

Christianity and Empire in South Manipur Hills: Senvon Encounter and the Dialogic Zo Peoples.

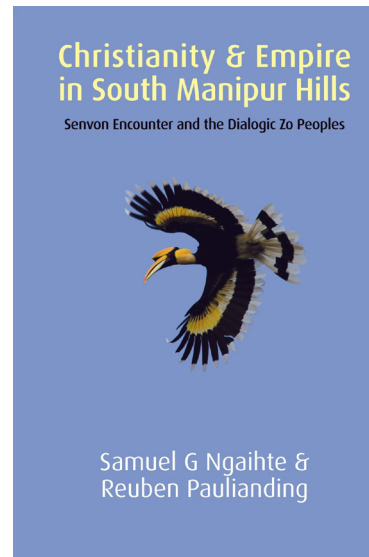
Samuel G. Ngaihte and Reuben Paulianding. Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2022. Indian Edition published by ISPCCK.

Henry Vumjou

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology–Bombay, India

e-mail: henryvumjou.iitb@gmail.com

The British Empire and Mission Societies started intruding into the Zo Hills during the 1890s.¹ Soon after, the conversion and introduction of literacy to the Zo people followed in all parts of the Zo Hills.² Christianity was first introduced in the Zo Hills of the present-day North East Indian state of Manipur in 1910 at Senvon Village, marking a uniquely historic event. The village chieftain invited a missionary to explain the Gospel in his village, a departure from the usual norm where missionaries arrive uninvited. The Empire and the Mission societies that came along with it narrativize the historical event of the introduction of the Gospel as a transformation of Zo people from “darkness to light,” denoting a conversion from the savage way of life to civility with the introduction of the Gospel



¹ I thank my friend Rama and the anonymous reviewers for making the necessary edits to my earlier drafts.

² Zo (people) refers to the Chin-Kuki-Mizo-Zomi group of people spread across the North Eastern parts of India, Chin state in Myanmar and the Chittagong Hills Tracts in Bangladesh. For more details on Zo, see Vumson’s *Zo History: With an Introduction to Zo Culture, Economy, Religion, and their Status as an Ethnic Minority in India, Burma, and Bangladesh* (published by the author, 1987).

to Zo people. *Christianity and Empire in South Manipur Hills* by Samuel G. Ngaihte and Reuben Paulianding challenges such a colonial narrative,³ which implicitly asserts Zo people as savages, devoid of any sense of agency or selfhood to negotiate with the Empire and Mission societies. The authors argue for Zo agency or selfhood by interpreting the historic Senvon encounter as a *meeting* between dialogic agencies. Zo people have fought and resisted the Empire as they advanced into their Hills. This constitutes Zo agency's negotiation with the Empire. Even under the Empire's rule, the Zo people, with their "agency," continue to negotiate with it to understand themselves and their disrupted world.

Ngaihte and Paulianding tightly weave numerous arguments on history, anthropology, theology, and philosophy concerning the Zo people, whom they view as late entrants to the academic world. The underlying thread in all chapters of the book is the *overturning of the colonial narrative that fails to acknowledge Zo's agency*. The book represents "speaking back" to what has been said about one's history by reintroducing and re-interpreting the misunderstood or deliberately ignored colonial accounts. The most glaring instance is the overturning of what was narrativized as an "encounter" in the colonial narrative to a "meeting" of not necessarily equal agencies. To insist and argue for Zo agency becomes the fulcrum of speaking back to a historical account that ultimately undermines the existence of such.

The Empire and Christian Missions narrative's characterization of the historic Senvon encounter is a monologic and linear totalizing narrative, oblivious to the complex negotiations the Zo people underwent with the Empire upon its intrusion into their hills. The book claims that the Senvon encounter between the missionaries and the Zo people is a dialogic meeting between two agencies. The authors build their argument for Zo agency around a hermeneutic re-interpretation of the "encounter" in Senvon village, in the present-day South Manipur Hills, as a *meeting* between two agencies.

The book speaks back to the written accounts of the cultural practices of the Zo people as recorded by the Empire. It expresses apprehensiveness about the records written by colonial administrators and ethnographers and questions

³ Samuel G. Ngaihte is an interdisciplinary scholar whose research interests include Continental and Indian philosophy, philosophical anthropology, and dialogic methodology. He currently teaches philosophy at Manipur University, Canchipur, and pursues research work in the North-East of India. Reuben Paulianding is an independent researcher with keen interests in indigenous philosophy and political theory. He studied philosophy at Stephen's College, Delhi.

their motives. According to these accounts, the Zo people did not understand ownership or boundaries concerning their land. This misunderstanding of Zo cosmology led to the labelling of Zo hills areas as “frontiers.” *Christianity and Empire in South Manipur Hills* attempts to overturn the prevailing hegemonic narrative by throwing light on the Zo people’s unique perspective regarding their sacred relation with the land and borders. They are not passive subjects of colonization. Rather, they live within tightly knit communities called *Tual*, where custom practices like *Tawnzawi Kaiha* are observed (Chapter 2). Within these *Tual* communities, a profound sense of belonging and identity exists, shaping the Zo people’s understanding of themselves as a collective. It serves as the framework through which they perceive the structure and boundaries of their land. Participation in *Tual* life and adherence to customs such as *Tawnzawi Kaiha* is essential for individuals to cultivate and affirm their Zo identity. Zo people maintain a cohesive network of villages known as the Zo cosmopolis. This network reflects a form of vernacular cosmopolitanism inherent in the primordial Zo world. Through these interconnected villages, Christianity spread rapidly among the Zo people, attesting to the significance of their communal networks in shaping cultural and religious dynamics.

Despite the rich oral tradition of the Zo people, they have been unable to document their history and culture, leaving it to be recorded by the pen of their colonizers. For the Zo people, history is passed down orally and can be intricate and complex. However, colonial officials documented Zo’s history and culture primarily for census purposes or to suit their interest in further subjugating them rather than out of genuine interest. This led to the reduction of their complex oral traditions into mundane written records, tailored to fit the colonial narrative of portraying the Zo people as savages—denying them any agency. As a result, the proper depth and richness of Zo traditions were lost, confined only to the interpretations of the colonial writers. The parochial written accounts documented by colonial officials reinforced the unfair portrayal of Zo people as savages without control over their lives, lacking organization and order.

The assertion that colonial accounts consciously ignored or distorted Zo cosmology and history may invoke debate. However, upon closer examination, the argument advanced by Ngaihte and Paulianding gain substantial merit, particularly when it concerns colonial depictions of Zo cosmology. Zo cosmology, deeply rooted in the belief in spirits (*khua*) such as *Khua-zing*, *Khua-hrum*, and *Khua-chia*, presents a complex worldview that colonial observers often failed to comprehend or deliberately ignored. *Dawi* is another

term denoting spirits and a further testament to the pervasive influence of spiritual entities in Zo culture. *Dawis* are spirits believed to require appeasement through sacrifices of animals or crops. Sacrifices are integral to maintaining balance within the Zo-lived world and cosmology. Interestingly, because Zo people understood the meaning of sacrifice, they could understand the sacrifice Christ made (Chapter 4). Despite the significance of sacrifice in Zo cosmology, colonial accounts frequently trivialized or misunderstood this sacred practice. Sacrifice was often reduced to merely calming irrational fears or dismissed as senseless appeasement by colonial ethnographers and missionaries. Sacrifices are depicted as part of an elaborate exchange system, neglecting their more profound spiritual significance. This failure to comprehend Zo cosmology reflects a broader pattern of disregard for indigenous knowledge systems and cultural practices. Rather than engaging with Zo beliefs meaningfully, colonial observers imposed their interpretations, which often overlooked or distorted the intricacies of Zo spirituality and cosmology.

The authors of *Christianity and Empire* substantiate the argument with the colonial narrative that simplistically associated *dawi* with “evil.” In Zo cosmology, *dawis* are not inherently evil entities. Semantically, *dawi* comes closer to “magic” rather than evil spirit. Instances like this are highlighted by the authors to convincingly overturn the Empire’s narrative in their book. On the same note, they stress that the Zo Hills, far from being just a remote “frontier” area, have a rich and complex history that belies the colonial notion of them as lands inhabited by “savages” (Chapter 3). For Ngaihte and Paulianding, Zo Hills were the backdrop for vibrant political intrigues, upheavals, and significant events—just as “civilized” Europe had been, although perhaps not in equal measure. This history is characterized by wars, treaties, and flourishing trade networks, demonstrating a sophisticated level of socio-political organization.

Concerning the history of Missions among Zo people, Chin Hills and Lushai Hills usually have a relatively more comprehensive coverage; the book offers a concise presentation of the Empire’s colonial advent into the lesser-known Zo Hills of Southern Manipur. It also brought to light the growth and proliferation of the mission societies and churches in the Zo Hills, an introduction to Christianity that is not quite the same structure and form as in other parts of South Asia. Interestingly, the same missionary who brought the Gospel to the Zo Hills of Southern Manipur was accused of mishandling funds for the mission society. From this event onwards, the Zo people understood they needed an autonomous institution to further govern and proliferate

the spread of Christianity in their areas. However, this accusation was also one of the incidents that led to the split of churches between those groups that were loyal to the missionary and those who saw them as guilty. The authors see this as evidence that Zo people are reclaiming their agency.

Christianity and Empire represents, for Zo scholarship, the beginning of the writing of history that is not merely an extension of the colonial records. It is Zo people who are writing about Zo's history themselves. The book also concisely presents the Empire's colonial advent into the lesser-known Zo Hills of Southern Manipur. The authors offer a critical analysis of the Christian missions by juxtaposing the mission's activities in spreading seeds of civilization with the backdrop of the colonial mission of educating the natives to serve their needs. The book highlights contextual theology's inadequacies in political contexts, especially in third-world countries. Contextual theology, in its two conceptions, fails as a framework for comprehending the Zo condition (Chapter 1). It fails to see the dialogic nature of encounters in mission practices and reduces the local population receiving the Gospel as passive recipients devoid of any relevant agency. The mission societies and its churches continue to embrace and perpetuate a "linear totalising narrative." They now adopted a post-colonial lens, and their assertion as rightful participants in the grand narrative further deprived the immediate-receiving-communities of their history and agency. In similar light, the education introduced by mission societies is often viewed as a tool to produce compliant colonial subjects devoid of agency. Ngaihte and Paulianding suggest that there is more to such interpretation. Zo people's reception of education was not merely about compliance, but also a means of negotiating their disrupted world. Much more than solely serving colonial interests, mission education became a catalyst for the Zo people to reclaim agency and navigate the challenges posed by colonial disruption, leading to the sprout of political consciousness and a renewed sense of self-determination encompassing the larger Zo Hills (Chapter 5).

The book draws heavily from local vernacular literature, a critical source for understanding the narrative of Empire and Christian Missions in the context being discussed. However, the authors' interpretation of this vernacular literature, particularly regarding the existence of a "linear totalising narrative," may not be readily apparent to readers outside the specific geographical and cultural context being examined. While the bibliography lists sources of local literature that potentially portray this narrative, the book itself does not delineate which specific texts contribute to this interpretation. This lack of

clarity may make it challenging for readers unfamiliar with the region's geography and history to grasp the presented argument's nuances.

However, saying all these does not mean that *Christianity and Empire* does not make sense. Instead, the book represents a case of native highlanders attempting at, in the words of Milinda Banerjee, “decolonizing political theology,”⁴ by asserting one's agency in two ways: (1) by reposturing one's own history and (2) by the very act of writing it. Repositioning their history and undertaking the act of writing it, the authors assert their agency in confronting colonial legacies. This approach offers a fresh perspective on the condition of colonized subjects in the postcolonial era without relying on conventional postcolonial frameworks. It is a valuable addition to the literature on North-east Indian studies, particularly concerning the history, culture, and religion of the Zo people. Its relevance is expected to endure and manifest in future scholarship, highlighting the importance of indigenous voices and perspectives in shaping our understanding of colonialism and its aftermath.

References

- Banerjee, Milinda. “Political Theology and Democracy: Perspectives from South Asia, West Asia, and North Africa.” *Political Theology* 25, no. 2 (17 Februari 2024): 85–90. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2022.2095850>.
- Vumson. *Zo History: With an Introduction to Zo Culture, Economy, Religion and Their Status as an Ethnic Minority in India, Burma, and Bangladesh*. Published by the author, 1987.

⁴ Milinda Banerjee, “Political Theology and Democracy: Perspectives from South Asia, West Asia, and North Africa,” *Political Theology* 25, no. 2 (17 Februari 2024): 90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2022.2095850>.