

Co-existence of Indigenous Faith and Christianity among the Wancho People of Arunachal Pradesh: A Comprehensive Review

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PhD (Geography)

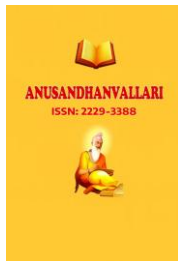
Abstract

The Wancho community of Arunachal Pradesh is one such case among many in the conversion processes which had been a part and parcel of the religious dynamics in Northeast India. The Wanchos Traditionally practiced an animistic belief system, which was based on reverence of nature, ancestor and headhunting, their supreme gods was Rang and Baurang. These cosmological beliefs underlay not only the religious life of the gods, but social order, agricultural methods, medicinal practices and morality. However, since the late twentieth century, Wancho society has rapidly converted, en masse, to Christianity, chiefly through Baptist and Catholic missions, as well as greater access to higher education and cultural contact with the neighboring Naga tribes (Hazarika et al., 2021; Chaudhuri et al., 2022). This is reflected in census data, showing the proportion of Christians among the Wanchos to have more than tripled in the past thirty years, from less than one third in 1991 to over 95% in 2011 (Census of India, 2011). No records are available after 2011 census, however sociological studies and church statistics have concluded that the Christian population continues to dominate through 2023-24, with a negligible presence of indigenous religious practitioners. The article examines the relationship between the indigenous Wancho religion and Christianity with a focus on their co-existence, interaction and conflict. Drawing on anthropological literature, census data, historical data, and ethnographic evidence, it explores the decline, adaptation and survival of indigenous religion as part of a majority Christian society. Other issues discussed are religious syncretism, cultural identity, inter-generational relations, the role of religious festivals, oral traditions and customary institutions in preserving indigenous culture, and the socio-economic and political factors of religious change. The latter includes health, education, and governance, which are all seen as factors promoting or weakening indigenous culture and its preservation. This article synthesizes various studies focusing on the Wancho conversion, and thus provides deeper understanding of the phenomenon of religious conversion among indigenous groups, while also calling for more ethnographic studies of Wancho religiosity, identity and persistence of culture.

Keywords: Wancho tribe, Indigenous religion, Animism, Christianity, Arunachal Pradesh, Religious transformation, syncretism

1. Introduction

Religion has been an important part of both social integration and cultural identity in indigenous societies. The religious landscape of Northeast India in particular has been transformed by colonial experience, missionary engagement, educational interventions and the emergence of new state formations (Baruah et al., 2019). The Wancho are among many indigenous tribes of Arunachal Pradesh who have undergone and experienced the process of religious change-over and coexistence of indigenous religious beliefs and Christianity. The Wancho mainly live in Longding district in south east of Arunachal Pradesh and are closely related culturally and linguistically to the Naga tribes across the India-Myanmar border (Hazarika et al., 2021). Until the mid-20th century, the Wancho practiced an animism belief system that conceptualized multiple deities, spirits and ancestral powers that controlled natural and social phenomena. Ritual specialists (or priests), village



elders, and customary institutions were entrusted with preserving the religious and moral order (Chaudhuri et al., 2022).

Contrary to the gradual religious assimilation of many other Indian tribes, Wanchos have gone through one of the most consequential transitions in their cultures, from their customary belief systems to Christianity, in a few decades. The Wancho community near-total cultural conversion (Census of India, 2011) raises questions about the persistence of the indigenous religion, the nature of conversion, and the role of indigenous religion in Wancho beliefs and identity today. While numerous anthropological and sociological studies have explored religious conversion among the indigenous tribes of Northeast India, the majority of these works takes a broad regional approach or concentrate on missionary efforts and demographic shifts. There is a notable deficiency in focused synthesis that specifically investigates the Wancho people regarding post-conversion coexistence, cultural negotiation, and the endurance of indigenous religious elements within a predominantly Christian context.

Existing studies often treat conversion as a linear replacement of indigenous faith, with limited attention to syncretism, generational perspectives, and the re-framing of traditional practices as cultural rather than religious expressions. This review addresses this gap by critically synthesizing available literature to provide a Wancho-specific analysis of religious transformation, coexistence, and identity formation. The objective of this article is to review and synthesize the literature on co-existence of indigenous faith and Christianity among the Wancho people by

1. Outline the traditional religious system of the Wanchos,
2. Examine the historical and socio-cultural factors driving Christian conversion,
3. Analyse patterns of co-existence, conflict, and syncretism, and
4. Assess the implications of religious change for cultural identity and heritage preservation.

2. Methodology of the Review

The method used in this study involves narrative review based on secondary data sources such as peer reviewed journal articles, ethnographic monographs, census reports, government publications and institutional reports. Significant databases and sources included are: Census of India, regional anthropological journals, books on the tribes of Northeast India, and published field studies specific to Wancho culture/religion (Hazarika et al., 2021; Baruah et al., 2019). Data pertaining to religion demographics is largely derived from the Census of India (1991, 2001 and 2011) with trends for the period 2012-2024 inferred from scholarly estimates, church records and regional sociological studies, presented clearly as projections therefore not classified as official statistics.

3. Indigenous Religious Beliefs of the Wancho Tribe

3.1 Cosmology and Deities

The traditional Wancho religion has an animistic basis that includes the worship of Rang (the Supreme Creator), as well as a wide variety of other deities and spirits that are associated with natural features such as mountains, rivers and forests. Many of these spirit entities were thought to affect things like agriculture (fertility of crops), health, and social relationships with others. Therefore, it was essential for Wancho people to perform rituals to keep balance between the human world and the spirit world, which were carried out by making sacrifices or offering other forms of appeasement.

3.2 Rituals, Festivals, and Social Structure

The everyday lives of Wanchos were strongly connected to religious rituals. The Oriah festival is an important tradition that takes place annually to mark seasonal changes in agriculture, as well as to promote community togetherness. These ceremonies helped solidify family ties and strengthened group identity (Monti et al., 2018). Finally, the religious authority of priests and village headmen came from having exercised religious knowledge, thereby creating a bond between indigenous beliefs, government authority, and customary laws.

4. Emergence and Expansion of Christianity among the Wanchos

Baptist missionaries from nearby Nagaland introduced Christianity to the Wancho area mainly during the mid-20th century. Schools, hospitals, and other literacy programs provided many people with economic support and made it easier for them to become Christians (Baruah et al., 2019). Over time, many of the institutions set up by Christians in the Wancho area became part of the community and replaced traditional ways of worshipping God.

Statistics from the census show this change was happening. In 1991 only about 29% of the Wancho population was Christian. This increased to about 73% in 2001 and more than 95% by 2011 (Census of India, 2011). Based on studies done after 2011, it appears that at least through 2024–2025, Christianity will still be the primary religion for the Wancho people, while traditional belief systems will remain highly modified or past life of the Wancho.

5. Religious Demographic Trends (1991–2024)

Religious Composition of the Wancho Tribe (1991–2024)

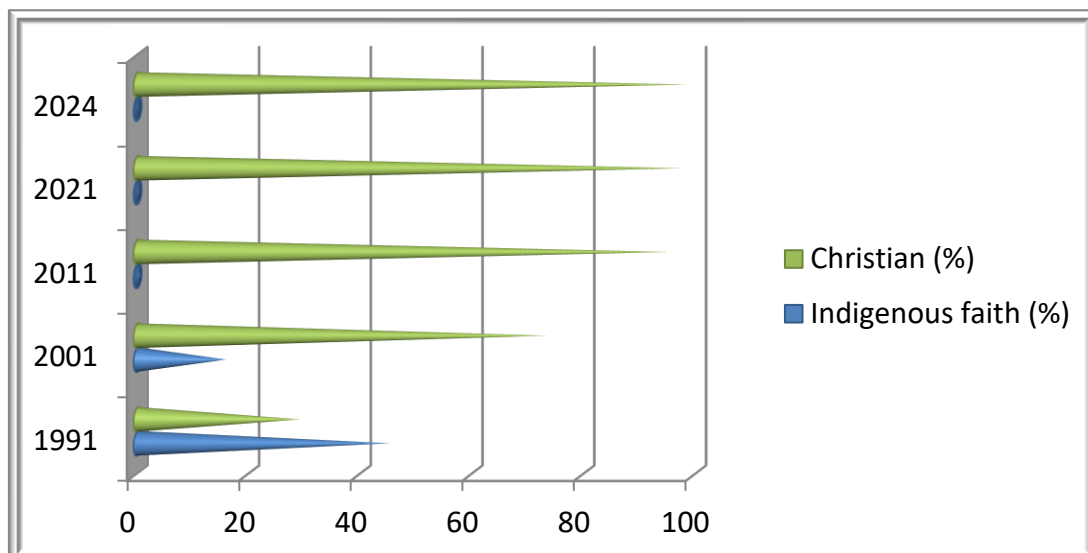
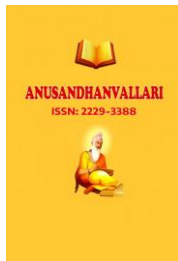


Figure 1. Trend of religious change among the Wancho tribe (1991–2024), showing a steep decline in indigenous faith and a corresponding rise in Christianity.

Note: Projected estimates based on regional studies and church records (Baruah et al., 2019; Chaudhuri et al., 2022).



6. Co-existence, Syncretism, and Cultural Negotiation

While Christianity is more prevalent than any other religion, many cultural elements derived from ancient religions are still part of local traditions, stories, and ceremonies. Scholars have found that many Wancho Christians continue to honour the old traditions, such as celebrating traditional holidays, honouring their ancestors' stories, and following customary laws, indicating a blend of cultures rather than an absolute break from them (Hazarika et al., 2021).

7. Social, Cultural, and Institutional Impact of Religious Transformation

The Wancho experienced significant socio-cultural change after many of them became Christians. The traditional village institutions or councils and specialists of rituals, used by the Wancho to manage the affairs of their villages and settle disputes, have been losing their power to the churches and their leaders, the pastors. The church has also taken on other responsibilities, which previously would have been addressed by the village council and specialists in rituals, such as providing educational resources for children and mediating disputes between people in the community as well as providing for social welfare.

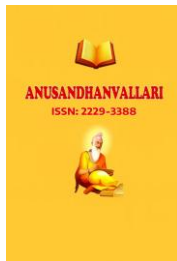
Culturally, by giving up animal sacrifice and feasting in the community, the Wancho have changed how they exchange goods and services with each other. This has helped lessen the economic burden of the traditional religious ritual but has also weakened ties to one another in the form of collective community recognitions of their cultural identity. By instituting Christian ethics, the church has helped instill in many Wancho people values such as being literate and moderately consuming alcohol and participating in activities of organised community participation, especially among young people and women.

8. Identity and Generational Perspectives

A one generation gap can be seen among the Wancho community. Elders embody lived experience of native religion, while the younger have primarily encountered traditional faith by way of stories and cultural practice (chaiudhuri et.al 2001). Nevertheless, tribal identity remains strong. Wancho language, clan based social relational ships and customary law still give identity of Wancho that are another instance in which ethnic identity proves distinct from religion.

9. Marginalisation and Revival of Indigenous Faith

Small-scale efforts to document and revive indigenous traditions have emerged, often framed as cultural preservation rather than religious revival (Hazarika et al., 2021). However, practitioners of indigenous faith may face social pressure or marginalisation, raising concerns about religious pluralism and cultural rights. From a wider viewpoint, the marginalization of indigenous spiritual practices brings forth issues concerning cultural rights and the concept of religious pluralism. Although the conversion to Christianity among the Wancho community has predominantly been a voluntary and community-oriented process, the diminishing opportunities for indigenous religious expression could lead to the deterioration of traditional knowledge systems. The constitutional measures aimed at protecting tribal culture and heritage highlight the necessity of preserving indigenous traditions, even when they are reframed as cultural rather than strictly religious practices. It is crucial to ensure a respectful coexistence between prevailing religious institutions and indigenous cultural expressions to maintain the cultural diversity of the Wancho community.



10. Discussion

Although Christianity is now the major religion, the customary religion of the Wancho continues to define their social values, culture and Wancho identity. The conversion of the Wancho tribe was largely collective, helped by the missionary-initiated education, healthcare and social integration programs for converts, and hastened by the decline of customary religion as an organized religion (Baruah et al., 2019; Hazarika et al., 2021). Despite the decline of indigenous religion, the legacy of symbols and rituals persists through festivals, oral traditions, and customary practices.

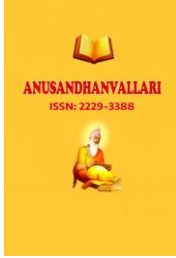
These are now markers of ethnicity rather than expression of indigenous religion. Similar traits have been documented for the other tribes across Northeast India (Xaxa, 2016). Replacing ritual authorities with church authorities in matters of governance and moral education has allowed for social discipline, but has also eroded indigenous knowledge transmission. This presents a challenge to cohabitation across generations, as elders might have lived experience of animistic traditions, whereas the younger generation may only know indigenous belief through historical contexts. This pattern highlights the importance of continuity but also the fragility of oral traditions in the absence of written records. The experience of the Wancho thus shows how religious change is a process of adaptation and selective retention.

11. Limitations of the Study

This review has certain limitations that must be acknowledged. Firstly, it is entirely dependent on secondary data, as no primary ethnographic fieldwork or interviews were performed. Consequently, the lived experiences and contemporary perspectives of the Wancho community members may not be adequately represented. Secondly, the official census data regarding religious affiliation is only accessible up to the year 2011; thus, the trends discussed in this article that occur after 2011 are derived from scholarly estimates, church records, and regional studies instead of official government statistics. Thirdly, while the narrative review approach is beneficial for synthesis, it may be subject to publication bias and the inconsistent availability of studies specifically related to the Wancho community. Notwithstanding these limitations, the study offers a thorough and critical synthesis of the existing literature and underscores areas that necessitate further empirical investigation.

12. Conclusion

The Wancho people of Arunachal Pradesh live in complex cultural and religious reconfigurations as they incorporate both traditional indigenous beliefs and a Christian faith. Although Christianity now dominates among the Wancho people as the predominant religion, traditional indigenous belief systems continue to persist through their cultural practices and collective memory, family values, and customs. While conversion to Christianity brought many new socio-educational benefits for the Wancho people, it also had a marginalising effect on the traditional religious knowledge systems of the Wancho. The Wancho's identity is based primarily on their language, kinship and customary institutions; hence, the Wancho people's identity continues to have strong linkages to these elements in the midst of much greater levels of Christianisation throughout their community. Understanding religious transformations among indigenous peoples therefore requires one to pay particular attention to both institutional change and cultural continuity. Future studies using ethnographic methods on oral traditions and documenting these traditions are critical to preserving the Wancho people's indigenous heritage while developing more inclusive practices for cultural and religious diversity.



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