sumi villages by the Indian Army in the course of the armed Indo-Naga struggle.

Actually...that was happening: after accepting Christ, we were allowed not to wear our own traditional dresses, because those of the treasures that we are now using as our traditional [attire], *mekhla* and all these things, the history said that it [was] copied from the works of the devil. Since it is copied by the devil, we should not wear it. And all our ornaments, they were neglected like anything, no one is preserving during that time when they became Christians. So, we lost many of our cultural and traditional things.<sup>23</sup>

My informant, Mr Kiyevi, talked about the ways in which traditional 'treasures' of Sumi material culture, such as jewellery and textiles, appear to have lost their symbolic value for the articulation of Christian Sumi identities. As a result, many of them had been neglected and destroyed as they were thought to be 'the works of the devil' and therefore unbecoming for Sumi Christians. Textiles and ornaments were destroyed by Sumi believers in their attempt to adopt a new, Christian identity, which was signified, among other things, by the clothes one used to wear.

Significantly and despite this apparent rupture with tradition, however, the cultural knowledge related to the production of such 'treasures' has been preserved and is currently being re-enacted in the creative reconstruction of Sumi jewellery and textiles with new materials and new designs. Undoubtedly, these processes are driven as much by local attempts to recreate and maintain a continuous cultural link with the past as by the increasing market demand for such cultural items due to intensified domestic and international tourism. All elderly women in the family with whom I lived, for example, had learnt how to make traditional Sumi necklaces as young girls, and often made them for their children and even for myself. But instead of using semi-precious stones that are now hard to find and very expensive, they used commercially-bought coloured beads. Each of them also owned an original *Achipu* necklace (made of only one line of cornelian stones), which they had received as a gift from their parents upon marriage. At the same time, the short booklet on traditional Sumi textiles and jewellery that I bought during the 2011 Hornbill Festival (Achumi 2011) quickly became a reference point in jewellery-making in the whole neighbourhood, which to me was an indication of the continued interest in preserving this traditional handicraft.

The same attitude is discernible in the desire to preserve the traditional handicraft of weaving, especially shawls of various lengths, which bear motifs distinctive of the Sumi. Some elderly women in the village where I usually resided were skilled weavers of small-sized male and the female Sumi shawls (respectively referred to as 'mufflers' and 'stoles'), and some were transmitting this knowledge to their daughters and grand-daughters. The latter showed varying degrees of interest in being engaged in such lessons on a regular basis. Because of their more intricate designs and the greater time and skill required to make them, *mekhlas* and full-length shawls were usually purchased either from shops in

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<sup>23</sup> Formal interview with Mr Kiyevi Awomi (church deacon), conducted on 22 September 2012 at his residence.

Dimapur, the commercial centre of Nagaland, or, whenever possible, from villages in the interior of Zunheboto District where textiles are produced by Sumi women as a form of livelihood. Traditional stoles and *mekhlas* were worn by the village women at formal church services, when they had to perform as part of a singing group in church and during the celebration of tribal festivals. Men would occasionally wear mufflers and full-length shawls during formal church services and village celebrations. In recent years Sumi men have also started wearing waistcoats instead of shawls and mufflers: the waistcoat is an innovative piece of clothing, which bears some of the symbolic designs of a shawl and is worn by young and old alike. These examples demonstrate that, despite the large-scale destruction of original jewellery and old textiles in the course of Sumi history, and despite common perceptions that culture is dying out and everything is 'lost', cultural knowledge has not only been preserved but attempts are also being made to transmit it to the younger generations.

This renewed active interest in Sumi cultural heritage is directly related to larger processes of so-called *cultural revivalism* within Naga society, which have been an observable socio-cultural phenomenon since the 1980s. Initiated by Naga community and church leaders, the cultural revival discourses and projects have sought to revive and preserve some valuable aspects of traditional Naga culture that have been rejected as 'unchristian' in the course of earlier conversions (e.g. some songs, dances, handicrafts etc.). With the re-evaluation of the cultural significance of this inheritance, traditional Naga culture has been discursively described as either 'good' and 'bad'. This selective bias reflects the complex nature of cultural heritage as a cultural, political and economic resource which is inextricably interwoven in processes of identity construction. As such, cultural revival projects are heavily underpinned by issues of power because they assign contemporary meaning and value to certain inheritance from the past and determine its future uses while at the same time delegating other aspects of this inheritance to the oblivion of the past (cf. Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996, Graham and Howard 2008, Smith 2006). Across Nagaland, cultural revival initiatives have attempted to reconstruct the collective Naga identity by reclaiming pride in 'good' cultural heritage and resituating it within the dominant referential frame of Baptist Christianity. Consequently, the revival of culture is underpinned by the tacit understanding that 'good' culture is what does not contradict the Biblical message and the accepted form of Baptist ritual and moral practice, while 'bad' culture is what does (the latter being primarily associated with the propitiation of spirits and their natural abodes). Against the moral sanction of Christianity, therefore, the 'good' cultural practices that are being revived (e.g. tribal dances, games, ceremonies) take a distinctly cultural rather than ritualistic form.

Within this discursive and power paradigm, my elderly Sumi informants talked about reclaiming 'good' culture and bridging the allegedly growing socio-cultural disconnect between the generations. For most of them 'good' culture consisted in continuing the culturally significant practices of weaving and jewellery-making (as already described),



preserving Sutsa (the Sumi language) for the younger generations and celebrating Sumi festivals, such as Tuluni (the festival of abundant crops celebrated in July) and Ahuna (the harvest festival celebrated in November). While participation in these festivals would entail the excommunication of those participating in them in the past, they are nowadays important community events in which the village pastor often plays a central role, not only by offering the invocation prayer at the beginning of each celebration but sometimes also by taking an active part in the festivities. In one Sumi village that I visited during Tuluni in 2012, for example, the pastor had taught the young boys the dances and indigenous games for the cultural programme that accompanies the formal celebrations and took the lead in the head-hunters' dance (*aphilekuwo*). The performance of games and dances related to headhunting constitutes an essential part of contemporary cultural and festival celebrations among the Sumi. My informants, lay believers and church executives alike, did not seem to see anything 'unchristian' about such cultural displays largely due to the fact that they are believed to have been stripped of their ritual significance and to have become 'innocent culture', as I was told. The function that this 'innocent culture' performs is not instrumental but rather serves to support symbolically and accentuate Sumi identity. The pastor in question, who was leading the head-hunters' dance, simply explained: 'This is our culture, na, how can we not know?'. On further probing it became obvious that the pastor had been actively involved in the student union of his village when he was young and had learnt the traditional games and dances while participating in cultural programmes organised by it. Another interview that I took with a senior church executive revealed a more theologically nuanced explanation of how the revival and enactment of 'good' culture intersects with the contemporary practice and experience of Baptist Christianity among the Sumi: 'it [traditional culture] was all created by God and therefore it cannot be wrong; tradition is not wrong because God made it'. This illustrates the fact that the Sumi Baptist Church is not ideologically opposed to the ongoing promotion of certain aspects of traditional Sumi culture in public and private life, and there is a growing understanding across church leadership that the display and practice of traditional cultural forms should be encouraged because it is constitutive of Sumi-ness, the condition of being Sumi.

At a macro-level, political discourses on the need to preserve and exhibit certain aspects of Naga tradition, especially performative Naga culture (dances, games, tribal festivals etc.), have been circulating in public space and in the local media most pronouncedly since the early 2000s. These discourses are indicative of a shift in political thinking which places a new emphasis on the need to make Naga culture more visible by creating opportunities for its display or 'showcasing', as the popular expression goes. The resultant commodification of this vibrant and visible part of Naga cultural heritage is then used by the state government for the purposes of promoting tourism and drawing political dividends from it while also generating some revenue. At the same time, however, it also exoticises the image of the Naga as brave warriors and of Nagaland as

'The land of festivals'. This is particularly obvious in state policies to promote domestic and international tourism in Nagaland via the annual Hornbill Festival, which has been organised in the first week of December since 2000. The festival is held at Kisama, a specially constructed heritage village near the state capital Kohima, and has become a mega tourist event in recent years, described by the Government of Nagaland as 'The festival of festivals' and as a 'cultural extravaganza' that attracts hundreds of foreign and local tourists to Nagaland.

Such commodification of indigenous culture for touristic purposes is certainly not a unique innovation of the Government of Nagaland. Each year it generates much public controversy and often heated debates in daily newspapers and on social media on the rationale of hosting such a 'cultural extravaganza' in the state, on the logistic burden it poses on the state's economy and the limited revenue that it actually generates, and on the 'authenticity' (or not) of the cultural forms displayed during the festival and their appropriateness (or not) for 'true' Christians. These debates, which intersperse the weeks preceding the Hornbill Festival each year, are significant because they reflect public sentiments and power dynamics within Naga society. It seems equally important, however, that the Hornbill Festival is underpinned by larger political and symbolic significance which, when analysed in its complexity, can shed some light on current processes of identity formation among the Naga and their political aspirations. Longkumer (2013) usefully suggests that the Hornbill Festival should be viewed not as a micro-event but as embedded in larger cultural, political, economic and religious processes that are shaping the present and future of the Naga. The consistent portrayal of the festival as 'indigenous', for example, serves as a political tool for procuring international legitimation for the Naga political claims for independence based on their distinct culture. Similarly, Stockhausen and Wettstein (2008) argue that the Hornbill Festival is a political tool through which the Naga declare their uniqueness and distinctiveness to the world, and thus legitimise their nationalist movement. Moreover, the authors interpret the coming together of various cultural groups representing different Naga tribes, who would otherwise not have much sustained contact between each other, as a powerful demonstration to the outside world that the Naga wish to be seen as one people, one nation. This indicates a desire to create and maintain a pan-Naga sense of solidarity and collective identity as well as constitute new forms of meaning-making among the Naga (cf. also Longkumer 2013 and Patnaik 2014).

Similar arguments can be advanced in relation to the nature of the other 'official' tribal festivals,<sup>24</sup> such as Tuluni among the Sumi that I have described above. On the one hand, the celebration of Tuluni serves an important function in sustaining the cultural

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<sup>24</sup> In the past, the celebration of the major tribal festivals among all Naga took several days to a week to complete. In the current political situation, the Government of Nagaland has fixed only one official date for the celebration of each major tribal festival. For the Sumi this is Tuluni, which is celebrated on 8 July.

memory of the Sumi and their experiences as one people through the customary narration of its story (*Tuluni ghili pini*). On the other hand, it is also often predicated on consumerist considerations which often prevail in village decisions on whether to organise a community celebration at all or not. Due to the high financial costs associated with the organisation of a community feast and a cultural programme, in some Sumi villages Tuluni is currently celebrated at the community level only if a chief guest (a patron to the celebration) or foreign guests are present. Despite this apparent lack of performative festivity, however, it is nonetheless significant that Tuluni is still widely observed by the Sumi in more intimate ways: by customary exchanges of pork meat and *anagho*<sup>25</sup> between family and friends and by shared meals and visits between family members. One of my elderly female informants explained these intimate celebrations in the following way: 'We just invite close close relatives OK, we have food together once and that's it. If I give this year, you will give next year, like this...'. This underscores an important cultural continuity in the contemporary celebration of Tuluni: it continues to represent a symbolic reinforcement of kinship and community ties, as it had done in the past, because the sharing of meals is central to the way in which Sumi kinship is constructed and experienced.

Necessarily, the contemporary meaning which is attached to the re-enactment of traditional cultural forms, such as performative Naga culture and handicrafts, is different from their original cultural context and hence open to reinterpretation, reinvention and continuous improvisation. As Patnaik (2014) demonstrates in relation to the Sumi, these improvisations are underpinned by an aesthetics which operates differently depending on its target audience: the local or the national/international market. Moreover, Patnaik contends that while driven by consumption demands, the aesthetics of cultural reproduction is also underpinned by the strong undercurrents of 'the refiguration and thus revaluing of cultural artefacts' by those who produce them (Patnaik 2014: 235). I would like to take this argument further by suggesting that this revaluation of cultural heritage is directly correlated to ongoing processes of identity reconstruction among the Sumi and other Naga, which seek to creatively constitute a 'new tradition': one which draws its symbolic resources both from certain aspects of historical cultural heritage and from Christianity.

The presence of a strong substratum of cultural reproduction and continuity in this 'new tradition' is particularly evident in the everyday lived realities of my Sumi informants, despite widely shared sentiments that culture is 'lost' or on the verge of being 'lost'. The distinctive social organisation of Sumi society, for example, has remained largely unaffected by their conversion to Christianity. Arguably, this could be attributed to the fact that neither the British colonial administrators nor the American Baptist

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<sup>25</sup> *Anagho* (from *ana*, 'cooked rice' and *agho*, 'a gift') is a special gift people exchange on Tuluni: it contains cooked rice and very big chunks of boiled pork wrapped up in banana leaves and given to friends, neighbours and relatives.

missionaries interfered actively in this aspect of Sumi tradition as well as to its socio-cultural salience for Sumi identity constructions. For example, while polygamy is no longer practised, the hereditary right of succession to power within chiefly lineages has remained intact, and customary laws are still being followed in relation to the settlement of land disputes, village feuds, and the inheritance of property. Some traditional rites of passage are no longer observed (e.g. the piercing of the ears of infant Sumi boys), but many others have retained their symbolic value, even though they are nowadays transformed and celebrated with Christian ritualism. The naming ceremony (*Aje kuku*), for example, continues to form an important rite of passage in the life of a Sumi individual; the selection of a spouse follows customary rules which prohibit the intermarriage of closely related clans; in accordance with Sumi custom, wedding invitations for close kinsmen are accompanied by big chunks of pork meat; and the preferred place for burying deceased family members continues to be the house compound. Admittedly, an important Christian innovation in the cycle of Sumi rites of passage is, of course, the ritual of believer's baptism, which is crucial to the construction of one's Christian personhood.

In addition, contemporary attitudes to illness and affliction among the Sumi also exhibit a strong continuity of cultural tradition. While the initial response to illness is the combined application of biomedicine and Christian prayer (especially in the form of collective prayer meetings organised on behalf of the afflicted by their family members), traditional healers are also occasionally contacted for certain persistent ailments. There are various types of such healers: masseurs, bone-setters, herbalists etc.<sup>26</sup> All of them specialise in the treatment of certain ailments and combine their healing powers with prayers; some of them are believed to see visions in dreams, which help them heal their patients. In this way, the healers are held to be in a sustained contact with the divine and thus able to channel its support for the benefit of their ailing patients. Some traditional healers are famous and are frequented by numerous patients from far and wide; others practise on a smaller scale in their villages. For example, the mother in the family with whom I lived was a traditional healer specialising in the treatment of muscle cramps and nerve inflammations. As a rule, she helped relatives and friends only, and her method of treatment included massaging the patient with mustard oil and pressing down very hard in the direction of the nerve/muscle. She explained to me that her healing was a gift from God, and she had inherited it from her mother. In addition, she was an active member of the village Baptist church and participated regularly in all prayer meetings, signing competitions and special functions organised by the church. The accommodation of such traditional healers in the life of the Baptist church is yet another example of the 'new tradition' that is currently being constituted among the Sumi and other Naga.

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<sup>26</sup> See Joshi (2012) for a detailed discussion of the types of traditional healers with a special reference to the Angami Naga.

Last, but not least, the preservation and continued use of Sutsa, the Sumi language, represents a socio-cultural continuity, which has important implications for the construction of Sumi identity. With their first biblical translations in the beginning of the twentieth century, the American missionaries and their Sumi assistants promoted the codification of the hitherto oral language of the Sumi to writing and initiated a long and vibrant literary tradition. Nowadays, the Sumi Cultural Association and the Sumi Literature Board in Zunheboto are sponsoring or otherwise supporting various publications, especially targeting the promotion of the Sumi language, thus facilitating the continued growth of a strong body of indigenous literature. The burgeoning interest in traditional Sumi culture that this article has sought to present is also reflected in some recent publications by Sumi authors in Sutsa (cf. Zhimomi 1985, Yeptho 1991) and in English (cf. Assumi 2009, Yeptho 2011, Achumi 2011), which complement other works focusing on the history of Christianity among the Sumi and its socio-cultural impact (cf. Aye 2005, Kiho 2004, Chishi 2003, Zhimomi 2012 etc.). This indigenous scholarship has not only provided a wealth of information about Sumi culture and traditions but has also filled in a significant gap in knowledge about the ‘large and important Sema tribe’, to borrow Elwin’s words yet again. It has also made an important contribution to contextualising Christianity and embedding it firmly in Sumi cultural tradition and history.

## Conclusion

The construction of the contemporary Sumi identity has been a long process of rejection, incorporation and creative transformation of cultural elements belonging to Christian and non-Christian religious traditions against the background of specific historical and political circumstances. British colonial rule and American Baptist missionary activity since the early twentieth century and the contested incorporation of Sumi lands into the independent Indian nation-state in the mid-twentieth century have served as important agents of change, which have left their imprints on the ways in which the Sumi constitute their identities and engage with their cultural heritage. With a particular focus on the history and contemporary significance of Baptist Christianity among the Sumi, the present article sought to demonstrate that even though Christian conversions have entailed certain discontinuities in the socio-cultural traditions of the Sumi, a number of continuities have persisted and come to shape the ways in which contemporary Sumi identity is being reconstituted. This article argued that, as a result, Christianity should not be viewed merely as a major agent of socio-cultural change among the Sumi, but rather as an intrinsic part of their contemporary identity and, more importantly, as a vital constitutive part of a ‘new tradition’ that is currently in the making: one, which is creatively embedding Christianity within a solid substratum of cultural reproduction.

It is clear that in the conversion process some important village institutions, such as headhunting and the *morung* system, have been abandoned while others have been

continued and preserved. The distinctive social organisation of the Sumi, for example, has remained largely unaffected by their conversion to Christianity, and customary law is still practised in matters pertaining to the settlement of land disputes, and the inheritance of property. While some rites of passage (e.g. the piercing of the ears of infant Sumi boys) have lost their symbolic significance, and are no longer performed, others (e.g. naming ceremony, marriage and funeral rites) have remained strongly rooted in tradition although they are nowadays marked by Christian ritualism. Necessarily, the rite of believer's baptism has become a new rite of passage central to the constitution of Christian Sumi identities.

It is also acknowledged that many items of Sumi material culture (e.g. jewellery, *mekhlas*, shawls, weapons, headgear) have been destroyed in the course of Christian conversions for their symbolic association with a 'heathen' past that the new converts wished to distance themselves from in their adoption of a new, Christian identity. However, the fact that the cultural knowledge about these items has been preserved and some of it is currently being recreated in cultural revival projects clearly indicates that their symbolic value for the construction of contemporary Sumi identity is being re-evaluated. With the tacit sanction of the Baptist church, various local initiatives have therefore sought to revive, preserve and promote certain inheritance from the past, such as performative Sumi culture (e.g. dances, songs, indigenous games) and some handicrafts (e.g. weaving, woodcarving, basket-making). Some of the village elders with whom I interacted were also taking concrete steps in teaching the younger generations this cultural knowledge in practical attempts to bridge an allegedly growing socio-cultural disconnect between the generations. To borrow Daniel Miller's (2003) terminology, the Sumi seem to have preserved and perpetuated those aspects of their traditional cultural heritage which *matter* to them because they are perceived as salient cultural symbols and resources infused with sentimental and symbolic value. At the same time, through the creation of new *mekhla* designs, innovative pieces of clothing such as the male waistcoat and new types of jewellery that still bear distinctive tribal colours and design patterns but are more affordable than their traditional counterparts, the Sumi seem to have creatively reinvented and re-imagined their cultural heritage in a process of traditionalisation in which the cultural value attached to tribal textiles and jewellery has been retained while their form has changed.

For my informants across Sumi villages, being Sumi meant a number of things: preserving *Sutsa* (the Sumi language), promoting the production and wearing of traditional textiles and jewellery, performing Sumi rites of passage and perpetuating the custom of community festivals and feasting, among other things. In the context of larger cultural revival initiatives which are ongoing across Nagaland, these have been deemed as 'good' culture, and therefore worthy of being preserved and transmitted to the younger generations. From my experience, young people were overall quite interested in engaging more deeply with their cultural heritage. In the process, traditional culture

becomes commodified to a certain extent, especially for the purposes of promoting national and international tourism, but this need not obfuscate the significance of the personal meanings and motivations attached to it for those who are engaged in reproducing it. While the suppression of certain elements of cultural expression in the past has been perceived as essential to adopting a 'true' new Christian identity, their creative re-enactment in the contemporary period reflects the shared understanding within Sumi society that these forms of cultural expression represent the uniqueness and distinctiveness of their community and as such they cannot be antithetical to their Christian identity. As I have sought to demonstrate here, this suggests that a 'new tradition' is currently being creatively constituted by the Sumi, and it draws its symbolic resources and strength from an equal engagement with Sumi cultural heritage and with Christianity. 🙏

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