

**A QUEST FOR TRIBAL RELIGIOUS RESOURCES FOR PROMOTING TRIBAL
THEOLOGY ENRICHING TRIBAL MORALITY AND ESCHATOLOGICAL HOPE**
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Introduction: Tribals are well known for their rich traditional heritages, their colourful dresses and beautiful songs and intricate dances. Their traditional heritages include the past and present, socio-cultural traditions, customs, religious beliefs and practices. They include myths and legends, taboos and omens, folktales and stories, proverbs, songs and so on. These tribal heritages have been transmitted orally from generation to generation. These tribal heritages when properly utilized can be wonderful resources for formulating tribal contextual theologies.

Therefore, this paper is an attempt to define tribal religion as well as tribal theology and draw out tribal religious resources for promoting tribal theology to enrich tribal morality and eschatological hope,

1. Tribal Religion and Tribal Theology: In brief, tribal religion is the religion practiced by the tribals. Tribal religion through the centuries has been equated with the terms such as animism, preliterate, primitive, and primal. Other names such as animatism, spiritism, ancestor worship and fetishism have also been employed to explain tribal religion. Besides these, the term ‘Primal Religion’ has also been used extensively and is a widely accepted term, especially in India.¹

Tribal religion is known by different names and commonly, it is defined by the term ‘animism’. E.B. Tylor has defined animism as, “the belief that all living things as well as everything held by primitive man [sic] to be living because of its locomotion or its ability to assume for itself some power or animated by spirits.”² However, this definition of tribal religion has a derogatory connotation as this type of interpretation of religion places the tribal religion at the bottom of the supposed line of religious evolution while Judaism, Christianity and Islam are placed at the top as they are monotheistic religions. Therefore, A. Wati Longchar has argued that, “to look at a religion in that way is quite dehumanizing and irrational.”³

¹ Christopher Augustus Bixel Tirkey, *Religion/Primal Religion* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998), 168-169.

² Jonathan H. Thumra, “The Primal Religious Tradition,” in *Religious Traditions of India*, edited by P.S. Daniel, David C. Scott and G.R. Singh (Delhi: ISPCK, 2001), 45.

³ A. Wati Longchar, *The Tribal Religious Traditions in North East India - An Introduction* (Jorhat: Eastern Theological College, 2000), 6. [Hereafter cited as Longchar, *Tribal Religious Traditions...*]

Tribal religion has also been described as “primitive religion.” However, even this term has a negative connotation, since it denotes an inferiority of the people practicing such types of religion.⁴ Therefore, in order to understand tribal religion, it would be useful to understand the unique characteristics of tribal religion.

a) Firstly, in the tribal religious worldview, there is no distinction between sacred and secular, spiritual and physical, heavenly and earthly; they all constitute wholeness of life.⁵ In this sense, for the tribals, religion would simply mean living in the spontaneous awareness of, an encounter with, acknowledgement of, and obedience to the active reality of the presence of God.⁶

b) Secondly, tribal religion does not have a written scripture like other religions. Their religious ethos is embodied in their myths, legends, folktales and stories.⁷

c) Another peculiarity of the tribal religion is that unlike other religions of the world, it does not have founder(s) or reformer(s). In other words, tribal religion is not centered on famous historical person/persons. Their religion rather is founded on earth/creation.⁸ Religious functionaries, traditions of divine birth and manifestations exist and are respected. But they are never worshipped or adored as divine representatives.

d) Another unique characteristic of tribal religion is that, it is basically a community religion. In the tribal religion, an individual’s life and the community life are inseparable.⁹ To be truly human is to belong to the whole community, including the ancestors and creation, and in order to do that one must actively participate in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of the community.

e) Another key feature of tribal religion is that, no human-made images or temples are used for worship of the Divine. Natural objects are accepted as symbols of the divine presence and adoration and oblations are given seasonally. Life-cycles, birth, marriage and death, and

4 Longchar, *Tribal Religious Traditions...*, 6.

5 Yangkahao Vashum, “Sources for Developing Tribal Theology,” in *An Exploration of Tribal Theology*, edited by Wati Longchar (Jorhat: The Tzudikong Baptist Church, 1997), 65. [Hereafter cited as Vashum, *Sources...*]

6 A. Wati Longchar, *The Traditional Tribal Worldview and Modernity* (Jorhat: Eastern Theological College, 1995), 5. [Hereafter cited as Longchar, *Tribal Worldview and Modernity...*]

7 Vashum, *Sources...*, 66.

8 Longchar, *Tribal Worldview and Modernity...*, 6-7.

9 Longchar, *Tribal Religious Traditions...*, 3.

annual cycles of major seasons and changes of nature accordingly form an integral part of occasional and seasonal festivals and scarifies.¹⁰

f) Another important characteristic of tribal religion is the worship of ancestors. Ancestors are part of the life of those who are alive and they are interested in the welfare of the living. The tribals offer grains of rice at the beginning of their meal to the ancestors and the faith is that they partake of the meal with the living ones.¹¹

Thus, according to Dr. T. Vanlaltlani, “tribal religion is the basic of religious beliefs and practices of the people who were, once, called primitive, original, indigenous, and native in the past, and have been called developed or modern people in the changing years of age due to the change of the life of its practitioners.”¹² Hence, tribal religion is as asserted by Longchar, a “distinctive religion having all the phenomenological aspects of religious ideas, activities, institutions, customs and symbols.”¹³

Therefore, tribal religion may be defined as the religion of the tribal people, which has all the distinctive traits of the major religious traditions which is the core of human existence, and pertinent even today.

Tribal theology in India is in the making. K.P. Aleaz opines that, there are more or less three approaches to tribal world-view evident in tribal theologians while theologising. First is the approach of contextualisation and indigenisation represented by senior thinkers like Nirmal Minz and the late Renthly Keitzer. Here the suggestion given is for adaptation of the tribal cultural values. The second approach takes a perspective that the gospel-values are already present in the tribal culture and world view. For example, Timotheos Hembrom would hold that the Santhal creation stories are in line with the Genesis creation stories. The third approach insists that a tribal Christian theology has to emerge from a tribal world-view. The space-centred tribal world-view contributes to the very content of tribal theology. The younger, creative theologian A. Wati Longchar is a major exponent of this approach.¹⁴

10 Nirmal Minz, “The study of Tribal Religion in India,” in *Re-visioning India's Religious Traditions*, edited by David C. Scott & Israel Selvanayagam (Delhi/Bangalore: ISPCK/UTC, 1996), 122. [Hereafter cited as Minz, *The Study...*]

11 Minz, *The Study...*, 122.

12 T. Vanlaltlani, *Tribal Religion: Mizo and Bru* (Aizawl: Mizo Theological Association, 2009), 5.

13 Longchar, *Tribal Religious Traditions...*, 7.

14 K.P. Aleaz, “A Tribal Theology from a Tribal Worldview,” *Indian Journal of Theology*, Vol. 44, No. 1 & 2: 20-29.

Tribal theology is one of the fast developing contextual theologies in India today. Tribal theology in its diverse expressions emerged in the 1980s. At the initial stage the proposal seemed to attempt and develop a theology in relevance to each particular tribe such as Mizo, Naga, Khasi and so on acknowledging the diversity of the tribes in spite of certain degree of similarity. Later on, the term tribal theology came to be used as an umbrella phrase to cover contextual theologies of North East India.¹⁵

Tribal theology simply defined is an attempt to theologize tribal heritage.¹⁶ Whereas, for K. Thanzauva, it is “a theological reflection on the tribal Christian experiences of the interaction of tribal culture and gospel”.¹⁷ For A. Wati Longchar, tribal theology is:

a people's theology born out of the experiences of various forms of injustice and exploitation in the context of their assertion for right and identity. It is a theology that attempts to express Christian faith in socio-cultural, religious, traditional and liturgical thought patterns of the people. Tribal/Indigenous theology is a resistance theology – resistance to affirm justice, identity, dignity and wholeness of land and all its inhabitants...It reflects on the issue of ethnic, cultural and political identities of people from the subject of people, land, power and divines to give them hope.¹⁸

2. Tribal religious resources for promoting tribal theology enriching tribal morality and eschatological hope: The tribals practice ethical and moral values and rigorous procedures are laid down to deal with the ethical moral problems within the community, these are primarily in the form of oral traditions handed down from generation to generation. The richness of tribal oral tradition has been beautifully described by the Renty Keitzer, who calls it the unwritten “Prime Bible”. He writes that,

These may be called as the unwritten ‘Prime Bible’ of the tribal/indigenous people.

One can find in these oral traditions their beliefs, norms, and practices; hence a great and rich treasure of theological value is hidden with this ‘Prime Bible’ of the people.¹⁹

15 Rosiamliana Tochhawng, “Methodological Reflection on Theologizing Tribal Heritage in North East India,” in *Theologizing Tribal Heritage – A Critical Re-Look*, edited by Hrangthan Chhungi (Delhi: CWM/ISSET-ECC/PCI/ISPCK, 2008), 22. [Hereafter cited as Rosiamliana Tochhawng, *Methodological Reflection...*]

16 Rosiamliana Tochhawng, *Methodological Reflection...*, 19.

17 K. Thanzauva, “Issues in Tribal Theology,” in *An Exploration of Tribal Theology*, edited by A. Wati Longchar (Jorhat: The Tzudikong Baptist Church, 1997), 39.

18 A. Wati Longchar, “An Assessment of the Tribal Theology: Trends and Challenges for Future,” in *Tribal Theology on the Move*, edited by Shimreingam Shimray and Limatula Longkumer (Jorhat: Tribal/Women Study Centres, Eastern Theological College, 2006), 8.

19 Renty Keitzer, *In Search of a Relevant Gospel Message* (Guwahati: CLC, 1995), 85.

In this section, an attempt has been made to draw out tribal religious resources for promoting tribal theology that can enrich tribal morality and eschatological hope.

a) Omen: For the tribal people, the observance of omen before undertaking a journey, farming, war or hunting, is a must. Presler has defined an omen as “any phenomenon believed to have supernaturally inherent potent.”²⁰ An omen is not an event that happens immediately, it is a warning of something that is to happen. Longchar defines omen as, “people look forward for indications and warnings likely to happen in their lives. It is believed that certain animals or birds are charged with *mana* and meeting these can be a danger a sign or vice-versa.”²¹ There can be both good as well as bad omens.

For the tribals, omens are the means of knowing God’s way, God’s purpose and warnings through nature such as animal, insects, natural phenomena etc.²² These experiences of the unexpected and ordinary things in nature kept the tribals in continuous attentiveness of God’s commands and intention. There are innumerable omens a few may be cited here:²³

- i) If lightning strikes a tree on a paddy-field, it is believed that there will be sickness in the household.
- ii) If a hawk constantly flies over a particular field, it indicates the death of someone in the owner’s household.
- iii) If a bird makes a nest in or near the sacrificial posts, it is a sign of rich harvest.
- iv) At the time of going on a trip in search of works to do, if a hornbill flies across the path of a person, it is believed that wealth will be acquired.

b) Taboo: According to Presler, taboo/taboos are those, “caution established to guard against supernaturally dangerous things like plants, animals or persons especially those that possess *mana*.”²⁴ Taboo extends to actions also. Hence, any action that violates the community norm brings the supernatural penalty. Therefore, the taboo object is not to be seen or violated, touched, heard, smelt and tasted. If violated, the person or community will automatically

20 Henry H. Presler, *Primitive Religions in India* (Bangalore: The Christian Literature Society, 1971), 8. [Hereafter cited as Presler, *Primitive Religions...*]

21 Longchar, *Tribal Religious Traditions...*, 35.

22 Sashikaba Kechutzar, “Rethinking Naga Religious Traditions: An Exploration of Tribal Christian Spirituality,” in *Theologizing Tribal Heritage – A Critical Re-Look*, edited by Hrangthan Chhungi (Delhi: CWM/ISSET-ECC/PCI/ISPCK, 2008), 173. [Hereafter cited as Kechutzar, *Rethinking...*]

23 Longchar, *Tribal Religious Traditions...*, 36-37.

24 Presler, *Primitive Religions...*, 10.

incur supernatural anger or penalty.²⁵ Taboo, thus, is a sacred interdict that takes into account the power that surrounds certain objects and activities.²⁶

c) Understanding of Supreme Being: Belief in the existence of the Supreme Being is common to all the tribal people. Although there are no written Scripture that speaks of the Supreme Being, the nature and attributes of this Supreme Being is well-expressed in the myths, traditional songs and folk-tales of the tribals. This Supreme Being is called by various names among the various tribals.

The tribals perceive the Supreme Being as the Creator, Sustainer and Dispenser of the universe. Many of the tribals believe the Supreme Being to be the judge of both heaven and earth who awards every soul according to one's deeds on earth. A person who leads a righteous life on earth is awarded with a heavenly home to live eternally after death. But an unrighteous person is sent to a place of eternal torment.²⁷ Therefore, the life and death as well as the afterlife are all within the power and jurisdiction of the Supreme Being.

Among the Santals, the Supreme Being '*Thakur Jiu*' is the upholder of moral law and the Judge of human both and now and in life after death. So human beings are responsible to *Thakur Jiu* for their deeds. The *Hana Puri* (next world) is in the hand of the Supreme God.²⁸ For the Ao Nagas, *Meyutsung* is the god of truth and justice and the final judge between life and death. The god of righteousness who demands purity, high moral and ethical standards, honesty, humility and a just life from every human being.²⁹

d) Moral code of conduct: Tribal society is based on socio-ethical principles, which provides the basis for a communitarian society to exist and function effectively. In other words these codes of conduct are a philosophical and ethical foundation of communitarian society. Among the Mizos this code of conduct is known as *Tlawmngaihna* and among the Ao Nagas as *Sobaliba*. Due to the constraint of time and space, in this paper, special concern is given only to the Mizo concept of *tlawmngaihna* as the basis for enriching tribal morality.

²⁵ Longchar, *Tribal Worldview and Modernity...*, 54.

²⁶ Kechutzar, *Rethinking...*, 175.

²⁷ Longchar, *Tribal Religious Traditions...*, 10.

²⁸ Stephen Murmu, "Towards a Tribal Theology from the Santals' Perspectives," in *Theologizing Tribal Heritage - A Critical Re-Look*, edited by Hrangthan Chhungi (Delhi: CWM/ISSET-ECC/PCI/ISPCK, 2008), 150-151.

²⁹ Kechutzar, *Rethinking...*, 178.

Dr. Laltluangliana Khiantge asserts that *tlawmngaihna* is an untranslatable term,³⁰ which is true, for there seems to be no single English word that can be used to translate the term. However, K. Thanzauva attempted to define *tlawmngaihna* by saying that, it literally means, “resistance to being helped by others by helping others who are in need. The emphasis is on a denial of self rather than an effort to be independent.”³¹

Tlawmngaihna is closely connected with the Mizo hospitality and the practice of sharing the fruits of the land and maintaining a cordial relationship with the next-door neighbours. It also consists in a selfless concern or good will for fellow human beings. In order to attain a high degree of *tlawmngaihna*, one has to be honest, courageous, diligent, enduring, patient, gentle, kind, discrete, humble, cheerful, generous, courteous, merciful and compassionate.³² It is more often demonstrated than theoretical.³³

e) Myths: As has been mentioned, tribal religion does not have a written scripture. But they have myths and legends, folktales and stories in which their whole religious ethos are embodied. For Wati Longchar, the myths are the ground of religion and it contains the religious truth of a particular community. Myths teaches how the Supreme Being works and reveals the Divine mysteries through creation, the place of the human, and the animal kingdom in this universe, their relationship and so on.³⁴ Thus, myths may be considered as the sacred Scripture and creed of the tribals.

Myths convey profound theological meanings and the religious truth of a particular group of people. They tell us about God, spirits and their relations with human beings and creation. They tell us how human beings understand themselves, their life realities and their relationship with God and creation.³⁵ Thus, myths understood under the right perception can give wonderful insights for enriching the moral standards of the tribal people.

30 Laltluangliana Khiantge, “Rethinking about the Folklore and Culture of the Mizos,” in *Theologizing Tribal Heritage – A Critical Re-Look*, edited by Hrangthan Chhungi (Delhi: CWM/ISSET-ECC/PCI/ISPCK, 2008), 298. Hereafter cited as Laltluangliana Khiantge, *Rethinking Folklore and Culture...*

31 K. Thanzauva, *Theology of Community – Tribal Theology in the Making* (Aizawl: Mizo Theological Conference, 1997), 120. [K. Thanzauva, *Theology of Community...*]

32 Laltluangliana Khiantge, *Rethinking Folklore and Culture...*, 299.

33 P.L. Lianzuala, “Towards a Theology of Mizo Tlawmngaihna,” in *Good News for North East India: A Theological Reader*, edited by Renthly Keitzer (Guwahati: The Christian Literature Centre, 1995), 124.

34 A. Wati Longchar, “Myth: A Source for Conceptualising Tribal Theology,” in *An Exploration of Tribal Theology* (Jorhat: The Tzudikong Baptist Church, 1997), 83.

35 Vashum, *Sources...*, 66-67.

f) Tribal songs: the source of eschatological hope: Singing is a way of life for the tribal people. It is extremely difficult to comprehend for non-tribals how much the tribals of North East India are singing. Therefore, it is a unique characteristic of the tribals who sing while working in the fields, who had fellowship in singing and conversed through songs and singing. They expressed their joys and sorrows, aspirations and religious beliefs and experiences through songs. Thus, in the absence of written materials myths, folklores and songs become the primary sources of the expression of the beliefs and faith of the tribals. Since it is not possible to deal with songs of different tribals living in India, in this paper, special mention has been made of the Mizo community of Mizoram.

K. Thanzauva writes that though the first Mizo Christians were proud of the translated Christian songs translated by the missionaries and the Mizo Christians themselves, these translated songs could not satisfy the thirst of the Mizo people. The revival that occurred gave birth to a new tune that was a synthesis of the Western and the traditional tunes. This really satisfied the Mizo Christians. The emergence of the indigenous tune was followed by the composition of indigenous songs. This was a fruit of the third wave of revival movements which occurred during 1919-1923.³⁶

K. Thanzauva further asserts that, any movement in Mizoram, whether religious or political, was always accompanied and inspired by appropriate songs and singing. In fact, the conversion movement in Mizoram could be described as poor people's movement, inspired by the songs of hope (eschatological songs). That "hope" became the energizing power for the early Christians not only to be able to survive in the midst of persecution, but to change their wretched situation.³⁷

Theological Reflections and Conclusion: From the above discussion of some tribal religious resources, the following observations and theological reflections pertaining to enriching tribal morality and eschatological hope may be drawn:

a) Among Christianized tribals omens are regarded as 'foolish superstitions' and a thing of the past. However, a theological re-interpretation of these tribal religious resources in the light of Christian teachings teaches us that God reveals Divine design and purpose to humankind through various means and instruments, even nature and animals. Therefore,

³⁶ K. Thanzauva, *Theology of Community...*, 218-219.

³⁷ K. Thanzauva, *Theology of Community...*, 221.

nature and created beings as God's instruments of God's revelation must be respected and given honour.

To abuse and manipulate these means of revelation would be like cutting the lifeline of the entire community because the very core of a tribal community and life is to be understood according to the way of nature. The whole rhythm of tribal life moves according to the directions of creation.³⁸

Moreover, a re-interpretation of omens as the revelation of God would definitely make the tribal Christians more sensitive to the revelation of God and thus enabling us to walk in the rhythm of God's directions in the midst of chaos and aimlessness that confronts us today.³⁹

b) Taboo as has been mentioned is a sacred interdict that takes into account the power that surrounds certain objects and activities. Although, all types of taboos may not come under the purview of sacred. However, taboo plays an important role in the social cohesion of the people. On the other hand, while people might be filled with fear at the thought of divine retribution if taboos are broken, they serve as a positive purpose for focusing one's life on the divine and the purposes of the divine. Thus, one's life gets integrated with the divine.⁴⁰

c) The tribal concept of Supreme Being entails judgment and retribution, punishment and reward according to the deeds done on this earth. Therefore, the tribals strove hard to live an honest and upright life for fear of judgment and punishment in the afterlife as well as in this earthly existence. This concept demands of the tribals to maintain a high standard of morality in this life in order to be rewarded in the afterlife.

However, in the tribal concept there seems to be no space for forgiveness of sins, whereas, the Christian teaching tells of a God of love, who is ready to forgive the sins of every person, no matter how many or how grave the sins are. Giving due importance and gratitude to the grace and providence of God, we cannot ignore the immorality, corruption, oppression and social evils prevailing in the Church as well as in the society.

Therefore, while recognizing the importance of the providence of God's grace, it is necessary to promote greater moral and ethical sensitivity to the ever watchful judgmental divine power to which we are answerable. To a God who is a 'consuming fire', who punishes

38 Longchar, *Tribal Religious Traditions...*, 42-43.

39 Kechutzar, *Rethinking...*, 180.

40 Kechutzar, *Rethinking...*, 181.

not only in the afterlife, but in the here and now as well. Hence, the tribal concept of the Supreme Being demands of us to uphold a high standard of morality and gives eschatological hope to the righteous and the just.

d) Among the tribal societies, it is quite evident that a kind of social ethical norm similar to the Mizo *tlawmngaihna* exists, although in varying degrees. These ethical norms are not without their demerits in terms of gender exclusiveness, clan or tribe exclusiveness and so on. Therefore, a theological rediscovery and reconstruction of these ethical norms is the need of the hour.

These traditional ethical norms must be incorporated into the social system. It is imperative to incorporate the universal concern of Christian teaching for love and justice into the tribal ethics to meet the challenges of today. Only then would the tribal moral code of conduct, whether it is *tlawmngaihna* or *sobaliba*, be truly effective in creating a just, harmonious, progressive, inclusive and sustainable society.

e) Many of the tribal myths exhibit the awareness of the existence of a Supreme Being who watches over human beings irrespective of caste, gender, class or colour. These tales relate the good result of helping the needy and the generous service to the needy. Many tribal myths teaches the virtue of suffering on behalf of somebody else, sacrificing time and energy for the benefit of others and extending hospitality and charity to others, without the expectation of any reward whatsoever.

The teachings imbibed in these myths have become the kernel of tribal social and ethical life and moralistic attitude towards others. In today's world of individualism and consumerism, such selfless and moralistic attitudes as imparted by the tribal myths need to be rediscovered for a truly just and egalitarian society.

f) A careful analysis of the theological content of the first seven songs composed by the Mizo Christians shows that they have "eschatological hope" as their central theme. This eschatological hope was not a new concept for the Mizos as they already had a similar concept called "*pialral*", a paradise for the warriors and the rich people who could perform "*Thangchhuah*."⁴¹

41 One could become a 'Thangchhuah' by giving at least four public feasts in prescribed order. Another way of becoming a 'thangchhuah' was to kill a required number of animals or enemies. Cf. Zairema, *The Mizos and their Religion*, in *Good News for North East India: A Theological Reader*, edited by Renthly Keitzer (Guwahati: The Christian Literature Centre, 1995), 76-77.

The first group of Mizo indigenous Christian songs composed in 1920s-1930s speak much of the hope of “heaven” (*pialral*). Most of them also compare and contrast this world and heaven, and portrays this world as a dark place, and a place of suffering, and heaven as a place of joy and bliss; and they express their impatience to go there. When we study the socio-historical context of the songs, we can see that for many of the early Christians it was impossible to go to ‘*pialral*’ as they did not have the means to perform ‘*thangchhuah*’. They were also a small and marginalized community in the society.

However, with Christianity, they were provided with the hope of going to heaven (*pialral*) without the performance of *thangchhuah*, for Christ had performed all the necessary sacrifices. Thus, an important religious resource of the tribals, i.e. songs were utilized for the expression of eschatological hope, a hope which gave the early Christians strength to overcome persecution and immense hardships.

Thus, from the above discussion, we can conclude by saying that tribal moral ethics is intricately connected with their eschatological hope. A life well-lived invariably leads to bliss in the afterlife. The concept of the Supreme Being as the supreme judge of humankind demanded the tribals to maintain a high moral standard in order to receive rewards in the life to come. Therefore, in order to develop a relevant tribal theology that enriches the morality and provides eschatological hope to the tribals of today, a rediscovery and reinterpretation of tribal religious heritages is necessary. A creative interaction of the Gospel and culture is necessary to develop a holistic theology of life.

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