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Prayers from the Kuki-Naga conflict: living through violence in Manipur

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This article offers an ethnographic account of individuals using Christian prayer as a coping strategy - one among others - in their process of healing in the aftermath of the traumas that resulted from the loss of their spouses during the Kuki-Naga ethnic violence that occurred between 1992 and 1998. Relationship with God through prayer provides some succour for people to cope with personal loss in militarised societies across Kangpokpi region in Manipur. Among the survivors, constant acknowledgement of God reveals a particular understanding of religion and of faith, which helps them mitigate their trauma and loss through forgiveness and validation of humanity.

Growing up amongst survivors of the Kuki-Naga conflict that raged between the years 1992 to 1998, I am drawn to explore how people continued their lives after experiencing the trauma of losing loved ones. I want to understand their post-conflict lives better. My exploration of this question entailed meeting people from both Kuki and Naga communities living in the villages of the Kangpokpi region in Manipur.¹ Although Kukis and Nagas living in Kangpokpi region interact through economic and political relations, most of their social and civic lives are conducted separately. During the conflict, Kangpokpi was regarded as the most dangerous region. People were pulled down from buses and shot. Some others were hacked to death. Recollecting the memory of the

¹ Kangpokpi was still a sub-division of Senapati district at the time I conducted my research in December 2015. It has now become a district. The Kukis involved in my research resided in Kangpokpi town. Both Kukis and Nagas inhabited the town before the conflict but now it is populated by Kukis who were displaced from Tamenglong, Ukhrol and Chandel districts during the violent ethnic conflict. On the contrary, Nagas who were settled in Kangpokpi town before the conflict and in villages around the town like Thangal Surung and Makeng left in large numbers, and now mostly reside in Senapati town. The Nagas who were involved in my research resided in the villages around Kangpokpi town, as they did prior to the violent ethnic conflict.

conflict from the years 1996 to 1998, when I was a child, I remember the everyday routine of running for cover whenever there was a shootout nearby. Families would hide in underground shelters, which were usually hand dug, located with an entrance underneath their bedroom floor or behind their houses. During wintery nights, every family sat on the cold floor of their bunkers and maintained complete silence, fearing that enemies might detect their hideout. Adult male members from each family would take guns and guard the village every night.

Anthropologist, Kimberly Theidon (2006), in her work on communities in the Ayacucho region of Peru, discusses what it is like to live in a post-conflict society where people formerly enacted violence on each other. She remarked: “Co-existence is based upon a complicated alchemy of remembering, forgetting and remembering to forget” (2006: 98). Such a process is also visible in Manipur. In the absence of communal reconciliation,² some Kukis continue to observe September 13 as ‘Black Day’ to commemorate the killing of 87 Kukis on the 13th of September 1993 at Tamei in Tamenglong District of Manipur.³ The objective behind the commemoration is complex. For example, some people use the day to remember their loved ones, others use it to demand justice and some use it to instigate hostility. While some Nagas also individually commemorate their loved ones during annual death anniversaries, others chose not to observe this.

The Kuki-Naga conflict

From 1992 to 1998, the violent ethnic conflict between Kukis and Nagas spread in places across Northeast India.⁴ Manipur witnessed the most violent clashes, which claimed hundreds of lives, while they also displaced thousands.⁵ Writing about the Kuki-Naga ethnic conflict is a complicated task given the multiplicity of causes, incidences of violence, as well as its manifold consequences and after effects, which members of both communities faced after the violent ethnic conflict came to an end. The scramble for land, however, remains a dominant narrative. The beginning of the Kuki-Naga conflict can be traced back to at least the time of the British colonial era. However, intermittent disputes in the form of inter-village raids existed between Kukis and Nagas even before the colonial era.⁶ Guite (2013) posits that such raids were conducted when negotiations

² The lack of political consensus, land disputes between Kukis and Nagas, and the negligence of both the central and the state governments remain hurdles for a communal reconciliation between the two groups.

³ While other accounts claim different figures, I will use the figure of 87 Kukis that were killed on the 13th of September 1993, based on the responses given by many Kukis during my fieldwork. Also, see Aheibam Koireng Singh, 2008) and SR Tohring, 2010.

⁴ The Kuki-Naga conflict affected the states of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland.

⁵ Within Manipur, the ethnic violence concentrated in the districts of Chandel, Senapati, Tamenglong and Ukhul.

⁶ This does not mean that Kukis and Nagas always had antagonistic relations towards each other. In the past, they would often make peace or maintained tributary relations. In addition, Kukis and Nagas conducted raids within their own respective tribes, too. Moreover, when the British attacked them, it was

between villages failed, or when there was a failure of payment of tributes. He holds that such raids were usually accompanied by plunders and taking captives. The colonial land re-arrangements and the policy of divide and rule bred further animosity between Kukis and Nagas. In 1840, McCulloch, the then Political Agent, resettled some Kukis in the front lines of the British territory and amongst Nagas for them to act as a buffer against the Burmese, the Nagas and the Lushai tribes (Dena, 2007: 184).⁷ In this way, the British as well the Rajas of Manipur used Kukis against Nagas. This strategy was also employed the other way around. For instance, when Kukis revolted against the British in 1917 by refusing to be recruited for the Manipur Labour Corps and be sent to France, Naga warriors were deployed to suppress the uprising. Similarly, Kuki warriors were recruited to suppress the 1930 uprising, which was led by Jadonang, who was a Naga.⁸

During those days, both Kukis and Nagas formed organisations to socially and politically represent themselves.⁹ Some of these political organisations went underground in the post-colonial era after the Indian government denied their political claims and instead retained the colonial legacy of divide and rule, which continues until today. Kabui (1994: 17) remarked how the Indian government displayed the colonial mentality by instigating one tribe against another. “The greatest casualty”, he writes, “is the credibility of Indian security forces, especially the Assam Rifles and the Assam Regiments who were alleged to have been involved in the conflict instigating one against another.”

The consolidation of the Kuki and Naga ethnic identities began to emerge during the colonial period and it hardened with their respective demands for territorial integrity. The violent conflict during the 1990s was a consequence of both communities in Manipur making overlapping territorial claims for several decades.¹⁰ The immediate cause of the conflict in 1992, however, was the desire of the respective ethnic armed groups (Kukis and Nagas) to control an important trading town called Moreh located along the international border between Manipur and Myanmar.¹¹ The Naga armed group, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak/Muivah (NSCN-IM), levied taxes that created

natural for the Kuki and Naga tribes to help and protect each other. Elwin (1961) and Guite (2013) state that Kukis and Nagas also conducted raids on the British as acts of resistance against the encroachment of the colonial tea planters on their territory.

⁷ The resettlement of the Kukis caused many disputes between Kukis and Nagas on the question of land and territory.

⁸ Jadonang was a Rongmei Naga, social and religious reformer whose intention was to drive away the British. He launched a political movement by mobilising the Zeliangrongs in 1930 (Longkumer 2010).

⁹ The Kukis formed an organisation called the Kuki National Assembly (KNA) in 1946 and later an underground unit called the Kuki National Front (KNF) in 1988. Naga political organisations such as the Naga Club and Naga National Council (NNC) were formed in 1918 and 1946 respectively.

¹⁰ On one hand, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM), a Naga armed group fighting for a Naga homeland asserted the integration of all the Naga inhabited areas of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Nagaland and parts of Myanmar to form the ‘Greater Nagaland’. On the other hand, the Kuki armed groups that is the Kuki National Front (KNF) and Kuki National Organization (KNO) demanded for a ‘Kuki Homeland’ within the state of Manipur.

¹¹ The Kuki and the Naga armed groups as well as the government of India and Manipur desired to take control of the border town because this trade point of Myanmar generates considerable sources of income.

resentment among the Kuki communities living in Indo-Myanmar border villages. In retaliation, the Kuki armed group, the Kuki National Army (KNA) began to demand tax from the Naga villages in Chandel district. Initially, the clash was between these two non-state armed groups. However, due to the ethnic alliances (as Kukis and Nagas) civilians soon became deeply entangled in the violence. The people from both the ethnic communities formed village guards to protect their homes. While members from the various Naga groups of Manipur were involved in the conflict, not all Kuki tribes were involved.¹²

By 1993, the ethnic conflict was at its peak and the most brutal forms of violence were recorded that year.¹³ The dead bore multiple wounds and cuts; bodies were cut into pieces, to the extent that some victims could no longer be identified. To explain what drives 'ordinary' people to participate in such violence, scholars have argued that the categorisation of groups based on fixed and rigid identities can lead to negative perspectives about the others (Mamdani 2001; Kriedie & Monroe 2002), so preparing the grounds for violence. Mamdani (2001) and Peterson (2002) explain how fear and obedience can drive, in particular circumstances, individuals towards violent actions. The people I interacted with pointed out that those civilians involved in violent acts were guided by armed groups and often feared becoming victims themselves. Thus, they enacted violence in the belief that this would produce safety for themselves. In addition, rumours about the cruelty of the violence enacted by 'the other' created resentment and fear, eliciting fantasies of revenge among survivors. During my fieldwork, several people from Kangpokpi region said, "The clash died down when a sense of realisation of the severe damage arose in the minds of both Kukis and Nagas." While over two decades have now passed, many of them still fear that the conflict has a possibility of resurfacing because of the continued aspirations for ethnic homelands propagated by the respective armed groups.

By presenting prayers from the Kuki-Naga conflict in the article, I also ask the following broader questions. What constitutes faith and healing in militarised societies?¹⁴ What kind of spiritual crisis do survivors undergo after witnessing violent killings? In what

¹² The Kuki tribe involved in the conflict was the Thadous, one of the major tribe within the larger Kuki-fold.

¹³ Some of the major incidences of violence, which most scholars have reported are the Khallang Massacre on the 8th of August, 1993; the Gelnel Massacre on the 13th of September, 1993; the Tamei Massacre on the 13th of September, 1993 (also remembered as the Joupri Massacre); the Toloulong Massacre on the 21st of September 1993. There are other violent incidences that occurred on the 29th of September, 1993; the 1st and 16th of December, 1993 and in October, 1994. See Aheibam Koireng Singh, 2008.

¹⁴ In Manipur, like most of the north-eastern states in India, the presence of heavy paramilitary forces and the long history of armed conflicts has created a highly militarised situation in the society. For instance, there is one-armed personnel to every five individuals in Manipur. Kikon (2004; 2005) wrote that the Indian state manifested its presence in the north-eastern region through military expeditions, thus developing an increasing emphasis on military power. As a result, militarisation has brought about a "fundamental distortion of the region's social and political institutions" (2004: 12).

ways can we understand attributes that are defined as “good and bad” as people of Christian faith share their experiences of violence? In order to examine these questions, this article is divided into four sections. First, I explore how Christianity came to Kukis and Nagas of Manipur, which subsequently led to spiritual and moral transformations in their societies. Next, I present personal narratives of individuals who lost their spouses during the Kuki-Naga violence. Sections three and four subsequently analyse how these individuals experienced the process of healing through prayer and forgiveness, which in turn elucidates how a particular understanding of faith and Christianity exists among survivors of the Kuki-Naga ethnic conflict. I submit that such an exploration contributes towards ongoing conversations about everyday experiences of enduring violence, processes of reconciliation and notions of justice, and healing in conflict societies not just in Manipur, but across Northeast India and beyond.

Situating Christianity in conflict areas

Colonial sources and texts of tribal communities in the North East region of India, and particularly in Manipur and the Naga Hills, show how Christianity and conversions transformed societies immensely.¹⁵ Today, the portrayal of Christian faith among tribal communities is presented either as a modernizing element that brought education and institutionalized religion or as a subversive element from the west that incited tribal communities to break away from India.¹⁶ According to my fieldwork experiences, neither of these dominant frameworks captures the everyday experiences of people who profess a faith they define as Christianity.

Christianity reached Kukis and Nagas of Manipur in the early parts of the twentieth century. William Pettigrew, a member of the American Baptist Mission Society, started his work among the Tangkhuls of Ukhrul district as early as 1896. The activities of the Christian missionaries among the Kukis began with the establishment of a mission school in a Kuki inhabited part of Ukhrul. However, it was only in 1912 that mission work among Kukis became active with the arrival of Rev. Watkin Robert of the Welsh

¹⁵ Adopting Christianity meant adopting not just a new religion, but also a new mode of life. Downs (1993) explains how Christianity was emphasised as a life style by the Protestant missionaries. In addition, Elwin (1961: 16) notes that the concept of “personal salvation in Christianity has introduced a new individualism in place of the former community spirit...” Conditions were laid down for the church members to renounce their traditional religious practices. For instance, Longkumer (2013) pointed out how the early Christian missionaries made a clear distinction between the traditional religion as ‘false religion’ and Christianity as ‘true religion’. Consequently, the animistic worldview was subordinated. While many traditional practices like head hunting and fear of evil spirits of the indigenous people were abandoned for good, many valuable parts of tribal heritage such as songs, dances and poetry have diminished after Christianity was introduced.

¹⁶ Longkumer (2013: 4) throws light on the analogy of how the Sangh Parivar believes that “Christianity poses a challenging threat to the territorial integrity of Bharatvarsh. The Sangh regards this ‘challenge’ as territorial ‘secessionism’; their aim is to prevent this and unite the country.” In the context of the Naga Movement, Nuh (2006), Thomas (2016) and Elwin (1961) point out how Christianity became a symbol of resistance to the military campaign of the Indian government subsequently contributing towards the further strengthening of the resolve of the Nagas to preserve Christianity.

Presbyterian Missionary and Dr. G.G. Crozier, a member of the American Baptist Mission Society. These two missionaries worked among the Kukis in Kangpokpi (Senapati district) and Churachandpur district. The Catholic missionaries also started their work among the hill tribes of Manipur in 1912 under Father Ansgar Koenigsbaver, a German Salvatorian missionary. Although, the primary aim of the Christian Missionaries was to proselytise, they also took to propagating love and brotherhood among the hitherto warring tribes. Ultimately, it was largely through medicine and education that the missionaries won the confidence of the hill people.¹⁷

For missionaries, educating the hill people meant first and foremost teaching them how to read the scriptures. This was effective in making them understand the ways of Christian living. Downs (1993) and Mohan (2016) point out how prayer had a prominent place in missionary teachings. The reading of scriptures in the schools was accompanied by the learning of prayers. The lives of the newly converts began to be increasingly governed by the time of prayer. For instance, congregations would assemble every evening to learn prayers. It was through the learning of prayers, that hill people acquired an understanding of the need to repent for their sins and seek forgiveness from God. For instance, Iralu (2000) notes how the precolonial practice of head hunting amongst hill tribes, including the “avenging of a murder”, was governed by a code of honour where “the failure to avenge a relative’s murder was the most shameful thing on the part of the living” (Cited in Joshi, 2012: 254). However, after embracing Christianity, Kukis and Nagas developed an approach towards forgiveness and abstinence from revenge based on the Christian theological notion of reconciliation.¹⁸

Mohan (2016: 46), in his study of the role of prayer among the Dalit Christians in Kerala posits, “The ideas and metaphors that the Dalits have learned through prayers were fundamental in transforming their social and cultural practices.” The Protestant missionaries introduced prayer books to the Dalits in Malayalam, which was used for everyday prayers. In course of time, some individuals became experts in composing ‘extempore prayers’ and they assumed leadership in the community. Similarly, the

¹⁷ Vibha Joshi (2012) explains how the missionaries envisaged hill people’s interest in education as an opportunity to gain access to them. Besides education, the medical services provided by the missionaries was another effective way of gaining acceptance among the hill tribes. The missionaries often combined evangelism with medical care because diseases such as cholera, malaria, small pox, dysentery, tuberculosis and leprosy were prevalent in the Manipur and the Naga Hills in the early twentieth century.

¹⁸ Christianity-based civilian organisations such as the Forum for Naga Reconciliation (FNR) have made appeals for reconciliation between the various Naga nationalist factions that have carried out recurring acts of vengeful killings. The theme for reconciliation was laid out with the hope that through prayer, the armed Naga nationalists as well as lay people would apologise and ask for forgiveness. There were a number of cases in Nagaland where families or clans reconciled as a result of this. However, despite the rhetoric surrounding the need to forgive and forget, there are few expressions of apology or regret on the part of the alleged perpetrators of the rival factional killings (Joshi, 2012, pp. 252, 253). Similarly, in the absence of an apology between Kukis and Nagas, the process of reconciliation becomes difficult. It prevents what Veena Das (2007: 218) considers central to reconciliation, which is that: “Public acknowledgement of hurt can allow new opportunities to be created for resumption of everyday life.”

missionaries who were working amongst Kukis and Nagas introduced prayer books while also translating the scriptures in local languages. Today, following the footsteps of the early Christian missionaries, Kuki and Naga pastors, priests and nuns continue to teach their respective congregations about how to pray. Prayer books are also distributed to church members. Those Kukis and Nagas belonging to the Baptist and Revival denominations within Christianity have resorted to 'composing extempore prayers' based on their own context and understanding. However, most of the Catholic Kukis and Nagas recite given spiritual prayers, for instance, the Lord's Prayer, taught to them by the church.

For Christians, prayer is regarded as food for the soul. Or as Sproul (2014: 1) writes, "Prayer is to the Christians what bread is to life." Christians believe that prayer builds their relationship with Jesus while also helping them determine God's will and overcome temptations. In light of the fundamental role played by Christian prayers in the lives of Kukis and Nagas, I will now present stories of how survivors of the Kuki-Naga conflict pacified themselves and dealt with the trauma they faced through their passion for prayer.

Stories of loss and trauma

Storytelling, a part of human experience, helps people to relate to other persons more closely. Stories work to build bridges between the past and the present. It is through story telling that the narrator can express emotions of pain, anger, happiness and hope. La Capra (1999) suggests that in post-traumatic situations, when one relives (or acts out) the past, distinctions tend to collapse, including the crucial distinction between then and now. Larson (2009: 185), in her exploration of forgiveness and reconciliation in the years following the Rwandan genocide points out that the process of learning to tell stories of loss, especially about the sudden loss of loved ones, helps victims in coming to terms with their emotions. It helps them overcome emotions of anger, frustrations, distress, grief and feelings of helplessness in the wake of 'sudden violent death' of loved ones. Similarly, Thiranagama (2013), through her ethnographic exploration of the Sri Lankan Civil War, affirms that the narratives of the 'wartime self' generates channels of coping. Likewise, I observed that survivors of the Kuki-Naga violence received some comfort from narrating their stories to those willing to listen to them.

In the narratives that follow, I have given fictional names to the survivors who participated in the research to protect their confidentiality.¹⁹ As I began my research, I introduced myself as a survivor of the conflict. I shared my story and asked them if they would be comfortable to narrate their experiences to me. They opened up their home more easily because we shared similar experiences of the conflict. I posed the following set of questions to them:

¹⁹ The names were derived from the kind of qualities I saw in them. At the same time, I have tried not to stray too far away from the meaning of their original names. I have named them based on their ethnic affiliation.

I would like to start by asking you to tell me in your own words the story of your life. I want you to tell me about your life, your struggles, the challenges you faced as if it is a story. Tell me about the experiences of your transition from a wife to a widow/husband to a widower. Tell me about the future of how things will look for you. Do not be bothered that I am going to write it down so the story should be told in this way or that way. Just tell me in a way that is most comfortable for you.²⁰

Khangtheidui's story

One winter morning in December 2015, my father, a local guide, and I went to the home of Khangtheidui, an 85-year-old Naga woman. Her daughter together with Khangtheidui's youngest son and his family received us. On stating the purpose of my visit, her children worried that their mother was very old and had started to lose her hearing ability. They were not sure whether she would be able to recollect memories of the Kuki-Naga violence. Moreover, they were sceptical about her ability to speak 'Meiteilon.'²¹ As she came out of her room, we shook hands and she sat down beside me. In Thangal Naga, the community she belongs to, Khangtheidui means 'the enduring one.' Despite the scepticism of her children and her advancing age, she recollected many vivid memories of violent incidents that took place in 1995. In fluent Meiteilon, she narrated the incidents.

It was sometime in May 1995 when Khangtheidui was weaving a shawl in a corner of the veranda of her home, when her husband said that he was going to fetch firewood from the forest as well as take their buffalo for grazing. Khangtheidui protested at his idea of venturing out into the forest because of the ethnic tension. She asked him to stay back at home but, as a hardworking man who never liked to sit idle, he would not agree. He set off to the jungle assuring her that no harm would come to him and that, in any case, he would not go far. When he did not return until late in the night, doubts began to rise and Khangtheidui informed her neighbours of his missing. Some people gathered to search for him and found his body hacked into pieces with a machete. Pieces of his body were found lying around in the forest. They collected the pieces and carried them home. Those who killed him had also taken away his buffalo. The search party did not allow Khangtheidui to look at the body. They told her: "It looks like meat cut into pieces. It would be better if you do not look at it." A funeral service was conducted and his body was buried in the church's cemetery. Khangtheidui said, "I was devastated but I told myself that I should not dwell on the loss. I had to stay strong for my children. I tried not to think too much and I prayed to God for the strength to cope with the loss."

²⁰ Some of the questions were adapted from, Goodman, 2004. Coping with Trauma and Hardship among Unaccompanied Refugee Youths from Sudan. Qualitative Health Research. p. 1180.

²¹ Meiteilon was used as the medium of communication during the interviews.

Job's story

One evening, in December 2015, I listened to Job, a 57-year-old Naga pastor, teacher and a father of three children. His name is taken from the Biblical character Job, as the pastor's words and way of understanding the blessings and tragedies of life resembled that of Job.²²

On Friday the 14th of July 1996, Job and his wife decided to go for a stroll and check on the paddy that was growing in their fields. Having done so, Job told his wife that they should head back home. It was time to feed the infant who was being looked after by a baby sitter. Job also was to evaluate the half-yearly exam papers of his school students. Job told her that they could come back the next day, if need be. His wife agreed. However, she insisted that she would first check on her mother's paddy fields before they would leave. On the way, she spotted some mushrooms and asked Job to collect them while she went ahead to check her mother's fields.

Some moments later, Job heard a gunshot. He stood up and saw some smoke curling up in the air. Immediately, he suspected that his wife had been shot. Job started running towards his wife but then a thought crossed his mind. "I should not go towards her now. What if the man is reloading his gun?" A little later, he could hear other people shouting and running in the direction of his wife and himself. At this moment, Job saw his wife lying dead on the ground. Recollecting the incident, Job said, "She must have tried to run towards me after seeing the man hiding in the bushes with a gun. The bullet went into her from the left side of the body and it pierced her heart."

The man who shot Job's wife ran up to the hill after he heard people shouting. Job realised that nothing could be done even if he had chased after him. His wife's body was carried home with the help of the people from his village. He said:

I was filled with rage, traumatised and could no longer think straight. People from my village and I wanted to stop vehicles that passed by on the National Highway running through our village. Fortunately, no vehicle passed by. Otherwise, some Kukis would have been killed that day. I was aware that repaying evil with evil is not the way to right the wrong. However, in that moment of anger, I wanted to avenge the unjust death of my wife. Later, I prayed to God to give me the strength to endure and keep me away from revengeful thoughts. I would never find any peace if I had taken revenge that day.

Hatneikim's story

I managed to fix an appointment with Hatneikim, a Kuki woman, taking the help of my local guide. As I arrived to listen to Hatneikim's story, I found her already waiting for my arrival. Hatneikim is 49 years old and lives with her four children. She is actively involved

²² In the Bible, Job is presented as a prosperous family man who encountered a terrible loss of his family, wealth and health. He struggled to understand his situation and simply put it as God's will. The pastor quoted Job saying, "The Lord has given and the Lord has taken away" (Job 1:21 NIV). Therefore, I ended up putting Job as the fictional name of the pastor.

in the local church that she and her husband established. Additionally, she is engaged in informal business from time to time. Hatneikim means 'the plucky one' in Thadou Kuki. "Where do I start or how do I even tell you? Well, let me narrate it to you this way", she started her narrative. On the day Hatneikim's husband died, she had asked him to take rest because he was feeling unwell. However, he went off to cut firewood in the forest regardless. She told me: "I made some *rotis*, and prepared tea in a kettle and gave it to him, so that he and my eldest daughter could have it later in the day." Sometime in the afternoon, Hatneikim heard a gunshot and she ran out of the house to see what had happened. She realised that the gunshot was fired from the direction where her husband and her daughter had headed off earlier that morning. After a while, her daughter came home running and told Hatneikim that her father was injured. Leaving her children behind at home, she ran to the forest. The only thought in her mind was to take him to the hospital, even though she feared he might already be dead.

People had already gathered at the place when she reached. They cut down some branches of trees and tied these together in the form of a makeshift stretcher to carry her husband to the hospital. Sadly, he died on the way. Hatneikim murmured: "I... did not have the strength to look at him. I felt that my husband was carried like an animal that had been hunted down. I went mad, I lost consciousness..." After a long pause, she uttered, "*Yam...nungaite...*" (it was such a very painful feeling). When her husband was carried home, two elderly Naga women and a man came down from the hill carrying firewood on their backs. That moment, Hatneikim thought of killing them. "I was very angry... at that particular moment; I felt that I had the strength to kill anyone. I became fearless... I wanted to grab a machete and hack them both to death but suddenly...." Hatneikim paused while she gazed at the floor in deep thought.

I heard a voice inside me saying that God would not be happy with me if I caused any harm to the innocent people who did not know anything about what had happened. I felt a sense of power controlling me.

After the death of her husband, Hatneikim's biggest worry was to look after her four children. With a deep sigh, she looked up, rubbed her face with her hands, cupped it, paused for a while, and then spoke:

Then, the next morning I woke up... and I prayed to God and spoke with Him at length about the challenges that awaited me. I felt a sense of relief, a sense of happiness after I prayed. I told myself that I should stop crying over the death of my children's father. I should be strong for their sake. I started earning once again with the determination to find every possible means to look after my children.

Recollecting tragic loss

These stories were narrated to me about 20 years after the events had taken place. What nevertheless struck me was the vividness in which they were told. I was astonished by how memories could seemingly just flow from the past into the present. This brought to mind what Maria Konnikova (2015: 1), drawing on her study of 9/11 survivors in New York, had to say about emotional memories: “Shocking emotional events tend to leave a particularly vivid imprint on the mind almost leaving a scar upon the cerebral tissues creating a cognitive impression called the flashbulb memories.”²³ When I reflected upon Job and Hatneikim’s responses to their encounters, it seemed that anger was the strongest emotion they felt in the aftermath of the violent act. They were filled with rage.²⁴ Angered by the injustice, they wanted to take revenge for their beloved one(s). Over time, however, it seemed that their anger was transmuted into a remarkable rationality shaped by their realisation that, despite the violence enacted against their spouses, harming others as a response to their emotional state would be equally wrong.²⁵

The trauma of losing their spouses led to a transition of their self. The survivors articulated the experience of their transition as that from a wife to a widow and from a husband to a widower. One of the many challenges, for them, was to appropriate the role of the lost one. This was an overwhelming experience for them. For instance, Job, suddenly a single parent, pointed out how difficult it was for him to run the household on a daily basis. Hatneikim and Khangtheidui expressed how the death of their husbands led to a major downturn in family finances. Adding to the narrative of their struggles, they said, “As widows, we were often isolated.” In patriarchal societies like those of the Kukis and Nagas, one common challenge faced by widows is that they are often left alone to fend for themselves.²⁶ Although some widows are fortunate to receive extensive support from family members, some are not.

²³ Similarly, in relation to recalling memory, Butalia (1998: 24) formulated that, “Often, people find it difficult to disentangle what they remember: the memory of violence, the victimhood and the many years that has passed. It is surprising how memories of the past can easily flow into the present and how remembering also meant reliving the past from within the context of the present.”

²⁴ Abrams (2013: 58, 48) in her study to understand parental loss wrote thus: “Feeling of helplessness can often turn to feeling of intense anger which is a natural reaction to a harrowing event. Rage and helplessness are two sides of the same coin.” Similarly, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969) in her postulation of “The five stages of grieving” in *On Death and Dying* indicated that anger is a necessary stage, an important element in the process of grieving. She added, “Anger is strength and it can be an anchor, giving temporary structure to the nothingness of loss. The anger is just another indication of the intensity of your love” (Kübler-Ross 1969: 63).

²⁵ Nevertheless, this rationality might only be applicable to the informants and not necessarily to all the others involved in the violence. Many, indeed, did take revenge, and which inflated the violence.

²⁶ For instance, a widow has no right over her deceased husband’s property and pension funds. She may receive a portion of the land and paddy to support her children (Barooah 2002). As a result, it becomes extremely difficult for the widow to sustain her family especially if she entirely depends on agriculture for livelihood, therefore, she has to look out for other means. There are many cases of women being sent away from marital home by the in-laws if the widow has no children from the marriage to look after (Kikon 2002).

When I reflected upon the survivors' narratives, I noticed that they developed certain strategies in order to cope with their loss. I perceived that through prayer, among other strategies, they were able to mitigate their experiences of loss and regain a positive attitude towards life. They acknowledged this by saying, "We were able to find the assurance to move on and to not dwell on the loss."

Prayer

I asked the survivors about the role of prayer in their lives, especially in view of the loss they had experienced at the hands of ethnic violence. Both Khangtheidui and Hatneikim expressed the divine love they experienced from the firm conviction that God listened to their prayers. Job said thus:

In prayer, I am consoled; I get more courage and faith. In prayer, I learned to forgive, I get peace and my sorrows are lifted. Prayer has been my armour in all these 20 years since my wife had passed away.

Prayer, then, helped the survivors reflect on their thoughts and actions. It was through prayer that they could place the dramatic event that occurred in their lives in the hands of God, believing that it must have been God's will. "What has happened has happened. What can I do? Alternatively, what could I have done to change fate? God knows. It is God's will." These lines echoed in the narratives of the survivors I spoke to. Attributing the loss to God offered the survivors a kind of comfort and consolation.²⁷ Furthermore, I wanted to know how the survivors prayed in their difficult times; Job thus articulated his prayer in the following words:

I beseech you, O Merciful Father, God of Compassion,
Have pity upon my sorrows,
I pour out my grief to you.
Lord, at this moment, nothing seems to be able to help the loss I feel,
I am broken and my spirit mourns,
I beg you to listen to my pleadings.
Nourish me with your strength,
Nourish my soul with patience in this difficult moment.
Help me to conquer this suffering with love.
Help me to forgive the person, who killed my wife,
Remember him in mercy; help him to be good again and give him peace.
All I know is that you will protect those who acknowledge you,
I will lean on you and your faithfulness.

²⁷ Janice H. Goodman in her study on the coping strategies of young refugees from Sudan pointed out that attributing incidents to the will of God avoided the participants from struggling with questions about why would this happen to them. "It provided an easy answer and enabled the participants to avoid thinking about the reasons for or the meaning of sufferings all around them" (Goodman, 2004: 1187).

At a broader level, I was curious to know how Kukis and Nagas prayed in times of war and difficulties. A Naga pastor from Manipur who actively worked for peace during the conflict told me how he would go to Kuki villages and prayed with them in their church.²⁸ He explained that many village churches were kept open so that anyone could enter and pray for peace, to pray for the cessation of the violence, and to pray that nobody, be they Kukis or Nagas, faced death or misfortune. "Prayer created a sense of understanding between members of both the communities and the intensity of violence was reduced", said the pastor. Noteworthy, too, is the role of the Kuki Women Organization (KWO) and Naga Women's Union of Manipur (NWUM), which took the initiative to open up a channel of communication between the two communities.²⁹ In addition, the All Manipur Christian Organisation (AMCO) and Manipur Baptist Convention (MBC) went to great efforts to encourage mass prayers and peace initiatives in order to reduce the intensity of violence.³⁰ The Baptist World Alliance also helped in bringing the churches of Kukis and Nagas together to initiate a process of reconciliation. Similarly, civil society groups such as the Kuki Inpi Manipur (KIM) and the United Naga Council (UNC) also formed the Committee for Restoration of Normalcy (CRN) with the motto – 'Let there be no ill-will' to work for the return of peace and normalcy.

What I understood from my interactions with both Kuki and Naga survivors is that prayer provided them with succour and was a means by which they created a relationship with God. Prayer also served as a medium for constant conversation with God. For the survivors, prayer became very personal and did not have to be necessarily articulated into audible words. It became a part of their everyday lives. The narratives here illustrate how praying "signifies to give and to forgive without reservation" (Andrews 2005: 197). Prayer thus gave them the strength to forgive (in the case of some survivors) and to reconcile with their trauma.

Forgiveness

In acts of forgiveness, we are saying here is a chance to make a new beginning because without it there is not future

Desmond Tutu, No Future Without Forgiveness. 1999

²⁸ Some Kuki pastors performed similar activities.

²⁹ Similarly, reflecting on the power of prayer, Abigail E. Disney and Gini Recticker (2008) in their documentary movie, *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, shows how women from different religious background gathered to pray for peace during the civil war that started in 1989 in Liberia. In prayer, they found successful ways for reconciliation, peace and courage to bring out more innovative ideas to fight injustice and violence.

³⁰ AMCO convened emergency meetings during the conflict and made fervent appeals to the two warring tribes, Kukis and Nagas to forgive the wrongs done in the past. Different churches, such as Sadar Hills Baptist Association, Rongmei Naga Baptist Association, Mao Baptist Association and Manipur Catholic Association appealed to people to observe social harmony by not yielding to false rumours (Dena, 2010).

When I asked Job how he sees the killer of his wife now, he replied:

I forgave the man who killed my wife but I will not forget what had happened. Once, I saw the person who killed my wife at the market. Another time, I met him on the riverbank. He did not know that he had shot my wife. He asked me, "Brother, are you cultivating rice here?" I replied, "Yes I am. Where are you off to?" Then I whispered in my heart, "I forgive you."

Job's reflections made me wonder how exactly does one forgive? What made him forgive the person who had so deeply wounded him? How did he find the strength to extend forgiveness? As I began my efforts to explore these questions, I observed that Job recalled the hurt by trying to see how the event would have unfolded from the offender's point of view. He said, "The person who killed my wife was also seeking revenge for his niece who had been injured. Why bring further grief to his family members like he brought to mine?" He then empathised with the family of the offender. By trying to see the events from the point of view of the man who shot his wife, Job extended the altruistic gift of forgiveness. With conviction in his voice, Job told me, "Forgiveness means I hold no grudge against the offender. I have buried what had happened. Of course, it is impossible to forget."³¹ While trying to grasp Job's process of coming to terms with his situation and to bestow forgiveness, I found Everett Worthington's principles of forgiveness very relevant. Worthington used the acrostic REACH to teach forgiveness: "Recall the hurt, Empathize, Altruistic gift of forgiveness, Commit publicly to forgive, and Hold on to forgiveness" (Larson, 2009: 91). For Job, forgiveness became a lived experience, not just an extension of theological teaching. Similarly, when I asked Khangtheidui about her view of the wrongdoers, she said,

I cannot tell whether I have forgiven the wrong doers or not. I do not even know whether I have grudges against those who killed my husband. Nevertheless, I stopped my sons from taking revenge. I only prayed harder for strength.

Larson (2009: 88) noted that it is very unhelpful and unwise to make someone feel guilty about not being able to forgive. She holds that, in order to understand forgiveness, one has to understand what forgiveness is not.

Forgiveness does not mean that what happened didn't matter. It isn't saying that the crime was a misunderstanding. It isn't saying that the crime did little harm. Forgiveness isn't forgetting. Forgiveness isn't usually a one-time act, but more commonly a lifetime commitment, especially of deep wrongs. Finally, and most importantly, forgiveness is excruciatingly difficult and should not be demanded.

³¹ By not forgetting, it does not imply to evoke anger or revengeful feelings; I feel it is a reminder of people's strength in being human.

Forgiveness is one of the most difficult things to accomplish, almost impossible in the human experience. Yet, it is regarded as a mandate for every Christian. The New Testament places much emphasis on forgiveness.³² In Christianity, forgiveness has two dimensions: one vertical, the other horizontal. The vertical dimension refers to forgiveness from God and the horizontal dimension refers to forgiveness from and to human beings.³³

Khangtheidui, Hatneikim, and Job also spoke about their views on revenge. Their narrations reflected the teachings of their faith (Christianity) wherein God does not approve of vengeful thoughts. For instance, Job quoted the New Testament about the disapproval of seeking revenge.³⁴ He then interpreted the biblical teachings about abstaining from revenge and seeking the peace of God in the following words,

The priests used to tell me that I would be no less than the perpetrator if I seek revenge. I was advised, "Control your anger and pray for your wife's departed soul instead. Pray for yourself and the perpetrator too." I would be filled with rage when I think about what had happened to my wife. However, I tell myself that I have no right to take his life. What would I gain by taking his life? I could have sought revenge but I left it to God to decide the judgement for the perpetrator.

Similarly, Khangtheidui voiced, "We were all devastated. My sons wanted to avenge their father's unjust death but I warned them not to do so by saying, Our Lord Jesus taught us not to take revenge or they would lose their lives instead." I noticed that Hatneikim also had the same approach when she thought of avenging the death of her husband, as I mentioned earlier. She stopped herself from inflicting harm on someone with the thought that God would not be happy with her. Thus, I infer that the teachings of their faith actively prevented them from committing a revengeful act.

Conclusion

In this article, I explored the lived experiences of survivors of ethnic violence in Manipur and demonstrated the centrality of prayer in their lives. Through their everyday prayers, they were able to endure and forgive. I witnessed that the faith professed by people living in Manipur's militarized society largely helped them in rationalising tragic events in their lives. The strength of their resilience also helped them to construct positive attitude towards life.

³² For instance, Mark 11:25 (NIV) says, "If you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so your father in heaven may forgive you". To cite a few more instances, Colossians 3:13, Matthew 18:21 and James 5:16.

³³ This insight is derived from a conversation I had with Melvil Pereira on December the 20th, 2016.

³⁴ "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. (Romans 12: 17&19, NIV)."

While I believe that these survivors trusted the mercy of God, I am equally convinced that their strength of character to imbibe Christian teachings and to put these into practice exemplifies that they live out what is preached locally. I, however, do not claim that all Kukis and Nagas succeeded in this. Members of both communities, after all, were involved in violent acts. The paradoxical Christian life among Kukis and Nagas also maintained the status quo of the protracted conflict. On one hand, Christianity preaches 'agape'³⁵, which is sacrificial to the extent of self-denial for the sake of another, while on the other its Kuki and Naga followers were not devoid of violence between themselves at a communal level and along ethnic and sectarian lines.

However, the stories of survivors, their experience of forgiveness and reconciliation validates humanity and it sets an example for us all. I addressed reconciliation with the concept of healing; a healing of an individual's wound created by the violent Kuki-Naga conflict. This healing, which is a lived experience re-humanises the survivor and restores hope. Noteworthy is Lederach and Lederach's (When Blood and Bones Cry out: Journeys through the Soundscape of Healing and Reconciliation, 2010) work on their quest for nurturing spaces of healing and reconciliation after Liberia's civil war. They asserted, "Healing restores voices of individuals and communities through interaction and interplay of voices" (Ibid.: 110). Through the stories of the individuals, I realised that it is important to share stories for nurturing spaces for healing and reconciliation. More broadly, among Kukis and Nagas, an undertaking of a communal exploration of the common grounds of empathy, compassion, sympathy, respect, and altruism would facilitate much needed communal reconciliation. 🙏

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³⁵ The Greek word *agape* is often translated 'love' in the New Testament. The essence of *agape* love is goodwill and benevolence. Unlike the English word love, *agape* does not refer to romantic love nor does it refer to the love of close relationships. *Agape* involves faithfulness, commitment and an act of will, distinguished from other types of love. Accessed at: <https://www.gotquestions.org/agape-love.html> on 05-01-2017.

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