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Rice-beer, purification, and debates over religion and culture in Northeast India

Introduction

As an introduction to my research, I received an invitation to visit the local schoolteacher, Helui, during my first week in a Zeme Naga village that I will call Hsongle in the Indian state of Assam, in January 2005.¹ I was slightly anxious, as I was told that Helui held considerable sway amongst the villagers, due to the fact that his father was a famous, and somewhat notorious, headman for many years. I thought his opinion about me and my research would matter. So, along with my research assistant, Tahulung, I climbed the steep hill to his house on the top of the village, called ‘upper Hsongle’. Range after range of hills come into view in the distance from this vantage point. Smoke is visible from nearer villages on hilltops, as people start tending the hearth for their morning meal. Looking down one can see the quiet murmur of families slowly moving about their daily chores, getting ready to walk to their fields.

We are led to the Helui’s house and a woman brings two cups of freshly brewed rice-beer (Zeme: *zao*). I quickly exchange a glance with Tahulung murmuring under my breath ‘it’s five in the morning...!’? Before we could begin any conversation, Helui arrives and another cup is poured for him as well. He carefully lifts the cup and with his index finger, sprinkles some on the floor as libation to the ‘spirits of the house’.

We begin talking and drinking; the woman making sure our cups are always full.

This goes on until 7 in the morning, till our conversation becomes unintelligible and

I am grateful to Joe Doherty, Jeanne Openshaw, Steven Sutcliffe, and members of the Edinburgh writing group, Aya Ikegame, Jacob Copeman and the two anonymous reviewers for reading and offering valuable comments on an earlier draft. Thanks to Gordon Graham for fruitful conversations over aspects of the paper, and I owe a great deal to Lindsay Graham who read and discussed various versions of the paper. Her insistence on clarity above all else has greatly improved this paper. My final thanks to all the Zeme friends who shared their homes and their stories over cups of *zao* and tea.

¹ Except for the town Haflong, all place and proper names are pseudonyms.

soporific. Heavily inebriated and unable to walk down the hill, we pause for a while in a neighbour's house to get something to eat. I would later learn two or three things from this encounter, aside from building a tolerance for rice-beer for the remaining of my time in Hsongle.

While drinking at five in the morning was not always avoidable during my research, I did manage to negotiate with my hosts for another beverage like tea or to learn the more difficult route of saying 'no'! I would later learn from my gracious host that morning that he wanted to test me to see if I was a Christian missionary. 'Why?' I implored, 'you could have easily asked?' Asking is one thing, he said, but seeing how people behave is another. Christian missionaries would seldom, if ever, accept rice-beer from a non-Christian because they would think that the drink has some power and agency from the ancestors. Given the fact that Christianity would reprimand its members for drinking or making rice-beer, the most obvious way to observe the behaviour of an outsider is to see, at least in his explanation, their attitudes towards it. Not only did I pass the test, but it also provided me with a lesson in how rice-beer delineates boundaries in the village, both physical and religious, while raising important questions with regard to how material things, like food and drink, shape religious identities.²

² In India for example there is a strong link between food, caste and religion (see McKim Marriott, 'Caste Ranking and Food Transactions, a Matrix Analysis' in *Structure and Change in Indian Society*, ed. Milton Singer & Bernard S. Cohn (eds.), (Chicago: Viking Fund Publications in Anthropology, no. 47, 1968); Dywer, R. 2004. 'Editorial: the Cultural Meaning of Food in South Asia' in *South Asia Research* 24, vol.1, (1968), pp.5-7; James Staples, 2008. 'Go on, just try some!': Meat and Meaning-Making among South Indian Christians in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 31, vol.1, (2008), pp.36-55; C. Osella, 'Introduction: South Asia special issue on Food', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 31, vol.1, (2008), pp.1-9. With regard to alcohol however, with a few exceptions (for example, Aya Ikegame & Crispin Bates, 'Time Gentlemen: Bangalore and its drinking cultures' in *Cities in South Asia*, Crispin Bates & Minoru Mio eds., (London: Routledge, 2015)), studies remain limited, though no substantial work has been done on indigenous drinks like rice-beer, which is different from alcohol on many fronts.

While the specific concern of this paper is with the drinking behaviour of the Zeme Nagas, I hope to address the larger question of the circulation of ideas brought by the colonial and Christian missionaries into social and cultural spaces quite different from their own. One way to frame this interaction is to examine the salient tension between worldviews inhabited by indigenous religions and Christianity; and the paradox that this represents in the Zeme's encounters, particularly in the manner in which 'religion' and 'culture' are increasingly viewed as distinct modes of thinking and behaviour. Rather than rehearse well-known and important critiques of these discussions³, I aim to demonstrate how the terms 'religion' and 'culture' were influenced by 19th century Victorian interlocutors – the enthusiastic missionaries and colonial administrators – but equally how local discourses have appropriated these colonial concepts as a point of leverage for internal social dynamics in contemporary times.

To allow for some pause before we delve into these deliberations, a set of fundamental questions, proposed by Webb Keane, will help to anchor this debate: when does religion stop and culture begin? Is religion inherently cultural? When is culture salvageable and when is it 'false religion' (Keane 2007: 86)? While Keane is applying these questions in the Indonesian context between Victorian ideas, Dutch missionaries, and the local Sumbanese interlocutors, as I will show, it can be applied equally to the Zeme Nagas. These encounters are widespread across the globe and each has its own character but it is important to have a point of entry from which we

³ Talal Asad, *The Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Webb Keane, 'The evidence of the senses and the materiality of religion' in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14 (2008), pp.110–127.

can start to analyse and understand these complexities. It is the example of rice-beer that can serve as this point of entry. Not only does it provide a microscopic examination of a material artefact that people engage with in their daily lives, but it also enables us to answer some of the compelling and intricate questions with regard to belonging in a multi-religious setting.

The paper will use ethnographic and historical examples from North Cachar Hills, Assam, and neighbouring regions of Nagaland, to answer these questions. Basing my study primarily on one village, Hsongle, I will argue that attitudes towards rice-beer are shaped by, and are a consequence of, their religious affiliations, the trajectory of conversions, and their choice of locale or colonies. In other words, not only are moral sanctions vital in deciding where one belongs – whether non-Christian or Christian – but also where one lives is determined by the religious affiliations. For instance, the Baptists who eschew rice-beer live in their own colony to avoid mixing with the Catholics or Presbyterians who do not. While the tradition of rice-beer amongst the Zeme was strongly shaped by their custom and tradition, with the coming of foreign and local missionaries, and prohibitionist ideas from the Baptists of Nagaland, the nature of these ancestral ties quickly became a source of tension and challenge amongst the Zeme themselves.

Based on Victorian notions of ‘animism’ and the work of ‘purification’, particularly in delineating ‘true’ from ‘false’ religion,⁴ the missionaries applied these ideas haphazardly to their indigenous subjects, which introduced incongruities between

⁴ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Trans. Catherine Porter, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the mission encounter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

their Christian ideals, and those they ‘converted’. Historical examples amongst the Nagas suggest that rice-beer was often used as a way to sift ‘actual’ and ‘nominal’ Christian converts, checking to see if they could meet the ‘standard’. However, rice-beer continues to present a problem today due to its religious and cultural attributes. It becomes significant in enabling us to understand the boundaries between religion and culture: when is rice-beer simply cultural practice, or religious ritual? When is it something to be abstained from for moral reasons? I will suggest that these questions are not so straightforward due to the difficulty of reconciling religion and culture that perplexed, and continues to perplex, missionaries, administrators, reformers, converts, and ethnographers both in the historical and contemporary milieu. Before a careful investigation of these questions will be offered, however it is important to understand the context.

Hsongle: Boundaries ‘on the ground’

I began my fieldwork in 2005 amongst the Zeme Nagas of North Cachar Hills in what is now the state of Assam in India. I will draw my analysis from the Zeme village of Hsongle, and the influence of Baptist Christianity from the Indian state of Nagaland, especially the neighbouring Nagas such as the Ao tribe, who provide a rich history in terms of the early Baptist missionary and colonial contact. Hsongle is interesting because of its size, and a varied spatial organisation that corresponds roughly with the religious diversity on offer. The diversity of religious traditions it represents displays a microcosm of activities, mirroring the macrocosm of forces in the North Cachar Hills, and the neighbouring Indian states of Nagaland and Manipur. Unlike the predominantly adjoining Baptist Christians of the Naga inhabited areas of Nagaland

and Manipur, the Zeme of the North Cachar Hills have both a growing Christian and a majority non-Christian population.

There are three religious traditions in Hsongle (and the larger North Cachar Hills).

The largest of these is the Heraka, followed by the Christians. Heraka is a religious reform movement which began in the 1930s and has evolved in several stages, principally organised under their second prophet Rani Gaidinliu. The Heraka is a reform of the ancestral practice known as Paupaise.⁵ The reforms primarily happened around the adoption of a transcendent sky god, Tingwang, which meant that the Heraka had to alter their sacrificial practices, and subsequently abandon them.

Making this move also meant that a new cosmology was fashioned that circumvented ancestral deities and spirits for Tingwang, without ignoring their powers completely.⁶ In fact, the initial reforms were primarily linked with economic ease prompted by the reduction (and eventual abolishment) of sacrifices.⁷ In the words of the reformers, the new practices were materially 'lighter' (a similar point is made by Christians who have converted from Paupaise).

Christianity amongst the Zeme was first introduced by J. Garlan Williams, a missionary of the Calvinistic Methodist Church of Wales (later known as the Presbyterian Church of Wales), in the North Cachar Hills in 1904.⁸ Christian conversion among the Zeme of the North Cachar Hills was initially slow primarily

⁵ Paupaise pervades the whole of social life, that is coextensive with formal rituals, sacrifice, household taboos, clothes, drink, food, sleeping, cultivating techniques, gender relations, etc.

⁶ Arkotong Longkumer, 'Cleanliness is next to godliness': Religious change, Hygiene and the Renewal of Heraka villages in Assam, India' in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 45 no. 2 (2011), pp.189-216.

⁷ Arkotong Longkumer, 'Religious and Economic Reform: the Gaidinliu Movement and the Heraka in North Cachar Hills' in *Journal of South Asian Studies* 30 (2007), pp. 499-515.

⁸ The Welsh Presbyterians were primarily operating from the Lushai and Khasi Hills (present state of Mizoram and Meghalaya in India respectively) in 1891 (Lal Dena, *Christian Missions and Colonialism: A Study of Missionary Movement in Northeast India with Particular Reference to Manipur and Lushai Hills 1894-1947* (Shillong: Vendrame Institute, 1988), p.41-6.

because their progress was actively opposed by the competitive other, the Heraka. However, two revivals in 1948 and 1978 significantly strengthened the growth of Christianity in the North Cachar Hills. Subsequently, the first Baptist mission penetrated Hsongle and other Zeme villages from Manipur (and later Nagaland), around 1975-76. The Baptist mission from Manipur had its first Zeme 'convert' from the Presbyterian Church around 1979.⁹ The Roman Catholics have entered Zeme villages in the last 20 years or so through the Salesians of Don Bosco and the Holy Cross missions.¹⁰

In light of the proliferation of different religious traditions and their choice of locale, Hsongle is arranged in colonies according to religious affiliations. When the initial Zeme Christians converted, they were segregated from the parent *in situ* Paupaise/Heraka villages, whose sacrifices, taboos, and non-working days associated with rituals conflicted with the beliefs held by Christians. Thus coexistence became a challenge for both Christians and non-Christians. Therefore, in Hsongle the Christian colonies¹¹ comprise of converts – the Presbyterian colony was the result of the movement of converted families from the traditional Paupaise/Heraka settlement area. The Baptist and Roman Catholics colonies are the result of movement from the Heraka and the Presbyterian colonies. These boundaries are distinguished, and

⁹ The Baptists view this as 'conversion'. For a similar account among the Christians of Taiwan who switch from Baptist to Presbyterian, and how it constitutes 'conversion', see D. K. Jordan, 'The Glyphomancy Factor: Observations on Chinese Conversion' in Robert Hefner (ed.), *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspective on a Great Transformation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p.285-6.

¹⁰ According to some estimates, the Zeme of North Cachar Hills has roughly around 40% Christian, compared to 60% Heraka (Rabi Pame, *The Zeme Naga Baptist Church, North Cachar Hills, Assam: A Study of culture and the Church*, Doctor of Missiology Thesis (Bangalore: South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies, 1996, p.61-62). While another source suggests that the Heraka population is almost 70% in North Cachar Hills making it one of the largest non-Christian areas in the Naga Hills (*ibid.*, p. 219).

¹¹ It is important here to note their use of the word 'colony' (in English) – 'where a group of people with a common interest live together' (*Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)).

movement between colonies conducted, to separate oneself from the different consumption, rules, and ideas surrounding rice-beer, and the way in which these collective identities brought about solidarity.¹² These spatial configurations are so interesting because they reflect cognitive and emotional boundaries, wherein the performance of ‘belief’ increasingly marks the territorial maps of religious belonging.¹³

The tradition of rice-beer

My first lesson in rice-beer was from Kisuing in upper Hsongle village who explained its intricacies and material value, both as a drink, and in its therapeutic and medicinal quality. He said, when ‘ill, mix it and drink with raw egg. The fermented rice is also a great cure against bee bites’. But it is the story of rice-beer, as a ‘gift from god’ that I remember most vividly.

A couple decided to go to the jungle for jhum for three days...and had sexual intercourse in the same spot, leaving behind their sexual fluids. Later, at that very spot, a tree (*nduihi bang*) grew. One day, a group of people went to the jungle for jhum and rested under that very tree. They cut some of the top branches, but did not pull it down; the branches were left hanging. In the meantime, they left their rice bundles wrapped in a banana leaf under the branches and went on with their jhum work. Liquid from the tree bark (*nduihi gei*) started dripping and fell on the banana leaf and mixed with the rice through a tiny hole in the leaf. When the workers came back to have their lunch, they got this wonderful smell. Upon

¹² During my fieldwork around three families relocated to the Baptist colony – two from the Heraka colony and one from the Presbyterians (this family later went back to Presbyterianism).

¹³ Belief can be understood in two ways: primarily as a ‘state of mind’ of assenting to set propositions (or ‘believe that’ model), in contrast to an activity whereby people’s commitments can be expressed in the ‘nonverbal ways they act out in the world’ (or ‘believe in’ model) (Joel Robbins, ‘Continuity thinking and the problem of Christian culture: Belief, time, and the anthropology of Christianity’ in *Current Anthropology* 48 vol.1, (2007), pp. 14-15). Amongst the Zeme for instance ‘belief’ is not a solitary act that is personal or private, but a public and observable behaviour that fits in with the ‘believe in’ model of acting out in the world in the sense of having trust (*kanumbe*) in someone or something. It pertains more to emotion than to cognition (see G. Lindquist & s. Coleman, ‘Against Belief?’ in *Social Analysis* 52, vol.1, (2008), pp. 1-18). However, Christians increasingly exercise the cognitive form of belief due to their avowed exclusivism, especially when marking their identity clearly from their non-Christian counterparts.

opening the banana leaves, the smell exploded and overtook their senses. This, they looked upon as a gift, a gift from god. They soon discovered that it was the liquid from the tree bark that was making the rice ferment. Thus, began the making of *zao*.¹⁴

Similarly, rice-beer was central to the Naga agricultural, feasting and ritual identity.

For example, Iris Odyou describes the significance of rice-beer as a ritual activity that is illustrated through the ceremonial Naga shawl, perpetuating both the identity of the maker, and the labour involved. Amongst the Sangtam Nagas for instance:

Feasting the village cannot take place without the cooperation and contribution of the wife who not only did the bulk of agricultural work but she also has to pound the rice and brew the beer for the feast and weave the ceremonial shawl. For her contribution she acquires the right to share in the high status gained by her husband. Wives and daughters of Sangtam Naga can wear a shawl with diamond shaped patterns symbolizing the grains of rice used in feasting the villagers and also the X-shaped pattern symbolizing the pounding mortar and pestle for the rice pounded to make rice beer.¹⁵

Depending on the type, it can be sweet and red (particularly made with red sticky rice), viscous white, or grainy. The most common one is white in colour and its density can be managed depending on the amount of water one adds to it. The less the water, the purer it is (and also more potent), it is believed. Rice-beer is part and parcel of their identity: to be a Zeme is to drink or use rice beer on important ritual occasions. Every public occasion is graced with rice-beer; the lack of it symbolises a lack of hospitality. The Paupaise and Heraka see the use of rice-beer as a vital aspect of their tradition, a 'gift from god'. They have gone to the extent of justifying its use by using the popular slogan 'loss of culture is loss of identity', even when inebriated. Therefore, rice-beer is pervasive in, and in fact coextensive with, their normal,

¹⁴ Arkotong Longkumer, *Reform, Identity and Narratives of Belonging* (London: Continuum 2010), pp. 129-130.

¹⁵ Iris Odyuo, 'The Various Aspects Of Naga Art' in *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science* (9), 4 (2013), p.17.

everyday routine and engages the individual in the practical network of relationships that constitute belief in ancestors, spirits and gods – it makes them ‘Zeme’.

Rice-beer is also associated with rituals that mark rites of passage, major feasts of merit, or festivals such as harvesting (*helienge*). Although different types are used for different purposes, its centrality in everyday life is emphasised, through, for example, libations that are made to the spirit of the house, as I first found out in my encounter with the schoolteacher. People also believe that intoxication makes the person more prone to ‘divine communication’. Jadonang, the first Heraka prophet, for instance, could communicate with god only if he drank rice-beer. In his confession before the Civil Surgeon of Manipur in the 1930s, he says that ‘I cannot dream unless I have *zu*, rice-beer’.¹⁶ But rice-beer also has a social function for the Paupaise, the older, ancestral practice. It delineates age distinctions.

Only older people are allowed to drink *nduizao* (rice-beer that uses an external fermenting agent from the bark of a tree), which is seen as stronger, and can only be handled by a person of that age. *Nduizao* is also taboo for younger people because, the Paupaise say, ‘it belongs to god’ (*herazao* [god’s *zao*]). *Tekuizao* or *Zao kesang* (grainy, less alcoholic rice-beer) can be drunk by all and is used on all ritual occasions, on the grounds that it is purer. Its purity is attributed to the exclusion of any fermenting agent, because all the ingredients are from rice. *Klezao* (watered down) is drunk particularly by children. The Heraka and Christians, however, do not observe these age distinctions in relation to rice-beer.¹⁷

¹⁶ Proceedings series: P/11892, British Library, Asia, Pacific & Africa Collections, India Office Records, No. 64.

¹⁷ Longkumer, *Reform, Identity and Narratives of Belonging*, pp.130-131.

Drink of the gods: boundary markers

So significant is rice-beer that it is the one thing that differentiates, on the surface, between the Paupaise, Heraka, Presbyterian, Catholic and Baptist. When I asked a recent Baptist convert Keseu from Heraka, why he became a Baptist, he said ‘primarily because I read the Bible and in particular the book of John. But also because the Baptists don’t drink rice-beer’. He chose the Baptists because not only do they abstain from rice-beer but also because ‘they submerge their whole bodies and therefore are pure Christians; Presbyterian and Catholics not only drink rice-beer but they don’t fully submerge’.

One can argue that almost everybody consumes rice-beer (some in secret), but it is the manner in which this is done that is significant. Only the Paupaise and Heraka will publicly drink and make rice-beer without constraints, either at home or for festivals. For them rice-beer is associated with the order of social relations of ritual and tradition. Since the Presbyterians and Catholics generally do not brew rice-beer or use it in public festivals, they provide income for the Heraka by buying from them. The Baptists conversely claim that they are a little more consistent by strictly avoiding rice-beer because of the moral value they place on abstinence. The Baptists are concerned with a direct relationship with God, mediated by the Holy Spirit. Baptism, which is a vital determinant of salvation, is freely chosen and not generally imposed. One of the reasons why the Baptist questions both the Presbyterian and the Catholic is because of ‘infant’ baptism; the element of free choice is markedly absent. It is the community who mediates and makes that choice for the individual.

Therefore, infant baptism and rice-beer are marked characteristics of non-Baptist Christians.¹⁸

But why is rice-beer such a significant boundary marker? Part of the reason has to do with the encounter with Christian missionaries during the mid-19th century and their strict prohibition of rice-beer amongst the Nagas. Furthermore, American Baptist attitudes, in particular, on abstinence have travelled widely and most Zeme Christians take their cue from the neighbouring Baptist Christians of Nagaland.

Missions and rice-beer

When the American Baptists first came in contact with the Nagas in the then Naga Hills in the mid-19th century, their restrictions on drinking rice-beer were stringent because it was seen as a barrier to ‘true’ conversion. The American missionaries were strongly influenced by the missionary zeal in America, following the Great Awakening and in particular the teachings of Jonathan Edwards (1703-58). David Kling¹⁹ argues that the modern American Protestant missionary spirit emerged within this context, through a theology of ‘New Divinity’. New Divinity embraced a form of reformed Calvinism to meet the challenges of the day and was seen as the rightful heir to the Puritan tradition. Their missionary tenets can be broken down into three main points.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.155. The case of the Catholics is interesting because they drink rice-beer publicly and privately. When I queried why this was so, most of them either said that the Priest from the town didn’t object to it, or that Jesus also drank wine. The Catholic population in Hsongle is tiny (numbering around 10 households) and although they have a small hut that functions as a church, they have no permanent Priest or a strong lay community.

¹⁹ David Kling, ‘The New Divinity and the Origins of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions’ in W.R. Shenk (ed.), *North American Foreign Missions, 1810-1914*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004).

First, they insisted on the absolute necessity of the new birth. Outward profession of faith or baptism was not enough; rather the inner and tangible work of the Holy Spirit had to be affirmed. Second, the universal spread of the gospel was predicated on the ‘means of salvation’. Human progress or ‘means’ towards betterment of their faith was not enough (such as regular reading of scripture). Instead, sinners were instructed to exhaust all human effort for God’s sovereignty and regeneration. Third, Christ’s unlimited atonement was promoted. Departing from traditional Calvinism of limited atonement of the elect or chosen, they argued that Christ’s atonement was sufficient to save each and every sinner anywhere in the world – becoming a persuasive prescription for global missions.²⁰ This influence of Calvinism can be extended into the Welsh Presbyterians as well, a point reiterated by a local Zeme scholar, Rabi Pame.²¹ He points to the centrality of the Bible, the work of the Holy Spirit and Christ’s atonement as paramount in realising the ‘meaninglessness of the animistic cycle of religious life’.²²

Armed with these theologies, missionaries in Assam and the Naga Hills wanted to sift ‘nominal converts’ from ‘actual converts’, as people often swayed between ancestral practices and Christianity. One way to conduct a thorough examination was through baptism, hoping that this outward act would be driven by the Holy Spirit and lead to ‘actual conversion’ – an idea that would have its own incongruities. Nevertheless, Christianity became a ‘matter of the heart’, corroborated by a perceptible experience.²³ For instance, amongst the Ao Nagas, those wanting to be baptised had to furnish evidence that they had not been drinking rice-beer for at least 3 months. Abstention

²⁰ *ibid.*, pp.20-24

²¹ Pame, *The Zeme Naga Baptist Church, North Cachar Hills, Assam*.

²² *Ibid.*, p.245.

²³ Kling, ‘The New Divinity and the Origins of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions’, p.20

from rice-beer – an Ao Christian would refer to himself as ‘a man who does not drink “madhu”’ [rice-beer] – was often regarded as the sign and hallmark of Christianity.²⁴

The American missionary Sidney Rivenburg in 1886 made a comment about rice-beer or what he called ‘maud-drinking’ that summarises mission attitudes and their ‘New Divinity’ theology:

They [Nagas] ferment rice, and it becomes eatable. So far, so good; but as fermentation proceeds, the liquid which trickles out is intoxicating. This they drink. It seems that the best thing would be to eat the fermented rice, but not drink the liquid. But the former leads to the latter, so we think we must teach them to dispense with both, lest the temple of the Holy Ghost be defiled.²⁵

The missionaries’ interpretation of alcohol was based on their arrogance connected with their ‘civilising mission’ – that rice-beer hampers development and makes the drinker lazy, incompetent, and sinful. It was also influenced by their American mid-West prohibitionist sentiments, which were widespread amongst Christian missionaries and colonial officials during the 19th and 20th century.²⁶

The Baptists’ preaching against the use of rice-beer emphasised the dire consequences for the drinker: ‘drinkers of rice beer...will burn in hell fire for ever’.²⁷ Despite this, some Ao Baptists were inconsistent with this moral rectitude, and slippage often occurred when a person wanted to drink rice-beer again. Since rice-beer was

²⁴ John P. Mills, *The Ao Nagas*, (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1973 [1926]), p.147.

²⁵ Riverburg, Sidney, ‘Prevailing vices, our treatment of them, in The Assam Mission of the American Baptist Missionary Union’ in *Papers and Discussions of the Jubilee Conference*, Held in Nowgong December 18-21, (Calcutta: Baptist Missions Press, 1886), p.227-8.

²⁶ M. Marshall, and L.B. Marshall, ‘Holy and unholy spirits: The Effects of Missionization on Alcohol Use in Eastern Micronesia’ in *The Journal of Pacific History* 11(1976), pp.135-166; Robin Room, ‘Alcohol as an Issue in Papua New Guinea: A View from the Outside’ in Marshall, M. (ed), *Through a glass darkly: beer and modernization in Papua New Guinea*, (Papua New Guinea: Institute of Applied Social and Economic Research, 1982), pp. 441-450.

²⁷ Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, *Return to the Naked Nagas: An Anthropologist’s view of Nagaland 1936-1970* (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1976), p.48.

available only with the non-Christians, the drinker usually had to foreswear his baptism before receiving a drink. Thus many Baptists drank secretly and with a ‘bad conscience’. J.P Mills, a British administrator, observes this dilemma when a Christian convert in the Naga Hills is tempted with rice-beer.

... one finds many men who have changed their faith as often as seven or eight times, or even more. A man will become a (nominal) Christian and be baptised. Then his soul yearns for ‘madhu’ [rice-beer] and, since anyone who touches alcohol is expelled from the Baptist community, he often goes the whole hog and joins the non-Christians again. Later he may change his mind, give up his ‘madhu’ and heathen practices and be readmitted to the Baptist Church.²⁸

In the Zeme context, the centrality of rice-beer takes on another dimension. When the Baptist church first established itself in Hsongle during the 1970s, most of its converts were from the Presbyterian churches. According to one Baptist witness, the Presbyterians ‘never adequately nurtured the word of God’.²⁹ In the view of such Baptists, the Presbyterians were un-Christian because their leaders allegedly consumed rice-beer, chewed pan (combination of betel leaf, *arica* nut and limestone), smoked tobacco and did not ‘live as servants of God’.³⁰ Indeed, the early Welsh Presbyterian missionaries allowed their Zeme converts to drink rice-beer, a practice which continues to this day. Due to this consumption, argues Pame, the missionary’s vision was altogether lost, the spiritual life was ‘cooled down’, and the growth of the church slowed considerably.³¹ Therefore, it is most likely that the earliest Zeme Presbyterians assumed that their conversion did not eliminate such local customs and manners. According to Malia, a Baptist convert from the Presbyterian church:

²⁸ Mills, *The Ao Nagas*, p.413-414.

²⁹ Pame, *The Zeme Naga Baptist Church, North Cachar Hills, Assam*, p.241

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ *ibid.*, p.95

Many Zeme Presbyterian Christians in North Cachar Hills still use rice beer openly as normal and accepted life style. Whereas the Baptists are strict about this vice in the church.³²

Although their activities began belatedly, nevertheless, approximately 21 Baptist churches have been established rapidly in the North Cachar Hills since 1979. I would argue that the success of the Baptist church is grounded on the notion that for some Zeme, it provides a clear break from the Heraka, Presbyterians, and Catholics (the three are seen as similar due to the use of rice-beer). It is interesting to note that although the Baptists' success rests on foregoing rice-beer, they require the conditions of material culture to make its rejection an ideological possibility in the first place.

While the influence of temperance movements had a reverberating effect on the Nagas, the larger problem with rice-beer, I would argue, was to do with its material effect (i.e., agency) and the danger it posed to Christian converts either due to its association with pre-Christian connotations, or because of the danger of reconversion.³³ Abstinence and the subsequent anxiety over rice-beer even in Zeme villages today illustrate this uneasy relation.

Rice-beer and agency

As my interactions with the schoolteacher make clear, a particular problem with rice-beer is its material effect: that it is able to communicate with ancestors and spirits by recognising their presence. Rice-beer in itself is not considered to have the power to make these connections, but rather it is human action that precipitates this kind of relation and this has further implications for those who repudiate this practice. Many Christians therefore say that they avoid the making and drinking of rice-beer because

³² *ibid.*, p.325

³³ Material objects are also important for Christians. The Bible, hymns, church, baptism, and other social practices also involve material interactions for Christians, but here I will focus simply on rice-beer.

they see it as having ‘agency’ – in that it has the ability to act upon humans, ancestors and the spirit world. This issue resonated more widely amongst the Zeme (and even other Nagas) to the extent that non-Christian practices – sacrifices, sharing of meat, venerating deities, taboos, and ancestors – were denounced as ‘satanic’ due to their perceived coercive powers.³⁴ In fact, Zinkeu, a Baptist converted from Heraka, fixes the problem solely on the moral agency of rice-beer, it being the main dividing line between the Christians and the non-Christians. ‘Their [Heraka] hope, and faith, in terms of inner spirituality’, he said, ‘is made corrupt by the use of *zao*’. Although we have already discussed the need for subtlety in our understanding of the ‘corrupting’ aspect of *zao*, it is worth noting that Zinkeu’s attitude may be primarily due to his ‘convert’s zeal’ and, therefore, his own strict Baptist worldview. However, he is also reluctant to acknowledge that many of his fellow Christians indulge in drinking due to his desire and fervour for a clear division between Heraka and Christian. But the larger point is that rice-beer is a problem that has its genesis in the missionary encounter, as we have seen, and has also taken a life of its own amongst the Zeme.

At the heart of these perceptions lies the attribution of agency to material things and the implications these have on the overall project of purification. Webb Keane, in his provocative book *Christian Moderns*,³⁵ situates the struggle of the mission encounter between the Dutch Calvinist and the Sumbanese interlocutors in Indonesia with the ‘moral problem of freedom’. In other words, underlying the idea of modernity is: how do we establish and sort proper boundaries between words, things, and subjects? How can we liberate humans from false beliefs and fetishisms that undermine

³⁴ Ramkhun Pamei, *Zeliangrong Nagas: A Study of Tribal Christianity*, (New Delhi: Uppal Publishing House, 1996); Asoso Yonuo, *Nagas Struggle Against British Rule Under Jadonang and Rani Gaidinliu 1925-1947*, (Kohima: Leno Printing Press, 1982).

³⁵ Keane, *Christian Moderns*.

freedom?³⁶ The answer to these questions, Keane suggests, lies in the work of purification, a concept borrowed from the French philosopher Bruno Latour.³⁷

Keane argues missionaries would reason that the ‘natives’ drew confusing distinctions between humans, things, and divinity: they attributed spirit to dead matter, and divine agency to ordinary creatures. The task of missionaries was therefore to explain that plants, trees, rocks and hills were not endowed with spirit (animism) and that the natives had erred by misascribing agency to non-human subjects (fetishism).

Animism thus became shorthand to characterise the fetishes, superstition, and the religion of the Nagas. Describing the ‘animistic religion’ of the Zeme, a 19th century Welsh Presbyterian missionary offers this unflattering description.

The main feature of Animism is the belief in evil spirits...Sickness, suffering, and misfortune are all traced to their malign influence. The priest by means of various forms of divination, is able to ascertain which spirit has been offended and what sacrifice it demands – a fowl, a pig...suffice it to say now that the people spend their lives in bondage to fear and superstition.³⁸

It is worth noting here at least that Edward Tylor’s animism was developed partly as a way to endow ‘the phenomena of nature with personal life’.³⁹ Animism was shorthand to describe the behaviour of primitive cultures in their attempts to ascribe anima onto nature in a very localised setting – ‘local spirits that belong to mountain and rock and valley, to well and stream and lake – in brief, to those natural objects which in early ages aroused the savage mind to mythological ideas’.⁴⁰ In a way,

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.5

³⁷ Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*. Writing from the perspective of science and technology, what Latour identified as the ‘work of purification’ is concerned with separating the human and the nonhuman, nature from society, the world of agency and that of natural determinism (cited in Keane, *Christian Moderns*, pp. 7, 23).

³⁸ John Hugh Morris, *A Land of Many Tribes: The Story of our Mission work on the North Cachar Hills* (Caernarvon: Calvinistic Methodist Book Agency, n.d.).

³⁹ Edward B. Tylor, ‘The Religion of the Savages’ in *Fortnightly Review* 6 (1866), pp.84.

⁴⁰ George Laurence Gomme, *Ethnology in Folklore*, (Kegan Paul: Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd, 1892), pp.67-8.

Tylor's theory of animism was developed against the unhelpful currency of the term 'fetishism'⁴¹ as well as giving us an alternative against the category of Spiritualism.⁴² Morris' explanation is of interest because it treats Zeme animism as very suspicious, an error that is also dangerous. But it also raises the important question of Christ's atonement as a universal principle – freeing oneself from the superstition of animism towards 'true conversion'.

It is worth noting that Tylor's notion of animism evolved as a means of rationalising animist behaviour (or 'primitive cultures') not as an error of judgement but as lacking knowledge.⁴³ For instance, for those on the bottom of the ladder ('rude races') spirits and soul had an 'ethereality' or 'vaporous materiality'.⁴⁴ The higher one climbed, the more spirits would attenuate in materiality until physical presence would disappear altogether, culminating in the apogee of religious evolution exemplified by Protestant Christianity.⁴⁵ Hence, Tylor's minimalist definition of religion as 'the belief in Spiritual Beings'⁴⁶ in a way universalised it and underscored the Victorian understanding of religion as belief-oriented, divorced from the materialities of everyday religious practice. Later missionaries probably translated this 'lack' of animist knowledge as an opportunity to point to its inadequacies and supplant it with the one 'true' religion.

⁴¹ This was related to the Christian theory of witchcraft that explained the 'false sacramental objects of superstition' and more generally to the church's theory of idolatry – that 'idols' are 'fraudulent manufactured resemblances' (William Pietz, 'The Problem of the Fetish, II' in *Anthropology and Aesthetics* 13, (1987), pp. 23-45).

⁴² That immaterial power/spirit was energising an inanimate object, and communicating through foreign bodies (spirit mediums). Had it not been for the modern sect of Spiritualism, Tylor says that the term spiritualism would have been an appropriate term for primitive religion (Tylor, *Primitive Culture* Vol. 1, p. 426).

⁴³ Keane, *Christian Moderns*, p.94

⁴⁴ Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture* Vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1903), p.457

⁴⁵ Matthew Engelke, 2012. 'Material Religion' in Robert Orsi, R (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p.210-11.

⁴⁶ Tylor, *Primitive Culture* Vol. 1, p.424

According to this logic, rice-beer becomes a kind of fetish for Christians as its meaning has been manufactured by humans to communicate with spirits and gods. A local Zeme Naga notes that once Zeme became Christian converts, in contrast to their non-Christian neighbours, they could ‘not comply with the traditional ways of drinking, taking meat which had been offered to evil spirits, worshipping rocks, trees, rivers and observing all the customs which they were required to keep’.⁴⁷ Through ‘Christ’s way of life’ they recognised their animistic error. They even risked adopting Christianity despite threats from their non-Christian kin.⁴⁸ Likewise, another local writer Asoso Yonuo, notes how the local Christians wanted to ‘tear down all the odd Animistic systems operating on human life’ – and in this regard, like above, age-old deities, spirits, the practice of sacrifice, divination, and the consumption rice-beer and sacrificial meat were ‘demoted and interpreted by Christians as devils or satans’.⁴⁹

This sort of fetishism helped explain to the Zeme Christians that ‘superstitious’ religious behaviour was nothing but false causal reasoning about physical nature that made the peoples’ relation to material objects central rather than God.⁵⁰ A Presbyterian church elder in Hsongle told me that ‘*zao* is not good; festivals and rituals are not good either because the non-Christians worship different gods, not a proper God’. Distancing themselves from rice-beer’s source and effects, purification for Christians is not to do away with material things but to change their meaning and restore them to their proper place.⁵¹ Many urban Christians in towns like Haflong told me that drinking alcohol without spiritual power, like Gin and Rum, is thus an

⁴⁷ Pamei, *Zeliangrong Nagas*, p.50

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ Yonuo, *Nagas Struggle Against British Rule Under Jadonang and Rani Gaidinliu 1925-1947*, p.32-3

⁵⁰ William Pietz, ‘Fetishism and Materialism: The Limits of Theory in Marx’ in Emily Apter & William Pietz, (eds.), *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 138-9.

⁵¹ Keane, *Christian Moderns*, p.200

acceptable form of sociability because the meanings of things have been organised and the rules altered. In the same vein, for some Christians non-ritual rice-beer is permissible because they now separate out its social usage (conceived as religiously neutral) from its religious (conceived as pagan) functions.⁵² This kind of secularisation means that rice-beer has been freed from its previous service to ‘animism’. What is particularly ironic is that for Tylor, animism was developed as a way to bring religion under the ambit of culture – his tome *Primitive Culture* expresses this position: ‘Culture, or civilization, taken in its broad, ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society’.⁵³ Yet what we see in these mission encounters is an effort to separate ‘religion’ – that which is universal – from ‘culture’ – that which is particular.⁵⁴

Splitting hairs: religion and culture

The terms ‘religion’ and ‘culture’ in a general, cognitive sense, do not translate accurately into Zeme, or for that matter into Naga languages. I use them primarily to illustrate how the various actors (foreign and local) attempt to sort and assign things and ideas to their proper places. Furthermore, ‘religion’ and ‘culture’ are used by indigenous actors (sometimes in English) as shorthand to describe the separation of the different domains of activities which were once a ‘total social fact’.⁵⁵ *Ra-se* (god/spirit practice) is thus translated loosely as ‘religion’ and *ki-se* (house practice) and *tu-lung* (bodily practice) as ‘culture’. Both the constituent parts are notable for their elasticity - stretched when searching questions are asked about where certain

⁵² *ibid.*, p.246

⁵³ Tylor, *Primitive Culture* Vol. 1, p.1

⁵⁴ Keane, *Christian Moderns*, p.112

⁵⁵ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies*, (London: Routledge, 1990 [1922]).

practices lie, and reshaped to their original form once these interests subside. Thus there is no ‘original’ template of religion and culture all abide by (though some claim it), but it is important to note that its dynamism means that newer forms are created throughout time. Therefore, even for the Christians and the Heraka newer configurations of religion and culture are imagined.

When Christians and the Heraka say that they have reformed from Paupaise, they articulate the notion that it is only ‘religion’ (*ra-se*) that has altered, everything else from Zeme custom (*Zemese*) remains intact. The Paupaise, on the other hand, label both Christians and the Heraka as *perua* (empty); they say, once you alter a part of *Zemese* you change the entirety of it. An instance of how these conceptual categories – religion and culture – are marked by Baptist missionaries working amongst the Tangkhul Nagas in Ukhrul, Manipur is interesting here:

Many of the church members and workers had participated in the great tribal feasts, which include sacrificing to evil spirits, apparently not realizing the inconsistency of such action with their profession of Christianity. When the issue was clearly drawn, seven of the little church of thirty-five remained steadfast...The remaining members...seemingly have returned to heathenism⁵⁶.

Central to the debate concerning the engagement of global religions such as Christianity with local traditions was: how does one negotiate with the past? What can be rejected or permitted? This largely depended on what was salvageable: if harmless, it was seen as culture, and differentiated from ‘false religion’.⁵⁷ This is related, as different scholars have pointed out,⁵⁸ to the compartmentalisation of

⁵⁶ Mary Clark, *A Corner in India* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publications Society, 1978 [1907]), p. 155

⁵⁷ Keane, *Christian Moderns*, p.85

⁵⁸ Asad, *The Genealogies of Religion*; Louis Dumont, ‘Religion, Politics, and Society in the Individualistic Universe’ in *Proceedings of the Royal Anthropological Institute for 1970* (1971), p. 31-41.

religion, law, economy, and politics as distinct domains, which is very much a product of post-Reformation Europe's separation of church and state.

In the same manner, for the Christians and the Heraka, reforming only 'religion' and advocating the preservation of local cultures became a focal point of their movements. Careful attention is placed on the neutral aspects of local culture worth preserving, while purifying aspects of pre-Christian 'false religion'. Therefore, for some Christians it is okay to drink rice-beer if it is not within a ritual context or to accept meat from non-Christians only if these were not a result of sacrifices. It is acceptable to wear traditional Zeme body cloths or the *talau dui* (a necklace made with conch shells) because these are now, allegedly, free from any pre-Christian rites and connotations. Central to these revisions is the concern of preserving culture as the arena of local and concrete expressions, while religion serves to distinguish itself as a universal and immaterial phenomenon – one that floats above culture.

Discussing the difficulty for Christian converts to distance themselves from Zeme traditional culture, Pame notes how Zeme Christians are sometimes as 'superstitious' as non-Christians. Of the amalgamation of ancestral ritual with Christian ceremonies, Pame says,

No question were [sic] raised about religious ceremonies because these were plainly pagan practices fully contradictory to the Biblical teachings. The problem has always been with social ceremonies, on the argument that all cultural practices are not necessarily sinful. So it is natural to people to modify it and retain them as Zeme culture even of Christians as part of their heritage.⁵⁹

Sorting out 'what is good' and 'what is evil' is a difficult task for Zeme Christians.

What this discussion suggests is that 'religion' is increasingly understood as interiorised in relation to tradition: that it is related to a mental state or conviction in

⁵⁹ Pame, *The Zeme Naga Baptist Church, North Cachar Hills, Assam*, p.306

which a certain world-view is held to be ‘true’ rather than ‘false’.⁶⁰ In other words, there is a strong sense in which the Christians’ disassociation with pre-Christian material culture like rice-beer relates to their notions of sin and immorality, and exercising belief over external performances of identity.

Once the split between religion and culture occurred, people were calling for the preservation of culture (as a secular activity) that does not come into conflict with the religious aspects. The anthropologist von Fürer-Haimendorf for example valorises the ‘secular’ aspects of Naga culture such as dress, ornaments, feasts of merit, rice-beer and so on, which he claims (mistakenly?) are not inherently connected with religion. He argues that those ‘secular’ activities would actually have complemented Naga Christianity had it not been for the excessive and puritanical ideas of early American missionaries.⁶¹ Similarly, Robert Reid notes that:

The rather iconoclastic zeal of the earlier missionaries who saw evil in anything that savoured of heathenism has in modern times given way, to the great advantage of all, to a more sensible policy, which is prepared to preserve all that is good in old custom so long as it is not inconsistent with Christian teaching.⁶²

Both von Fürer-Haimendorf and Reid interpret culture as a semantically neutral activity that is largely separated from religion. Religion, in both their cases, is treated as an objective, inner activity that can co-exist with the outer domain of culture. In fact, most Christians are puzzled by the Heraka/Paupaise. They are simply classed as a social and cultural organisation: ‘they have no religion’. Yet, as this paper has shown debates about religion and culture are shaped by certain folk sociology from

⁶⁰ Deborah Tooker, ‘Identity Systems of Highland Burma: “Belief”, Akha Zan, and a Critique of Interiorized Notions of Ethno-Religious Identity’ in *Man* 27 vol. 4 (1992), p. 802.

⁶¹ von Fürer-Haimendorf, *Return to the Naked Nagas*, p.255

⁶² Robert Reid, ‘The Excluded Areas of Assam’ in *The Geographical Journal* 102, N.1-2 (1944), p.22.

the West that has taken a life of its own in the Zeme context. Although Christians are invested in the project of purification and what it means to be 'pure', material things like food and drink and the values they evoke continue to mediate the growing tension between practice and belief and in the process threaten and violate this boundary.

Rice-beer and moral development

Once rice-beer loses its ability to have an effect on humans or is stripped of any agency, it becomes a 'social' activity. The pervasiveness of its consumption has meant that rules about the time, place, and occasion of drinking have become increasingly redundant. The irony is that once rice-beer becomes pluralised and divested into a secular sphere, the problems related to rice-beer emerge and it becomes open to abuse. Its previous ritual status made it restrictive - but now planting it firmly within the domain of the secular, its previous service to ancestors and gods has changed to serve the needs of thirsty merchants and consumers. For Christians, this raises questions of moral discipline, which are related to social and economic mobility: that (a) drinking affects the overall moral balance of the person and hinders development; (b) prohibition enables the emergence of a better society. These views have generally shaped the discourse of rice-beer in contemporary times.

The issue of development and progress is therefore strongly associated with rice-beer in most Zeme households. On the one hand, rice-beer is seen as a threat to the pursuit of hard work, education, and the accumulation of capital, which can be described as an ethic that is puritanical or capitalist. Compare this with working families in 19th century Britain who became abstainers because they wanted their children to get ahead in the world.⁶³ On the other hand, making rice-beer generates capital for

⁶³ Room, 'Alcohol as an Issue in Papua New Guinea', p. 445.

families (particularly the Heraka) and creates consumers on a local and regional level that sustains micro-economies, because rice-beer, especially in the towns, is one of the main material consumables. It is, for some Heraka families, the main source of income. Yet, rice-beer has become an odd bedfellow for the Heraka, mainly men. For instance, Irangjeing, who works in Hsongle medical centre, told me how the village council often talk about reducing *zao*: drinking *zao* means, the council often said, ‘being backward and uncivilised. After drinking *zao* they cannot clean up and are dirty’. Besides these civilisational proclamations that are often widespread, many Heraka women complain that the men are addicted to rice-beer, causing a lot of hardships in the family home. In response to these complaints, a local male Heraka preacher in Hsongle, Haije, reminded the villagers at a community meeting:

...why do you spend all your money on *zao*, instead of sending your children to school; I ask you to stop these practices. Only then will we be able to compare with other communities [read Christian] and we can save money, send children to good school.

Most women I talked to reason that this is because rice-beer has largely been deprived of its ritual connotation and is freely brewed and drunk for non-ritual purposes.

Wangsam, a Heraka leader in Hsongle, noted how the Heraka are lagging behind the Christians because of the abuse of *zao* and how her role as a mother is to teach her children to avoid drinking *zao* and to pursue education. As Haije and Wangsam suggest, these conversations are related to the broader question of education and development. The drinking of rice-beer can be very expensive; the buying and making of it also very time consuming. Since the Christians are less engaged in the production of rice-beer for public occasions, they incur less expense both in terms of money and time, providing an ideal Weberian template of the interaction between

economy, religion and society.⁶⁴ Therefore, if Christians are much better off in terms of economic wealth, which can be then reinvested into creating more social capital, isn't Christianity more attractive?

There are different attempts at answering this question. Non-Christians often say that once a person stops drinking rice-beer then isn't it better to become Christian? Indeed, some people, wanting to accept Christianity because of educational facilities, but eager to retain their beer drinking habits, join the Catholics or Presbyterians where it is tolerated. These issues are not flippant, but seriously considered in light of the problem of rice-beer. Speaking to a Heraka, Newme, about his addiction to rice-beer he said: 'when I realised that I was drinking unlimitedly, I asked myself if I should convert to Christianity, if I transfer my religion, then I will quit *zao*'.

Although he remained a Heraka through the process (some do not), changing behaviour, in some cases, is simply associated with adopting a new practice, far from professing any doctrine or statement of faith, an observation made earlier by Mills as well with regard to the Ao Christians.

Although it is difficult to ascertain the exact nature of these conversions over rice-beer, the Zeme Baptist converts, in retrospect, say that the Baptist church offered clearer boundaries prohibiting the use of rice-beer, whereas the other churches seem to have fuzzy boundaries concerning rice-beer. However, did they *really* convert to stop drinking? Is their abstinence the result of these explicit boundaries, or did they convert regardless of this issue surrounding rice-beer? In these turf wars, cause and effect are often muddled. The fuzziness of these categories is significant precisely because the division between religion and culture has been so widely accepted. But

⁶⁴ Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Fischhoff, E. (London: Methuen & Co Ltd., 1965).

the fact that the lived reality is a blend of these two categories – as we have seen in this example of rice-beer – reminds us that to make this distinction so decisively is to misunderstand, to some extent, the nature of both religion and culture.

Conclusion: rice-beer and the everyday

Like most times in ethnographic research, one gets used to a certain kind of routine surrounding eating and drinking. When discussing, interviewing, participating in events, or simply having a friendly banter, food and drink almost always make an entrance to the habitual patterns of these recurring ethnographic instances. At least in my case, food and, especially, drink marked my sense of time while also reminded me of the boundaries of religious affiliations, and those of tradition and custom. The lesson I learnt early on during my fieldwork gave me an insight into how everyday things like rice-beer can be ‘read’ as provoking ways of thinking and belonging in a village like Hsongle, in the wider Naga regions, and more generally.

This paper has shown how certain historical boundaries between material artefact and religion cannot be so easily maintained. The case of the Zeme (and other related Nagas) and rice-beer provides a useful insight into this discussion. It was the missionaries’ general position that pre-Christian material aspects of Zeme culture were inimical to the ‘true’ inner (and abstract) meaning of Christianity, influenced largely by the ‘New Divinity’ theology. The inner spiritual life, it was hoped at least, would be inculcated not only through scripture, and daily church attendance, but also through the ‘means of salvation’ that depended on the ‘actuality’ of conversion corroborated by a purity of heart. That is why the Baptist missionaries in particular imposed such strict ‘standards’ upon converts by examining their drinking behaviour. What this has meant is that ‘religion’ is gradually being considered a dematerialised

and distinct feature of society, based largely on belief as a cognitive exercise. The older forms of material culture (rice-beer, clothes, shells, beads, shawls) are therefore treated as anachronistic and are separated from ‘false religion’, incorporated as a prop only if they do not contradict with ‘true religion’. It is the Christians (or even more the Baptists) who seem to be invested in this project of purification more than the other groups whereby the distinction between religion and culture serves their purpose to certain ends.

Moving away from Tylor’s stipulations, discussions on animism were not only relegated to primitive irrationality that needed supplanting with a higher form, but provided the grounds to dismiss indigenous practices as an error of judgement, based on manufactured human frailties (fetishism) that led to even deeper ‘superstitious’ behaviour. The Zeme themselves navigate the terrain of how these operate in their everyday situations – what is acceptable and what is not; to what constitutes proper drinking behaviour once stripped of ‘agency’; to the various social problems arising once it becomes ‘secularised’. In this way, the set of questions I posed at the beginning, drawn from Keane’s analysis of the uncertain points of separation and intersection of religion and culture, suggests that bringing these in order, a venture started by the missionaries, has also been inherited by indigenous actors for internal social dynamics. The example of rice-beer then provides an analysis of how these dynamics unfold.

With the non-Christians, the relationship with rice-beer varies. For the Paupaise – the ancestral practice – rice-beer generally continues to function as before – in that it continues to mediate their relationship with the gods, spirits and ancestors. For the

Heraka – the indigenous reform movement – it is slightly more ambiguous. Although rice-beer is associated with ritual activities, such as its use during important religious events, festivals, and acknowledging ancestors, it is associated with abuse and lacking moral discipline because its strict ritual and age distinctions have largely been altered and forgotten. By contrast, the Christians’ increasing emphasis on belief being prior to practice results in their piecemeal attempts at preserving the exterior aspect of tradition, i.e. using rice-beer on social occasions. For Christians, then, once drinking rice-beer is stripped of its religious meaning, it can continue to function as a symbolic cultural activity. The non-Christians hold the view that it is impossible to have one – religious belonging – without the other – rice-beer. The inverse can be observed with regard to the Baptist who hold exactly the same view, namely that one cannot have Christianity with rice-beer. The juxtaposition of these arguments further elucidates the implications of what Zeme religious identity means to the Zeme from all religious traditions. It also suggests that religious identities are shaped by all manner of forces and that paying attention to everyday transactions like drink brings about a rich analysis that has much wider significance in how people perceive religion, culture, and their relation to everyday life.