Chapter Five

HERAKA MOVEMENT

The Heraka is a socio-religious movement of the Zeliangrong Nagas. The movement was started by Haipou Jadonang, for the preservation of the Zeliangrong indigenous religion and culture. Heraka\(^1\) literally means ‘pure’ in Zeme, and it is a reformed religion. It believes in the supreme God Tingkao Ragwang (God of Heaven), the creator of everything, and does not believe in the worship of spirits or smaller deities. This reformed religion aims in the abolition of the obscurantist customs and superstitious practices. Besides, the reform movement also has political aspects. In the words of Gangmumbei Kamei, ‘the religious reform of Jadonang in the traditional Zeliangrong society was a synthesis of Christian monotheism and Hindu idolatry and temple culture, rationalized and simplified form of religious worship, the social solidarity and unity among the Zeliangrong groups reviving their common origin, past and a political ideology of a kingdom which inspired political integration of the Zeliangrong people under a polity system, perhaps monarchy, thus making the Zeliangrong revolt for independence, anti colonial struggle, identifying with the greater national struggle for India’s independence.’\(^2\)

\(^{1}\) Heraka means pure, which is not mixing with other evil things. The word Hera-means God and Ka-means fence. It means God fencing out to the evil gods and kept his people inside his fencing. Thos who are inside the fencing, they are called Herakame, which means the pure people. See Newme, Ramkuiwangbe, Tingwang Hingde (Guwahati: Regional Zeliangrong Heraka Association, Assam, 1991), p.1.

The Beginning: Haipou Jadonang

Jadonang\(^3\) was conscious of the conservative, orthodox and superstitious religious beliefs of the Zeliangrong people. The Zeliangrong people believed in the idea of a Supreme God who was the creator of the universe, dispenser of good and prosperity and who lived in heaven. There are three categories of deities worshipped in the Zeliangrong traditional religion: the universal God and the gods of the lower realm, the deities presiding over the villages and the ancestors of the family. They also worshipped the elements of nature, the fire, the wind, the earth and offer sacrifices to these deities. The Zeliangrong people became too superstitious that the worship of Tingwang or Tingkao Ragwang (Supreme God) was submerged in the sacrifices. They observed gennas and religious taboos which had replaced the religious prayer. Religion became a mere performance of sacrifices and propitiation of spirits and observance of gennas ranging from the birth of a child, a piglet, puppy, or hatching of chicken, a kite and crow sitting over the roof, a dog climbing the low roofs, burning of house, earthquake, still born child, death of women at delivery, death by drowning, and hanging. Despite such social and religious chaos, the rich and those who could afford still performed the religious sacrifices. Jadonang believed that Tingwang or Tingkao Ragwang (Supreme God) chose him to reform the superstitious and genna ridden religion of the Zeliangrong people.

\(^3\) Jadonang was born in 1905 in the village of Kambiron, in the present state of Manipur. The exact date of his birth was not known. At the time of his death in 1931, he was around 26 years, counting being done on the basis of the jhum cycle of his village and that he was 10 years older than his disciple and successor, the legendary Rani Gaidinliu who was born in 1915. Jadonang was born in a poor peasant family. His father was Thuidai of Malangmei clan, and mother Chunlungliu from the Dangmei clan. The British projected him as the freedom fighter of the Nagas, while the Christian projected Jadonang as the leader of heathen movement, as they found him a stumbling block in the spread of Christianity.
Broadly, three stages of Jadonang’s personality development are attributed: spiritual, social and political. The spiritual inclination was inborn which was evident in his initial life. From childhood, the behavior of Jadonang was very uncommon, unusual and extraordinary. For an instance, Jadonang used to have religious trances sometimes for five days, and even for ten days. The frequent trances were considered as long sleeps. Then he began his religious activities. He constructed temples, and showed the people how to worship the Tingwang (supreme God). He also constructed Tarang Kai, a ceremonial house dedicated to God. He went on pilgrimage to holy places specially Bhuvon Hills in Assam. He also constructed temples known as Kao Kai to worship God.

In the social life, Jadonang was extremely afflicted to see the miserable and pitiable social hardship of the Zeliangrong people. That was the reason for his religious reform. The Christian missionaries under the British administration propagated Christianity in many parts of the world. During the time of Jadonang, some Zeliangrong people pledge to accept Christianity just to appease the British government for its favor. Jadonang was contemplative about Zeliangrong culture, religious beliefs, and tradition would be in grave danger if such religious conversion was to go unabated.

This is because the converts abandon their tradition and culture. Therefore, Jadonang established the tradition of temple construction in order to rouse and organize the people to avoid such conversion and made every temple a good center of social organization. Different traditions of the village were made one common to all and the people were brought to stand in one platform of religion. Thus through social renaissance,

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Jadonang put forward a new dimension and cultural vitality to the society which was suffering from rigidity, narrowness and compression for a long time.

In the formation of Jadonang’s political leadership, his visit to Messopotamia during the First World War was remarkable. It was perhaps from this adventure that Jadonang was inspired by the outside atmosphere to struggle for religious, social and political freedom. For an instance, the Naga Club was formed on the basis of the idea maintained by those soldiers who went to foreign land. Later on the idea of Naga National Council was established. After organizing the society and securing public support for his leadership, he attached himself constantly in making a plan to put a challenge before the colonial British. On the one hand, Jadonang tried to save his own society, culture and religion from the grip of foreign Christian missionary through constant spiritual thinking and social reform.

On the other, his concentration was fully confined to the attainment of political freedom which he called ‘Makam Gwangdi’ or Naga Raj\(^5\) as Crosgrave, the then chief secretary of Assam called it. The word ‘Makam Gwangdi’, means ‘the kingdom of the Nagas’. He further even reiterated the slogan ‘Makameirui Gwangtupuni’, which may be translated as ‘the Nagas would rule one day’. It may be mentioned here that the word ‘Makamei’ also suggest that Jadonang was referring to the Zeliangrong people in particular. Jadonang was arrested on 19\(^{th}\) February, 1931 at Lakhipur by the British, on his return journey of the last pilgrimage to Bhuvon Hills, for declaring Naga Raj. Later he was

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executed by the British in the same year. Though he was the harbinger of a new reformed religion, he did not live to see the culmination of the reformed religion.

The reforms introduced by Jadonang in the traditional Zeliangrong religion were a synthesis of Christian monotheism and Hindu idolatry and temple culture. It was a revitalized and simplified form of worship. His philosophical reform was the worship of Tingkao Ragwang or Supreme God through prayer. He rediscovered the holy cave of Lord Bisnu in the Bhubon hills. He started the construction of temples where people worship God. The temple was called *kao kai*, and inside there was a shrine and pulpits and aisles of bamboo. The first temple was constructed in Kekru, then in Kambiron, Nungkao of Manipur and Binnakandi in Assam.

The abolition of enumerable taboos and gennas had purified the Zeliangrong traditional religion. He composed religious hymns to be sung during worship, and gave instructions for the composition of dances to be performed by the worshippers. These hymns, songs and dances were revealed by God. He constructed two temples, the first one like a church pulpit and articles in the central hall where he used to pray and preach. In the second temple he introduced a shrine with the temple, where he kept the clay idols of God Bisnu and his wife and a mithun. The first temple depicts the outward influence of Christianity in the church like temple for religious congregation and services, while the second temple depicts the influence of Hinduism.
Rani Gaidinliu: The Second Phase

After the martyrdom of Jadonang, Gaidinliu, the charismatic spiritual and political successor of Jadonang continued the legacy of Jadonang. The arrest, trial and execution of Jadonang stunned his followers with fear and anxiety. Jadonang’s role was the preparatory phase and real action came during the phase of Gaidinliu, his brilliant and determined disciple. The visit to Kambiron (Manipur) around 1926-1927 was the beginning of a master and disciple relationship between Jadonang and Gaidinliu. She realized the spiritual power of Jadonang, and wanted to learn from him, and she became devoted to his master. Though, their association was only for about four years, Gaidinliu could follow the language and teaching of Jadonang. For an instance, Jadonang composed many songs and poems; Gaidinliu could learn them and also added her own in the later years. During the last pilgrimage to Bhubon cave, Lord Bisnu revealed to Jadonang and Gaidinliu, a new reformed religion, which is called Heraka.

Gaidinliu reorganized Heraka followers and challenged the British inspite of the innumerable odds and struggle. By her spiritual strength and skill in organization, she could convince the people and move forward to accomplice the mission of Jadonang. Several attempts to arrest her were failed for sometimes as the troops were allured that she appeared in different places simultaneously but actually she moved from place to place under the protection of her disciples. Troops were sent to Zeliangrong territory from all directions. At last, she was arrested in early 1933, tried and sentenced her to life

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6 Over the years, Rani Gaidinliu has been understood or misunderstood in various ways. For a statesman like Jawaharlal Nehru, she was a heroic freedom fighter who fought against the British colonialism. For Christians, she was a leader of anti-Christian or pagan movement, but for her followers and her people she was a prophetess, socio-political and religious reformer. Gaidinliu, the daughter of Lothonang Pamei, was born at Nungkao (Luangkao) village, Tamenglong, in the present state of Manipur on January 26, 1915.
imprisonment for starting such a heinous cult and carrying out insurrection against the British government, although it did not wholly succeed in suppressing the ideology on which it was built. She was released from Tura Jail when India became independent in 1947. Whatever might have been her teaching, Gaidinliu’s heroism had moved veteran Indian nationalist Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, who gave her the title of Rani in 1937. Her political programme was the translation of Jadonang’s idea of the establishment of a Naga Raj. She continued to work for the welfare of the Zeliangrong people till her last breath. The important legacy of Gaidinliu was the reforming of the traditional religion which is known as Heraka.

The objective of the Zeliangrong movement under the leadership of Rani Gaidinliu was defense of her indigenous religion; revival of the political fight for the integration of the Zeliangrong into a common homeland. The Naga national workers in their political campaign took up Christian proselytism as a main function. Many of the Zeliangrong people who followed the indigenous religion were condemned or coerced to convert to Christianity. They formed into the Zeliangrong army and had a force, which in the course of six years of active existence (1960-66) reached a strength of 400 combatants and 1000 non-combatant civil followers. They came to be known as Rani party, parallel to the Federal Government of Nagaland. The Zeliangrong government of Rani Gaidinliu was engaged in the twin objectives of preservation and promotion of the Heraka cult against the Christian preaching and establishment of a Zeliangrong administrative unit, either as a district or union territory. They were not opposed to the Naga independence movement as such, but their clash was more on the religious issue. The Rani party had not only created
an army but also a civil government where Rani Gaidinliu was the patron saint chief of the Heraka religion and chief of the government.

Besides being a freedom fighter and prophetess, Gaidinliu was a socio-cultural reformer. She was against the Western influences on the culture of the people. It was on this ground that she opposed Christianity as foreign religion that destroyed the traditional religion. She always stood for the preservation of indigenous culture and identity. Basically, it was for this reason that she always appeared on traditional attire. In one instance, while she was in Lucknow in her traditional attire, a Zeliangrong youth saw her and called her *apui* (mother). Then Gaidinliu told him that ‘today you could recognize me because of my traditional attire, otherwise you would not recognize me, so wear our traditional dresses so that we could recognize one another’. To the present day, the Heraka instructed men to put on bronze earrings, and women to have short hair in the front side, so that they could recognize their fellow Heraka.

**Philosophy of Heraka**

Heraka believes in one God, pervading the eternal energy and ethers in which all beings abide. Tingwang (God) is one alone without a second dwelling. He is omniscient, the truth which support all divine things. He is illuminator of all luminaries and enlightens people in their dwelling. He pervades all subjects and is the upholder of all and He dwell in spirits. The Tingwang (God) communicates with the ascetics and divine souls, the knowledge of objects beyond the sight like an old messenger who conveys the news of a distant place. Like an indwelling universal spirit, the Tingwang illuminates all souls by His

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7 Interview with Tingkupeu (priest) of Nrianam village, NC Hills, Assam on 23rd March, 2011.
refulgence and delivers the fruits of the action done by them knowing them fully by His omniscience. He is the most adorable Supreme Being, the creator, upholder, sustainer and dissolver of this creation. Therefore, Heraka religion commands all its adherents to worship that one Tingwang (God) who protects the beings and things on earth by day and night, by waking and putting them sleep, by light and darkness.

Objectives of the Heraka Religion

1) The Heraka believes that the Almighty Tingwang (God) is the creator of this earth and He has the supreme power to withdraw it whenever He wishes. Hence, to worship Him and sing His Holy songs in praise of Him is the Heraka religion.

2) To honor the elders, and respect parents, preserving the worthy custom and culture of our progeny perpetually.

3) To attain most beloved of Tingwang (God) everyone should maintain neat and clean personal character in mind and physical power mindfully is also a must in Heraka religion.

4) To possess truthfulness in speaking as well as in action. To acquire childlike knowledge and seek the path of shining but jealously and violence to be kept off.

5) To pay charity upon God’s people besides searching the path of happiness and peace of mind.

6) In the Heraka religion, performing sunrise prayer on every full moon day is the main worship to Almighty Tingwang (God). Therefore, all Heraka followers must observe that day very strictly.

7) Construction of temple is the compulsion of Heraka to worship with perfection.
The rebirth after death is also believed in Heraka.\(^8\)

The manner of worship in Heraka is both devotional and sacrificial. The aim is to bring good and prosperous life to men individually and collectively through the grace of God. The idea of a kingdom where there will be no wars and suffering. The idea is based on the morality, ethics and spiritualism of the Zeliangrong people. The God is to be worshipped through the singing of the devotional hymns which are in praise of Him. The prayer must be performed individually or collectively on every full moon day. There is a prayer-cum-sacrifice ceremony known as the Bupu Ngai (the festival of the full moon) in honor of Tingwang (God). Heraka has simplified the birth and death ceremonies. Though sacrifices to the spirits and deities are abolished, the great sacrifices of Taraang and Banru offered to Tingwang are still followed. The Heraka had also started constructing temple known as Kelumki (House of Prayer). Rani Gaidinliu, the preceptress of Heraka religion taught different ways of worship to Tingwang in four different phases:

1) Gaidinliu advised her followers to observe sacrificial ceremony of animal to Almighty Tingwang for getting His blessings. While performing puja, animals or chicken would be killed with spear and dao, and let blood be shedded as it could ooze.

2) Atleast after about 15 years of practicing the first phase of teaching, Rani Gaidinliu taught the second phase. In the second phase, while taking puja, either animal or chicken would be cut with dao to the former and strike with a piece of

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schimawallichii block holding at the roadside to the latter and let blood be shedded. At this phase, the sacrificial ceremony was a bit diminished than the first phase.

3) After more or less of 10 years of the second phase, Gaidinliu again changed a little in mode of worship. She told her followers that they should perform puja with animal well tied its mouth with a rag and kill. But chicken to be killed by holding tightly without oozing any drop of blood from it. In this phase, practice of offering animal in puja was completely diminished.

4) Practicing the third phase of about 5 years, the preceptress vigorously declared and confessed before the general public on the 11th day of January 1990 at Kipeiloa village, North Cachar Hills, Assam that they had fully done the requirement of sacrificial oblation in puja. Influential sacrifices of animal in any puja are to be totally abolished. People are free to perform puja with a clean mind and body at any specific time and day.  

Heraka Conception of Spirit/Life after Death

Generally, Nagas believe that the soul does not perish at death, but continues to live in a different realm. However, the concept varies from tribe to tribe, especially the place of the soul’s final destiny. Some tribes believe that the souls go onward by a narrow path guarded by a spirit with whom it must struggle, where as others believe that the soul finds its final home below the ground or takes the form of various insects. Most Nagas also believe that a righteous man’s soul goes to a village of the dead towards the sunrise; a bad man’s soul goes to a less pleasant place towards the sunset. It is also believed that since man continues to live after death, some utensils, domestic animals, clothes, food, weapons,

and so on should be arranged for the deceased so that he/she could use them.\textsuperscript{10} To the present day, those Nagas who still retain their indigenous religion believe in the concept of life after death and retain its practices.

The Tingwang is the creator and sustainer of the universe and God of human being. The Zeliangrong people believed that there are other gods and goddesses, but they are not to be worshipped, but only Tingwang. Besides the Supreme God, there are spirits which they called ‘\textit{herui}’. The spirit comprises of both good and bad. The spirit is dwelt everywhere such as in the sky, above the earth, beneath in the depth of water, in the dark caves, recesses of mountains and hills, rocks, hones tree and bamboo grove. The benevolent spirit is generally thought to be spirit responsible for the welfare and prosperity of human; it guards and protects the village from disease pestilence and natural devastation. Benevolent spirit is known as ‘\textit{heruikeyibe}’ which means good spirit. The malevolent spirits are always thought to be dangerous and destruction to human affairs. It is believed that all forms of human sufferings such as damage of properties, disease, accidents of various kinds and madness are attributed to malevolent spirit. The malevolent spirit is known as ‘\textit{herui kesiabe}’ which means bad spirit.

Heraka people believe in rebirth of human soul. Although, the living human body dies, its soul is not death since it comes from Tingwang (God). It is believed that all souls of righteousness and good doers will go to the Kingdom of God after death or born again to human life in a high ranking family according to the Judgment of the Supreme God and live in a notable life in this world. And ultimately, those who had done good deeds in all

\textsuperscript{10} Inato Yekheto Shikhu, \textit{A Rediscovery and Rebuilding of Naga Cultural Values: A} \textit{Analytical Approach with Special Reference to Maori as a Colonized and Minority Group of People in New Zealand} (New Delhi: Regency Publications, 2007), p. 15.
generation of his/her life in this world will certainly go to the Kingdom of God (Heaven) living eternally and liberation from all miserable life after death. But on the contrary, mankind of falsehood, evil doers, and sinners will be born again and again after death into the lower forms of destitute life as retribution and ultimately its soul would become extinct after like a dew drop falls and dried up.

For the Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak (TRC), the human soul after the physical death of the man will go to the land of the dead, Taroi-Lam. He will lead another life in that world. He will live among his ancestors who are supposed to have another life of their own. The soul of the man may be reborn in the human world. There is a god ruling over the land of dead known as Taroi Gwang (King of Taroi-Lam). There is also belief that the human soul in the land of the dead may get punishment from the king of the land of the dead. Since both the TRC and Heraka belong to the Zeliangrong religion, it has many similarities. The difference lies in that Heraka has brought radical changes compared to the TRC. Nevertheless, the TRC are also reforming certain necessary taboos according to the change of time, and tries to adapt with the modern world.

The Heraka Priest (Tingkupeu)

In most of the Naga villages there are priests who perform religious duties and represent the whole community in worship. Their main function is to offer sacrifices at all

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11 Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak (TRC) is also a reform indigenous religion of the Zeliangrong people, which was historically evolved and based on various customs and tradition from the past. The religion has no founder but there were number of law givers, prophets and diviners who made revelations of God’s message to man and society. In terms of numbers, TRC has more number of followers than the Heraka. At present TRC has about 30,000 strong supporters in Assam, Nagaland and Manipur, while the Heraka has about 15,000-20,000 followers.

festivals and other important occasions such as births, deaths, marriages, and making the
deity happy. The priest also communicates with the dead person’s soul and delivers
messages to the family. This communication is possible only when the priest goes into a
trance. It is also the duty of the priest to schedule the day for general worship by counting
the days, months and seasons.13

In Heraka the priest plays a very important role in the religious life of the
community. The priest is known as Tingkupeu, which means the one who invoke or call on
Tingwang (God). Priesthood in Heraka is not hereditary but depends on the quality of a
person. There are criterions to become Tingkupeu such as humility, obedience,
righteousness, love, holy, kindness, and faithful. The Tingkupeu performs rituals and
prayers on behalf of the village in hejuadekung (the sacred altar), as the intermediary
between God and men.

Besides performing rituals and prayers in kelumki (house of worship), the
Tingkupeu also teaches about the Heraka religion to the people. Recently, the followers of
Heraka have instituted a preacher who is known as Hingde Paume, whose task is to go to
places and preach the Heraka religion. Like the Christian missionaries, the Hinde Paume
goes to villages to preach and teach the people, the law of Heraka religion. However, the
Hingde Paume does not go to Christian villages, but only to paupaise14 or Heraka villages.
Therefore, the concern of the Heraka is to protect and preserve their religion.

13 Inato Yekheto Shikhu, A Rediscovery and Rebuilding of Naga Cultural Values: An Analytical Approach
with Special Reference to Maori as a Colonized and Minority Group of People in New Zealand, op.cit, p. 15.
14 Paupaise is the primordial religion of the Zeliangrong people. There are still few paupaise households in
villages like Hezailoa, Kipeiloa, Tungje Punggo (Hereimidalo), and Hungrum. The Heraka frequently visits
these places to bring them into the Heraka fold.
However, there are some instances where Christians are re-converted to Heraka. Those re-converts are mostly people who became Christians to get benefit from conversion. When their expectations of benefits are not materialized, they go back to Heraka. Those re-coverts to Heraka are awarded with gifts and prizes from the Heraka community. Christians claim that the institution of Hingde Paume (Heraka preacher) is nothing, but an imitation of the Christian missionaries. Christians also argued that whenever Christians have a programme of evangelism in villages, the Heraka preachers used to come in advance in the villages and dissuade the people not to attend the Christian meeting. The Heraka preachers even suggested the people not to listen, in case they attend the Christian meeting. Thus, the Hinde Paume, apart from teaching and preaching Heraka religion, also engage in dissuading the people from attending Christian meetings.

The Tingkupeu offers prayer in occasion like house dedication, marriages, and while attending the sick. Normally the Tingkupeu offers prayer for the sick, visiting their homes. If the need arise, then group of priests would offer prayer for the sick in paiki. This is because the kelumki (house of worship) is never open for any emergency cases. The kelumki is open during full moon day (jalua), and during festivals. The Tingkupeu also offers prayers while naming a child. If a child is born during daytime, the child is brought to the sun for prayer. If the child is born after sunset or at night, then the child is brought to the sun the next day. The significance is that the child is a gift from God. It is an

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15 Interview with a Presbyterian Pastor of ‘Nkiabangloa village in NC Hills, Assam on 5th April, 2011.
16 The Paiki is the supreme body in the village polity. Its existence and authority are based on the age-old custom and tradition of the Zeliangrong people. The Paiki is the wielder of all administrative, judicial, religious and military power. It is the village government, a court of justice, an authority on religious affairs and the supreme command on defense and security of the village. It may also be mentioned here that the Zeliangrong polity is essentially a democratic gerontocracy, the rule of the elders. Opinions expressed by the head or representatives of the clans and lineages are given pre-eminence in the process of decision making. Therefore, the elders exercise their rights and duties according to their rank in Paiki.
17 Interview with a priest (Tingkupeu) of ‘Nrianam village in NC Hills, Assam on 23rd March, 2011.
act of honoring God that he has given a child. However, this prayer can be offered even by
an elderly woman, in absence of the Tingkupeu. After five days, the Tingkupeu prays for
the life of the child; to be successful and become a useful person in society. If the child is
dead before five days of its birth, even then funeral is performed the same way it is
performed for an adult.

On the full moon day (jalua), the Tingkupeu offers prayer when the sun rises in the
morning in the kelumki. The people along with the Tingkupeu offer prayer to the sun,
invoking Tingwang so that they could be like the sun, giving light into this world. Before
the full moon, the priest and the people have to keep themselves clean one day ahead. The
Tingkupeu is not allowed to kill any living creatures or pluck any plants. Besides, he
should not share bed with his wife and abstain from worldly things. He should fast and
remain clean. On the full moon day, he should remain clean. After the prayers and rituals,
the Tingkupeu can break his fast.

The Tingkupeu is the permanent priest of the village. He is assisted by one junior
priest. Whenever the Tingkupeu is ill, his assistant performs rituals and prayers in the
village. If the Tingkupeu fails to perform his duty well, the villagers can remove him from
priesthood. He can be also removed if he is morally corrupted. If he remains good and
faithful, he can remain as priest for his lifelong. Besides, the Tingkupeu can step down
from priesthood if he is too old, and finds it difficult to carry out the rituals, prayers and
ceremonies. Every Heraka village has one Tingkupeu with one junior assistant. Every
matters relating to the Tingkupeu, like selection or removing him from priesthood are
decided by the villagers in their respective *paiki*. The *paiki* decides and governs the institution of priesthood.

Nevertheless, the Tingkupeu is the head of the village. He plays a leading role in all religious activities of the village. He is regarded as a commune with God. So, he is respected by all as Divinity. The priest of Heraka is selected to the oldest male from amongst the villagers who has courage enough and experienced in worshipping to control his villagers and having fanatic childlike minded person. When the Tingkupeu is once selected then he has to govern the role of priest till his long life time. The Tingkupeu and the holy altar stone must be properly maintained and should be considered it as the Chief and the dependency of the village respectively. Tingkupeu has to perform every prayer of the village such as to perform prayer for good health and rich harvest of the village both in individual or collective affairs. He will broadcast the day of prayer on the eve of every prayer and perform prayer on every important festival.

**Kelumki or House of Worship**

Kelumki means house of worship. The Kelumki is separate from the rest of the village in the way it is conceived, as physically treated and respected. Every Heraka village must have one Kelumki and it is the most sacred ground for the Heraka. It is usually built on the highest point of a village. It is done in the same model of the first temple built by Haipou Jadonang and Rani Gaidinliu invoking as a chain of memory for legitimation. Every Kelumki must have a *Naimik Kekelum Be Bam*, place of sunrise prayer outside facing east. East is vital for two factors: it signifies the direction of Bhubon cave, as well as

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18 The researcher visited some Heraka house of worship in N C Hills of Assam. The observation is made like in the case of Donyi-Polo house of worship.
that of the sunrise, which is great importance during Jalua, full moon ritual. The sunrise prayer place must be elevated and is reached by the three steps symbolizing life-death-life. There is a veranda before entering the Kelumki. The main entrance is called Muidi; once inside there is another side entrance called Muicheiki, small door on the right, as it is strictly forbidden to place it on the left. In using the Muicheiki, one must re-enter using the same door.

Before entering the compound of the Kelumki, shoes must be removed. Inside there are two sections: the right for the male and the left for female. On the left there is a bench facing the congregation for the girls specially chosen to serve the Heraka community and on the right is reserved for the secretary, chairman, president, and priest of the village. Podiums are also present on both sides for those wanting to say a few words. On the podium is written ‘Tingwang Hingde’ (God’s law) and below that ‘Sam Yi Besa Bam’ (Speak the truthfulness). At the front of the Kelumki is the altar, centrally placed and elevated. One must climb the three steps to it, proceeding the right leg, then left, and right.

The altar is on two levels. On the first level, only fruits, vegetables and flowers can be placed while the second level is for coins and paper money. This offering is accompanied by a prayer (personal and private). Once that is finished, one must turn anticlockwise and return to one’s place. While one waits to reach the altar, a space must be kept between the right and the left for Tingwang to come and go in between. When one looks directly above from the altar, there is a small opening into a short wooden tower.

The way of worship in the Heraka religion is very simple. It is a devotional worship. In the Heraka religion prayer may be performed individually or collectively at any
time and day, whenever require. An individual may offer prayer every day in the morning and in the evening usually before sleep. The devotees compulsorily offer sunrise prayer on every Full Moon day and the Heraka New Year Day at Kelumki. An individual or collectively offers prayer at the time of ailments and birth or death of a person. They pray at Kelumki on the Full Moon Day and the Heraka New Year Day. In the early morning, they gather at Kelumki and recite hymns and offer collective Sunrise Prayer. The Priest offers prayer to Tingwang. Then, they enter Kelumki in singing devotional song. Individual member also offers prayer at the holy altar. They sing a rejoicing song in praise of Tingwang. On the Heraka New Year Day, they sing a devotional song followed by incantation of Heraka hymn and drink Telau dui\textsuperscript{19} (holy water). The Telau dui is used as sacrament to cure or prevent sickness and to cleanse sins on the full moon day.

**Celebration of Festivals**

Festival forms an important and integral part of the Zeliangrong society. One of the important objectives of celebration of the festival is to appease different gods and goddess, deities and spirits for socio-cultural and socio-economic betterment. The festivals have socio-religious significance. However, the Heraka celebrates different festivals mainly to invoke blessings from the Supreme God. The Zeliangrong people celebrate numerous festivals in a year on different occasions in a proper manner and with enthusiasm and

\textsuperscript{19} It is believed that Telau dui is the holiest water which is available only in Bhubon Cave. Therefore, Rani Gaidinliu used this Telau dui for healing the sufferings of her followers during her freedom struggle against the British. The Heraka people use to collect Telau dui from Bhubon Cave every year. It is used on the inaugural day of a new house of worship and sprinkling of Telau dui upon the person indicates converted into Heraka religion.
devotion. All their festivals are based on the different stages of agricultural operations; pre-operation and post-harvest.

_Helei N’gi_ is the first festival of the year.²⁰ It is celebrated before the commencement of any plantation, invoking the blessings God. It is therefore, a seed-sowing festival. It is celebrated in the month of March/April, and the date of celebration varies from village to village as decided by the respective _paiki_ (traditional political institution). The _Helei N’gi_ is celebrated for three days. The first day of the celebration is a day of prayer; the second day is a day of big festival; and the third day is the concluding day of the festival. The _kelumki_ (house of worship) is open during the festival so that people can pray in the _kelumki_. The _Nchang N’gi_ is the post-seed sowing festival. This festival marks the end of plantation work for the year. It is a small festival compare to the seed-sowing festival. It is celebrated in the month of May.

The _Puakpat N’gi_ is a harvest festival. It is celebrated by offering the first produce to _Tingwang_ (God) in the _kelumki_. The offerings are used for the community. It is celebrated in the month of September/October for three days. _Nsim N’gi_ is the festival of the youth. It is also a post-harvest festival where people make merry with the produce from their plantation. It is celebrated for three days, and no prayers are involved in this festival. Boys and girls celebrate in their respective dormitories with songs and dance competition. There are also high jump, long jump and shot put completion.

²⁰ The researcher had interactions with the villagers of Hekaukang village, Asalu village, Impoi village, Nrianam, Nchureloa village and Mahur town of N C Hills, Assam in April-May 2012. The researcher acknowledged the help of Tabitha Gangmei of Nchureloa village in translating some difficult dialect and language variations into English regarding the festivals.
*Hega N’gi* is the biggest festival of the Zeliangrong people. It is also the last festival of the year. Celebrating *Hega N’gi* is considered blessed among the people, and it is celebrated for three days. On the first day, offering is made (usually the best produce) to *Tingwang*, so that the following year would be a blessed year. The second day is considered as a day of big festival. There are high jump, long jump and shot put competition. In the evening, men usually go to wealthy families and drink the traditional rice beer. The third day is also known as the *Puakpat N’gi*. Foods and drinks are brought from each house and share among the people. After the grand feast, people pray together and the celebration comes to an end. It is celebrated in the month of December. The *Hega N’gi* is also a post-harvest festival. When the granaries are full, the landscape is dry, the whole village is free from all agricultural works, and people turn to celebration, festivity and worship of God. This festival is described as a New Year festival as it marks the end of the year and beginning of the New Year. It is a festival heralding the New Year.

The Heraka celebrates these festivals as it relates to the cycle of agricultural operations. It is celebrated mainly to invoke the blessings of Tingwang, the Supreme God. The Christians also celebrate the same festivals but with certain modifications. For an instance, the *Helei N’gi*, the seed-sowing festival is celebrated by observing a day of prayer in the church. Both the Heraka and Christians decide the day of celebration differently and also differs from village to village according to their convenient time. Like the Heraka, the Christian also celebrate the seed-sowing festival invoking the blessing of God before commencing the agricultural work. The Christians observe or celebrate most of the festivals including the seed-sowing festival usually for a day. But, in the celebration of *Hega N’gi*, Christians celebrate together with the Heraka because it is the biggest festivals
of the Zeliangrong people. During the celebration, Christians also participate in long jump, high jump, and shot put. However, Christians celebrate only for one day and do not participate in rituals and ceremonies of the Heraka.

Nevertheless, in some villages, Christians do not celebrate most of the festivals including the biggest festival, Hega N’gi. For an instance, the Hekaukang village, which is a Christian village, does not celebrate Zeliangrong festivals including the Hega N’gi. Recently, students union has started organizing the Hega N’gi so that everyone can participate irrespective of their religion. Celebration organized by the students union is welcome by the Christians as it does not involve Paupaise or Heraka rituals and prayers. Recently, the Catholics have started celebrating the Hega N’gi on a specific day. The Catholics celebrate the Hega N’gi on December 28th, where in the celebration, cultural songs and dances are performed. There are also long jump, high jump and shot put competition during the celebration. During festivals, the Heraka often accused the Christians that, though they do not brew the rice beer, they consume more than the Heraka. This is because especially in Heraka festivals some Christians participate to drink the rice beer.

In some villages, like Impoi village, the Heraka usually invite the Christians in their festivals. The Christians who wants to participate in the festival are warmly welcome. Likewise the Christians also invite the Heraka in their festivals like Christmas. Since Christians are majority in Impoi village, they usually help the Heraka community in time of

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21 Interview with a Christian school teacher of Hekaukang village of NC Hills, Assam on 28th March, 2011.
22 Interview with the first Catholic convert of Asalu village, NC Hills, Assam on 28th March, 2011.
need. For an instance, in the event of death, Christians used to help them. However, in most areas, Christians and Heraka do not maintain cordial relation during celebration.

In 2010, the Zeme Christian celebrated its centenary in Lodi village. Since the centenary celebration was due during the seed-sowing festival season, the Christians appealed to the Heraka community to celebrate the *Helei N'gi* before or after the Christian centenary celebration. But, the Heraka deliberately celebrated the seed-sowing festival on the same day with the Christian centenary celebration. This created an enmity between Heraka and Christians, as there were shouts of celebration from the Heraka community which made the Christians uncomfortable during the celebration. Thus, the relation between Heraka and Christians became strained during the festival.

In the past, in Hekaukang village, when there were few Christians, during the Heraka festivals, Christians used to secretly go to field, and secretly come back home. This was done because, during the Heraka festivals, no one was allowed to go outside the village. There were instances where trouble used to break out between the Heraka and Christians during the festivals. The Heraka religion is basically a community religion. Therefore, to belong to the community, one has to actively participate in the beliefs, rituals, ceremonies and festivals of the community. While the Christians refuse to participate in the affairs of the community, and therefore live separately usually in another village, or in the same village demarcated by a boundary.

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23 Interview with Church elder of Impoi village, NC Hills, Assam on 29th March, 2011.
24 Interview with a Christian elder of Hekaukang village, NC Hills, Assam on 28th March, 2011.
The Full Moon (*Jalua*)

The Herakas have no fixed days of congregational worship like the Sunday of the Christians, the Friday of the Mohammedans, or the Sabbath of the Jews. If to be religious means to be seen in religious gatherings in churches or temples on fixed days of the week, or preaching publicity about God, or praying in public to Him, or sitting in sack clothes and ashes, or going on pilgrimage, a Heraka may be considered as the least religious of human beings, or as one having no religion. But they are, in fact, intensely religious people as they believe in honest work, truthfulness in thoughts and word, and justness in all their transactions. Thus religion permeates the life of Heraka in all its aspects because he or she must work to live and honest work is worship. Nevertheless, the Heraka offer prayers on full moon day and is considered as a sacred day.

Why the Heraka rest on full moon day? In the past, people were afraid of the solar and lunar eclipse. When Jadonang and Rani Gaidinliu went to the Bhubon cave, God commanded them to rest on the full moon day. The God told them that men are like egg which is soft, and don not know good and evil. In order to be strong, and to remain clean, Heraka rest on the full moon day.

The Heraka cannot kill any living creature or pluck any plants, but to remain clean on the full moon day. The people are forbidden from work, and should wait for the sunrise for prayer in the kelumki. When the sun rises, the people offer prayer to the sun outside the kelumki. This is because the sun is the strongest of all creation and God created human beings not only to live in this world but also to respect God’s creation. Therefore, the Heraka worship the sun so that they would be as strong as the sun. They believe that God
cleanses their sins on the full moon day. The Heraka rest on the full moon day, and are abstained from their daily work like going to the field, spinning cotton, haircut and so on. They are also not allowed to go to another village, and if a person goes out from the village, he/she should come back to the village the same day. The wife and husband are to remain clean, and should not share their bed. The people may take bath but should not wash dirty clothes. Besides, there are no rituals for individuals on the full moon day.

**Brief Account on Hindutva Politics**

The arguments enunciated by Ghurye, and advocated aggressively by the Sangh Parivar have unprecedented consequences for the tribes in India. The categorization of tribes as Hindus by Ghurye and other right wing Hindu organizations have led to a difficulty in understanding tribes as distinct and authentic groups. Undoubtedly, there are both similarities and differences in the religious practices of the Hindus and the tribes. The protagonists of Hindutva have, however, conveniently overlooked the differences between the Hindus and the tribes. By bringing religion at the forefront of the conception of what constitutes tribes, the Sangh Parivar marked off continuity with the colonial tradition. In the colonial literature, tribes were no doubt characterized by their distinctive religion but they were also seen in conjunction with other dimensions especially their isolation from the larger society. The advocates of Hindutva, however, are concerned in conceiving tribes solely in terms of religion.

In addition, the orientation of Hindutva, to the conception of tribe have begun denying the status of tribes to those who otherwise belong to the same ethnic group, speak

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25 G. S. Ghurye conceptualized the tribes in India as backward Hindus.
the same language, share the same social organization but practice and adhere to other than the Hindu religious traditions. Such articulation has been brought into the limelight in the recent attacks on tribal Christians in India. The Sangh Parivar articulated that tribals cease to be tribes once they become Christians. Such conception of tribes not only goes against the general anthropological understanding of tribes but also against the Constitution of India. Individuals belonging to certain groups have been identified as tribes not because they belong to particular religion but because they belong to a group or community, which has been enumerated as scheduled tribes in the Indian Constitution. These groups or communities are categorized as schedule tribes not because they practice a particular religion but because they constitute a particular community distinct from the dominant regional community.

The assertion of a Hindu identity and the right-wing politics in modern India dwelt on the nation building project. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is a cultural organization but it espouses a Hindu identity and cultural heritage with political ramifications. Hinduism as a unifying religious tradition and the distinctiveness of Hindu culture as a bounded category was fashioned from the seventeenth century onwards due to interventions by colonial administrators, travelers, scholars, and missionaries in the Indian subcontinent. The modern notion of Hindu nationalism began with V. D. Savarkar in his book ‘Who is a Hindu?’ a text that provided the ideology for the establishment of the RSS in 1925 by K. B. Hedgewar.

26 The assertion of a Hindu identity is largely a product of a nineteenth-century Indian response to British colonialism. The aspirations of nationalist leaders like Savarkar to own a history as much as the West sowed the seeds for mapping India’s civilizational history.
Savarkar’s main argument in Hindutva is that the Aryans who settled in India at the dawn of history already formed a nation now embodied in the Hindus. Their Hindutva, according to him, rests on three pillars: geographical unity; racial features and a common culture. Savarkar minimizes the importance of religious criteria in the definition of a Hindu by claiming that Hinduism was the only one of the attributes of Hinduness. This stand reflects the fact that, like most of the ethno-religious nationalists, Savarkar was not himself a believer but rather an ideologue.

Since its inception, the RSS has been propagating Hindu nationalism. According to the RSS, the leaders of India’s nationalist movement and those of post-independent India failed to create a nation based on Hindu culture. It considers Western culture and civilization as enemies of Hindu culture. Islam and Christianity are depicted as alien religion, for they are seen as the religions of foreign invaders—the Mughals and the British respectively. The RSS wanted the entire gamut of social life to be designed on the bedrock of Hindu nationalism—one nation, one religion and one culture.28

During the 1990s, the Sangh Parivar focused their attention on tribal areas where Christian missionaries had already established educational institutions and medical facilities and conversions were taking place. This resulted in various clashes over tribal customs, which the converts to Christianity had ceased to observe. While Christians argued that tribals were not Hindus, the Sangh Parivar, who renamed the tribals as Vanvasi (forest

dwellers) rather than adivasis\(^{29}\) (original habitants), argued that they were part of the Hindu family as they shared many of the cultural and religious aspects of Hindu religion. The Sangh Parivar adopted a programme of homecoming to counteract Christian missionary activities and they also started schools and other social activities in the tribal areas.

The rise of BJP as a political power at both local and central government levels inevitably brought a strong suspicion among religious minorities that the Sangh Parivar would use this political influence to achieve their religious purposes of Hindutva at the expense of minority rights. During the 1998 election campaign, some Hindu activists in tribal areas allegedly threatened that, if they won the election, they would withdraw Scheduled Tribe concessions\(^{30}\) for Christian tribals in an effort to persuade them to reconvert. While strongly denying the alleged inducements to conversion in the tribal areas, Christians protested that the intimidation by Hindu activists was a clear breach of the secular nature of the constitution.

The Sangh Parivar demanded the government to take number of measures including issuing a total ban on conversion; ensuring that converts were returned to the Hindu fold; withdrawing Scheduled Tribe concessions given to the tribal converts; banning the foreign funding of Christian missionaries; and tabling a constitutional amendment to prevent

\(^{29}\) The word ‘adivasi’ is largely a socially and historically accepted term for the original people of India. Interestingly, the RSS does not use the word ‘adivasi’. The Hindu nationalists translate ‘indigenous peoples’ as ‘vanvasi’, literally, those who live in the forest, instead of the word ‘adivasi’. From the Hindu nationalist ideological standpoint the initial inhabitants of the country were ‘Aryans’ and not aboriginals, and that the aboriginals were driven away or conquered by Aryan invasions.

\(^{30}\) The RSS has always been one of the most vocal opponents of positive discrimination in India. It immediately criticized V.P. Singh’s announcement on 7th August 1990 that the recommendations of the Mandal Commission report would be implemented, which meant that 27 per cent of central administration posts would be reserved for Other Backward Classes (OBC). The RSS is hostile to reservation because they are caste-based, and that the Hindu nation building is challenged by the caste identities. See Jaffrelot, Christophe, ed., *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black Publisher, 2007), p. 256.
conversions. They accused the Christian campaign of conversion being deliberately provocative because it involved attacking and abusing Hindu deities. The ideology of Hindutva strongly asserted that the rights of the majority Hindus must be respected as opposed to the Christian and moderate Hindu argument of the freedom of choice of individuals.

Hindus were provoked by Christian calls for conversion per se and not only by forced or induced conversions, a point which Christian protagonists largely failed to recognize when they continued to stress that their intension was only to care for the poor and bring justice to the tribals. While Christians treated the situation as politically motivated and thought that the Parivar were interested in their political numbers, they also largely missed the religious nature of the Parivar’s arguments. Hindus argued that conversion was violence, being something imposed upon people from outside of their socio-cultural and religious sphere, while Christians argued that conversion was the result of a search to satisfy their needs, and that outsider were merely instruments to help people make a personal decision to change.

**Heraka and Hindus: The RSS Politics of Assimilation**

The project of Hindutva to include tribal cultures and its varied traditions into one overwhelming Hindu solidarity is a strategy that has been part of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and RSS since their inception. As early as 1978, the RSS had started their work with the Nagas under the organization Kalyan Ashram \(^{31}\) (Tribal Welfare Organization). By the late 1960s the VHP had already started work among the non-

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\(^{31}\) The Kalyan Ashram was founded in 1952 at Jashpurnagar, Chhattisgarh, but it came to the North East only in 1978.
Christian Nagas, primarily the Heraka, and were defending them against Christian proselytization. The VHP aim is to organize a pluralistic Hindu society throughout the entire Hindu world. The ideology of the RSS and VHP had already seeped into Heraka rhetoric and their talk is often peppered with these nation-building bumper stickers.32

Phrases such as ‘all religions have truth, compassion, and love and are like streams that go into one ocean’ or invasion of foreign religion and foreign culture will bring total destruction of Naga society. These phrases reflect neo-Hindu projection of self and tradition and constitute part of the mass programme of such unifying Hindu solidarity.33 Powerful symbol such as om and swastika are also commonly found in Heraka homes. Images of ram and Sita are distributed by VHP activists to the Heraka followers. These visual materials are the new ways by which the Hindu groups disseminate their ideology. By appropriating or encouraging the use of these civilizational symbols, the Heraka are immediately seen as assimilating, thus marking them off from the largely Christian population. This assimilation is projected through the subtle deployment of Sanatan Dharma (eternal faith and culture) and the wider net of Hindu solidarity.34

Organizations such as the Janjati Vikas Samiti or Vanvاسي Kalyan Ashram under the umbrella of Akhil Bharatiya Vanvاسي Kalyan Ashram are active with the Heraka developmental projects, education and also in providing organizational support. Integration with bharat mata is a huge financial and cultural investment, pursued by the Kalyan Ashram. For an instance, Kalyan Ashram has recognized Rani Gaidinliu and Haipou

33 ibid
34 ibid
Jadonang as freedom fighters and included them in a promotional poster that is pasted in Heraka and Kalyan offices. Attempts are also made to link Vanvasi with the rest of Hindu civilization. Instead of progressing with a sophisticated notion of tribal culture and its place in Indian society, the notion of Vanvasi reverts to an ideological pristine state that somehow can be preserved, though dependent on organizations like the Kalyan Ashram for its survival. The Heraka are seen as preserving the *sanatan dharma* which is treated synonymously with traditional Hinduism. For the Hindu groups the Heraka present a practice that is consonant with the rest of the Hindu nation.

The presence of Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) in N.C. Hills of Assam began as early as 1972, where they started free hostels in Haflong. In 1994, the Vivekananda Vidhyalaya School was started in the same place. In the initial years, the VHP focuses their services only in the Haflong town area, and they increase the number of hostels both for boys and girls. However, in 2004 their work extended to the Heraka villages of Boro Chanam, Laisong, Hezaichak, N. Songkai and Boro Haflong. In these Heraka villages, the VHP imparted free education and a subsidized hostel fee of rupees three thousand per year. Many Heraka students go to these schools and hostels.

35 In Heraka homes and Kalyan office in North Cachar Hills of Assam, posters of Jadonang and Rani Gaidinliu are pasted along with other Hindu leaders. Besides, there some Heraka who resides in the Kalyan ashram serving in the office.
36 In 1964, in association with Hindu clerics, the RSS set up the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP-World Council of Hindus), a movement responsible for grouping the heads of various Hindu sects in order to lend this hitherto unorganized religion a sort of centralized structure. The Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) was established with the purpose of generating unity among all faiths, sects and communities, addressed as Hindu, and to make society well organized, integrated and true follower of dharma. It aspires for unity, cohesion, integrity and a proper attitude towards national life. See Bajpai, Suresh Chandra & Barthawal, Harish Chandra, *R. S. S. At a Glance* (New Delhi: Surichi Prakashan, 2007), p.31.
37 Interview with a VHP worker in Haflong, N. C. Hills of Assam on 2<sup>nd</sup> April, 2011.
38 Ibid
The association of VHP and Kalyan Ashram with literacy and education is also reflected in a vast network of schools and colleges. Annually, many Heraka students are sent to these schools on scholarships. Schools and colleges based in Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand, Haryana and Maharashtra are common destinations for these students, who, along with their studies are also fed Hindutva ideology. But, overall the education has been beneficial for students except when it comes to religious education; they are told to follow the system of religion (Hinduism) practiced in the schools. Besides, since these students are normally on scholarships, it is difficult to disrespect the wishes of those running the schools. These students who study in Hindu schools often speak fluent Hindi, and are by default influenced by the Hindu way of life.

The reason for the Heraka students getting education in Hindu schools is that it provides free education. Besides, the Hindu schools provide dresses, beddings, and other necessities for the students. Students who are sent to other cities like Delhi, Bangalore, and Chennai on scholarship are usually made to serve in the Hindu schools. There are instances, where students are compelled to work in those schools. Some students came back home on the pretext that their parents are sick and that they had to go home. This is because many students do not want to work in those Hindu schools after their education.

The close association of Heraka with Hindus makes it difficult to demarcate the religious boundaries between them. Christians called the Heraka as Hindus, and even some Heraka claim themselves as Hindus. For the Christians, Heraka are Hindus because the Heraka practices some of the Hindus way of life. For an instance, recently, the Heraka has

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stopped eating beef because of its close association with the RSS. Some Heraka have even stopped chewing betel nuts. Besides, in some Heraka homes, especially in town areas, there are postures of Hindu gods, symbol of om, Hindu calendar published and circulated by Hindu organizations. Here one may argue that the moment a tribal religion loses its unique feature; its purity and distinction are lost. But this does not mean that the tribal religion is static and closed. There has always been active incorporation of the new elements and reformation of the old, the evidence of which can be found in the elaboration of myths and general beliefs.

Some Christians argued that ‘today the Heraka stops eating beef, tomorrow they may burn their dead bodies like the Hindus when they die’. The close association, and the imitation of the Hindu way of life among the Heraka followers, makes it difficult for Heraka to maintain its distinct religious identity. The close association of Heraka and Hindus is also made possible because some leaders of Heraka happened to be the former students of Hindu leader during their schooling years. Today, in most Heraka areas, people greet each other ‘namaste’, like the Hindus greet each other.

40 The amendments passed by the Shivraj Singh Chauhan-led BJP government have added a new dimension to the cow protection laws existing in many states. The amendments have clauses that make even the consumption of beef illegal. It also stipulates that a person found guilty of cow slaughter will be liable to face up to seven years of imprisonment instead of the earlier provision of three years. This renewed aggressive pursuit of the long-standing Hindutva agenda of cow protection has assumed significance at various levels. The slogan has been a key component of the pan-Hindu identity politics that the proponents of Hindutva have sought to advance for over eight decades. Since its inception in 1925, the RSS has formed a widespread network of Gau Raksha Samitis (cow protection societies) that maintain gaushalas (cowsheds), particularly in North India. One oft-repeated slogan of the cow protection societies is: “Cow is holy for Hindus, Muslims eat it to insult the Hindu faith.” Frontline, February 24, 2012, p. 5. Also see Tehelka, Vol. 9, Issue 08, February 25, 2012.

41 Interview with Church elder of Impoi village, NC Hills, Assam on 29th March, 2011.
The Hindus, on the one hand accused the Christians, and held responsible for the loss of tribal culture that students who are educated from Christian missionaries’ schools do not know their own culture, as they are imparted with modern education. Hindus argued that they do not proselytize the tribals, nor they convert the tribals to Hinduism. A VHP worker argued that Hindus do not teach or propagate Hindu religion in the Hindu schools. But whatever they teach in their schools are those that includes in general knowledge, and do not teach or inculcate any Hindu prayers or rituals.\textsuperscript{42} Since Christians are averse to Heraka, the Hindu schools conveniently serve their interest. The Christians, on the other hand, argued that those Heraka students educated in Hindu schools sing patriotic song, Hindu devotional song, and practice yoga. Besides, the Ramakrishna Mission provides free education to many Heraka students. There are two Ramakrishna Mission schools in Heraka region, one in Haflong area and the other in Laisong area.

Some Heraka claim themselves as Hindus. A Heraka priest argued that ‘since we live in Hindustan, we call ourselves as Heraka Hindus, but the religion is different from Hinduism’\textsuperscript{43}. He further argued that the Heraka are the Zeliangrong Hindus, and there are others like Bengali Hindus, and that they are different from each other. On the question of the presence of Hindu symbols like \textit{om}, postures of Hindu gods and goddesses, Hindu calendar circulated by Hindu organizations in Heraka homes, the Heraka priest argued that it is a sign of brotherhood, and also to seek help from Indian Hindus whenever necessary. The Heraka priest even considers Christians as Hindustan Christians. In Heraka festivals, Hindus are invited, and often celebrate with the Hindus. In the same way Heraka also celebrate Hindu festivals like Holi, Diwali and others. Besides, in Heraka programmes and

\textsuperscript{42} Interview with a VHP worker in Haflong, Assam on 7\textsuperscript{th} April, 2011.
\textsuperscript{43} Interview with Heraka priest of ‘Nriamn, NC Hills, Assam on 23\textsuperscript{rd} March, 2011.
events, Hindus are invited. For an instance, in 2010, during the celebration of Heraka school silver jubilee in Tenning, Nagaland, many Hindu leaders and organizations participated in the celebration.44

The Heraka accused the Christians, that Christians are responsible for the loss of Zeliangrong culture. For the Heraka, the religious identity marked the Zeliangrong identity since Heraka is the sole religion of the Zeliangrong. For Heraka or any indigenous faiths in North East India, religion and culture are inseparable. There is no sacralizing of space, and there is no clear distinction between the two dichotomy of secular and non-secular. Religion, culture, tradition and polity are interwoven in tribal societies. Once a person is converted, he/she refuse to participate in the community’s festivals, or any other obligation is not binding on the new convert. This is the reason why a convert has to leave the village and settle down in another Christian village or to a new place. Therefore, a Christian dissociates himself not only from his indigenous community life, but also from his culture and tradition.

Hindus extended their help to the Heraka on the ground that Heraka is the indigenous religion of India. For the Hindu nationalist, the ideology of Hindutva is the basis for extending their services to the indigenous populations in India. The RSS considers the (tribals) indigenous people as Hindus. As a result, the indigenous people are made to consider India as their motherland and holy land. Besides, the RSS inculcates the tribals to respect the ancient Indian culture and tradition. This similar line of thinking, that is respecting one’s culture, tradition and religion conveniently brought the Heraka and the

44 The researcher participated in the Silver Jubilee Celebration of Heraka schools in Tenning, Nagaland in 2010.
RSS together. Both for the Hindus and Heraka, Christianity is a foreign religion, and that their holy land is not in India.

The Heraka who are closely associated with the Hindus are mostly from the urban areas. They are in close relation with the RSS. For an instance, a Heraka follower in Mahur town considers the RSS and Heraka as one.\footnote{Interview with Heraka follower in Mahur town, NC Hills, Assam, on 25\textsuperscript{th} March, 2011.} In the town areas, the RSS used to conduct yoga classes to the Heraka students. Through such programmes, Hindus are able to influence the Heraka community, and invite them for other events and programmes. Today, most of the Heraka followers who are close with the RSS have stopped eating beef. The Heraka follower argued that ‘a cow gives milk, and is like a mother to many; people drink milk and grow, so its sacred’.\footnote{Ibid.}

However, this is not in the teaching of Heraka, but rather indoctrinated from the Hindu religion. According to a convert, ‘Heraka people stopped eating beef because they associate with the Hindus, and Hindus do not eat beef which makes them difficult to go together, and the Hindus despise them. So, in order to maintain good relations with the Hindus, the Heraka have stopped eating beef’.\footnote{Interview with a Christian convert in Nchureloa village, NC Hills, Assam on 8\textsuperscript{th} April, 2011.} The influence of Hinduism is also evident from the construction of kelumki (house of worship) in the town areas of Lodi village and P. Longkai village, where the architectural designs of these kelumkis resemble the Hindu temple.

A Christian elder argued, ‘in town areas Heraka leaders are highly influenced by Hinduism, but they did not disclose to the villagers, because the villagers may not follow...
them, and may not consider their leaders as Zeliangrong’. He further argued that many Heraka leaders and intellectuals import Hinduism, but their followers are ignorant and they just follow. But, most of the Heraka in villages asserted that they are not imitating Hinduism, and that they are not aware of the close relation of Heraka and Hindus. They are still practicing the teachings of Rani Gaidinliu. Therefore, those Heraka who are close to Hindus are the leaders in town areas, students from Hindu schools, and intellectuals who benefitted from Hindu organizations.

Heraka also do not eat dog. The reason why Heraka do not eat dog differs from place to place. This can be broadly classified into two views: one those Heraka who have close association with Hindus in urban areas, and those Heraka in the village. Heraka in urban areas are closely linked with Hindus, therefore, they are influenced by Hindu world view. But, in the villages, Heraka are intact with the tradition, and teachings of Rani Gaidinliu. A Heraka from Mahur town argued ‘dog is a sacred animal because dogs usually died for their masters. He further asserted that it was dog who showed Arjun and Bhim, the way to heaven in the Mahabharata. Therefore, the Heraka do not eat dog. However, a priest in a village gives different reason why the Heraka do not eat dog. The priest argued that it was Rani Gaidinliu who told the people of Heraka not to eat dog because it is un-clean. Gaidinliu further forbids the people of Heraka not to offer dogs to God. Even today, in some paupaise religion, people used to cut the head of the dog or bury the dog alive in order to please the God.

48 Interview with Christian elder of Impoi village, NC Hills, Assam on 29th March, 2011.
49 Interview with a Heraka in Mahur town, NC Hills, Assam on 25th March, 2011.
50 Interview with Heraka priest of P. Longkhai, NC Hills, Assam on 24th March, 2011.
Heraka and Christianity: Loss of Culture is Loss of Identity

Genuine cultural identity of any society is comprised of indigenous religion, native culture, language, glorious history of forefathers, art and crafts, rites and rituals, traditional village institutions and customary laws. Much ammunition has been collected to target Christians as the root cause of ‘loss of culture and tradition’ among the followers of various indigenous faiths in India. For the Heraka, becoming Christian, means getting further education. This is because in most of the tribal areas in North East, it is the Christians who are imparting quality education to many people in the region. There are other educational institutions which are run by the government, but it is largely the Christian missions that provide good and proper education to the tribals. Becoming Christian would profit as most Nagas are Christians and that they are the ones spearheading the Naga political movement. Therefore, becoming Christian speaks to the notion of pan-Naga identity rooted in a particular understanding for Heraka believers.

Generally speaking, the Heraka followers endorsed their support for a Naga solution, but nevertheless they are in a difficult position, especially with relation to the Indian state with the support of the RSS and VHP on the one hand, and the relation with the majority Christian Nagas on the other. Conscious of the Naga movement, some Heraka followers are skeptical of the intentions of the Naga leaders in that they espouse a Christian ideology while suppressing other religious tradition such as the Heraka. This is because the Nagas slogan ‘Nagaland for Christ’ became a recurring slogan towards their movement. Therefore, Heraka reiterated that the Naga claim for independence should be based solely on the common ethnic links and not on religious affiliations.

\[51\] The slogan ‘loss of culture is loss of identity’ was given by the Kalyan Ashram.
After the independence of India, and during the troubled times before and after the creation of Nagaland state, a Christian revival took place that transformed the very nature of Naga identity. Traditional clothes, necklaces, beads, wood carvings and so on were burnt publicly as a sign of shedding of old clothes and taking on the new religion. This symbolic Christian imagery not only affirmed the religious solidarity of the Nagas but it also led to the overhauling and indeed the loss of traditional culture overnight. At the same time, the Heraka were consciously reforming their traditions to counter the threat of Christian missions; they were driven by the excesses of certain form of Christianity with its emphasis on active evangelization among the Heraka.

The Heraka were of the view that the Naga movement, under the Naga National Council (NNC) was imperialistic in its own way because it alienated many of Heraka people due to its overt Christian message, coupled with the gospel of struggle for a Christian homeland. For the Heraka, freedom should be for all Nagas and proselytizing in any form must be discouraged. The Christian on the other hand considered the Heraka as representing all that was satanic, superstitious, compared to the Christian religion in the indigenous religious tradition. For the Heraka followers, the Heraka stood for all that was glorious about Naga culture, while the embracing of Christianity constituted a violent rejection of all past religious beliefs and practices. Such Christians were taught that everything traditional must be deplored while everything Christian must be glorified. With extreme condemnation and isolation meted out by the Christians to these non-Christians, Rani Gaidinliu decided that she would fight for a separate Zeliangrong homeland (consisting of the Peren district of Nagaland, North Cachar Hills of Assam, and

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Tamenglong district of Manipur), bringing the Zeliangrong people into one administrative unit within the Indian Union, without any overt religious message.\(^{53}\)

The Heraka are largely anti-Christian in their rhetoric because of conversion tactics employed by Christians in the past. Therefore, they try to distance themselves from Christian schools and instead rely on government schools or schools run by VHP like Saraswati Vidhya Mandir, Vivekananda Vidhyalaya and Kendriya Vidyalaya.\(^{54}\) However, the VHP run school requires its students to say a pledge that indicates the difficult position for the Heraka follower. The strong integrationist ideology that is part of such a Hindu organization places the Heraka in a difficult position. They try to distance themselves from any classification partly because being close to Hindu groups betrays the common sense ideology of the Naga being anti-India and therefore by default anti-Hindu. In the eyes of the Hindu organizations, the Heraka are anti-conversion and by default anti-church. For the Christian and also to some extend the Heraka, monotheism implies a form of worship, which is anti-Hindu.

The increasing influence of Christianity, with its monotheism, and the threat of proselytization gave rise to intense competition. This demonstrated that the need for a unified religious system to compete with the Christians, and to some extent the Hindus, gives rise to differentiated forms of social life. It also marked the creation of a sacred community. This began the evolution of a religion and the sacred within a culture where previously, in the Zeliangrong traditional religion, there was no separation of the sacred from the mundane. Therefore, what is significant is that becoming Heraka from the

\(^{53}\) ibid

\(^{54}\) Ibid, p.182. 
traditional religion is not seen as conversion while becoming Christian from Heraka is conversion. Situating the rhetoric of conversion between the Christian church and various Hindu organizations, notions of ethnic allegiance, nationalist perceptions and locally constructed boundaries shape the ongoing debate regarding identity and boundaries. To safeguard the functioning of the community as both indigenous, and preserving the ethnic population from Christian and western influence, the use of Hindutva (Hinduness) as encompassing indigenous populations highlights an important point. Primordial ethnic notions are also used effectively by the Zeliangrong Heraka in determining group membership against Christians who are viewed as foreign.

There is a perception held primarily by Naga Christians that the Heraka are Hindu since they are associated with Hindu organizations. As a form of resisting, the Heraka adopt Hindu symbols such as om and swatika in houses and publications. Heraka are also very closely associated with the people of Kalyan Ashram of Nagaland and Vidhya Bharti of Gujarat. The proclamation of Nagaland or Nagalim55 for Christ has alienated the Heraka people as they see their aims as a threat to the Heraka religious practice. Hence they drift away from the Naga Christians and instead rely on Hindu groups for financial and organizational support. Because of this the Hindu groups extend their ideology and include the Heraka in the project of Hinduness while keeping Christian proselytization under scrutiny. For the Heraka, it is more a question of survival and day-to-day resistance, than the overt pandering to the idea of Naga nationhood.

55 The word ‘Nagalim’ denotes the Naga inhabited areas of India and Burma. It is used by the NSCN and other Naga civil societies for the united greater Nagaland.
There is an increasing influence of Christianity in the Heraka in relation to their indigenous faith reform. For an instance, Heraka attempted to ban only large animal sacrifices. But in recent years, they have instituted a complete ban on animal sacrifice. Though this was partly responsible because of the impact of food scarcity in Zeliangrong villages during the 1930s, curtailing of animal sacrifices is indeed influenced by the Christian religion. This reform, apart from simplifying the mode of rituals, is an appeasement to the Heraka followers to remain in their indigenous religion. Adopting one God and simplifying its mode of worship by instituting songs and prayers instead of ritual sacrifice of animals is a step for a change with the passage of time. However, some followers of Heraka condemned this reform as foreign import, just like Christianity. But, still Heraka is revered and popular than Christianity for two reasons. First, it was based on local reforms and gave the impression that it was not foreign. Second, Heraka retained much of traditional Zeliangrong customs like drinking of traditional rice beer, preserving traditional dances and clothes, and were more tradition friendly.

Drinking the traditional rice beer is one of the oldest cultures of the Zeliangrong. There are varieties of rice beer. The mildest beer is called dekuizau which is prepared from millet. This beer is used by everyone. The second variety is called ndauzau, which is a medium one prepared from fermented rice with yeast made of wild leaves or root. The third variety is called chiakne which is a kind of liquor prepared by distilling rice or millet and is the strongest beer, and is allowed only for elders. For the Heraka, they publicly drink and make traditional rice beer without constrains, either at home or for festivals. For them rice beer is tradition and must not be forgotten. Since the Presbyterians and Catholics do not brew rice beer or use it in public festivals, they provide income for the Heraka by buying
from them. The Baptists, however, are a little more consistent. Their strict policy on avoiding rice beer is more determined, though some of them join the Heraka in drinking rice beer. This kind of drawing a boundary between the Heraka and Christians represents a superficial layering over which religious allegiances are fought.

This is because the missionaries’ interpretation of alcohol (rice beer), influenced by their mid-West prohibitionist sentiments, was enforced upon the Zeliangrong people without understanding the values of rice beer in Zeliangrong culture. Thus almost randomly, the line between Christians and animist was drawn, creating misleading pigeonholes. By banning the use of rice beer, a value judgment was placed on Zeliangrong culture that refused to acknowledge their universe as both religious and cultural, intertwined and imbedded. However, many Christians, especially Baptists hold the view that drinking of rice beer has no religious or cultural use in Heraka faith, but it only hampers development, both personal and social.

Nevertheless, rice beer also has social function. Every public occasion is graced with rice beer, and lack of rice beer symbolizes the lack of hospitality. It is also drunk for itself, on quiet or more boisterous occasions. It also delineated age distinctions. Certain drinks are allowed only for older people. In spite of such difficult and fuzzy religious boundaries drawn, some Heraka followers, wants to accept Christianity because of educational facilities. Thus, some of them either join Catholics or Presbyterians since they do not have strict rules regarding the use of rice beer at home. The main issue is that they are not allowed to brew it at home or drink publicly. But, to stop drinking traditional rice beer...

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beer is difficult for the people of Heraka. Even though the missionaries thought more in terms of social benefits, to the Naga converts not drinking rice beer was a defining criterion for being a Christian.

The Heraka considers Christianity as foreign religion. In the early years, when Christianity first arrived in Zeliangrong areas, the converts usually follow those pattern from whom where they embraced Christianity. This brought about massive changes in their orientation towards their indigenous culture. For an instance, there were cases where a convert refused to wear their traditional dresses, and refused to participate in cultural festivals of the village. This radical orientation and changes mark off the Christians from Heraka. Therefore, there were divisions between the Christian converts and Heraka, and the converts were usually driven out from the village and in some cases, the converts were demarcated from Heraka by a boundary line if they are to live in the same village. However, in recent times, Christians are also aware of the importance of preserving their indigenous culture. In most festivals, the Christians also observe in their churches, as most Zeliangrong festivals are related to the stages of agricultural operations. Traditional dresses are widely used by the Christians. Therefore, with certain modifications, Christians are also able to adapt to their indigenous culture.

The Heraka considers Christian proselytization as invading the indigenous faith and culture. In some villages, Christians are not allowed to preach. Villages like Boro Chanam, N. Nianglo are Heraka majority, and their strong presence makes it difficult for Christians to preach. Beside, in some villages, Heraka do not permit Christians to preach. However,

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57 The Baptist Christians are the pioneers in this regard. In the past, many traditional attires, necklaces and other are burnt condemning that they are satanic. However, in the present day, there is a realization even among the Baptists, the importance of preserving and promoting traditional dresses.
there are other villages where Heraka welcome the Christian preachers, though they refuse prayers in their houses. There are some places where Heraka accused the Christians, that it is Christians who do bad things, and that they should settle themselves first. Nevertheless, there are some Heraka who would want to convert to Christianity but not in position to convert because of two reasons. Firstly, once they become Christian, they have to leave their village, because Heraka and Christians do not live together. Secondly, Heraka are intoxicated with traditional rice beer or tobacco, they are not in a position to give up those intoxicants.

The Catholics are somehow more liberal than the Baptists towards the Heraka drinking rice beer or other intoxicants. The Catholics even brew rice beer in places like Laisong, Hangrum and Namrengam. The Presbyterians do not permit brewing rice beer, but are more liberal and accommodative to the Heraka than the Baptists. The Catholic mission first came in N. C. Hills in 1973. Unlike the Protestants, the Catholics do not go for rigorous preaching, but evangelization is done through education. This is done by establishing educational institutions in villages, and imparting to the locals at a highly subsidized rate. The Catholics even imparted free education to some students who are converted to Catholics. In these educational institutions, hostels are provided to only Catholic students. At present there are two Catholic schools, i.e. Don Bosco School, one in Asalu and the other in Laisong.

In Asalu, most of the villagers are Christian, and only one person remains in Heraka, since Catholics first came in Asalu among the Zeliangrong areas of N. C. Hills in 1979. Besides, Asalu was a centre during the British in the sub-continent. There are 60
households, and out of which 30 households are Catholics, and the remaining are either
Baptists or Presbyterians. According to the first convert of Asalu village, ‘most people
converted to Catholics because of good education’.\textsuperscript{58} He further stated that he was
converted to Catholic because Catholic priests brought him to work in a convent school in
Haflong. It was from the convent school that he was converted to Catholic.

The Heraka, on the other hand, do not proselytize or preach their religion to others.
Their main concern is to protect, preserve and promote the indigenous religion. Christians
claim that the Heraka imitate Christian way of functioning and governing the organization.
The recent institution of Hingde Paume (Heraka Preacher), who goes to villages to preach
Heraka religious laws and practices, for instance, is an imitation of Christian missionaries,
as claimed by the Christians. The compartmentalization of various functioning bodies in
Heraka, like the elder forum, women forum, and youth forum is also an imitation from
Christian organization. Therefore, for efficient administration, the Heraka’s geographical
areas have also emerged from local to three states of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland, under
the apex organization of Zeliangrong Heraka Association. Through this organization, the
Heraka organizes various meetings, tour programmes to Assam, Manipur and Nagaland to
preach the Heraka religious laws, along with showcasing their cultural dances, and songs.
Some Christians claim that Rani Gaidinliu became Christian before she died, and therefore,
her religious reform has many Christian teachings.

\textsuperscript{58} Interview with the first Catholic convert of Asalu village, NC Hills, Assam on 28\textsuperscript{th} March, 2011.
Constructing Heraka Identity

Identity formation is not the function of a single process. Various endogenous and exogenous forces influence building ethnic affinities and attachments that make identity formation a complex process. While primordial elements such as race, language and religion provide institutional frame, the cultural perception of the community towards other groups leads to crystallization of identity. In a multiethnic society, the reaction to challenges arising out of attempts by the dominant groups towards assimilation, growing economic competition among different ethnic groups and political and developmental processes enforced by the state reinforce identity formation. Moreover, the whole process gets a fillip when the emergent middle classes politicize issue of language, culture and religion to their advantage.\(^5^9\) Therefore, identity formation is not the outcome of a single identifiable factor.

The separation of communities into ethnic slots for administrative purposes became the characteristic of British administration in North East India. People rarely conceived of their self identity in terms of ethnicity because, although belonging to a certain polity, they mixed with a world where boundaries shifted and were redrawn accordingly. In a sense, this construction began in classification. Such classification was important for the British because religious movements, which were thought to spread across tribal boundaries, confused categories and created fear amongst the colonial powers of a pan-tribal alliance. These movements were seen as a new threat and as subversive of traditional society as of colonial order.

Such situation was the case when Jadonang and Gaidinliu started causing a stir during their reform of traditional practice. Jadonang was accused of inventing a religion which was a debased form of Hinduism, while Gaidinliu was cast as a sorcerer and the new priestess of this cult. When this reform became popular, Jadonang used civilizational symbols from the Hindu pantheon such as Bishnu and Mahadeo to crystallize and evoke a sense of awe through the appropriation of these powerful symbols to further the reform. However, the religious reform of Jadonang and Gaidinliu did not associate with Hindu organizations in the initial years. The reform was rather an agitation towards the spread of Hinduism and Christianity. There is a constant fear about the loss of tradition, culture, language and religion among the Heraka people.

The post-independent India viewed ethnic identity in the North East against the backdrop of the mainstream. The word ‘mainstream’ implies there are ‘sub-streams’ that are not part of it. That there are many streams among which there is a dominant one towards which the other streams are desired to flow and ultimately merge. It also implies that the word ‘mainstream’ is exclusivist in nature and that only by possessing certain defined characteristics can a ‘sub-stream’ be qualified to be part of it.60 The Nagas, for an instance could not accommodate within the mainstream of India. The Heraka, on the other hand, remain ambiguous and do not cling either to the mainstream of India or to the larger ethnic Naga struggle for recognition of independent status.

The Heraka, being rooted in an indigenous religious tradition is an assertion of their identity as Zeliangrong. Therefore, by asserting that the true ethnic link from the past to the

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present is maintained and practiced by the Heraka, they are able to assert an authentic self. By appealing to nativist traditions, they are able to draw the distinction between the Heraka and Christians as a yardstick against which the latter can be condemned as foreign. These sentiments are based on primordial attachments. This distinction or separation of local identity is rooted in their religious practice. In other words, if one is not of a particular religious group, one is a foreigner. This is nothing new but the ideology of Hindutva to define who is a Hindu or rather a nation building project based on Hindu religion. The politics of ‘the other’ therefore is entrenched within the Heraka community.

The Paupaise\textsuperscript{61}, the ancestral way of life, often do not understand why the Heraka and Christian quibble. In Paupaise eyes, they are the same as foreign. This is because Heraka is a reform religion, and that the Paupaise mostly accused Heraka that they are associated with Hinduism. The Paupaise claimed that they are the true indigenous religious groups, and by default the true Zeliangrong. The Heraka also in the similar ways propagated for a Zeliangrong identity, and Heraka to be the sole Zeliangrong religion. Similarly, the Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak (TRC) does not consider Heraka as the true indigenous religion. The TRC though it is also a reform indigenous religion of the Zeliangrong finds it difficult to accept the Heraka as representing the Zeliangrong identity. Like the Jew, the Heraka attempts to construct the Zeliangrong identity by promoting Heraka religion.\textsuperscript{62}

For the Heraka, they try to find links with the local or the tradition. By rejecting a global religious practice such as Christianity, they ground their identity in the reality of

\textsuperscript{61} The Paupaise is the primordial religion of the Zeliangrong people and it constitutes a negligible population to the present day because of the reformation which came to be known as the Heraka.

\textsuperscript{62} The Semitic religion (Judaism) is purely based on ethnicity, where the ethnicity and religion are identical.
home. The Heraka construct a viable rhetoric of indigenizing their faith while proclaiming Christianity as foreign and by evoking powerful symbols such as death, they are able to cement this bond and encourage their members to hang on to their practice. In the initial years of Christian converts, since the converts were minority, they were more conscious of their religious identity (Christianity) than their ethnic identity (Zeliangrong). This consciousness is even present in the minds of the Christians today; that is their religious consciousness of being Christians is more significant and pervasive than their ethnicity of being a Zeliangrong. This is even true with other Naga tribes or the Mizos.

The Christians, although they appreciate the Heraka for their strong sense of preserving traditional faith and culture, they also regard them as having no everlasting or eternal life. For the Christians, the concept of having eternal life or salvation marked them off from other religious communities. To be a Christian means to leave the past life and become a new creation. For a Christian convert, everything became new, and by default he is detached from the non-Christian social order. The closeness of Heraka with Hindu organizations betrays allegiance to Naga nationalism in the eyes of the Christians. The Christians constantly jibe at the insecurities of the Heraka by questioning if their feathers have been smudged by Hindu incense. The Hindu organizations, on the other hand, seem to assert a sense of historicity by linking the vanvasi to ‘Bharat Mata’.

The difficulty of finding a comfortable identity for the Heraka is also connected with the larger question of Naga nationalism and the politics it engenders. The slogan ‘Nagaland for Christ’ is the crux of the issue for the Heraka in participation in the Naga’s political struggle. Besides, because of its massive conversion to Christianity among the
Nagas, Christianity has become part and parcel of Naga identity. This is true because in many countries Nagas are known through Christian missionaries and its institutions. For the Naga Christians, the politics of India’s nation building is a source of historical suspicion. The position of Rani Gaidinliu and the expression of her Indianness as well as her Naganess is something the Heraka does not want to draw attention due to the present political situation.

During the Zeliangrong People’s Convention (ZPC) movement, the demand made by Rani Gaidinliu was for the integration of all Zeliangrong inhabited area into a single administration under the Indian Constitution, while the other Naga groups were demanding for independence. This brings the closeness of Gaidinliu with Indian leaders. Besides, she was considered as the freedom fighter of India. This situation compels the Heraka to remain silent in relation to the Naga movement. Therefore, the Heraka do not wish to commit to any single group or ideology. Due to their ambiguous position, there is the impression that the Heraka have to oscillate between these two powerful groups they have to confront and live with everyday.

The Heraka are trying to broaden the indigenous, trying to transcend local power and elevate the indigenous so that it can compete with world religions. Since, the Heraka are minority they are not in a position to establish or organize their religion like the major world religions. The closeness with Hinduism in fact helped the Heraka in propagating

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63 Mention must be made here that the Nagas had no interaction with India proper throughout the historical period. The British formulation of the ‘excluded area’ kept them excluded from the Indian mainstream during the British rule. Christianity came in handy to create an apprehension against Indianization, which the leaders branded as Hinduization. See Sujit Choudhury, ‘The North-East: A Concept Re-Examined’, in Kailash S. Aggarwal, ed., Dynamics of Identity and Intergroup Relations in North-East India (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1999), p. 95.
their religion in a broad platform. The RSS and other Hindu organizations organize religious conference from time to time. It is in those platforms that Heraka along with other indigenous groups are able to promote and propagate their religion. In other words, the closeness with Hinduism elevates the Heraka to a higher platform. Nevertheless, in most of the religious conference organized by the Hindu organization, there are slogans like ‘loss of culture is loss of identity’, ‘save your culture’, ‘all religions are same’, ‘respect your motherland’ and so on. Besides, there are signs of Hindu religious symbols in sticker or banner of the conference. In such situation, Heraka are either considered as Hindus or part of Hindus. In the process, some of the Hindu elements are accommodated into the Heraka day to day life. The Heraka on the one hand wants to retain its distinct religious identity, while on the other also want to broaden and promote their religious identity. Therefore, Hindu organizations come and offer a convenient platform for the Heraka to broaden their religious identity.

The Hindu elements are easily incorporated in the Heraka because they do not have a proper religious text, codifying and binding to all the people. Despite the publication of the Hingde book (Heraka religious text), its impact is far from certain, as are its consequences in the lives of the Heraka, whose population is mainly in the villages where levels of literacy remain low. Even in the urban areas, literacy rate is still low compare to Christians. Besides, the Heraka relationship between the text and the reader is even more ambiguous. The older generations are not interested in reading the text probably due to literacy constraints.
The Christians in contrast to the Hindus are engaged in rigorous proselytization. This is one reason why the Heraka are averse to Christians. For the Christian, the pan-Naga identity is identified with Christianity. Since majority of the Zeliangrong Nagas are Christians, to revive the identity of the Zeliangrong through Heraka become a difficult task. There are many Christians who want to revive the Zeliangrong culture, but do not want to associate with Heraka. This is because even the Heraka have lost most of its original culture, and their religious outlook are considered as the debase form of Hinduism.

Therefore, the Heraka rhetoric has been strategically constructed around the Christian and Hindu agendas that constantly evoke in them the need to adapt. So Heraka identity is formed along these distinct fault lines and as a result, they are not seen as one or the other. In the eyes of Hindu organizations they are anti-conversion and by default anti-church, and in the eyes of Christians they are Hindus, and therefore not Nagas. Nevertheless, since Heraka attempts to preserve traditional faith and culture, their belief is local.

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