



Research article

ISSN 2582-0214

QUEST FOR REDISCOVERING TRIBAL SOCIAL ETHICS FOR CHRISTIAN ETHICAL PRINCIPLE

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ARTICLE INFO

**Article history:**

Received: 08-5-2024

Accepted: 09-6-2024

Available online 30-6-2024

Keywords: *Christianity, Tribal, Social, Ethics, Theology*

ABSTRACT

When Christianity was introduced to the tribal people, without proper knowledge of their tradition and cultures, some missionaries regarded many of their practices as irrational, primitive and backward that did not match their expectations of what human culture ought to be. In such a context, the tribal religion and culture are looked down upon. So, conversion was understood in terms of replacement of the old ways of life which include rejection of traditional cultures and value system. At the same time, as we compare to the mission strategy of Paul, he adapted the Gospel in terms of intelligible to his audience and their mental outlook, and he interprets the message in their own way, in light of their own spiritual needs. He utilized such Hellenistic philosophical constructs to present the gospel to his Hellenistic audience in a culturally relevant and contextualized way by saying, "To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law." Attempts have been made to analyze some tribal social ethics which could be helpful for maintaining Christian ethical principles. It is a task to teach our people that this is not simply going back to the old ways, rather rediscover the values of the tribal heritages for challenging the present problems of the society.

**Introduction**

Christianity did not develop in vacuum but real life communities of men and women who inhabited particular social settings. When Christianity was introduced to the wider Greco-Roman empire, they invite people to accept Jesus as Lord and his coming was seen as the fulfillment of God's purpose. But problem arises in accepting those views when Christianity expands to a wider Greco-Roman empire. As Christopher Stead rightly argued:

When the church began to expand into non-Jewish societies, it met with enquirers who doubted or denied such beliefs and was forced to defend them by arguments...they had begun to restate their faith as a coherent theology, drawing largely upon Greek thought, which was by far the most important intellectual influence on the Roman Empire.¹

Moreover, Rudolf Bultmann also states, "The Gospel had to be preached in terms intelligible to Hellenistic audience and their mental outlook, while at the same time the audiences themselves were bound to interpret the gospel message in their own way, in light of their own spiritual needs."² In such a context Paul recognized that Christianity needed to address itself to the question and concern of its day: "To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law." (I Cor. 9:20-21, NRSV) Therefore, as Paul was witnessing the gospel in the midst of the Hellenist and the Roman people, he was aware of the intellectual currents.

Change of Tone

"For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom" (I Cor. 1:22, NRSV). One can recognize that the book of the Old Testament and even the four Gospels contain numerous miracle stories which were regarded as signs of the power of God. At the same time, such miracle stories or signs were not common in Pauline letters, instead he address the popular philosophies of the day in his writings. Among the many reason, it seems that Paul took the context seriously and fitted his message without losing the value of the gospel he preached, rather he make use of it to proclaim his message relevantly for his immediate audience. While the Jews were interested upon signs or miracles, the Greeks might seek wisdom. In Athens, it seems that Paul adapted his message to his audience. They did not know the Scriptures, but they did know the Greek poets. So, Paul begins where they were and then moves forward to

¹ Christopher Stead, "Greek Influence on Christian Thought," in *Early Christianity : Origin And Evolution to AD 600*, edited by Ian Hazlett (London : SPCK, 1991), 175.

² Rudolf Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting*, trans. by R. H. Fuller (London: Thames and Hudson, 1956), 176.



present the good news of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.³ Roetzel also affirm that “What is clear is that he employs certain literary forms and devices, expressions, methods of argumentation and concepts which comes from a Hellenistic tradition”⁴ While contextualizing the ‘Unknown God’ in Luke-Acts, R.Chhuanliana also contended:⁵

Paul did not reject the Athenian theology outright, yet he urged them to turn from their present faith to the living God. He rather showed appreciation of their religiosity, as well as their poets like Aratus of Soli (who said, “We are indeed his offsprings.”) and Epimenedes (who said, “In him we live and move and have our being.”). Highlighting step by step the shortcomings of their theology, he tried to convince them to the Christian faith. He began with God the creator and then moved on at the end to Christ, his resurrection and future judgment; this is because Jesus Christ was an unknown figure to the Gentile world.

Similarly, T. Paige also rightly assert, “Paul’s practice of deliberately using Stoic themes in redefined ways is an early Christian attempt at cross-cultural communication, even more significant if Stoicism or a Stoicizing influence were at work in the Gentile churches.”⁶ Therefore, this change of tone from miracle stories to the prevailing Hellenistic philosophy would imply Paul knew the need of adapting the Gospel in accordance with his audience.

Need of Rediscovering Tribal Social Ethics

Michael Nazir Ali pointed out that during the nineteenth century, dominant cultures destroyed other cultures that did not match their expectations of what human culture ought to be.⁷ They always regarded as *demonic* because the experiences and practices of the tribal cultures did not have analogues to the Western cultures. Wati Longchar also observed that even in the realm of religion and culture, the tribal religion and culture are looked down upon. Anything that does not conform to the western worldview is “devilish,” “irrational,” “inhuman,” “inferior,” backward,” “primitive,” and so forth.⁸ When the Christian Missionary came into contact with the tribal cultures, they came with a strong view to conquer other world by the Christian faith. Conversion was understood in terms of replacement of the old ways of life which include rejection of traditional cultures and value system.⁹ The

³ Ken Fleming, “Missionary Service In The Life Of Paul” in The Emmaus Journal, Vol 1/ No.2 (Summer, 1992), 108.

⁴ Calvin J.Roetzel, *The letters of Paul : Conversations in context, 2nd edition* (Atlanta : John Knox Press, 1982), 12-13.

⁵ Ramsay Chhuanliana Kawlni, *Lord God Most High My Saviour* (Delhi : ISPCK, 2009), 239.

⁶ T. Paige, “Philosophy,” in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, edited by Craig A Evans and Stanley E. Porter. (Illinois, Downers Grove : InterVarsity, 2000), 717.

⁷ Michael Nazir Ali, *Mission and Dialogue : Proclaiming the Gospel Afresh in Every Age* (London : SPCK, 1995), 14.

⁸ Wati Longchar, *The Traditional Tribal Worldview and Modernity* (Jorhat : N. Limala Lkr, 1995), 9,

⁹ Wati Longchar, “An Assessment of the Tribal Theology : Trends and Challenges for Future” *Tribal Theology on the Move*, edited by Shimreingam Shimray and Limatula Longkumer (Jorhat : Tribal Study Centre, 2006), 2.



condemnation of tribal histories and ways of life has had far reaching psychological consequences for tribal people which manifests in feelings of inferiority and self abasement. People are often led to develop the sense of security and inadequacy because of the repeated negation of their ways of life.¹⁰

On the other hand, M.Kipgen has rightly pointed out the values of tribal moral codes when he discussed about the pre-Christian era of the tribal people :

The tribals in the North East India have rich and highly valuable moral codes of their own. In the pre-literate society of the tribals of the religion these codes have been the guiding lights in the firmament, making their lives moving and meaningful. They continue to be of great value and source of strength wherever they made used after the educational and Gospel lights have come.¹¹

Lalpekhluva also said, “The Gospel of Christ must be perceived, not only in and through Judeo – Christian culture or western culture, but also in and through every culture. The message of Christ must also be incarnated in the culture of the tribal people.”¹² Renthly Keitzar also thought that Jesus Christ, after a century of the coming of Christianity in North East India, is yet to theologically incarnate in the tribal culture.¹³ In other word, if the message of the Word of God is interpreted and manifested in relation to the experience and thought form of the tribal cultures, it will be incarnated meaningfully in the life of the people. Zairema also affirms that the salvific work of Christ would not be meaningful if it did not touch the mundane reality of the life of the people.¹⁴ Thanzauva has mentioned that the fundamental assumption of the rediscovery of traditional values is than human beings as created in the image of God has its own way of solving problems and doing development. An imposition of a foreign ideology, technology and development approach will not enhance real development unless they are incarnated or indigenized.¹⁵ The image of accepting the traditional cultures and practices can be found in Paul’s preaching to the Athenians :

From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live

¹⁰ Yangkahao Vashum, “Naming the Native : Colonialism, Missionaries, Theologies and Indigenous” *Dalit Tribal Theological Interface : Current Trends in Subaltern Theologies*, edited by James Massey and Shimreingam Shimray (Jorhat : Tribal/Women Study Centres, 2007), 48.

¹¹ Mi.Kipgen, “Tlawmngaihna and Christianity,” *Tribal Theology : A Reader*, edited by Shimreingam Shimray (Jorhat : Tribal Study Centre, 2003), 79.

¹² L.H. Lalpekhluva, *Contextual Christology : A Tribal Perspective* (Delhi : ISPCK, 2007), 201.

¹³ Renthly Keitzar, “Tribal Theological Trends in North East India” *Tribal Theology : A Reader*, edited by Shimreingam Shimray (Jorhat : Eastern Theological Journal, 2003), 43.

¹⁴ Zairema, “A Quest for Indegenous Expression of Christian Theology in Mizoram,” *Ground Works For Tribal Theology in the Mizo Context*, edited by Rosiamliana Tochwang, K.Lalrinmawia & L.H.Rawsea (Delhi : ISPCK, 2007), 120.

¹⁵ K. Thanzauva, *Theology of Community*, 87.



and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.' Acts 17 : 26 – 28. (NRSV).

Therefore, rediscovery of tribal social ethics does not merely mean romanticizing tribal cultures, rather to accept the tribal people as God's created being in his own image and to overcome from their feeling of inferiority complex.

Contextualisation as The Transforming Factors :

As indicated above, Paul adapted the Gospel in terms of intelligible to his audience and their mental outlook, and he interprets the message in their own way, in light of their own spiritual needs. He utilized such Hellenistic philosophical constructs to present the gospel to his Hellenistic audience in a culturally relevant and contextualized way. For one instance, in Stoic (and Cynic) ethics, *autarkeia* was regarded as essence of all virtues. It described the cultivated attitude of the wise person who had become independent of all things and all people, relying on himself, because of his innate resources, or on the lot given to him by the gods.¹⁶ Therefore, in Phil.4:11-13, it seems that Paul here borrows the very Stoic-sounding sentences so that his audience can pick up easily, but he transforms it that his sufficiency is only because of Christ, the basis and source of everything for him. Paul finds Christ sufficiency in times of bounty as well as in times of need. So, as Vincent had pointed out Paul is not self sufficient in Stoic sense, but through the power of new self – the power of Christ in him.¹⁷ In the same way, while doing Christian theology in Indian context, the Indian Christian theologians also took the Brahmanic philosophies and make it relevant for the Indian context. While the concept of *avatare* may be working among the Greek audience for the doctrine of incarnation, but for the Indian, who have the Hindu background, the concept of *avatara* might be more meaningful. In such a juncture, Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya defines trinity as *saccidananda*,¹⁸ A.J.Appasamy also taught Christianity as *Bhakti Marga*¹⁹ and so on.

This is also true when Christianity was first introduced among the Mizo people. At its inception, Christianity was not attractive to the Mizo people. They looked at the missionaries with a contemptuous attitude and watchful eyes.²⁰ And the message of the early missionaries was completely foreign to the Mizo. As Lalhmuaka had pointed out, the people were not interest in their message. On most occasions, their hearers were children and those who wanted to see the white man out of curiosity.²¹ J.H. Lorrain, one of the pioneer Missionaries also said, "Our first message as soon as we could speak the language was a Saviour from sin.

¹⁶ Gerald F. Hawthorne, Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 43 : Phillipians (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1983), 198.

¹⁷ Marvin R. Vincent, Phillipians And Philemon : The International Critical Commentary, (Edinburgh : T & T Clark, 1979), 143.

¹⁸ Robin Boyd, An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology (Delhi : ISPCK, 1998), 69

¹⁹ Boyd, An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology, 119.

²⁰ L.H. Lalpekhluu, Contextual Christology : A Tribal Perspective (Delhi : ISPCK, 2007), 84.

²¹ Lalhmuaka, Zoram Thim ata Engah (Aizawl : Synod Publication Board, 1988), 107.



But the people had no sense of sin and felt no need for such savior.”²² Then slowly, as Lalsangkima Pachuau had pointed out, “Missionaries eventually learned the need to preach in the thought-forms of the people and their messages interacted with and were eventually shaped in large measure by the ideas and world views of their audience.”²³ The missionaries in due time learned to forge their message in response to these existing views, visions and dreams of the people. Therefore, knowing these, D.E. Jones, one of the early missionaries, preached “Believe on Pathian Jehovah and worship Him, then you don’t need to sacrifice to the demons (ramhuai) any more. Even when you die you shall go to Pialral.”²⁴ As Lalsangkima observes, “Here one see that the preaching not only used the Mizo religious language, but also responded to Mizo religious aspirations.”²⁵ Then, he further stated as :

It is, in part, a reinterpretation of traditional religion in the light of Christianity. Pathian is reinterpreted as an active and loving Being, the way to pialral after death, and the experience of healing from sickness without sacrificing to ramhuais. The fear of hremhmun (hell), the desire to go pialral after death, and the experience of healing from sickness without sacrificing the ramhuais (evil spirit or demons) were...the factors that led them to accept the Christian message.²⁶

Thus re-interpretation or re-expression of Christian faith by using traditional terms and thought forms make the message of the missionaries convincing and effective. Therefore, it is obvious that contextualization of Christian message and adaptation it into the psycho religious need of the audiences led the message more meaningful and valid to the audiences.

Rediscovering Tribal Heritages

Since the inception of Christianity in tribal cultures, western missionaries and the first generation Christians did not appreciate their own social heritages. They were rather skeptical about their culture and its traditions. They hold that the Western Culture is the only valid

²² Quoted in C.L. Hminga, *The Life And Witness of the Churches in Mizoram* (Serkawn : The Literature Committee, Baptist Church of Mizoram), 57. Here Lalpekhluu also observes that the chief and the ruling class of the people regarded Christianity was to threat both the socio-cultural tradition as well as the orderly administration among them. (Lalpekhluu, *Contextual Christology*, 85.)

²³ Lalsangkima Pachuau, *Ethnic Identity and Christianity* (Frankfurt am Main : Peter Lang, 2002) 99. In the traditional religious teachings of the Mizos, every sickness was caused by evil spirits and costly sacrifices had to be offered in order to recover from sicknesses. Sacrifices offered to appease the spirits seem to have no connection with the people's belief in the supreme and benevolent God Pathian, nor with their striving to attain a place at pialral (or heaven) after death. In order to go to pialral after death, an individual had to perform various rituals involving costly community feasts at each stage or hunt down a number of wild animals including a bear, a deer, a wild gyal, and a wild boar.

²⁴ D.E.Jones message was recollectd by Zathanga, one of the first converts in the South who later became one of the native Baptist Pastors. Interviewed by C.L.Hminga in 1975. See Hminga, *The Life And Witness of the Churches in Mizoram*, 62. Cf. Lalsangkima Pachuau, *Ethnic Identity and Christianity*, 99.

²⁵ Lalsangkima Pachuau, *Ethnic Identity and Christianity*, 99.

²⁶ Lalsangkima Pachuau, *Ethnic Identity and Christianity*, 99-100.



expression of Christianity, no other culture being sufficient to express Christian faith. . In order to overcome the previous view of tribals as *inferior, backward, primitive and irrational*, theologizing and rediscovering tribal heritages are felt necessary.

Therefore, an attempt to rediscover Tribal social ethics from their own heritages through analyzing their way of living and value system, folktales, folklores, sayings, proverbs etc. for Christian ethical principles. For doing Tribal Theology, *Synthetic-Praxis method*²⁷ is suggested to be the method of tribal theology. As Thanzauva has mentioned one of the areas of doing Tribal Theology by using this method is 'Rediscovery of liberative elements from traditional values.'²⁸ In this section, an attempt should be done to rediscover some tribal heritages.

1) Rediscovering Tribal Community as the Community of the People of God

Thanzauva suggested that 'Communitarianism' as an organizing principle of Tribal theology. He opines that this is the key to understand the tribal society. Communitarianism is the concept and life principles of tribal community in which a homogeneous people live together sharing their joy and sorrow in mutual love and care.²⁹ By evaluating their life and practices and their value system, the tribal community was a *closed-knitted society* having *honour and shame* based value system. Their concept of honouring *Tlawmngaihna, Thangchhuah, Khuangchawi, Nopui and Huai no* etc. and the do's and don'ts, which was used for their guiding principles, were all strongly structured by the values of honour and shame within the society. This kind of society could not be found in the western society where individualism plays more than communitarianism.

On the other hand, the concept of communitarianism can be found in the Palestinian community which is also structured by honour and shame. Jerome H. Neyrey mentioned that the ancient Mediterranean culture was strongly structured around the pivotal values of honour and shame. Their world was divided into male and female spheres, with specific places, objects, and action appropriate to males and corresponding ones for females.³⁰ Even in the New Testament, the first Christian community, the voluntary practice through unselfishly made their possessions available to all believers (Acts 2:44-47; 4:32-5:11). Therefore, by

²⁷ Synthetic-Praxis method is a combination of two models of contextual theology namely Synthetic and Praxis method. The first is concerned with developing a relevant theology by way of synthesizing the Gospel and culture in a particular context. The latter is concerned with 'right action' (*orthopraxy*) for the transformation or liberation of the people. This method aims at synthesizing Christian heritage and tribal heritage for Christian praxis for liberation; reinterpreting Christian heritage they have received via Western missionaries and rediscovering liberative motifs in tribal heritage through a threefold process of rejection, adoption and transformation. (Rosiamliana Tochwang, "Methodological Reflection on Theologizing Tribal Heritage in North East India," *Theologizing Tribal Heritage : A Critical Re-Look*, edited by Hrangthan Chhungi (Delhi : ISPCK, 2008), 23, 27.)

²⁸ K. Thanzauva, *Theology of Community: Theology in the Making* (Aizawl: Mizo Theological Conference, 1997), 84.

²⁹ Thanzauva, *Theology of Community*, 106.

³⁰ Jerome H. Neyrey, *Paul, In Other Words : A Cultural Reading of His Letters* (Westminster : John Knox Press, 1990), 222.



looking at the life and practices of the Tribal people, they can be regarded as the *Community of the People of God*.

2) Rediscovering Tribal Ethical Code of Conduct as the Guiding Principles for the People of God

In Rom.2:14-15, “For when Gentiles who do not have the law, do by nature the things of the law, what the law requires. These not having the law are the law for themselves, who show the work of the law is written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness and their thoughts bringing accusation or even making defense among themselves.” Here, as Fitzmyer acknowledged that it is not simply the law, but the Mosaic Law which is already stated in vs. 12.³¹ the word *fuvsei* is dative singular of *fuvsij*, which simply means ‘nature’³² and also ‘natural order’ or ‘natural condition.’³³ Here Paul might compare the Jews who possesses the written law with the Gentiles who have done the what is written in the Law by ‘nature.’ Thomas Schmeller thought that here Paul is using a topos of Hellenistic ethics which he probably knows from the Hellenistic-Jewish apologetics. Especially Stoicism emphasizes life in accordance with nature (*physis*) as a moral aim. The law of nature, an unwritten law, which is perceived by reason, is of greater obligation than every law (*nomoj*) made by human beings.³⁴ Udo Schnelle also affirms that here Paul takes up the Greco-Roman doctrine of the *nomoj avgrafoj* (unwritten law).³⁵ Neil Elliot said that although the Gentiles do not have the Law, nevertheless does what the Law requires, are ‘a law unto themselves’, the point being they are no less accountable before God’s righteousness for not ‘having the Law’.³⁶

In the same manner. although the tribals did not have any written scripts, but their ethical code of conduct in the form of do’s and don’ts which is known as ‘Thiang’ and

³¹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Letter to the Romans” New Jerome Biblical Commentary, edited by Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmer and Roland E. Murphy (Bangalore : Theological Publication in India, 2004), 837.

³² Fritz Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, vol.-2, Romans – Revelation, translated and revised by Cleon L.Rogers, Jr. (Grands Rapids, Michigan : Zondervan Publishing House, 1980.), 6. (Here after cited as Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key...*)

³³ Barbara Aland, et.al., *The Greek New Testament with Dictionary*, fourth revised edition (D-Stuttgart : Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft / United Bible Societies, 2004), 196. (Hereafter cited as Aland, et.al., *The Greek NT...*). The term *fuvsei* is used 4 times in Pauline letters (Rom.2:14; Gal.2:15, 4:8; Eph.2:3), *fuvsin* 3 times (Rom.1:26, 11:21, 11:24) and *fuvsewj* only 1 in Rom.2:27.(John R. Kohlenberger III, Edward W.Goodrick & James A. Swanson, *The Exhaustive Concordance to the Greek New Testament* (Grands Rapids, Michigan : Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 992. Here after cited as Kohlenberger, *The Exhaustive Concordance...*)

³⁴ Thomas Schmeller, “Stoics, Stoicism” *ABD*, vol.6, 213. In particular the Stoic belief that there is a natural bond of sympathy between human beings and the cosmos, that human beings by nature knows the proper order of things and so knows what is fitting in matters of conduct. Here, Lohse’s summarization of Stoic doctrine is also worth mentioning, thus: “The universe is filled with the divine logos and its power, and the rule of the logos is discernible in the works of the cosmos... Anyone who recognizes the ordered coherence of the cosmos will ... join in praise to the deity.” E. Lohse, *The New Testament Environment* (Nashville : Abingdon Press, 1976), 244-245.

³⁵ Udo Schnelle, *Apostle Paul : His Life and Theology*, 79.

³⁶ Neil Elliot, *The Rhetoric of Romans : Argumentative Constraint And Strategy And Paul’s Dialogue with Judaism* (Minneapolis : Fortress Press, 2007), 122 – 123.



‘Thiang lo’ in Mizo were the guiding principles and authoritative in their lives. Many of the tribals beliefs were simply regarded as ‘superstitious belief’ which is given in a Mizo termed as ‘Puithuna atthlak’ but a closer look to the context reveals that it is their way of teaching their ethical norm by invoking the super natural power in their own context. Lalthangliana pointed out that in the traditional cultures, supernatural beings played an important role and were deeply and firmly embedded in their lives.³⁷ Their concepts regarding ‘Thiang’ and ‘Thiang lo’ were transmitted to the younger generation according to which they tried to strictly maintain the ethical norm of the people and their religious life. Thanzauva also observed that the tribal people rather than reading the written Scriptures, tribals read nature and what happened to their own lives in order to understand God’s intention for them.³⁸

As indicated above, this tribal beliefs and ethical norms is very much parallel to what we have read in Rom 2:14-15, the tribals who try to maintain and keeping their ethical norm in the form of do’s and don’ts plays a very important role in their socio-economic life as well as religious life.

3) Rediscovering the Concept of *Pasaltha* as the Judges in the Old Testament :

When we analyzed the functions of the heroes and heroines in the book of Judges in the Old Testament book, except Deborah, the “Judges” were essentially ad hoc military deliverers whom God raised up in times of military crisis to deliver the nation of Israel. So, in the Dictionary of Biblical Imagery, it is suggested that the better translation would be “warrior-ruler.”³⁹

In the traditional tribal societies, in times of danger when the security of the people and the village was threatened by the enemies or wild animals, *Pasaltha* were the *Tlawmngai* persons, who always willing to volunteer their services even at the cost of their personal interests for the sake of the community. They were always ready to sacrifice their lives for the defense of their village.⁴⁰ Therefore, by looking at their functions and role in the society, *Pasaltha* in the traditional Mizo context and *Judges* in the book of the Old Testament have some similarities in their own context.

4) Rediscovering the Concept of *Tlawmngaihna* as *Agape* in the New Testament

By looking at the concept of *Tlawmngaihna* (Sobaliba of the Ao Nagas) in the society, they both have almost the same meaning- unselfish, self-denying, brave, a desire to help others without expecting nothing in return. *Tlawmngaihna* embraces various types of human qualities and activities and manifests itself in various forms and aspects of community life

³⁷ B.Lalthangliana, *Culture and folklore of Mizoram* (Delhi : Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 2005), 257.

³⁸ Thanzauva, *Theology of Community*, 89.

³⁹ “Book of Judges,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* edited by Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, Tremper and Longman III, (Downers Grove, Illinois : Inter Varsity Press, 2000) CD Rom.

⁴⁰ V.S. Lalrinawma, *Mizo Ethos : Changes and Challenges* (Aizawl : Mizoram Publication Board, 2005), 133.



which can be summed up as “community over self,” wherein self-sacrifice for the need of others is the spontaneous outcome.⁴¹

So, by looking at the both the concept of *tlawmngaihna* in Mizo culture and the Biblical context where the term *Agape* is used, Mizo theologian like K.Thanzauva, H.Vanlauva etc. suggested that at least in some instances the Mizo ethical word *Tlawmngaihna* seem to be an appropriate word instead of *Hmangaihna*. K.Thanzauva argued that if the word *Hmangaihna* in I Cor.13:4-7 is replaced by *Tlawmngaihna*, the meaning might be clear for the Mizo readers and the text runs like this – “*Tlawmngaihna* *nain a dawh thei a, ngil a nei bawk thin; tlawmngaihna* *nain a itsik lo va; tlawmngaihna a infak lo va, a uang lo va, a che mawi lo lo va, mahni hma a sial lo va, a thinur duh lo va, sual lamah a ngaihtuah lo va; fel lohnaah a lawm lo va, thutak erawh chu a lawmpui thin a; engkim a tuar hram hram a, engkim a ring a, engkim a beisei a, engkim a tuar chhuak thin.*”⁴² H.Vanlalauva also suggested that in Rom.13:10, *Tlawmngaihna* might be appropriately used instead of *Hmangaihna* and the same text run like this, “*Tlawmngaihna* *nain vengte a tikhawlo ngai lo va; chuvangin tlawmngaihna hi dan zawh famkimna a ni*”⁴³ Since the term ‘Agape’ in the New Testament is an unconditional love, unselfish love and a love that sacrifices for the good of others, therefore the meaning of *Agape* in the New Testament can be discussed in the light of the concept of ‘*tlawmngaihna*’ in the Mizo context.

Tribal Social Ethics for Christian Ethical Principles :

In this section we will analyzed some tribal social ethics which could be helpful for maintaining Christian ethical principles. This analysis will be done by rediscovering the meaning of the ethical teachings especially from the tribal’s sayings and proverbs.

1) Tribal Social Ethics Concerning neighbourhood :

To love one’s neighbour is one of the Jesus’ central teaching in the Gospel, i.e. ‘*Love your neighbour as yourself*’ (c.f. Mat.5:43; 19:19; 22:39; Mk.12:31; 12:33; Lk.10:27). This teaching more detailed and elaborated in Pauline writings, i.e. the commandments like ‘*You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet and all others commandment, are summed up in this word*’ (Rom.13:9-10) and Paul emphasized that to love one’s neighbour is the fulfilling of the law.

Even though the traditional societies of the Mizo cultures did not hear this kind of teachings, it is not a strange message for them because they had had already in their heart as clear as it is written in the Bible. Many of their proverbs and sayings which were orally transmitted greatly contributed the ethical norm of the people, for instances : *Thenawm mangang chhan ngam lo chuan pawnfen fen mai tur.* (A person who does not have the

⁴¹ Thanzauva, *Theology of Community*, 123.

⁴² K.Thanzauva, *Theology of Community*, 128.

⁴³ H.Vanlalauva, “Hmangaihna vrs Tlawmngaihna,” *Chhinglung*, vol 6 (Bangalore Mizo Association Annual Magazine, 1991-21), 22.



courage to help a neighbour in trouble should wear a skirt). *Thenawmte do ai chuan khaw sarih do a thlanawm zawk*. (It is preferable to fight against seven villages than fighting against one's neighbour), etc. So, the tribal people try to maintain mutual understanding and relation between neighbour which maintain their social life peace and harmony.

2) Tribal Social Ethics Concerning Socio-Economic Life :

Certainly, there was an inequality among the Mizo traditional society in their economic and social life. The society comprises different varieties of people such as – rich and poor, court members and ordinary people, chief and the commoners. At the same time, the ethical teaching of their proverbs and sayings greatly help for building the relationship between the haves and have not, the upper and the lower class of the society. The Mizo sayings of *Sem sem dam dam, ei bil thi thi*. (One who hoarded for oneself alone will die and those who share with others will survive) clearly described as they were the 'sharing community.' On the other hand, in opposite to the previous saying, there is also a saying for the greedy or dishonest persons : "*Mi awkhrawl an hlawhtling thei, mahse an tlu thut thin*" (Dishonest person may prosper, but they can fell down at once).

In order to maintain the solidarity among the society, they have a motto of social relationships which strongly lingered in their heart, i.e. "*Dam leh tlang khatah, thih leh ruam khatah*" (If we live, let's live together in one place and if we die, let's die together in one place). During when they gathered together for '*Sa lu lam*,' the song leader used to lead them by saying "*E za e, e za e, aw za e, aw za e*" (If we say yes, let's all say yes and if we say no, let's all say no). This kind of ethical teaching bound together in time of sorrows and sufferings.⁴⁴ They try to maintain the feeling of oneness, a sense of entity and a perfect harmony within the society.

3) Tribal Social Ethics Concerning the Weaker Sections of the Society :

The tribals were concern the weaker sections of the society and they never neglected, rather take care by the community. The widow, the sick and the handicapped, all are taken by the community. As a community, their build their houses together, labour together in the jhums, mourn together and celebrate together is anything to celebrate.⁴⁵ T.Vanlaltlani observed that the Tangkhul sayings "*Mi-mai yang sarra*" (It is woeful to be partial) and "*Mara-vahong rameinao wui mangali pangkating sarra*" (It is woeful to raise hands/voice in front of orphans, widows and widowers) safeguard all the community members of the tribal society.⁴⁶ Tribal people maintain closed-knitted society in which even the poorest family could not be looked down upon or cruelly treated. Laltluangliana Khiangte pointed out that the story of Liandova and his brother (Tuaisiala) is specially for the tale relates that the version of God,

⁴⁴ Zairema, *Pi Pute Biak Hi*, edited by Chuauthuama (Aizawl : Zorun Community, 2009), 148.

⁴⁵ Thanzauva, *Theology of Community*, 113.

⁴⁶ T.Vanlaltlani, "Socio-cultural Heritage of the Tribal People in India from North East India Context," *Theologizing Tribal Heritage : A Critical Re-Look*, edited by Hrangthan Chhungi (Delhi : ISPCK, 2008), 77.



Pathian was omnipresent God who watched over all human beings including the very poor section of the society.⁴⁷

Although there was a class divides, in terms of economic and social life, at the same time the sayings like *Lungpui pawh lung te-in a kamki loh chuan a awm thei lo*. (Without the support of the small pebble, a big rock cannot be stable) always protected the rights and dignity of the poor sections of the society. Therefore, this kind of teachings protected the weaker sections of the people from being oppressed and exploited in the community. This brought about socio-economic harmony among the people.

4) Tribal Social Ethics Concerning Morality :

The tribal sayings very much preserved and promoted their morality which is very much parallel to the teachings of the Bible. The following Mizo sayings and proverbs of like *A tha lam kawng a chho va, a chhe lam kawng a pheii* (The right path is very steep upward and the wrong path is horizontal) emphasized hard work and negated laziness which is in line with the teaching of the Bible especially the *Proverbs* (Prov.10:4; 12:24; 13:4; etc.), *Nu leh pa pawisa lo chu an dingchhuak tak tak ngai lo*. (Those who do not respect parents never prosper) taught them to respect one's parents which is also parallel the household code in Col.3:20, *Mahni infak leh sakhi ngalah engmah a bet lo*. (Nothing sticks in the shin of a barking deer and in self praises) taught them to be humbled in front of others, rather than not to be proud of himself/herself. (cf. Mat. 6:2), *Kawi pawh a kawm a that chuan a rah a tha, a kawm a that loh chuan a rah pawh a tha lo*. (If the shell of a large bean is good, the nut it bears is good. If the shell is not good, the inside nut is also poor) emphasized the importance of good heart. (cf. Mat.5:8; 15:18; etc.), *Tawngkam thain sial a man* (Good words deserve a mithun) taught the importance of good speech towards others (cf. Col.4:6).

The tribal sayings concerned even their attitude towards the handicapped or disabled persons, i.e. *Piansual leh phar charin tlai luat a nei lo*. (It is never too late to become handicapped or to be a dry leper). Again the Mizo saying like '*Uire chu sakeiin a seh duh*' (One who commits adultery is beaten by a tiger) and Manipur Meitei's saying '*Meibu phine kuptune thamba yade*' (Fire could not be covered by cloth) demonstrate that even a single evil action or sexual immoral actions cannot be hidden from others.⁴⁸ Therefore, although the tribals did not know the ethical teachings from the Bible, they promoted their morality by means of their valuable wisdom teachings through their sayings and proverbs in their life and practices.

⁴⁷ Laltluangliana Khiangte, "Rethinking about the Folklore and Culture of the Mizos," *Theologizing Tribal Heritage : A Critical Re-Look*, edited by Hrangthan Chhungi (Delhi : ISPCK, 2008), 302.

⁴⁸ T.Vanlaltlani, "Socio-cultural Heritage of the Tribal People in India from North East India Context," *Theologizing Tribal Heritage : A Critical Re-Look*, edited by Hrangthan Chhungi (Delhi : ISPCK, 2008), 79.



5) Tribal Social Ethics Concerning Other Creation :

The tribals' life is connected with other creatures. They respected animals, plants and land because they are the source of their life. The tribal tradition envisages a vision that all living realities are interrelated, interconnected and interdependent.⁴⁹ Thanzauva describes the tribal approach towards other creatures as 'Communitarian Approach' which comprises the community of God, Human and other creatures which maintains the inter-connectedness and inter dependence of all creation including God the creator himself.⁵⁰ Even though hunting animals was the common practice in the tribal cultures, but even if they hunted animals they never killed more than they needed for food. They never killed animals unnecessarily; they thought that killing the lives of the living creatures was against the will of the Creator.⁵¹ According to their belief, a man or woman who was ruthless to animals was believed to suffer before his or her death more painfully than that of the animal that he or she tortured. They also showed their respect for animals especially to tiger, bear, wild-pig, lion, elephant and to all other huge animals; they called them either *sa hrang* (wild beast) or *sa pui* (great beast), which are the expressions of respect and fear.⁵² Not only to the wild animals, but they also showed their respect even to the small insects. Even when they burned up the forest for their cultivation, they believed that many of the animals would be burnt in the fire. Therefore, they used to observe the day of mourning over the dead of the animals in the fire on the next day of burning *jhums* which is known as '*Kang ral Ni*.'⁵³ This shows that the Mizo concerned the life of the other creation and the sense of ecology.

Conclusion

In our discussion of rediscovering the past, tribal theology as a whole, it is our task to teach our people that this is not simply going back to the old ways, rather rediscover the values of the tribal heritages for challenging the present problems of the society. Even in the secular world, the rise of nationalism is not regarded as going back but moving forward. The changes of names of some metropolitan cities such as Bombay to *Mumbai*, Calcutta to *Kolkata*, Madras to *Chennai* clearly shows the rise of nationalism for the present generation. There is a tension to rediscover the past values i.e. Tribal social ethics for Christian ethical principles. Therefore, it is a high time (as well as a right time) to educate our people and this is the task of the theologians to guide them in the right path.

⁴⁹ A. Wati Longchar, "Indian Christian Theology And Tribals In India," *Tribal Theology : A Reader*, edited by Shimreingam Shimray (Jorhat : Eastern Theological Journal, 2003), 61.

⁵⁰ Thanzauva, *Theology of Community*, 176 – 177.

⁵¹ Zairema, *Pi Pute Biak Hi*, 144.

⁵² C. Vanlaldika, "A Comparative Study of the Covenant and the Mizo Thurochhiah with Special Reference to Exodus Chapter 19 – 23" (M.Th. Thesis, Senate of Serampore College, 2003), 103.

⁵³ C. Vanlaldika, "A Comparative Study of the Covenant, 86.



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