

## **Best of All Worlds: Rangfraism The New Institutionalized Religion of the Tangsa Community in Northeast India**

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### **Abstract**

In recent years, elites in many small ethnic communities in northeast India have made attempts to revive, reform and institutionalize their traditional religious practices in order to stem the tide of conversion to world religions and also to use their new religion as a marker for their ethnic identity. In this paper, I focus on the small Tangsa community, living in the northeast Indian states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, and try to understand the processes and intentions that underlie the formation of their new reformed religion called Rangfraism. Friction with Christian missionaries and interaction with Hindu activists in this remote hilly frontier region have played a big role in the process of transforming their traditional system into their “new” religion. I try to ascertain which of the older practices have been retained, which have been adopted from other revival movements in the area and which have been appropriated from Christianity and Hinduism. While it will be clear that the leaders have attempted to take the best from all quarters in order to make their new religion more attractive, the analysis will also demonstrate how that very strategy has led to internal contradictions and, hence, to confusion and resistance.

### **Keywords**

Rangfraism, religious reform, institutionalization, politics of elites, syncretism, Tangsa, India.

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## Introduction

“Tangsa”, meaning “children of the hills”, is an umbrella term for about 35 different trans-Patkai ethnic groups,<sup>1</sup> arguably related to the Naga, who entered India from the slopes of the Patkai hills in present-day Myanmar at different points of time in the past, but mostly within the last 100 years, and have settled in the plains of the northeast Indian states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. There are no more than 60,000 Tangsa living in India at the moment; many more Tangsa still live in the Sagaing division of Myanmar on the other side of the Patkai range.

The easternmost part of Indian hill state of Arunachal bordering Myanmar is home to many ethnic communities besides the Tangsa, such as the Singpho (known as Jingphaw or Kachin in Myanmar), the Wancho and the Nocte. The state of Assam, in the valley of the Brahmaputra, is home to many ethnic communities as well as to the mainstream Assamese-speaking predominantly Hindu population.

The relatively recent arrival of the Tangsa in the plains from the hills, their acceptance of a “modern” way of life and intermixing with other non-hill communities may have brought them closer to the rest of the world, but has meant many changes to their lifestyles. Mostly farmers and tea-growers now, the different Tangsa groups speak different languages<sup>2</sup> (belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family), many of which are not mutually intelligible, so that they use Singpho or Assamese (and increasingly also Hindi and English) to communicate across groups. Although most Tangsa villages in Assam are ethnically and linguistically mixed, the majority of the Tangsa in Arunachal live in villages where the norm “one village, one group, one language” is still adhered to.<sup>3</sup>

They were always divided along ethnic and linguistic lines, encounters and interactions with and subsequent conversion to religions like Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity created further fissures. The Tangsa groups that

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<sup>1</sup> There seems to be no unanimity about the number of Tangsa groups. Moreover, in Myanmar, where Tangsa also live, the terms Tangshang or Heimi are used for the Tangsa. Simai (2008: 5) claims there are 17; Morang (2008: 17) divides them into 6 larger sub-tribes. There seems to be a list with as many as 32 different Tangsa communities approved by the Government of India. According to a latest count, there could be as many as 69 linguistic groups on both sides of the Indo-Myanmar border who could be considered to be Tangsa/Tangshang/Heimi. For more details, see Morey 2012 (unpublished).

<sup>2</sup> Some of these languages are considered to be highly endangered as they have very few speakers left.

<sup>3</sup> However, in recent times religious conversions and subsequent differences within erstwhile village communities have led to some villages splitting along religious lines.

arrived earlier embraced either Hinduism or Buddhism, the religions of their Assamese and Singpho neighbours, respectively. American Baptist missionaries, who had already arrived in the neighbouring state of Nagaland in the late nineteenth century,<sup>4</sup> started actively proselytizing in Tangsa areas in the 1970s (cf. Downs 1976; Joshi 2012). The Tangsa living in Myanmar started to convert to Christianity from the mid-twentieth century (Ronrang 1997: 23). As there was a lot of contact between the Tangsa living on both sides of the border, Christianity also spread through these mutual contacts. Most of the Tangsa groups who arrived in India later have now adopted Christianity. Today, the Christian Tangsa in India are divided into many denominations: Baptist, Presbyterian, Catholic and many smaller groups. Some Tangsa have not converted and still follow their older traditional beliefs, while others have recently adopted Rangfraism, a new religion based on the traditional practices of the Tangsa.

Before describing Rangfraism, however, let me briefly discuss the older belief system of the Tangsa. Although not many practitioners of that system are left today, and there is not always agreement on what that system was, the community's understanding of what is traditional is mostly guided by the following rules of thumb: "what is old is traditional", "what we did in the hills before moving down to the plains is traditional", and "what we did before we converted to Christianity is traditional". Tangsa elders have told me that they used to believe in benevolent spirits, like the *Wihau*<sup>5</sup>, which protect and bring prosperity, and also malevolent spirits, which cause illness and bring misfortune. When a person was ill, augury was practised with the help of diviners; rice beer was offered and animals were sacrificed to appease the spirits.

Hindu organizations like the Vivekananda Kendra Sangathan (VKS), named after a Hindu religious leader, with their many good Vivekananda Kendra Vidyalaya (VKV) schools and their social-welfare and rural development wings, such as Arunjyoti, have been active in the remote hills of Arunachal Pradesh for a long time. The Vivekananda Kendra Institute of Culture (VKIC) based at Guwahati, the capital of the state of Assam, presents itself as a promoter of indigenous culture and practices, and organizes

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<sup>4</sup> What is true of many upland communities in Zomia land as described by Scott (2009: 319) was also true for the Nagas: "With the arrival of Christian missionaries in the hills around the turn of the century, upland people gained access to a new salvation religion. Many of them seized it. It had two great advantages: it had its own millenarian cosmology, and it was not associated with the lowland states from which they might want to maintain their distance. It was a powerful alternate, and to some degree oppositional, to modernity."

<sup>5</sup> For more about *Wihau* and the song that is sung on such occasions see Barkataki-Ruscheweyh / Morey 2013.

seminars and publishes books and periodicals.<sup>6</sup> For lack of a better term, Tangsa elders sometimes use the term “Hindu” to refer to their older traditional practices because, like a section of Hindus, they also used to sacrifice animals. Hindu activists have been exploiting this confusion, as well as the flexibility and inclusive nature of Hinduism,<sup>7</sup> to claim that the Tangsa were always Hindus and would always remain so (see Xaxa 2005). This was roughly the scenario till about the 1970s, when the Baptist missionaries arrived on the scene and large-scale Christian proselytization began.

## Rangfraism

By the 1990s, better educational levels, access to a modern lifestyle<sup>8</sup> and improvement in living standards, especially in the tribal majority state of Arunachal Pradesh, had resulted in an educated Tangsa elite, many of whom had been educated in the Vivekananda Kendra schools. Encouraged by Hindu activists and nursing a feeling of nostalgia for their past, a section of this educated class have been spurred to redefine their “traditional” religious practices under the new name Rangfraism in an attempt to stop further conversion to Christianity among the Tangsa.

The Rangfraa movement was started in the mid-1990s by a group of Tangsa professionals, including doctors, engineers and civil servants, led by the charismatic Latsam Khimhun,<sup>9</sup> a senior civil engineer by profession (and government employee). They saw the danger of losing what they perceived to be their traditional culture and values if conversion to Christianity was allowed to continue. It was clear to most of them, however, that since moving down from the hills and giving up their former ways of living certain elements of their “traditional” belief system had become obsolete and redundant. Moreover, many older practices for curing illness (by offering sacrifices) were very expensive and had become untenable with access to hospitals and

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, a collection of essays *Traditional Systems* 2005 was published as a result of a workshop organized by the VKIC in Changlang in 2000.

<sup>7</sup> The definition of Hinduism given by the Hindu Mahasabha (a Hindu organization) includes all religions which originated in India. They claim that the simple act of calling oneself Hindu (irrespective of practices and rituals) made one Hindu because of its all-inclusive paternalistic nature (cf. Longkumer 2010: 67).

<sup>8</sup> This includes access to television and modern methods of communication, such as mobile phones, the shift to a cash economy and access to education, healthcare and basic infrastructure.

<sup>9</sup> Mr. Khimhun is also a member of the World Indigenous Faith Preservation Forum. A prolific writer, he describes Rangfraism as the “reformed cult” of the Tangsa.

modern medicine. They also could see good reasons, like the sense of community fostered by a weekly meeting of the congregation, why increasing numbers of Tangsa were attracted to Christianity.

But there were several issues to resolve on the way. One major problem was that they had no name for their traditional practices. But they had always used the term *rangfraa*, literally “god of the skies”, to refer to an invisible and formless being who could see when people did wrong. So Rangfraa was chosen as the name of their new God and the Rangfraa Faith Promotion Society (RFPS, hereafter referred to as the Rangfraa Society) was formed in 1995. Their stated aims were first of all to promote, preserve and protect what they perceived as their traditional culture, and secondly, to stop the strong wave of conversion to Christianity. To achieve this, they decided on a two-pronged reform of their traditional system: (a) to discard most of the obsolete and unscientific superstitions and taboos of the old system; and (b) to incorporate elements from other world religions which could make their religion more attractive to its followers.

### **The additions**

As a step to implementing (b) above, they decided to institutionalize their religion by setting up places of worship called *Rang-som-hum* (“God-prayer-house”), hereafter referred to as prayer-house. The prayer-house in New Changlang (see Figure 1) was designed by Latsam Khimhun himself and is the prototype for all *Rangsomhums* (made of concrete) already or to be built. This design incorporates architectural elements from places of worship of the four world religions – the central shrine with the idol is borrowed from Hindu temples, the hall-like building resembles a church, the round dome is taken from the Muslim mosque, and the crowning turret with glass windows recalls a Buddhist pagoda.

But they also needed a form and a mythology for their new god – Rangfraa. Many Tangsa communities have the story of an old dirty beggar called Tonku-wa, a Noah-like figure, who destroyed the world with a flood because it was too full of evil. Rangfraa (or Rang-wa, “father of the skies”, as he is commonly referred to) was identified with Tonku-wa. His image was selected through open competition<sup>10</sup> and a 300-kg marble idol (see Figure 2) was made in its likeness and installed in the Rangfraa prayer-house at New Changlang on 4 November 1997. Similar idols or images of Rangfraa have been installed in other Rangfraa prayer-houses elsewhere. Prayer-services

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<sup>10</sup> The winner was the painting of Mrs. C. Lowang, a Nocte lecturer from the Tirap district.

(*Rangsom*) are held on Sundays, Wednesdays and Saturdays. *Rangsom* means a combination of *Romrom* (ritual) and *Rangtam* (prayer). The service begins with a mass prayer (*Khorong ngut*) followed by the singing of devotional songs. The service is held in a mixture of languages, mainly depending on the composition of the congregation, whereas the hymns, composed and set to music by Latsam Khimhun, are either in Muklom or in Longchang, two of the many Tangsa languages.

FIGURE 1: The Rangfraa prayer-house (*Rangsomhum*) at New Changlang



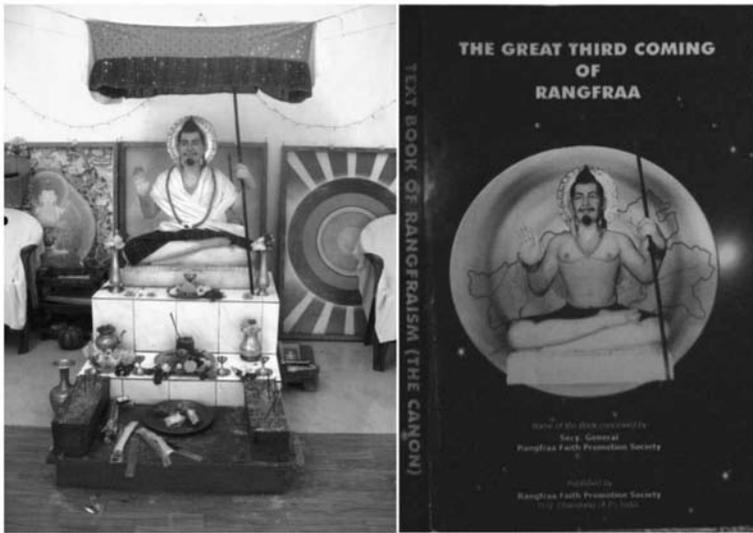
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In the words of the Secretary General of the Rangfraa Society, Latsam Khimhun, the relationship between Rangfraism and the older practices has three aspects: 1) the religious aspect, which was not there before and has been added; 2) the cultural practices, which has been kept completely intact; 3) the bad social practices, which have been eliminated.

What Mr. Khimhun calls “the religious aspect” was never there before because traditionally the Tangsa never prayed. But since he, the self-proclaimed eldest son of Rangfraa, considers this aspect to be very important he has created it all through his writings, in English, over the years. Thereby, he has created

not just a compassionate and all-powerful image of a father-God Rang-wa and the attendant mythology around him (in the book *The Second Coming of Rangfraa*, 2006) but also a rigid system of worship and prayer through which he wishes to give form and structure to this new religion as set out in several books.<sup>11</sup> The book titled *The Great Third Coming of Rangfraa* (2006, see Figure 2) is the Holy Book of the Rangfraites (their equivalent of the Bible for Christians).

FIGURE 2: The idol inside the New Changlang Prayer house and the Holy Book of the Rangfraites



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The double word *Rang-fraa* was also believed to embody the twin aspects of power (*rang*) through miracles and healing as well as that of wisdom and knowledge (*fraa*) that Rangfraa embodied. Hence, the religious component is structured along two lines: the Rang line represented by the *keychus* (literally “pure ones”, mostly young girls who supposedly get possessed by the spirit of Rangfraa during a prayer service and acquire powers to heal and proph-

<sup>11</sup> Besides the books already mentioned, another is titled *Rangfraism: Its System of Worship and Prayer* (conceived by Er. L. Khimhun, Changlang: Rangfraa Faith Promotion Society, 2008).

esy) and *rang-shamaals* (senior *keychus* who are supposed to be able to work miracles), and the Fraa line which has to do with moral teachings and philosophy (represented by the Secretary General himself and a few other *ming-keychus* – those who have the authority to conduct initiation). The Rang side is female, the Fraa side is male, together Rangfraa is complete, both. Since the Buddha is also called Phraa (or Fraa), so Buddhism is Fraa-ism, hence Buddhism is, according to Mr. Khimhun, contained in Rangfraism. The system of initiation into Rangfraism and the advance through several stages to higher levels of moral and spiritual perfection is also similar to the Buddhist path. However, the *rang* (power) aspect in Rangfraism tends more towards the Hindu aspects of *shakti* (power, energy).

### Recasting the old

What has changed in the social and cultural aspects to confirm Mr. Khimhun's above-mentioned claim? The "traditional" Tangsa belief system had many practices based on what they today perceive as taboos and superstitions: a field struck by lightning was abandoned; twins, stillborn babies and women who died at childbirth were quickly disposed of; persons who died an unnatural death would not be brought back to the village – Rangfraites no longer subscribe to these practices.

Many of the Tangsa groups were formerly head-hunters and followed the practice of burying their dead under their *chang-ghars* (raised stilt-houses), ostensibly for fear that the enemy would steal the heads and take them away as trophies. This practice has been discontinued. The death rituals have also been suitably modified, the feasting done away with, and the dead body is no longer kept rotting for days waiting for family members to arrive. Animal sacrifices are allowed during festivals and special occasions, for instance if there is a wedding in the family, a new house is built or the steps to the *chang-ghar* are renewed, but they are no longer mandatory. Feasts of merit are also no longer performed.

The Tangsa used to spend a lot of money and energy trying to appease the malevolent spirits who they believed caused illness and misfortune. In Rangfraism the practice of treating illness via augury, divination and expensive sacrifices has been replaced by prayer, fasting and healing. Now, instead of sacrifice they offer flowers and *agarbatti* (incense). There were also benevolent spirits in the traditional Tangsa system, for example the house spirit that many call Mattai, and the spirit of mother earth called Wihu/Wihau which many Tangsa pray to after harvesting is over. These spirits and the festivals associated with them have been retained, because, according to Mr. Khimhun,

these are cultural practices and are part of people's identity as Tangsa. Although villagers often sacrifice a buffalo communally during such festivals, it is not mandatory. Instead of offering blood, the Rangfraites can offer rice-beer and rice along with ginger at the *lam-roe* outside the village at the time of their Moh festival. They have also retained most their old Tangsa mythology, even though some stories have been rewritten, as we saw above in the case of Tonku-wa (cf. *The Second Coming of Rangfraa*, 2006).

Before this reform movement began, animal sacrifice and rice-beer drinking were the most important markers of any festivity, but now Rangfraa followers are encouraged not to drink rice-beer or sacrifice animals. While this is seen as an internal contradiction by many outsiders, the leaders of the Rangfraa movement look at it as a process of rationalizing their cultural and economic practices and claim that the "traditional" practices of the Tangsa, inasmuch as they are feasible in today's world, have been retained, albeit some in a modified form.

However, some new elements have also been introduced. For instance, whereas previously healers and diviners called *shammas*, who were usually older men or women, would be called in to cure illness, healing in Rangfraism is, as mentioned above, based on belief in the power of *keychus* and the *rang-shamaals*; moreover their healing powers are often put forward as proof of the power (*rang*) and intention of Rangfraa to take care of his believers.

### **Selective appropriations from Christianity**

Similarities with Christian practices prevalent in the area are not hard to find: services on Sunday mornings;<sup>12</sup> Holy Books (the *Bible* or the *Great Third Coming of Rangfraa*, as the case may be); the notion of Holy Water; similarities in the conduct of the services with singing of hymns and collective prayers (spoken loudly together, each in his or her own language); the practice of reading out and explaining passages from the Holy book by the Preacher/Preceptor; the idea of Sunday as a day when no routine work is done (Khimhun 2008: 21); the practice of fasting as a method of healing; and the image of a compassionate, but exacting God who protects, but also demands. Some of the terms used are also the same, such as healing, confession, charity, revelations and scriptures.

Baptism can be considered to be similar to initiation in Rangfraism (although there are several stages of initiation in Rangfraism). The marriage

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<sup>12</sup> There are also evening services in the Rangfraa prayer-houses on Saturdays and Wednesdays, just as in the Tangsa Baptist churches.

vows stated in Section 15 of *Rangfraism: Its System of Worship and Prayer* sound very familiar to those used in a church. Many ideas have also been borrowed: the view that fields struck by lightning should not be abandoned was first propagated among the Tangsa by Baptist missionaries (cf. Ronrang 1997). Even the partial bans on drinking rice beer and sacrificing animals are strictures borrowed from Baptist Christianity.

Moreover, both the Christian and the Rangfraa services impart a sense of fraternity and solidarity to the village community; and the services provide at least a weekly meeting of the community to discuss other matters, fix dates and make announcements. It is clear that Rangfraism had borrowed and adopted many Christian practices so as to keep their followers within their fold. A senior Rangfraa Society office-bearer even went as far as to admit that the *keychus* (and their becoming possessed and acting as mediums) were their response to the practices of “seeing visions” and “speaking in tongues” prevalent in many churches in that area.<sup>13</sup>

It is also clear that Rangfraism is an attempt to stop the wave of Christian conversion. In one booklet, the Rangfraa Society goes so far as to appeal to all those who have converted to Christianity to adopt Rangfraism; there is even a procedure set forward for reconversion. Using the popular slogan: “Loss of culture is loss of identity”, the Rangfraa Society leaders have tried to keep the Tangsa from converting to Christianity. However, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>14</sup> given the change in stance of the Baptist Christian leaders towards preservation of cultural practices, the cultural identity of a Rangfraite Tangsa is not very different from that of the Christian Baptist Tangsa, so it is hard to see the logic of that argument. It is worth mentioning here that there is also a parallel movement among a section of the Tangsa elite to creatively reformulate their cultural traditions in an effort to establish a new pan-Tangsa cultural identity (cf. Barkataki-Ruscheweyh 2013).

The Christian Tangsa, however, are not convinced about the claims made by Rangfraism. As reported by Mamai Maihu (2004: 17), “the view of the Christian Tangsa is that the institutionalisation of Rangfraism is an interpolation from other religions. It seemed to them as a mockery of the old traditions.” Whereas every Christian Tangsa I asked told me that Rangfraism is certainly different from their older belief system, another Baptist elder told me that the old man Tonku-wa in the mythical Rangfraa story was none other than the Noah of the Old Testament. “Moreover”, he continued, “both the Rangfraites and the Baptists ask us to keep our houses clean, and to pray when we are

<sup>13</sup> Although these practices are typical in Pentecostal and Revival Churches, they are also prevalent in some Baptist Churches in that part of Northeast India.

<sup>14</sup> See Barkataki-Ruscheweyh 2015: Section 6.3.1.

sick”); hence, there was not much difference between Rangfraism and Christianity for him.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, the web of connections and inter-relations are complex, tangled and many-faceted.

## **Hinduism through the back door**

One source of this confusion could also lie in the fact that many of the arguments used by the Rangfraa Society leaders imitate those used by other religious reform movements elsewhere in the region, such as the Heraka Movement among the Zeme Nagas (Longkumer 2010) and the Donyipolo Movement<sup>16</sup> among the Apatanis in Arunachal Pradesh in the 1960s and 1970s (cf. Chaudhuri 2013). In this respect, the Rangfraa movement is part of a bigger pan-Arunachal movement against Christian conversion that advocates a return to indigenous faiths, spearheaded by organizations such as the Indigenous Faith and Cultural Society of Arunachal Pradesh (IFCSAP), based in Itanagar, the capital of Arunachal Pradesh. It first started among the Adis and has now spread to the Nishis and the Apatanis around Itanagar. The IFCSAP is actively influenced by Hinduism and the many Hindu organizations active in the hills.

Hence, it is not surprising that many Rangfraa Society activities are supported by Hindu nationalist groups, like the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh) and the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad). Rangfraa is shown in many calendars and publications of the Vivekananda Kendra as the God of the Tangsa and Tutsa communities in Arunachal Pradesh. Hindu organizations played an active role in having the Rangfraa statue made in Jodhpur in Rajasthan (located thousands of kilometres away in western India) and transported by train and road across India so that it could be installed in the prayer-house at New Changlang. Mr. Khimhun and other Rangfraa Society office bearers maintain close links with the Vivekananda Kendra and the Arunjyoti officials and often take their advice and use their facilities.

Introducing idol-worship, which is considered to be characteristic feature of Hinduism, into Rangfraism has come in for considerable criticism even among their own followers. The Secretary General claims they had no option since they do not have a symbol like a cross (which is in itself an admission that they seek to imitate Christianity) which they could use

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<sup>15</sup> Interview, 25 January 2012, Kuttum village.

<sup>16</sup> Most of the teachings of Rangfraism are almost identical to what Talom Rukbo, who started the Donyipolo Movement among the Adis, had to say about the new institutionalized religion. For more on this, see the paper by Claire Scheid in this volume.

FIGURE 3: The image of Rangfraa (left) and an image of the Hindu god Shiva (right)



instead.<sup>17</sup> But that cannot explain why most Rangfraa prayer-houses have images of Hindu gods like Shiva and Vishnu near the central altar as well as images of Hindu religious leaders like Swami Vivekananda. The image of Rangfraa looks very much like a tribal Shiva<sup>18</sup> (see Figure 3) and the *keychus* are often possessed not only by the spirit of Rangfraa, but also by the spirits of Hindu gods and goddesses such as Shiva and Kali. “Rangfraa and Shiva are the same, they are like brothers”, I was told in one Rangfraa village.<sup>19</sup> There is a twin Rangfraa-Shiva shrine on the road connecting Changlang town to Margherita, which illustrates this duality. Setting all doubts to rest, Mr. Khimhun told me in private conversation<sup>20</sup> that, like Buddhism, Rangfraism was an offshoot of Hinduism, only simplified and clearer, and the fact that the main altar in a Rangfraa prayer house was like that in a Hindu temple was proof of that.

<sup>17</sup> Interview, 24 February 2012, Roing. This argument is identical with that used by other reform movements like the Donyipolo Movement, where an image had to be created.

<sup>18</sup> Of course more than one person told me that Rang-wa’s face had a great similarity to that of the Secretary General himself, which is not surprising in the light of Mr. Khimhun’s claim that he is Rang-wa’s eldest son.

<sup>19</sup> Interview, 16 January 2012, Lunglong village in Changlang.

<sup>20</sup> Interview, 24 February 2012, Roing.

Therefore, it was not surprising that many of the practices adopted by Rangfraism are very Hindu in content: besides idol worship, the use of *diyas* (oil-lamps) and *agarbatti* (incense) during a service, offering flowers, ringing the prayer-house bell when entering it, sprinkling holy water over the devotees (which is also common in Catholic services) and the use of *tulsi patta* (basil leaves) (see Figure 4) are all essentially Hindu temple rituals. So close is this relation that the Rangfraa Society leaders have been accused of playing into the hands of the Hindu fundamentalist groups. Not without good reason: in his Preface to the book titled *Philosophy of the Janajatis of Northeast Bharat* (2010: iv), also published by the Vivekananda Kendra, the Secretary General of the Rangfraa Society writes “Basically there is no difference between the Janajati [ethnic communities] and the Hindus. This fact was known to every Hindu from the very beginning, so they never felt the need to convert the Janajatis to Hinduism as they are already Hindu”, borrowing the argument, *in toto*, from his Hindu patrons.

FIGURE 4: Sprinkling holy water using basil leaves in the Bazaar Line Prayer House in Changlang



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While the link to Hinduism is clear to all, it is less obvious why the Rangfraa Society leaders align themselves with Hindu hardliners. Of course, since the primary aim of the leaders is to stop conversion to Christianity, which is labelled a foreign religion, being in league with the non-foreign ones like Buddhism and Hinduism is understandable. But this has brought the Rangfraites into direct confrontation with the equally zealous Baptist militant organization, National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) with the motto “Nagaland for Christ”, which has a strong foothold in the Tirap and Changlang districts of Arunachal Pradesh where the Tangsa live. There have been many instances of violence and tension, resulting in the closure of a few Rangfraa prayer-houses and exacerbating the already deep rifts between these communities.

### **Taking the best of all worlds**

Gregoire Schlemmer, a French anthropologist who has worked with the Kirant people in Nepal, neatly summed up all important points about Rangfraism in a single sentence when he described Rangfraism as a new religion which is modelled on Christianity, whose processes are Hindu and whose legitimation is in tradition (private communication). Over and above these three sources, in setting up this new religion the Rangfraa Society leaders, led by Mr. Khimhun, have also borrowed from Buddhism and other religious revival and reform movements such as the Donyipolo and Intyaism, which already existed in other parts of Arunachal Pradesh.

This substantiates the aforementioned claim that the Rangfraa Society leaders have sought to take the best of all worlds. This they have tried to achieve by doing away with many of the obvious “weaknesses” of the older system, while selectively appropriating many features from other world religions in an attempt to make the new form even more attractive for converts. Expressed in Mr. Khimhun’s rather convoluted style: “Let our people develop in their own genius<sup>21</sup> by eradicating the unwanted practices and assimilating the good things from outsiders in their own justifications and capacities without any interference and imposition from them (Khimhun 2006a: 3).” In other words, although the process of change and reform has been incremental, the ultimate aim is to have the best of all worlds.

Furthermore, although it is clearly a syncretic form of religious revival, Rangfraism still claims to be nothing more than an institutionalized and

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<sup>21</sup> See Elwin 1964, and the comments made by India’s then Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, in the Preface.

rationalized form of their older traditional practices. By so claiming, they have partially succeeded in stemming the wave of conversion to Christianity among a section of the Tangsa. As a result, in 2012 there were 69 Rangfraa prayer-houses in Changlang and Tirap and the number of followers is increasing and includes several high-ranking officials in the local administration, senior professionals and politicians.

While this “best of all worlds” strategy might look like it has paid off in that they have succeeded largely in achieving their stated aims, the impact on the community as a whole has not been very marked so far. In 2012, there were possibly about 1,000 initiates into Rangfraism. This looks very small when compared with the fact that there are more 10,000 Christians Baptists alone among the Tangsa. Moreover, Rangfraism is restricted to small pockets in the border areas between the Changlang and Tirap districts. There is no record of Rangfraites in Assam. Furthermore, the Rangfraites among the Tangsa are drawn mostly from the Longchang and Moklum groups (Mr. Khimhun is Moklum); the large Pangwa subfamily among the Tangsa have been left largely untouched, except for a few followers in the Mossang, Mungrey and Juglei groups. There are also some followers in the neighbouring Tutsa community living in Tirap, but they have been harassed (and in some cases forced to give up their new faith) by the very Baptist Christian NSCN, who have their stronghold in the Tirap district.

Moreover, when taking the “best from all worlds” and combining elements from various directions, one must take care to avoid putting contradictory elements together. There were problems with that right from the beginning in the form of initial resistance from within the community itself to the idea of institutionalization. In an M.Phil. seminar paper, a Tangsa writes:

Village elders felt establishment of temple and idol not necessary, they are satisfied with their old system of belief as it is preserved in oral tradition of Rangfraa, they think of institutionalisation as something superfluous. The common people of Changlang are of the opinion that the concept of temple, idol and written literature as encroachment upon their old belief system. [...However,] educated people feel that in order to preserve the oral tradition, it is necessary to institutionalize Rangfraa, for them reconstruction is the demand of present time in order to deal with modern situations, future generations would be benefited from them, otherwise it will disappear one day if it is not preserved literally (Maihu 2004: 16).

Hence Rangfraism can also be considered to be a product of modernity and education in the sense that it is a response to a section of the educated Tangsa who realize that they need to rationalize and give a more scientific rationale to their beliefs.

In recent years, Rangfraism has attracted many new (including non-Tangsa) followers mainly on the strength of the healing powers of their *keychus*; most followers said they were Rangfraiters because the miracles and the healing were proof of the power of Rang-wa. Many said they attended services out of “fear of punishment” by Rang-wa. However, many senior Rangfraa Society office-bearers felt that their newly founded religion was being hijacked by the Rang aspect of healing and miracles; so much so that the Fraa aspects that could be acquired only through study of the actual tenets of the new religion were not being heeded at all.

But the actual tenets of Rangfraism are not clear, even to the office bearers; lack of resources for proper training of the Preceptors and the senior members aggravated the problem. The Rangfraa philosophy as stated in books is all written in English by Mr. Khimhun in a rather confusing and difficult style – and as such is beyond the comprehension of most individuals.<sup>22</sup> Lack of a common Tangsa language among the followers and the lack of a script for any of the Tangsa languages, are further problems faced by the leaders of the Rangfraa movement. I did not meet a single Rangfraitre, except for perhaps Mr. Khimhun himself, who told me that he or she had become a Rangfraitre because of its ideology or philosophy.

Moreover, healing, miracles and prayers also have their limitations as the main attractions of the religion. Tangsa followers sometimes revert back to augury and sacrificing animals when healing does not work. The strict rules about cleanliness and abstinence from betel-nut, tobacco, rice-beer and non-vegetarian food three days in a week set down in their *System of Worship and Prayer* do not go down well with many believers. Moreover, more and more young girls want to become *keychus* probably because it gives them some agency and power in a strongly patriarchal system, which, in turn, causes new social problems. More disturbingly, given the central role played by the Secretary General Mr. Khimhun, Rangfraism runs the danger of becoming a one-man cult.

For ordinary Rangfraiters, their new religion means that they can carry on as before with their traditional practices, with the addition of the prayer-house, the idol and the services. However, even here the system comes with inbuilt ambiguities, depending on how one reinterprets practices from the traditional system as part of the new. As a consequence, internal differences have arisen among senior office bearers over whether drinking of rice beer

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<sup>22</sup> For example, in the booklet titled *Uniqueness of Rangfraism* (p. 3) Khimhun claims that “its system of worship and prayer is based on the philosophy, hidden in the mythology of the Rangfraiters”. As this statement is not explained further, the meaning of that statement remains unclear.

and sacrificing animals are permitted during festivals. Furthermore, since many of the new followers are not Tangsa, just saying that Rangfraism is based on the traditional belief system of the Tangsa is not enough. Thus, this new reform movement has still some way to go in its quest to institutionalize and rationalize the traditional belief system of the Tangsa and combine it with the best of all worlds in a way that resolves contradictions in its teachings, achieves clarity about what it stands for, and presents a convincing, attractive religious message and practice for people in a modern world.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, while Rangfraism may have done away with assumed obsolete and unfeasible “superstitions” and practices, it has also introduced another, equally complicated and very strict new set of rules and regulations. Healing is based on belief in the supernatural powers of Rangfraa as much as the older system of cure was based on belief in appeasing angry spirits by sacrificing animals. And there are internal contradictions too, the most crucial being that while it claims to be a reformed version of the older Tangsa faith system, it now has an idol in place; moreover, an idol that looks very much like the Hindu god Shiva.

Moreover, the Secretary General himself has fallen into the trap of failing to distinguish between the two meanings of the word “Hindu” (as mentioned in the Introduction). But this misunderstanding could even be deliberate, as Mr. Khimhun has openly declared that, “all those who are willing to die and live for Hindustan are Hindu”, thereby conflating Hinduism with nationalism, as his friends and advisors in the Vivekananda Kendra would like him to do (cf. Business Standard 2014). In that case, Rangfraism seems to be nothing more than just a local variant of Hinduism. More interestingly, in this particular instance, it is not “nationally inflected ethnographers” as David Zou (2010: 57) maintains, but a section of the nationally inflected educated elite from within indigenous cultures who have contributed to “re-formulating tribal indigenous cultures merely as instances of ‘little traditions’ that can be simply subsumed within the great Indian (read Hindu) tradition”.

More generally, the Rangfraa example also demonstrates that no matter how clever the “best-of-all-worlds” strategy to attract followers is, and no matter how good the initial intentions of a project might have been, in order to execute any new idea, leaders of small marginal communities, such as the Tangsa, who have no access to resources of their own, and only limited contacts to the outside world, tend to seek the patronage of one or the other of the bigger local players, just as the Rangfraa Society leaders have sought

from the Hindu activists. In the process, they fall into the trap of unwittingly promoting the agenda of the “big brother”, as their own.

In any case, the process also illustrates how small frontier communities like the Tangsa seek to come to terms with their changed life-worlds and react to the friction and interaction, both internal and with other communities – neighbouring frontier and lowland communities as well as interest groups from both sides of the border – by coming up with sophisticated strategies of revival and survival that bear witness to the complex interplay between resilience and transformation that go beyond simple and unidirectional processes of assimilation or domination.

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