



# Impact Of Colonialism And Christianity On The Rengma Naga

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**Abstract:** This study explores the complex and far-reaching impact of colonialism and Christianity on the Rengma Naga, a distinct Indigenous community in Northeast India. It critically examines the profound transitions in their socio-political and cultural landscape brought about by these twin forces of historical change. With a focus on the Rengma's traditional political institutions, the paper traces how pre-colonial governance structures, rooted in customary laws and community consensus, began to evolve and decline with the advent of British colonial rule and the introduction of Christianity. These external influences not only redefined authority and decision-making within Rengma society but also catalyzed a broader shift toward modern political institutions.

While colonial administration often undermined indigenous governance through indirect rule and restructuring of territorial boundaries, the arrival of Christianity brought new educational and moral frameworks that further accelerated cultural transformation. As traditional beliefs and rituals were gradually replaced, many Rengma practices once central to communal life were sidelined or reinterpreted through Christian norms. This dual intervention—administrative and spiritual—reshaped the identity and cohesion of the community in ways that continue to reverberate today. Rather than viewing these changes as linear or purely disruptive, the study adopts a nuanced lens that considers both loss and adaptation. It foregrounds the agency of the Rengma in navigating these shifts, illustrating how elements of tradition have persisted or transformed within new contexts. By drawing on oral histories, archival records, and ethnographic insights, the article contributes to broader debates on colonial encounter, religious conversion, and indigenous resilience in the Northeast.

**Index Terms** - Rengma Naga, Colonialism, Christianity, Western Education, Traditional political Institution, Modern political institutions.

## 1. Introduction

Colonialism and Christianity among the Rengma Nagas marked a crucial moment that permanently altered their socio-political and cultural lifeworld. Before these external influences took root, the Rengmas, like other Naga tribes, lived in self-sufficient village republics governed by traditional chieftainship and customary laws. Their socio-religious framework was deeply intertwined with ancient beliefs, oral traditions, and ritualistic practices that reinforced communal identity and governance structures. However, with the imposition of British colonial rule and the parallel spread of Christianity, these indigenous institutions underwent deep transformations, setting the foundation for the emergence of modern political institutions. Colonialism introduced administrative mechanisms that integrated the Rengmas into a larger politico-economic framework, disrupting their traditional autonomy.

The British introduced new forms of governance, such as appointed village headmen, tax systems, and indirect rule, which reconfigured existing power dynamics. Simultaneously, Christian missionaries, particularly from the American Baptist Mission, propagated literacy, formal education, and a new ethical worldview that redefined social structures and aspirations. The convergence of these two forces—the colonial state and Christian evangelization—led to an irreversible shift in the Rengma way of life, fostering both opportunities for political self-assertion and challenges to indigenous traditions.

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## II. Background of the Rengma Naga

The Rengma Nagas are recognized as one of the prominent and relatively “advanced” tribes of Nagaland. Thong (2016, 16-20) traces their migration from the east, passing through Myanmar and northern Manipur before settling in Makhel, which today is in the state of Manipur. From there, the Rengmas moved to Khezakenoma, Kigwema, Kohima, Nerhema, and Tsiethuma—referred to by the Rengmas as Peshvünynu and Terogvüthun—the highest peak in the Rengma region, as well as Khwephen. Nshoga (2009, 15-47) provides a comprehensive analysis of the origins, migration, and settlement patterns of the Nagas in general, and the Rengmas in particular. However, due to the absence of a written script in early Naga society, much of this history remains obscure and is primarily preserved through oral traditions. While oral narratives can sometimes be subjective, blending myth with historical facts, they remain invaluable in reconstructing the past and understanding the traditional history of both the Nagas and the Rengma Nagas.

Despite the inherent limitations of oral traditions, historical accounts of the Nagas can be traced through external sources, including Vedic literature, foreign records, and the Ahom Buranjis. These sources have significantly influenced the study of the Nagas, often shaping narratives that are fragmented, stereotyped, or exoticized. Among the earliest references to the people and geography of present-day Nagaland and its surrounding regions are the mentions of the Kiratas in Vedic texts, Claudius Ptolemy’s *Geographia*, and the historical records of the Ahoms compiled in the Buranjis. However, a critical examination of these sources reveals intrinsic limitations, biases, and interpretative gaps. These issues necessitate a reassessment of

external narratives in light of indigenous oral traditions and contemporary historical methodologies to develop a more nuanced and accurate understanding of Naga history.

According to Nshoga (2009), Rengma oral traditions trace their origins no further than Southeast Asia and Khunrinyu (Burma). After crossing Mekerenyu (Manipur), they arrived at Khinzonyu (Kezhakenoma), where an internal division occurred following the so-called magical stone incident. This event, which stemmed from a dispute between two brothers over the misuse of a magical stone, led to the separation of their descendants. While the elder brother chose to stay back, the younger brother, along with his group, migrated northwest from Kezhakenoma, eventually reaching Kagwenyu (Kigwema), a place whose name means “empty house.” Oral traditions suggest that the migration was led by four key figures: Tsemi, Kasha, Kewhi, and Nyerhe.

### **III. Traditional Life of the Rengma Naga**

Among the Rengma Nagas, villages functioned as independent socio-political entities, maintaining distinct identities and exercising autonomy over their internal affairs. Each village had its own socio-political, economic, and administrative structures, ensuring self-governance and communal cohesion. A village is typically a cluster of dwellings constructed near arable land, with its size varying based on the number of households. Larger villages comprise numerous houses, while smaller ones consist of only a few dwellings. Village is usually a group of dwelling of houses, built near cultivable land. A big village usually consists of a lot of houses, whereas a small village is usually consisting of very few houses only. The villages of the Rengma Naga maintained their own identity and sovereignty with its rights to the people. Each village had their own distinct socio-political, economic and political units. The Rengmas like the other Naga tribes usually built their villages atop the hill or on the neck of a hillock, and while selecting the site for the formation of the village the things taken into consideration were availability of spring water and position highly defensible, and it had to have a tree suitable for use as a head tree. Usually the villages were surrounded by trees and light jungles, so that the village was not exposed and visible to the enemy villages. The villages varied in sizes from 8 houses in Nishinyu “the new village” to Tseminyu (257 houses) (Mills 45- 49).

The establishment of a new village followed a customary ritual performed by two or three members of the community. These individuals conducted sacrificial ceremonies using animals such as cocks, dogs, pigs, or eggs at the proposed site to determine its suitability. After the ritual, their dreams were analyzed to interpret omens related to the location. Additionally, fire was lit at the site, and the direction of the smoke was observed—if the smoke rose straight into the sky, the site was deemed auspicious and selected for settlement; however, if the smoke dispersed erratically, the location was considered inauspicious and subsequently rejected. Village boundaries were well-defined and marked by natural features such as ridges, valleys, rivers, streams, and stone formations. These territorial demarcations ensured clarity in land ownership and minimized conflicts between neighboring villages.

### **IV. Classification/Division of the Village**

Each Rengma village is traditionally divided into distinct sections known as khels, which serve as socio-political and territorial subdivisions within the community. The primary khels include Kasung, Aiyengshi,

and Aphru, each with well-defined yet unmarked boundaries. Although no physical markers delineate these divisions, the placement of households within a particular khel is widely recognized by the villagers. The naming of khels often reflects the dominant clan residing within them, as seen in Sampinyukasung in Tseminyu, Tepinyuaiyengshi in Tesophenyu, and Lorinyu in Phenshunyu (Mills 1936, 56). A long-standing tradition within Rengma villages is that each khel maintains its own Morung, or bachelor's dormitory, which functions as a center for youth training, community defense, and cultural transmission. However, in exceptional cases—such as in Tseminyu—multiple morungs have existed within different khels. Historically, each khel was typically dominated by a particular clan, though individuals from other clans could reside there if they possessed property or established household rights. In earlier times, dense forests surrounded the khels, serving as a strategic safeguard during times of conflict. These wooded areas provided natural cover and escape routes in the event of sudden raids or enemy attacks. However, with the transformation of socio-political structures and the decline of inter-village conflicts, this practice is no longer observed in contemporary times.

### **V. The Morung System and its role**

The Morung, or dormitory system, has historically been one of the most significant social institutions among the Rengma Nagas. The condition of a village's Morung was seen as a reflection of the village itself—a neglected or decaying Morung indicated a weakening community, whereas a well-maintained and actively used Morung symbolized a thriving and disciplined society. It served as an essential institution where young boys were trained in various aspects of life, including warfare, craftsmanship, singing, dancing, social etiquette, and oral traditions that celebrated the heroic deeds of their ancestors. The Morung system was common among all Naga tribes and was either integrated into the house of the village chief, the home of a wealthy individual, or built as a separate structure (Shimray 1985). Shimray referred to the Morung as the "Naga School," highlighting its role as an educational and disciplinary institution where boys were molded into responsible members of society. A boy would enter the Morung at a young age, often when he felt too ashamed to continue sleeping in his parents' house. The Morung thus functioned as a surrogate parental figure, instilling discipline and shaping the moral and social values of its members.

Mills (1937) noted that among the Rengma Nagas, the Morung was commonly referred to as Rensi, Azüghü, or Awikhu, depending on dialectal variations. Each khel (village section) possessed at least one, or in rare cases, two Morungs, which were often the largest and most decorated buildings in the village. Membership in the Morung was not optional; all young men were required to join and participate in its communal lifestyle. Discipline was strictly enforced, and individuals who displayed defiance or unruly behavior were dealt with sternly. Family background, wealth, or social status held no significance within the Morung—all members were considered equal, reinforcing a sense of unity and social cohesion. The dormitory was also a place of education, where young men learned various crafts such as basket-making, wood carving, and weaponry. They were trained in military tactics, including methods for detecting enemy movements through sound and reconnaissance. Mock alarms were sounded to test their awareness, and they were occasionally sent into the forests to collect specific medicinal plants for treating injuries, thereby acquiring basic first-aid skills.

While young men in the Morung were trained in the arts of life and warfare, the girls' dormitories provided a structured environment where they mastered essential skills such as cotton ginning, spinning, and weaving. The nature of their crafts varied by region—some areas focused on intricate weaving, while others emphasized embroidery, jewelry-making, and other handicrafts. Girls brought indigenous tools like spinning wheels, raw cotton, and thread, engaging in collective learning under the guidance of their seniors. The ladies' dormitory, called in local dialect as KatsüNyü (Western Rengma), Aowekeye (Central Rengma), and Ashi (Eastern Rengma) (Mills 1937), much like the Morung for boys, was a well-structured and disciplined institution that played a crucial role in shaping young girls into responsible members of society. Every Rengma Naga village typically had at least two or three such dormitories, with larger villages divided into sections known as khels, each housing one or two dormitories. Membership was compulsory for young girls upon reaching puberty, and they remained in the dormitory until marriage. Beyond skill acquisition, the dormitory was instrumental in shaping a young girl's character, social conduct, and future responsibilities. Perhaps the most significant social function of the dormitory was in facilitating courtship and marriage. Each evening, young men from the Morung would visit, bringing flutes and violins to accompany group singing. These interactions—filled with songs, conversations, and fleeting glances—allowed young men and women to understand one another over time, forming bonds that often culminated in marriage. This long-standing tradition ensured that relationships were built on familiarity and shared experience, reinforcing the cultural ethos of the Rengma Naga society. Thus, the ladies' dormitory was much more than a place of residence; it was a foundational institution that nurtured skills, strengthened social ties, and played a pivotal role in shaping both personal and communal life.

## **VI. Traditional Domestic Life and Transformations**

The domestic life of the Rengma Nagas was historically characterized by self-sufficiency and skilled craftsmanship. Cotton cultivation was a vital aspect of their livelihood, with every household producing enough cotton to meet its own needs. Weaving was considered an essential skill for women, and young girls were introduced to the craft at an early age, often playing with toy looms as a form of practice. The ability to spin and weave was a prerequisite for marriage, emphasizing the cultural significance of textile production within Rengma society. Beyond weaving, the Rengmas engaged in a wide range of economic and artistic activities, including spinning, dyeing, cloth painting, pottery, woodworking, leatherworking, metalworking, and basket weaving. Essential survival skills such as fire-making, agriculture, hunting, and fishing were also integral to daily life. Additionally, trade played a crucial role in the local economy, particularly in the exchange of salt, which was a valuable commodity. Recreation and cultural expression were equally important, with games, music, and dance serving as common pastimes for both young and old members of the community.

However, with the advent of modernity, significant changes have transformed the traditional Rengma way of life. Thatched houses, once the standard form of dwelling, have been largely replaced by modern buildings constructed from contemporary materials. Similarly, the widespread use of factory-made textiles has diminished the traditional practice of spinning and weaving cotton yarn. Additionally, the Morung or dormitory system, which once played a crucial role in educating and disciplining young men, has been

supplanted by formal schooling and higher education institutions. These transformations reflect broader socio-economic shifts, yet they also pose challenges in preserving and maintaining the rich cultural heritage of the Rengma Nagas.

## VII. Dimensions of Rengma Religious Beliefs

Contrary to simplistic classifications, Rengma religious traditions exhibit a structured belief system that integrates theism, polytheism, and spiritual mediation. At the core of their religious worldview was Terügü, the sovereign creator and supreme authority over both heaven and earth. He was regarded as omnipresent and omnipotent, an invisible yet all-encompassing force responsible for the existence of both living and non-living beings. His role as the ultimate divine force aligns with broader theistic traditions that recognize a supreme deity (Nshoga 2018). Beyond Terügü, the Rengmas venerated a pantheon of deities governing various aspects of life. Terügi, a female counterpart to Terügü, was also revered, while Kepongü and Kepongi were associated with abundance and fertility, respectively. Shenrhwegü and Shenrhwegi oversaw wealth and prosperity, whereas Thekhogü and Thekhogi were the deities of animals. The household, a crucial unit of Rengma society, was under the protection of Kapügü and Kapügi (Nshoga 2018). This extensive divine hierarchy underscores the complexity of Rengma religious beliefs, highlighting a theological system that goes beyond mere spirit worship. The Rengma Naga spiritual worldview acknowledged a complex hierarchy of supernatural entities categorized as benevolent, malevolent, or neutral forces that influenced human affairs. Spirits, collectively referred to as **Songinyu**, were believed to be omnipresent, inhabiting natural landscapes such as forests, rivers, streams, and mountains. While some spirits were protective, others were considered dangerous, capable of bringing misfortune, illness, and even death (Nshoga 2018).

Among the benevolent spirits, Songigü was regarded as the supreme celestial entity, dwelling in the sky and bestowing blessings upon those who demonstrated devotion. Within this divine order, Songü, the male spirit of power, and Songi, his female counterpart, played integral roles in ensuring harmony and prosperity. Similarly, agricultural success was believed to be under the watchful influence of Niseginyu, the guardian spirit of crops, with Nisegü as the male deity and Nisegi as the female (Nshoga 2018). These spirits reflect a deeper spiritual understanding beyond mere animistic interpretations, as they embody distinct divine attributes and maintain cosmic order.

## VIII. Religious Practices and Ritual Observances

Unlike many organized religions, the traditional Rengma belief system did not have a formal priesthood. Instead, individuals acted as their own priests during personal rituals, while elders—chosen based on age, clan affiliation, and ritual knowledge—performed community-wide ceremonies. A significant aspect of Rengma religious practice was the observance of Genna, a system of ritual prohibitions deeply embedded in their spiritual and social life. The term Genna, derived from the Angami word Kenna meaning “prohibition” (Thong 1997, 24), was used to denote religious festivals, ritual feasts, or periods of enforced abstention. Gennas could be observed individually or communally. When an individual observed Genna, they were required to remain secluded, avoiding all contact with others. In contrast, a communal Genna meant that the entire village ceased all activities and isolated itself from external interactions. Such prohibitions were

observed on occasions such as childbirth or to protect agricultural fields from pests, reflecting the interconnectedness of religion, social order, and economic survival. However, remnants of traditional religious concepts persist in cultural practices, oral traditions, and communal memory, demonstrating the historical continuity of Rengma spiritual thought. The shift from indigenous religious structures to Christianity not only marked a transformation in belief systems but also played a crucial role in shaping modern Rengma identity.

### **IX. The Decline of Tradition and the Rise of Modern Political Institutions**

The Rengma religious system was deeply interwoven with their way of life, characterized by an oral tradition that preserved myths, folktales, moral codes, and customs across generations. Unlike the organized religions introduced later, their traditional beliefs lacked a sacred text but were rich in symbolic and ritualistic expressions. The arrival of colonialism and Christianity in the Rengma regions in the early 20th century initiated profound transformations, reshaping the community's socio-religious fabric and traditional political structures. Before these influences, Religious practices revolved around the worship of both natural forces such as the Sun, Moon, Winds, Lightning, Thunder, Trees, Stones, and Rivers, as well as supernatural beings, including deities, spirits, and ancestral ghosts as discussed above. These beliefs shaped the spiritual and communal identity of the Rengmas, reinforcing a worldview where the sacred and the mundane were inseparable.

The colonial administration played a crucial role in facilitating the spread of Christianity, which accelerated the erosion of traditional Rengma religious and political structures. The British, as part of their broader colonial policy, sought to pacify the Naga Hills and establish administrative control. In doing so, they disrupted indigenous governance systems and undermined traditional religious institutions. The introduction of Western education, legal frameworks, and missionary activities brought significant cultural and structural changes.

One of the most immediate effects of colonial rule was the weakening of the traditional chieftainship system. Rengma chieftains historically held both religious and political authority, serving as custodians of tribal customs, conflict mediators, and spiritual leaders. However, under British administration, local governance structures were reorganized, diminishing the power of tribal chiefs. The colonial government introduced village councils and other bureaucratic mechanisms that altered the indigenous power hierarchy. This shift was further compounded by Christian conversion, which introduced alternative religious and administrative leadership within Rengma society.

With Christian conversion, many traditional rituals and spiritual practices were abandoned. Practices such as headhunting, once considered a marker of valor and tribal identity, were eradicated under Christian influence. Similarly, various indigenous ceremonies, sacrificial rituals, and animistic beliefs were either discarded or reinterpreted through a Christian lens. However, despite the widespread conversion, remnants of traditional religious practices persisted. Elements of indigenous spirituality, such as belief in an invisible supreme being, observance of communal feasts, and the use of traditional musical instruments in religious worship, continued alongside Christian teachings (Downs 1994, 152).

The missionaries also played a crucial role in altering social hierarchies within Rengma society. Christianity introduced new forms of leadership, often elevating individuals who were educated in missionary schools over traditional leaders. The influence of the church gradually superseded the authority of tribal elders and chiefs, leading to a restructuring of Rengma political and social institutions. As a result, religious and political authority became increasingly fragmented, contributing to the decline of traditional governance systems.

Furthermore, the introduction of Western education played a crucial role in shaping new political ideologies among the Rengmas. Educated Rengmas, many of whom were products of missionary schools, began advocating for political representation and engagement in broader regional and national affairs. This marked a shift from the insular governance of the past to active participation in state and national politics. Despite the profound disruptions caused by colonial rule and Christianization, the Rengmas have retained aspects of their traditional identity. While many indigenous religious practices have faded, cultural elements such as traditional festivals, folklore, and communal rituals continue to be celebrated. The influence of the church remains strong, shaping not only spiritual life but also social and political dynamics within the community. However, the decline of traditional institutions such as the Morung and the chieftainship underscores the lasting impact of colonialism and Christianity on Rengma society.

The transformation of Rengma society illustrates a broader pattern observed among indigenous communities subjected to colonial rule and missionary influence. The interplay of colonial governance, Christian evangelization, and indigenous agency resulted in a hybrid socio-political structure where elements of tradition coexist with modern institutions. This transition, while leading to the decline of certain cultural practices, also facilitated new avenues for political participation and social organization.

## **X. Conclusion**

Colonial administration, missionary activities, and Western education led to the erosion of indigenous religious practices, the decline of age-old institutions like the Morung, and a reconfiguration of the socio-political order. The arrival of colonialism and Christianity among the Rengma Naga marked a profound transformation in their traditional way of life. The Christian faith, despite initial resistance, gradually gained widespread acceptance, introducing new religious and moral frameworks while replacing several traditional customs. While this transition contributed to the abolition of practices such as headhunting and slavery, it also led to the weakening of indigenous belief systems and the restructuring of political authority. The traditional role of village chieftains, once deeply intertwined with spiritual and administrative leadership, underwent a shift, as the influence of church institutions and modern governance systems expanded.

However, the legacy of colonial rule and the spread of Christianity also laid the groundwork for modern political consciousness among the Rengmas. Exposure to Western education and administrative structures enabled the Rengma Nagas to engage with emerging political discourses in the region. As traditional authority structures weakened, a new political awareness emerged, fueling aspirations for self-governance and recognition within broader state mechanisms. The evolution of political institutions among the Rengma Nagas was not merely a byproduct of colonial intervention but also a response to the changing socio-political landscape in which they found themselves.

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