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COMMUNITARIAN METHODOLOGY: A FEASIBLE APPROACH FOR TRIBAL THEOLOGY

MARIANMAI MAISUANGDIBOU

ABSTRACT

The tribal world, which is overtly communitarian, has to make use of this communitarian expression in its research. Tribal Christians seeking knowledge cannot avoid community aspect as it is the community and within this community that their life evolves. The centrality of communality in tribal context demands any research on tribal, and by tribal scholars and intellectuals, to critically utilize communitarian features and elements. This discourse on communitarian methodology is to determine the practicality of the said approach. For this matter, the paper would attempt to review the existing methods in tribal theology, ascertain their feasibilities and drawbacks. Further, it would propose a communitarian methodology as a viable model for tribal theology. For that reason, the study undertaken is explicitly explorative and constructive with few inputs from other domains.

KEYWORDS

Tribal theology, methodology, community, God-world-humans continuum, culture, liberation

INTRODUCTION

Tribal theology is a community-centred theology. It is essentially communitarian to the core, and the driving force of this theology is the communitarian values. In other words, the uniqueness of tribal theology is the emphasis on community. This community is not anthropocentric, but holistic, that encompasses everything in totality. The God-world-human (*Ting-kadih-maina*)¹ continuum is the characteristic of this communality. Hence this overtly communitarian nature in tribal worldview is the point of departure for tribal theology. However, tribal theologians and intellectuals have neglected or sidelined the significance of community in tribal faith expression, and especially in the section of methodology². Or they

¹The term God-world-humans is transliterated as *Ting-kadih-maina* in the Liangmai language. The expression *Ting-kadih-maina* is derived from the words: *Ting* from *Tingwang* (God), *kadi* from the expression *kadih* (means the world/land including all other creations), and *maina* from *chamaina* (human being). In Greek, it is derivatively used as *Theo-cosmo-anthropic* inter-relationship or *Theo-cosmic-anthropos*, which is a combination of three Greek words *Theos* (God), *cosmos* (World/universe) and *anthropos* (hu-man); it denotes the relationship of God-cosmos-human, and it also points to the relation of all the realities. The expressions God-world-humans, God-cosmos-anthropos, God-creation-humans are interchangeably used in this paper, and these terms point to the same reality or the meaning. Refer M. Maisuangdibou, *Liangmai and Christianity: Faith in Search of Understanding and Transformation in Indigenous/Tribal Context* (Tamei: Witinglung Publication, 2015), 147-150.

² Method and methodology are interchangeably employed in this paper. Method and methodology are closely intertwined, yet they serve different roles and purposes in the research process. A method is simply a tool/s used in research. It is the devices/tools or the means used for collecting data, such as interviews, surveys, focus groups, contextual inquiry, and observation. Commonly researchers employ one or more methods. On the other hand, a methodology is a rationale for the research approach and the lens through which the whole study will take place. It is the justification for using a particular research method/approach, for instance,

have not critically utilized the communitarian model in their approach to theology. On this ground, the research undertaken is to examine the idea of community — both as a methodology as well as an outcome of tribal faith endeavour. For this matter, an explorative analysis combines with constructive, and other significant approaches are employed. The overall vision of the paper is to conceptualize and evaluate the rationale of the communitarian approach proposed in tribal theology.

1. TRIBAL WORLD AND TRIBAL THEOLOGY

According to the 2011 Census conducted by the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India (GOI), the tribal population numbered 104,545,716, which constitutes 8.6% of the total population of India.³ The tribal-indigenous communities are scattered almost all over India. They are diverse and heterogeneous. At the same time, there are similarities and interconnectedness in various manners, especially in their worldview, culture, and lived experiences. From ancient times, these communities had been living in relative isolation, self-sufficient, and self-sovereign. Nevertheless, they have gone through colonialism and defeat at the hand of the British empire first, and secondly, under the regime of the Government of India. Today, they are one of the most alienated communities in the world.

Even after more than 70 years of Indian independence, the tribals continue to remain at the bottom of the Indian social structure. K. Thanzauva describes the situation of the tribals as “culturally alienated, socially stigmatised, economically exploited, poor and politically powerless.”⁴ The mainland Indians treat the tribals as below the caste or low caste people who are poor, illiterate, naïve, and impure. In such an Indian social milieu, because of the caste-ridden society, the tribals suffer the stigma of being untouchable, marginalized, and oppressed.⁵ They are also alienated from their own land. Besides, these tribal communities experience inferiority complex, psychological traumas, and rejection due to the long time experience of colonialism and dominance. Again they are rejected as Indians outside Northeast India due to their Mongolian look. Hence, these lived experiences and social realities are the basis for their critical reflection on their life and especially on their Christian faith.⁶

Tribal theology that borne out of the tribal realities is a contextual theology. It seriously takes into consideration the tribal situation in its faith articulation. Secondly, tribal theology is pluralistic and wide-ranging. Diverse tribal communities have distinct tribal theological expressions. This aspect is due to the diversity of tribal cultures as well as church

phenomenology, ethnography, postmodernism, feminism. To put it simple, methodology is the overall view of the methods employed in a research.

³“2010 Census Data,” http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_Data_2001/India_at_glance/scst.aspx. Accessed on 04th August 2020.

⁴K. Thanzauva, *Theology of Community: Tribal Theology in Making* (Bangalore: ATC, 2004), 23.

⁵A. Wati Longchar, “Tribal Theology – Issues, Method and Perspective,” *In Search of Identity and Tribal Theology: A Tribute to Dr. Renty Keitzar*, Tribal Study Series, No. 9, ed. by A. Wati Longchar (Jorhat: Tribal Study Centre, 2001), 45-46.

⁶Yangkahao Vashum, “Tribal/Indigenous Theology and its Methodology: A Review and Proposal,” *Journal of Tribal Studies*, XIII/1 (Jan.-Jun. 2008), 36.

denominations, and social backgrounds. Therefore, tribal theology can be best expressed as tribal theologies. In other words, tribal theology/ies is not monotonous, as diverse realities of different tribal/indigenous groups demand multiple tribal theologies. Thirdly, tribal theology is community-centred. It appropriates the rich worldview of communitarian values in its theological endeavour. Fourthly, tribal faith expression is imaginative, creative, critical, systematic, and coherent. At the same time, it is dynamic, open-ended, multi-layered, and in the state of becoming. Fifthly, the goal of tribal faith reflection is God's salvation, liberation, and the Kingdom of God. It is to transform tribal society and the world at large, it is also to restore the God-world-humans community and to revive the dying tribal cultures, reestablish their authentic identities, and experience lives in totality.

The distinctiveness of tribal theology from other theologies is that its starting point is the tribal world – the culture, history, tradition, cosmovision, and its present situation. Tribal theology attempts to contextualize the Gospel by utilizing tribal resources. The tribal understanding of life, the interconnectedness of the divine, the world and nature, land and resources, plants, animals, spirits, and humans, is crucial in expressing tribal knowledge, theology, and spirituality. In the present context of economic globalization, ecological degradation, social problems, effects of Covid-19 and other diseases, political conundrums, cultural and identity crises, tribal theology has to delineate the Word of God to bring hope, vision, liberation, emancipation, and transformation for the whole world. Moreover, the current world of post-industrialization, postmodernity, post-truth, and impression of posthumanism demands tribal theology to reflect and reposition its faith expression that has never witnessed before.

2. REVISITING TRIBAL THEOLOGICAL METHODS

In any knowledge-seeking process, no single methodology is absolute and perfect. Likewise, a particular method cannot comprehend the totality of tribal quest for liberation and transformation. Honestly, methodology in its entirety is an area where tribal Christian theology has been grappling since tribal theology was introduced in an academic world.⁷ There is no such a single methodology that can suffice the whole aspirations of the tribals. Tribals are not homogenous, and such demands multiplicity of methods in any tribal theological inquiry. Brightstar Jones Syiemlieh delineates, "... it can be said that the prospects of tribal Christian theology depend much on its methodology."⁸ This proposition should not be taken lightly as methodology and theology (epistemology) are inseparable in many cases. Besides, systematically speaking, methodology decides the discourse and the outcome of an epistemology (theological knowledge).

⁷Brightstar Jones Syiemlieh, "The Future of Tribal Christian Theology in Northeast India: Possible Directions," *Tribal Theology on the Move*, Tribal Study Series No. 14, eds. by Shimreingam Shimray and Limatula Longkumer (Jorhat: TSC, 2006), 42.

⁸Syiemlieh, "The Future of Tribal Christian Theology in Northeast India: Possible Directions," 42.

2.1. KEITZAR'S METHOD OF INDIGENIZATION AND CONTEXTUALIZATION

Renthy Keitzar propounded a method of indigenization and contextualization, also known as *Naganization* of the Gospel in the tribal context of Northeast India. The primary concern in these methods is to make the gospel message relevant to the tribal people. It evolves a new theology based on sound biblical teaching and, at the same time, a message that can penetrate the core of tribal mentality.⁹ He writes, "The tribal thought forms, ideas, theological terms, life situations, and so on, can be adopted with adaptations in interpreting Christian ideas so that the gospel truth can be applicable to whom it is proclaimed."¹⁰ Keitzer prefers contextualization over indigenization, but both terms for him "... have terminological ambiguities and practical problems in their specific application."¹¹ For him, the "appropriate term" should be "Naganization of Christian Gospel and theology: that means, making the Gospel message and Christian theology relevant to Naga cultural way of life."¹² But *Naganization* should not be a mere indigenous technique of reading, but it should be an existential reality of theological interpretation of Christian truth in terms of Naga culture and their past, the present, and the future. It means that Christianity should be presented in the total life of the Nagas. In other words, as Nagas are Christianized, and so also Christianity must be *naganized*, and that is indigenization in its truest sense.¹³ Hence this method of *Naganization* is a missiological task as well as a process of the Naga Christians to make Christianity relevant to Naga realities in totality.

Keitzer's inputs on theological methodologies, such as indigenization and contextualization are paramount. More than that, his proposal of native/local term *Naganization* is a critical component in tribal theological construction. However, his method of indigenization (contextualization) is the first phase or the initial stage for tribal-indigenous faith articulation. Therefore, indigenization is not the overall result or the end-product; and it is not the aggregate approach in the theological endeavour. Secondly, indigenization does not resolutely appropriate socio-political, cultural, and environmental issues. Thereby what is post-indigenization is a paramount question. Hence the notions of liberation, justice, and freedom amid rampant injustice, neo-colonialism, alienation, and oppression in the tribal life cannot be neglected. Thirdly, Keitzer's contextualization, regardless of its inclusive nature, is problematic as numerous methods and approaches are within these contextual studies.¹⁴ And Keitzer did not discuss the operational method within this contextual framework.

⁹Renthy Keitzar, *In Search of a Relevant Gospel Message: Introducing a Contextual Christian Theology for North East India* (Guwahati: Christian Literature Centre, 1995), 1.

¹⁰Keitzar, *In Search of a Relevant Gospel Message*, 1.

¹¹Renthy Keitzar, "The Indigenization of Naga Christian Theology," *In Search of Praxis Theology for the Nagas* (New Delhi: Regency Publication, 2003), 34-51. Cited by Humtsoe, "Contextual-Theological Evaluation of Renthy Keitzar's Bible Translation Approach," 71-72.

¹²Keitzar, "The Indigenization of Naga Christian Theology," 36. Cited by Eyingbeni Humtsoe, "Contextual-Theological Evaluation of Renthy Keitzar's Bible Translation Approach," *Journal of Tribal Studies*, XIII/2 (Jul.-Dec. 2008), 72.

¹³Keitzar, *In Search of a Relevant Gospel Message*, 19.

¹⁴Refer Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004 [1992]); Thanzauva, *Theology of Community*, 84-103.

2.2. THANZAUVA'S METHOD OF SYNTHESIS-PRAXIS

In the context of tribal communities facing alienation, oppression, and other socio-political and cultural predicaments, K. Thanzauva advocates the 'synthesis-praxis method' as the theological method for the construction of tribal theology.¹⁵ For realizing the Kingdom of God, and also to experience liberation and transformation, tribal theology has to be a synthesis-praxis-oriented.¹⁶ For Thanzauva, 'synthesis' means the process of synthesizing or fusion on various levels: the Bible together with Christian traditions on the one side and several other issues from the context on the other side.¹⁷ Conversely, praxis is used as 'action-reflection' to reject a purely academic theoretical exercise without action. Thanzauva stretches the method of praxis is dynamic for the transformation of society towards the realization of the Kingdom of God.¹⁸ Praxis, thereby, means discovering the truth by acting and involving, and the task of synthesizing has to be done by involvement to produce authentic theoretical articulation.¹⁹

Thanzauva also proposes a communitarian model. He recognizes tribal theology precisely from a liberation perspective, and the basis of this liberation is the communitarian aspect of God-human-world relationship.²⁰ Thanzauva's 'community model' is an appropriate model to express the tribal concept of God-human-world relationships. Because God is in all, and all are in God.²¹ He adds that in the tribal understanding of God-human-world relationship, "God is never perceived as wholly other but as the one who became human and participated in the life of the world".²² This community model is dynamic in the present situation as a better relationship between God, creations, and humans are crucial more than before because of ecological, socio-political, and cultural crises.

The drawback one can observe in the synthesis-praxis method is that methodologically speaking, it is not an indigenous model that is born essentially out of the tribal realities. Even though the dialectic and action-oriented strategies are an integral part of tribal life, they are never systematized theoretically. Instead, one notices the influence of

¹⁵K. Thanzauva, "Methodology of Tribal Theology Toward a Synthetic-Praxis," *Tribal Christian Theology: Methods and Sources for Constructing a Relevant Theology of the Indigenous People of North East India*, Tribal Study Series No. 15, ed. by Razouselie Lasetso and Yangkahao Vashum (Jorhat: ETC Programme Coordination, 2007), 42; Also see, K. Thanzauva, "Issues in Tribal Theology," *Tribal Theology: A Reader*, ed. by Shimreingam Shimray (Jorhat: Tribal Study Centre, 2003), 20-23.

¹⁶Thanzauva, *Theology of Community*, 73.

¹⁷Thanzauva, "Methodology of Tribal Theology Toward a Synthetic-Praxis," 42.

¹⁸Thanzauva, "Methodology of Tribal Theology Toward a Synthetic-Praxis," 43; K. Thanzauva, "Methodological Issues: Subaltern Perspectives," Seminar Paper delivered during D.Th. Methodological Course, SATHRI, Serampore, May 2013, 32. Also see, Yangkahao Vashum, Book-Review of K. Thanzauva, *Transforming Theology: A Theological Basis for Social Transformation*, *Journal of Tribal Studies*, XIII/1 (Jan.-Jun. 2008), 80.

¹⁹Thanzauva, "Methodology of Tribal Theology Toward a Synthetic-Praxis," 43.

²⁰K. Thanzauva, "Meaning and Task of Theology," *Towards a Tribal Theology: The Mizo Perspective*, ed. by K. Thanzauva (Jorhat: Mizo Theological Conference, 1989), 22.

²¹Thanzauva, *Theology of Community*, 195.

²²Thanzauva, *Theology of Community*, 195.

western philosophy (for instance, Socrates, Marx, and Hegel's dialecticism) and liberation theology (inspired by Marxism) in this synthesis-praxis model. Likewise, Yangkahao Vashum maintains that this 'synthesis-praxis method' is viable in the indigenous/tribal theology. First, it takes the people's cultures and their distinctive socio-economic, political contexts seriously. Second, it allows for critical interaction between Christian traditions and the indigenous/tribal people's ways of life. Thirdly, it requires reclaiming past cultural traditions and values.²³ In contrast, the shortcomings in the synthesis-praxis method are: firstly, it assumes that Indigenous/Tribal cultures are fundamentally identical, as it fails to recognize the diversity that exists among Indigenous communities. Secondly, this method fails to recognize the 'differentiated complexity', which is the consequence of the hybridity that is in contemporary Indigenous people's reality due to colonialism.²⁴

Furthermore, one believes that the method that Thanzauva formulated for tribal theology is excessively anthropocentric. As tribal life is integrally related to their community of God, the world/nature, and humans, it is imperative to consider such relational values to develop an inclusive theology. Another drawback in the synthesis-praxis method is that it does not make seriously apposite the diversity, pluriformity, fluidity, and heterogeneous nature of tribal communities. Acknowledging the diversity and plurality of tribal world is the ground of tribal theology/ies. Besides, while dealing with tribal methodology, the dimension of community, which includes the divine, the world, nature, land, ecology, and humans, and their inter-relatedness needs special consideration, which Thanzauva did. However, he ends up his faith expression prioritizing the humanistic aspect.

2.3. LONGCHAR'S LAND-CENTRED METHOD

A. Wati. Longchar asserts that for tribal theology, the point of departure from other dominant theologies is the tribals seek for liberation from the perspective of 'land' or 'space' or 'the creation'.²⁵ He observes, "Space is the point of reference and the key to understand human selfhood, God, and spirit."²⁶ For him, having the right relationship with space/land or whole of creation is vital as it sustains and nourishes people and gives them an identity. This aspect is due to the tribal understanding that without the land, space, and creation, God ceases to be God; God becomes inactive without nature, and humans can attain redemption only with the rest of creation.²⁷ This tribal vision of the world is unique because of the affirmation of the centrality of space/land in understanding all realities.²⁸ Further, Longchar asserts that this distinctiveness of tribal worldview lies in affirming space/creation as the foundation for

²³Vashum, "Tribal/Indigenous Theology and its Methodology: A Review and Proposal," 49-50.

²⁴Vashum, "Tribal/Indigenous Theology and its Methodology: A Review and Proposal," 50.

²⁵Land/space is the basis of life. Here, poverty, war, oppression, ethnic conflict, and identity problems cannot be understood or solved without relating to the integrity of creation/land. Wati Longchar, "Tribal Theology: Development, Issues and Challenges," *Journal of Tribal Studies*, XVII/1 (Jan.-Jun. 2012), 16.

²⁶Longchar, "Tribal Theology – Issues, Method and Perspective," 62; Bendang Longkumar, "Theology of Creation in the Thought of Wati Longchar," *Journal of Tribal Studies*, 1/2 (Jul.-Dec. 2007), 44.

²⁷Longchar, "Tribal Theology – Issues, Method and Perspective," 63.

²⁸Longchar, *An Emerging Asian Theology – Tribal Theology*, 1. Cited by K.P. Aleaz, "A Tribal Christian Theology from India," *Journal of Tribal Studies*, VII/2 (Jun.-Dec. 2003), 291; A. Wati Longchar, "An Assessment of the Tribal Theology: Trends and Challenges for Future," *Tribal Theology on the Move*, Tribal Study Series No. 14, eds. by Shimreingam Shimray and Limatula Longkumer (Jorhat: TSC, 2006), 9.

understanding the tribal people's culture, identity, personhood, and religious ethos.²⁹ According to him, the concept of the land/creation is mysterious. He adds that the creation/land points to the same reality beyond time, and it also goes beyond human rationality. Therefore, the experience of time and history is an integral part of the creation.³⁰

One understands that the methodology set forth by Longchar is remarkable in the contemporary tribal reality/ies. That means one cannot neglect the importance of space/land/creation in tribal theology. Nungshitula Jamir while discussing on Longchar's model for making the Gospel message relevant and rooted in the tribal land, she points out that, for the tribals, every creature is an active participant in the divine, they inter-related, and has a measure of sensitivity and enjoys a certain degree of autonomy, spontaneity, and freedom.³¹ Similarly, Vashum opines that "land and space theology brings in the necessary corrective to the one-sided approach of the traditional Christian theology, not enough has been done in relating tribal theology with creation in the image of God."³² At the same time, Longchar's space/land centred theology is local, contextual, and tribal, and it takes cognizance of the tribal world.

Few criticisms of Longchar's method are: (1) despite Longchar's disapproval of western/dominant methodologies as anthropocentric, dominant, and exclusive, his method continues to adhere to the western notion of 'unity' and 'certainty'. The contention is that his methodology can be equally termed as logocentric,³³ as he recognizes land/space/creation as the centre, and the rest depends on it, (2) theologies from the west or even from India have normally prioritized a being/entity (*whether* reason or faith or Scripture, or experience, and others) as its starting point. This dimension is considered as singular, independent, unilateral, and one, thus ignoring plurality, multiplicity, and diversity. Likewise, Longchar's land-centred method too falls on this line of western prioritization, (3) Longchar's theological model has given exceeding priority to land/space/creation as the starting point of theology, thus neglecting the significance of 'communitarianism', where any priority is not necessary, (4) again, tribal episteme is not lineal but circular. Therefore things have to be examined from

²⁹Longchar, *An Emerging Asian Theology – Tribal Theology*, 6-10. Cited by K.P. Aleaz, "A Tribal Christian Theology from India," 291.

³⁰A. Wati Longchar, "Jesus Christ in Tribal Theology: A Critique," in *Journal of Tribal Studies*, VII/2 (Jun.-Dec., 2003), 266-267. According to Longchar, the term "the creation" points to the very primordial time of creation; it points to the very beginning of time. It is a comprehensive reality which includes everything, including human beings. Creation (without an article "the") refers to non-human segments of creation, including living objects, air, water, living beings, etc. the land or land is used interchangeably to refer to the "place" which gives identity to people, and sometimes referred to as soil and earth. It also means survival and, "It is our life." The space is sometimes referred to cosmic order, and sometimes referred to "place" which gives people an identity.

³¹Nungshitula Jamir, "The Emergence of Tribal Theology: Its Relevance," *Journal of Tribal Studies*, VII/2 (Jun.-Dec. 2003), 310-311.

³²Vashum, "Tribal/Indigenous Theology and its Methodology: A Review and Proposal," 37; Yangkahao Vashum, "Space, Creation and Land: An Indigenous/Tribal Eco-Theology of the Northeast India," *Journal of Tribal Studies*, XVII/1 (Jan.-Jun. 2012), 40-44.

³³Here the land has become the base, taking the centre stage, and substituting the others within the organic reality. In other words, it has sidelined the remaining entities within the community, such as God and humans.

the holistic and circular point of view; so to bring land/space/creation as the centre is problematic, (5) no doubt, the tribal community is a land-centred community, but the fact of the matter is that land is not the only defining force. And it would be myopic to overlook other organic entities such as the universe, Supreme Being, deities, human, body, mind, etc., in totality. Therefore, instead of fixing any centre, tribal theology has to focus on the whole concept of the cosmic community, which is more inclusive, and (6) the diversity of tribals, in terms of their cultures, language, and experiences, are not clearly denoted in Longchar's theological approach. Here, the seriousness of making misrepresentation and generalization of the whole tribals can be identified.

No doubt, theology has its starting point, a perspective, and bias is unavoidable. Here one's prejudice or preunderstanding (*see* Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur) and interest (*see* Habermas) plays a role in constructing theology. But one should also have a firm conviction that perspective or starting point could be pluralistic, multiple, and diverse. Accordingly, tribal theology demands multiple points of reference in light of their worldview. The land/space/creation, as understood, is pivotal in tribal cosmovision; however, it is not exclusive to take as the reference position. Besides, the land/space is embedded within the whole reality/ies. Here the land is intrinsically within the communitarian setup; therefore, as discussed above, it cannot be privileged by suspending the divine and the humans. Hence tribal theology cannot give precedence to land at the expense of other entities.³⁴

2.4. VASHUM'S POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

Among the tribal theologians, Yangkahao Vashum is one of the theologians who advocated an indigenous/tribal theology from a postcolonial perspective. According to him, "indigenous theology is a form of postcolonial theology in that it emerges out of a people's struggle against the force of marginalization and oppression."³⁵ It is to dismantle all forms of every colonial power – the hidden aspects of those institutional and cultural forces that had maintained the colonial and neo-colonial powers and that remain even after the natives achieve political independence.³⁶ The main focus in this method is, therefore, to decolonize and demissionize the colonial systems,³⁷ in all levels of life. According to Vashum, "An indigenous theology that is influenced by postcolonial thinking and discourse must be amenable to the fluidity and hybridity which characterise tribal existence." In other sense, it must reject the Western worldview, which is structuralized according to 'discreet and

³⁴M. Maisuangdibou, "Re-envisioning Tribal Christian Theology: Postmodern Perspectives," <https://www.academia.edu/>, accessed 14th July 2020.

³⁵Vashum, "Tribal/Indigenous Theology and its Methodology: A Review and Proposal," 50.

³⁶Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004, Indian Reprint), 63.

³⁷Yangkahao Vashum, "Colonialism, Missionaries, and Indigenous: A Critical Appraisal," *Journal of Tribal Studies*, XII/2 (Jul.-Dec. 2007), 22.

mutually exclusive categories',³⁸ such as the same/other, subject/object, spirit/matter, civilized/primitive, pure/impure, and rational/irrational and so on.³⁹

Postcolonial method is crucial in tribal theology because it takes into account three things: firstly, the impact of colonialism on tribal society is a location for postcolonial studies. Secondly, postcolonialism addresses the heterogeneity of indigenous culture and its multifaceted and stratified nature.⁴⁰ Finally, it is a technique of resistance against colonialism, and it also delves into the psychological and social impressions of colonialism on the natives' life. Despite the prominence of postcolonial methodology, there are also limitations in it as the method itself is foreign to the tribal/indigenous people, despite coloniality and postcoloniality are integrally part of their life. That means tribal themselves have to come up with their postcolonial methodology that is tribal in nature. Instead of rejecting the present method, tribal postcolonialism has to move beyond the existing model to make it more contextual and relevant to the tribal people. Secondly, concerning the issue of identity, hybridity, which refers to the creation of new transcultural forms in colonial life, is not neutral, and one cannot overlook the monopolization of western/dominant culture over the other native's culture in such 'hybridization'. Thirdly, postcolonialism is human-centred approach. It has no space for issues like an ecological crisis, climate change, postmodernity, and the contemporary media-related lifestyle. Fourthly, postcolonial method does not accommodate the tribal cosmovision of God-creation-human interrelatedness in its scheme of things. Hence there are severe drawbacks for tribal theology to apply postcolonial method. Thus this strategy alone cannot suffice the aspiration of tribal theology. Therefore, tribal scholars have to accommodate both the local and nonlocal approaches to construct an inclusive tribal/indigenous theology.

2.5. TRIBAL FEMINIST/WOMANIST METHODOLOGY

Feminist/womanist scholars have questioned the immensity of tribal culture and worldview. They pointed out the ambiguities in tribal culture and tradition, thus claiming that tribal culture is one-sided, monotonous, male-centred, patriarchal, and parochial. Even though the tribal community is communitarian, however, it is never an egalitarian one.⁴¹ Patriarchy is at the root of the community's worldview, culture, and social setup. In this setting, tribal feminist/womanist thinkers are deeply concerned with the representation of women in tribal discourses that they try to free themselves and the social order from patriarchy and any forms of oppression.⁴²

³⁸Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner and Mayra Rivera, "Introduction," in Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera, eds., *Postcolonial Theologies: Diversity and Empire* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 46. Cited by Vashum, "Tribal/Indigenous Theology and its Methodology: A Review and Proposal," 52.

³⁹Vashum, "Tribal/Indigenous Theology and its Methodology: A Review and Proposal," 51-52.

⁴⁰Vashum, "Tribal/Indigenous Theology and its Methodology: A Review and Proposal," 53.

⁴¹Some scholars argue that tribal society is an egalitarian society as there are no class and caste system. However, numerous women scholars and others have highlighted that tribal society is not an egalitarian society as there is deep-seated patriarchy that oppressed the women throughout the history. Therefore the researcher prefers to call the tribal society as communitarian rather than an egalitarian one.

⁴²M. Maisuangdibou, "An Interpretation of the Traditional Myths of the Liangmai Community: Towards a Liangmai Theological Hermeneutics" (D.Th. Thesis, FFRRC, Kottayam, 2019): 117.

R.L. Hnuni, one of the pioneers of tribal feminist theology, expounds that feminist theology develops out of the experiences of women, which is holistic as it rejects dualism and seeks liberation for all humanity.⁴³ She maintains that the fullness of life of women should be the norm for doing feminist Christian theology.⁴⁴ In the same manner, Limatula Longkumer advocates feminist theology – a reading of the Bible from women’s perspective. She proposes few hermeneutical tools for reading the Bible: (1) that resists any form of oppression, (2) reading from the context of the readers, (3) a critique of both the Bible and the tribal culture that are oppressive to humanity, (4) a contextual reading that is praxis-oriented in approach, (5) justice as the theme of feminist reading, (6) a synthesis of biblical and oral sources, (7) finally, storytelling as a method.⁴⁵ She further indicates that women’s concern in “biblical interpretation is that the Bible should be used as a tool to transform and liberate the people.”⁴⁶

Lalngihakthuami proposes a ‘theology of new humanity’ where the tribal attitude towards women searches a new and unbiased perspective.⁴⁷ She remarks, “Our attitude towards women need a fresh and just perspective where we will be sojourning together for a more humanely and just society. And this theological vision must let us think and to enthrone a new inclusive one that will bring about a liberative tribal theology.”⁴⁸ For Lalngihakthuami, a liberative tribal theology needs a change of mindset and adopt inclusive and liberating tools. According to Eyingbeni Lotha, “community of togetherness” is the aspiration of tribal feminism. She asserts, “Tribal feminism... is not aimed at polarizing women and men. It does not seek a power race with men, who have dominated the society since head hunting times.”⁴⁹ To achieve feminist aspirations, the focus on reinterpretation and rereading of the Bible with the objectives of liberation and transformation is vigorously highlighted in numerous tribal scholars.

In a similar vein, Lovely Awomi James writes, “They (women scholars) are now able to critically analyze the destructive and dehumanizing elements within their own given cultural context.”⁵⁰ She calls for a new definition and interpretation of womanhood in the tribal setting, which is thoroughly grounded in their being as women and in their own feminine experiences.⁵¹ For her, “Womanist theology is [a] critical reflection upon

⁴³R.L. Hnuni, “Feminist Theology: Meaning and Concern,” *Contextual Theology*, BCS Study Material: Theology, compiled by Wati Longchar (Kolkata: SCEPTRE, 2013), 202-203.

⁴⁴R.L. Hnuni, “Feminist Theology: Methodology,” *Contextual Theology*, BCS Study Material: Theology, compiled by Wati Longchar (Kolkata: SCEPTRE, 2013), 213.

⁴⁵Limatula Longkumer, “Tribal Feminist Reading of the Bible,” *Tribal Theology and the Bible: A Search for Contextual Relevance*, ed. by Yangkahao Vashum, TSS No. 19 (Jorhat: TSC, 2011), 145-149.

⁴⁶Longkumer, “Tribal Feminist Reading of the Bible,” 139.

⁴⁷Lalngihakthuami, “A Critical Re-Look at the Tribal Heritage from a Feminist Perspective,” in *Theologizing Tribal Heritage: A Critical Re-Look*, ed. by Hrangthan Chhungi (Delhi: CWM/ISCT-ECC/PCI/ISPCK, 2008), 221.

⁴⁸Lalngihakthuami, “A Critical Re-Look at the Tribal Heritage from a Feminist Perspective,” 221.

⁴⁹Eyingbeni Lotha, “Community of Togetherness: Perspective in Doing Tribal Women Theology,” *Tribal Theology: A Reader*, ed. by Shimreingam Shimray (Jorhat: Tribal Study Centre, 2003), 178.

⁵⁰Lovely Awomi James, “Reconceptualizing ‘Womanhood’ in Contemporary Naga Tribal Context: A Naga Woman’s Theological Perspectives,” *Journal of Tribal Studies* XV/2 (July-Dec. 2010): 15.

⁵¹Awomi James, “Reconceptualizing ‘Womanhood’ in Contemporary Naga Tribal Context: A Naga Woman’s Theological Perspectives,” 16.

Naga/tribal women's place in the world that God has created by taking Naga/tribal women's experience seriously as human beings who are made in God's image."⁵²

Tribal feminism/womanism attempts to subvert patriarchy. Their works dissected the whole male stereotyped and gender bias in tribal society. Their methodology is developed in response to the limits of traditional methods and other methods that do not capture the experiences of women and others who have been marginalized in the academic world as well as in society. The point of reference for women's approach is the rejection of patriarchy and its culture. Women's theologians have pointed out the constraints in the tribal cultures that are detrimental to the half of tribal population. They argue that tribal society is far from egalitarianism.⁵³ Therefore, the theological context one conceived cannot neglect the lived experiences of women and other oppressed groups.

The contention one finds in feminist/womanist methodology is how does one 'reread' or 'reinterpret' the texts as feminist/womanist intellectuals proposed? What is/are the method/s of this rereading and reinterpretation? Is this rereading all about applying any theory justly? Otherwise, are all these theories, such as traditional approaches, reader-response theory, postcolonial study, decolonization, deconstruction, eco-criticism, dialogical tools, new criticism, feminist criticism, or any other innovative models part of 'rereading'? Or, does tribal feminism/womanism need to have a distinct method of their own? The point is that tribal feminist theology also needs to overcome methodological shortage and predicament if it is to have a concrete tribal theological epistemology of its own. It has to re-examine women's experiences, both past, and present seriously, to construct a substantial methodology.

3. COMMUNITARIAN METHOD⁵⁴: A PROPOSAL

Community and communitarian values are prevalent in all societies of the world. However, the distinction of the tribal community from others is that it is overtly communitarian in nature. This tribal communitarian dimension is not from an anthropocentric point of view; instead, it is holistic, which encompasses God-world-humans (*Ting-kadih-maina*) relationship. Here humans are never the centre, but they are integral parts of the God-nature-human centred reality. Secondly, individualism is hardly depicted in tribal culture. Individual values are set aside for the sake of community living. It is within the community that individuals experience and function their rights and dignity. Hence the community, which includes the divine, the world, and humans, is supreme and unequivocal. This communitarian order consists of all things animate and inanimate beings, the land, all living and non-living beings, plants and animals, humankind, cultures, socio-polity, economy, religion, spiritual and material entities, body, and mind. Thus, it embraces the whole reality/ies.

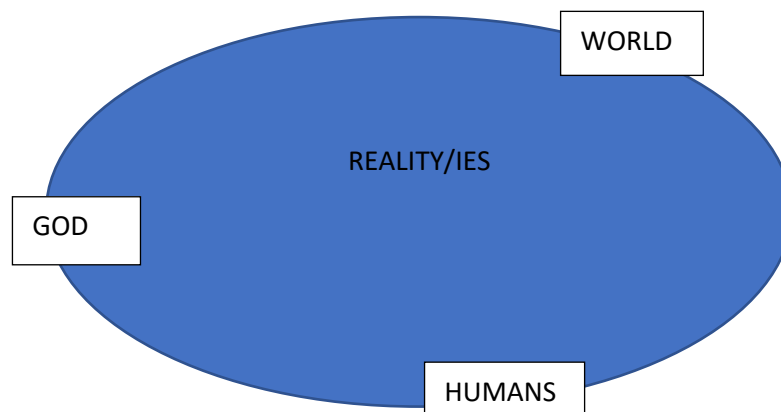
⁵²Lovely James, "A Naga Women Perspective on the Headhunting Culture of the Nagas: A Factor that Reinforces the Culture Myth of Male Superiority and Female Inferiority," *Journal of Tribal Studies*, X/1 (Jan.-June 2006): 10.

⁵³Maisuangdibou, *Liangmai and Christianity*, 143.

⁵⁴Also see M. Maisuangdibou, "Methodological Issues in Tribal Theology," https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Marianmai_Maisuangdibou.

According to the tribal worldview, the community of God-nature-humans should always be valued and respected. Any negligence or disdain against the cosmic community leads to catastrophe. Therefore, tribal people were conscious of stepping on the land, harming the land, cutting trees, killing animals, and plucking leaves and flowers. For any such act, they would plead to the Supreme Being for their needs. Further, they asked for forgiveness for any damage they had done. They would also appeal to God, and the spirit of the object they need before collecting it. Accordingly, tribal communities are more scientific, eco-friendly, and environmentally conscious. Hence one can visualize that the current problems faced by the world are due to the harm done to this cosmic community. If humans disregard the eco-system, or if humans do not give due honour to the divine and the mystery, the whole communal interconnectedness is disturbed. Today, the world is facing climate change, ecological dilapidation, social disharmony, political trouble and insecurity, psychological trauma, fear psychosis, and many others. All these predicaments can be traced back to the distortion and injustice committed to the God-world-humans continuum.

The tribal cosmic vision of communitarian interconnectedness is inclusive. It is embedded in all tribal communities of the world and especially in the tribal life of Northeast India. It is a communitarian model of reality that involved God, nature/creations, and humans in integral nature.⁵⁵ In other words, the entire reality/ies exists because of the communitarian nature of God-nature-human. Longchar disseminates that nature or the world is a central theme in tribal tradition, which is opposite to dominant Christian thinking of humans (*anthropos*) as the primary point of reference and norm.⁵⁶ Nature is integrally part of the total reality. As a result, the world/nature is equally important as God and human beings in tribal life and knowledge as well as in tribal Christian theology articulation. The notion of communitarianism is cyclical – God-world-humans:



The figure above depicts that the three entities are in an integral relationship. They are connected and interrelated as the whole reality/ies. The Supreme Being, the creator, and

⁵⁵M. Maisuangdibou, *Tribal Theological Hermeneutics: Methodological Issues in Interpretation* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2014), 160-163.

⁵⁶Longchar, *The Traditional Ao-Naga Worldview and Its Contribution Towards a Christian Understanding of Creation*, 331. Longchar argues that while the doctrine of creation is a subordinate category in the main line Christian traditions, “creation” is the centre and key to understand all realities in the traditional tribal vision of the world.

sustainer is integrally part of the reality/ies. The world/nature serves as the mediator between God and humans, and vice versa. This correlation of God-world-human (*Theos-cosmic-anthropos* in Greek) should thus be the point of reference in tribal theology. As noted above, this concept of *Ting-kadih-maina* is familiar to various communities/religions/philosophies of the world. However, the point of departure for tribals from others is the explicit prominence given to this communitarian relationship. This communitarianism is the whole philosophy and worldview of the tribal communities. For tribal-indigenous people, nature/creation is not merely to satisfy God or humans, but it is an equal partner in the continuum.

Tribal/indigenous communitarian philosophy of God-world-human interrelatedness which theologians like Thanzauva, Longchar, Vashum, and others uphold in the construction of tribal/indigenous theology is a critical component. Yet, the researchers realised that tribal theologians had not comprehensively deliberated on the communitarian model. They also did not make use of this communitarian model as an explicit and authoritative approach in their tribal theological articulation. Nonetheless, this tribal communitarianism is the most striking element in the tribal world that can be offered to the world and particularly to the body of knowledge. To incorporate the integral relationship of communitarian interrelationship – God-human-world – in theological methodology is the need of the hour to counter dominant methodologies imported from the west. Secondly, it is to re-balance the dominance of space-centred method (Longchar) and the liberation-praxis method (Thanzauva) in tribal theology. This point is because the land is part of the community, as underlined above. Again Thanzauva's model of synthesis-praxis is extremely anthropocentric. This communitarian dimension, on the other hand, will also help to equally respect and provide space for all entities and their spirituality, the world consciousness (including all creations).⁵⁷ Anyhow, the tribal viewpoint of communitarian life is broad, open, and ambiguous. Yet, the generality and extensiveness of theology and other subjects demand to focus on the whole aspects of life.

Tribal theology and its methodology cannot be exclusive. Specific methods and theological outcomes are exclusively tribal; however, there would also be several convergences with other theologies. Salvation and liberation, for instance, are universal symbols in several theology/ies all over the world.⁵⁸ In a similar vein, Syiemlieh suggests that "... tribal Christian theology needs to take into account the theoretical insights of postmodernity [postmodernism] where the watchword is 'integration of methodologies'. Similarly, various theories and approaches, to name a few Marxism, psychoanalysis, ethnography, postmodernism, feminism/womanism, cultural studies, subaltern studies, critical theories, postcolonial methods are viable methodologies in the tribal theological discourses. By way of illustration, postmodernism involves a rejection of the modern worldview but launched under the conditions of modernity.⁵⁹ Underlying everything is the

⁵⁷Maisuangdibou, *Tribal Theological Hermeneutics*, 160, 163.

⁵⁸Anyhow, the ideas of salvation and liberation are different in diverse theologies depending on contexts. For example, Dalit theology seeks liberation from caste system; whereas, tribal theology pursues liberation from community's point of view.

⁵⁹Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer of Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 2.

belief that all human knowledge is limited and culturally conditioned.⁶⁰ Here, tribal theology needs to engage and dialogue with modern sciences and other social-cultural theories. They could enrich tribal knowledge. Nevertheless, it requires special attention in moving together with contemporary social and scientific ideas to meet the challenges of modern tribal societies. This dimension should also serve both as a critique as well as a partner in the construction of human knowledge.

The communitarian model proposed has its weaknesses, and it cannot be absolutized whatsoever. But for tribal theology and tribal knowledge at large, this interconnectedness serves an explicit purpose as it is the decisive point of reference that is typical from other theological methodologies. In short, the relational understanding of the *community* is to enrich the tribal Christian idea of God and the importance of nature and all creations. The world or the environment is the location of interface, dialogue, and it is the medium where all realities interact. Such theological methodology and articulation are essential to counter radical dualism in the Christian understanding of faith, and it is also to bridge the horizons of tribal Christian life and their living contexts. This theological process is a total contextualization of the Gospel in the living realities of the tribal/indigenous people. Moreover, it helps to rebuild the oneness and the integrity of life in totality.

3.1. CRITICISM OF COMMUNITARIAN METHOD

Applying the communitarian method is pivotal in tribal theology and other tribal studies (tribal disciplines and related domains). Tribal knowledge has to interpret and analyse anything from the perspective of the community. This communitarian perspective is the basis of tribal dissemination of knowledge. For instance, any text such as ecology, anthropology, sociology, economics, philosophy, ethics, aesthetics, psychology, literature, and other domains could be examined from this communitarian point of view. It accommodates the concepts of land, ecology, justice, self, mind, peace, relationship, rights, and equality.

Anyhow, this communitarian method is not free from shortcomings. The problems identified in this approach are: (1) the tribal worldview of communitarianism is fast disappearing in the contemporary tribal society. (2) it is a traditional conception of the world; therefore, it is limited in its perspective and ideology. (3) it does not deliberate several issues, such as women's experience, technological questions, and the contemporary situations of the world. (4) again, the communitarian approach is a broad or macro strategy; thus, it could neglect micro themes like health, emotion, wellbeing, creativity, imagination, and more. However, tribal researchers can develop knowledge and fill the gap (research gap) between the community method and other subject-matters like the body, spirituality, wellbeing, sickness and diseases, psychological issues like trauma, mental illness, and depression, church missions, family matters, subaltern studies, postcolonial, postmodern issues, and many more.

⁶⁰Kevin "O" Donnell, *Postmodernism* (Oxford: Lion Publishing Plc, 2003), 6.

As indicated, communitarianism could be augmented by contemporary methodologies. As a case in point, the distinctiveness of postmodernism is its rejection of the modern belief of totalization, universalization, and meta-narrative. At the same time, it deconstructs the binary structure and ‘logocentrism’. The significant dimension in postmodernism is that it critically accommodates small, less, unknown, unpopular narratives, stories, instead of one grand-narrative. In other words, it celebrates the elements of diversity and decentering; it also upholds such as multilayered, and reality is inferred as more significant than what one thinks and defines. In such a case, native’s myths, worldviews, cultures are equally essential and integrally part of the diverse epistemologies. For postmodern thinkers, the Bible itself is a collection of small narratives. There is a similarity between the tribal understanding and postmodern perception of realities. One needs to dissociate from any model that claimed for universality. Nevertheless, to use any model is to apply to specific cases appropriately.

3.2. READING THE BIBLE AND REALITY UTILIZING COMMUNITARIAN METHOD

If Jesus Christ had read the Old Testament from the Kingdom’s perspective, tribal Christians should interpret the Bible using the Jesus model and the communitarian approach to make the message relevant to the tribal Christian milieu. The message of the Gospel can be enhanced by incorporating the community model.

The Bible in the tribal world would be more relevant only if the communitarian values are appropriated. The scriptural discourse is to enhance the spirituality of the tribal Christians in light of Jesus’ spirituality. In that case, the Word of God must dialogue with the tribals employing tribal resources. Until and unless the Gospel is presented to the tribals as a tribal tradition, as a tribal storybook, the tribal Bible, it cannot be genuinely relevant. Here the translation of the Bible in the tribal languages is tribal in nature. However, the translated tribal Scripture has to be interpreted, analysed and practice in tribal ways of life. These dimensions demand tribals to read God as tribal, Jesus Christ as one of them, and the Holy Spirit as similar to the spirits understood in tribal contexts. Here the God of the tribal and indigenous community is like them. Jesus, the tribal, is poor, alienated, and neglected. Yet, he loves his tribal community, speaks a tribal language, enjoy living in the forest and mountains, listening and sharing folklore and oral traditions, he is also fond of shifting cultivation, and enjoy roaming the forests, hills, crossing the rivers, and cares for the environment. He is tribal to the core, the tribal of the tribals. He likewise died and rose again for the tribal people, thus giving hope and future for the tribals of the world to seek salvation and liberation.

As understood, the Bible is a community product. It is the involvement of God, the world, and humans. The Bible is the story of the creation of the universe – “the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1: 1), and the recreation of a “new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21: 1). It is out of God’s love that he created the whole world, including humankind (John 1: 10). The line, “For God so loved the world...” (John 3: 16) delineates that God did not love only the humans but the world – the *cosmos*; thus, he gave his begotten Son to die for the

whole world. It is the world, not only the humans that God gave his life. If John 3: 16 is cosmic-oriented, then when has it become anthropocentric? Are not Christians become human-centred? These Bible passages and many others proved that the Bible is a community-centred book. There is a dynamic interconnectedness between the divine, nature, and all humans. For this reason, any scriptural passage can be analysed from the communitarian approach. However, in some passages, the idea of a community might be absent; still, it would be compensated in the other passages. In this way, the Bible has a good sense of community in entirety.

Similarly, globalization, eco-system, science, and technology can be read from the communitarian method. It is to explore these systems, their natures, and characteristics, their impacts, and the pros and cons of these systems. The issues are: whether these systems recognize and value the God-world-humans community; Is the cosmic spirituality realised and the respect for the mystery part of these processes? Are these systems reverent for land, animate and inanimate objects, and the environment? Are globalization and technology humanly, creationly, and divinely? Does the present environmental studies holistic? Does the community in totality is appropriated in science and other studies? Hence, the focus of science, technology, ecology, and others should be humanization, creationization, and divinization. It is to honour and recognize the interrelatedness of humans, the world/nature, and the divine.

CONCLUSION

Methodology is the underpinning element in any knowledge exploration and construction. Every context has various issues; therefore, diverse academia/theologies apply different methods. It is the methodology that defines the perspective of the study. If the methods are not appropriate, then the knowledge generated will be faulty or inapplicable. As mentioned, tribal theology/ies seeks liberation and transformation of the cosmos from the communitarian perspective. From this viewpoint, one can sum up that tribal theology/ies is formulated out of tribal contexts to recapture their heritage, history, and tradition, and it is for the total liberation and transformation of the world.

Furthermore, tribal theology views that emancipation and justice for the cosmic community as critical elements to experience true humanity and cosmonity. For such purpose, the struggle for justice and recognition in the tribal settings is cosmical — the interrelatedness of God-world-humans. This interconnectedness is the starting point of tribal theology. This study thus examined the numerous methods and approaches which are applied in tribal theological expressions. Further, a communitarian method derived from the tribal way of life is proposed as a more dynamic and inclusive approach for the tribal Christian faith articulation.