



Journal of North East India Studies

ISSN: 2278-1455 (Print) 2277-6869 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.jneis.com>

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To cite this article: Ngamtinlun Touthang (2018): Hoineilhing Sitlhou, *Deconstructing Colonial Ethnography: An Analysis of Missionary Writings on North East India*, New Delhi: Ruby Press, 2017, *Journal of North East India Studies*, Vol.8(1): 100-104.

Published online: 24 September 2018.

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Book Review

Hoineilhing Sitlhou, *Deconstructing Colonial Ethnography: An Analysis of Missionary Writings on North East India*, New Delhi: Ruby Press, 2017.

Reviewed by Ngamtinlun Touthang

Deconstructing Colonial Ethnography: An Analysis of Missionary Writings on North East India by Hoineilhing Sitlhou is an attempt to critically analyse the writings of protestant Christian Missionaries in North East India during the 19th-20th centuries. The western missionaries along with the colonial administrators left rich written literatures on local cultures, society and history which continue to play an important role in defining the history of the people of North East, especially tribal communities. Earlier writings on Christian missionaries, especially by Christian writers, focused mainly on how western missionaries arrived and spread the gospel in the North East, a region largely occupied by, as they termed it, ‘barbaric’, ‘savage’ and ‘uncivilised’ tribes. Local church leaders often compared the coming of Christianity as the arrival of ‘light’ to this dark world. Missionaries were considered God sent to save the ‘heathen’ people of North East.

The book started with how Christianity came to India, first in the South and then to other parts of the sub-continent including the North East. It pointed out that Christianity first came to South India (Kerala) through St. Thomas, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus Christ, during the first century A.D. itself sowing the seeds of Christianity in the country. However, there was not much of success in expanding the Gospel until the missionaries came during the colonial period. In the North East, Christian missionaries came and spread the gospel during the 19th and first half of the 20th century. One major difference between South India and the North East is that when the missionaries arrived in South India, the society was already highly Hinduised. In other words, Christianity intruded into a society where Hinduism had already been deeply rooted. During the same time in the North East, majority of the tribes still follow animism or their traditional religious practices (p.57). Unlike South India where the missionaries were largely successful in converting a good number of

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Hindus, they could hardly convert Hindus like the Meiteis and Assamese in North East.

Sitlhou argues that the native people were not passive observers to the colonial project but active participants either in assisting or in resisting it (57, 102-103). Many people looked upon education with suspicion and as an attempt at intrusion that threatened the existing social structure. The emergence of isolated revivalist movements like the Seng Khasi Movement in Meghalaya which started towards the end of the 19th century to preserve the traditional Khasi culture is a case in point (99, 117 & 137). In fact, many traditional institutions has been put to an end though the local people themselves who were also instrumental in pulling down their own religion, and of erecting in its ruins the standards of the cross (p.82). Meanwhile, no one could have thought that translation of the Holy Bible will invite a great deal of controversy for the local people among the tribes like the Thadou-Kukis (p.129, & pp.133-134). Furthermore, the relationship between the missionaries and colonial administrators were not always cordial. Christian mission and colonisation were two movements opposed to each other fundamentally (p.79). They often work hand-in-hand but at times the missionaries had to even abandon their mission field so as to avoid confrontation with the colonial administrations.

However, one of the main contributions of missionaries and colonialists remains the introduction of education. Wherever they are posted/placed, they always try to introduce the art of reading and writing by establishing schools. In fact the mission was a better instrument to introduce education than the government. Since open preaching could not yield the much desire result, other activities like opening of schools, dispensaries and hospitals, translation and publications, and other humanitarian works became indispensable for the missionaries (p.74). School was one of the principal means adopted for the introduction of Christianity. Bible was made the ultimate source of authority by imposing a condition that if an individual has to worship God aright, the person must be able to read (p.72). This served two purposes: first, it helps create a class of educated people whose service were indispensable for the colonial masters in the administration of the Hills. This educated class were utilised as Lambus, Translators, and even clerks. Macaulay in 1835 had stated that the British India needed “a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” (p.81). On the other hand, the newly converts who can read and/or write help the missionaries in expanding their missions. The missionaries had given special attention in translation of the Bible apart from other literatures. They spent a substantial amount of their time in learning local dialects and in translating the Bible (p.110). The use of letters express Divine sanction like *The Ten Commandments* was said to have been written on stone plate (p.106). It took several years for the local people to begin producing a literature of their own but once they received the gospel, they became indispensable aide to the missionaries (p.137). The missionaries were also instrumental in providing women education, removal of irrational beliefs, and in the formation of a common identity (p.85).

Being the first to introduce writing among the tribals, the missionaries along

with colonial administration have laid the foundation of modern literature. For the plains people of Assam and Manipur, it was a matter of revitalising and modernising an ancient language with an extensive literature of its own; but with the hill tribes, it was a matter of creating a written language and literature where none had existed before. Publication was also a vehicle in which the culture, language and education of the West were imposed on the local people (p.105).

Though the western people may fairly be credited for bringing light to the dark world through the introduction of western/English education, and opening up the eyes of the local people, their purpose do not always serve their interest. For instance, one of the conditions laid down by missionaries to convert was that the native people should altogether discard all their traditional religious practices and rituals (p.21). This literally put many of the age old practices/customs and traditions of the native people to an end.

However, it should not be forgotten the largely successful attempts made by the missionaries and colonialists to remove social evils and superstitions among the native people. For instance, putting an end to the age old practice of head hunting, especially among the Naga tribes, burying of an infant along with the death body of the mother among the Mizos (Lushais), and the tradition of keeping slave or 'bawis' (pp.46-47, & p.92) are not mean achievements. The practices of drinking, village level raids/feuds, etc. have also been significantly reduced on the pretext that those were against Christianity.

Another significant impact of the missionaries and colonialists was the emergence of modern identity consciousness during this time. The Britishers were the first to systematically assign names to the tribes (p.94, see also Haokip 2013: pp.78-78). Before the arrival of the colonialists, clans, family and village or small groups of villages (as in the case of Khasi states) were the primary units of identity (p.93). Tribal language was not a reference point for identity though it becomes important after India's independence. Most of the names given to the tribes were alien to them. But Churches emerge in the name of tribes or communities which later on translate into identity consciousness at various levels. Such consciousness was responsible for bringing together a tribe as one even if they speak different dialects (as in the case of the Tangkhuls of Manipur) or divide a tribe who speaks similar/communicable languages as in the case of Chin-Kuki communities (see also Haokip 2011). Whether it has negative or positive impact, it certainly has impacted the formation of identity among the local people of North East. In the process, they also redefined the notion of who is an 'outsiders' and 'insiders'. For instance in Manipur, the influence of Britishers were so strong that the hill tribes discovered their identity as 'Naga', 'Kuki', 'Mizo', 'Zomi', etc. and this has drastically changed their outlook, thought patterns regarding their neighbouring tribes and communities (p.95). Significantly, the tribal communities were once officially divided into three categories in 1981 as Naga, Kuki-Chins and Old Kukis (p.33, & p.126).

Side by side, the evolution of dialects/languages followed. With time, *Duhlian* dialect evolves into Mizo language, *Ukrhrul* dialect for Tangkhuls, *Cherra* dialect for Khasis, *Awe* dialect for Garos, *Changli* dialect for Ao Nagas (p.133, p.62, and

p.117), etc. Since they have no scripts of their own, Roman script was used to write these languages. On the other, Manipuris (*Meitei Lon*) in Bengali script for Meiteis (Manipuris) and Assamese language in Bengali script for Assamese was also introduced.

Another interesting point about the evolution of Christianity in the North East was that the missionaries cleverly used indigenous concept to explain Christianity by even changing the nomenclature of the term 'God' in local dialects. In other words, Christian God was translated into local dialects by taking name of one of the Gods worship by the local people. For the Mizos, '*Pathian*' was used as the equal translation of Christian God (p.21). Initially, *Jihova* which is found in the Bible was used to mean God but later changed to *Jisua*, and again *Isua* since the later is easier for the Mizos to pronounce (p.120). In the same manner, *Pathen/Pathien* was used by Thadou-Kukis; *Tsungrem* for Aos, *Terhuomia* for Angamis; *Kahwang* for Konyaks, etc. (p.25, & also see Thomas, 2016, pp.32-34) to mean the Christian God. With this, the Christian God became localised and was no longer an alien god imposed upon them from outside; it was their own generic term made universal by the Bible message, and made permanent by the Bible's medium (Eaton 1984). But among the Angamis, J.E. Tanquist used the name of a traditional goddess called '*Ukepenopfu*' to refer to the Christian God thereby altering the gender of the entity (Thomas, 2016, p.32).

To sum up, the book has four main Chapters apart from the Introduction and Conclusion. In the Introductory section, attempt is being made to clarify various important concepts and theories used in the book. The First Chapter titled 'Mapping of Cultural Rhythm and Evangelism' "gave a brief profile of the history of missionary movement in India" (p.1). It pointed out that the earliest Christian community in India were the Syrian Christians of Kerala who were converted by St. Thomas who was later speared to death according to tradition carried on by the Christian communities.

The Second Chapter titled 'Colonialism and Textualisation of Cultures' gives a more detailed analysis of the native people of early missionaries contact with North East and unveils the oscillating relationship between Christian missions and colonialism (p.35).

The third chapter titled 'Exploring the Fault lines of Missionary Education in North East India' is an effort to understand how Christian missionary education operates within a colonial situation in North East as it has been widely seen either as an arm of colonial conquest and cultural colonisation or as an agent of social emancipation (p.71).

The last chapter titled 'Print Culture and Evangelism in North East India' traces the development of print culture through history in North East India: how it replaced oral tradition and how missionaries became pioneering agencies and also made an enduring impact in the field of translation, literature and printing (p.104).

To conclude, in spite of poor editing which is clearly the responsibility of the publishers, I recommend the book for academics and general readers alike who are interested in the Northeast in general and the impact of Christianity in the region in particular.

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