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# **‘Cleanliness is next to godliness’: Religious change, hygiene and the renewal of Heraka villages in Assam**

**Arkotong Longkumer**

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*This article investigates the link between religious change and perceptions of and attitudes towards ‘hygiene’ and ‘order’ amongst adherents of Heraka, a religious reform movement among the Zeme Naga of Assam. It examines the problematic role of sacrifice, its relationship to the economy, and the consequent theological shift towards a monotheistic god, Tingwang, by focusing on the ritual of a Heraka village renewal. Not only does this ritual validate the abandonment of sacrifice, but also greatly diminishes disease-creating conditions—with blood equalling dirt—that traditional sacrifices had allegedly involved. Thus, while it can be said that ‘secular’ factors such as economic and health benefits explain the ‘conversion’ to Heraka, the article argues that theological beliefs, in particular Christian notions of ‘cleanliness is next to godliness’, also had an impact on the Heraka.*

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**Keywords:** religious change, sacrifice, hygiene, Heraka, Zeme Nagas.

## **I**

### ***Introduction***

**A widespread, if** not always explicit, view of modernisation associates it with the abandonment of traditional religious and cultural practices in favour of economic and scientific notions rooted in post-Enlightenment European thought. If such a clear-cut and comprehensive abandonment ever happened, it was certainly not typical. In most cases, the change described as ‘modernising’ arises in contexts in which there are identifiable, and crucial, continuities between past and future, and where religious, economic, educational, medical and domestic beliefs and practices are deeply intertwined. With the advent of modernisation, there is a fragmentation of ‘traditional society’ into differentiated and dispersed practices. ‘Old practices’ are reassessed in a new light that transforms how they are understood, while ‘new practices’, under the aegis of ‘reform’, are formulated so as to maintain continuities with the past. The case of the Heraka, a religious reform movement, popular among the Zeme Naga of North Cachar Hills, Assam, India (see Map 1), illustrates



ideas developed in conjunction and competition with Christianity. The article is organised to highlight several interrelated themes that underpin this central point.

First, the article examines the genesis of the Heraka movement in the North Cachar Hills. The central tenet of the Heraka posits it as a departure from *Paupaise*<sup>2</sup> (ancestral practice), especially with regard to the adoption of a sky god, Tingwang. For the Heraka, the significance of Tingwang as the principal deity is two-fold: (a) he was seen as mobile as his overarching presence delimited any territorial reach; and (b) because traditionally his status was that of a minor (and distant god), he required fewer sacrifices. Therefore, this cosmological shift was associated with the economic ease that the reduction (and eventual abolishment) of sacrifices brought about. Not only did this shift characterise the importance of cosmological change, but it also helped explain the abandonment of the many smaller gods, and the subsequent reconfiguration of Heraka society. This process is explained below in important rituals such as village renewals.

Second, the article examines the reconfiguration of the role of sacrifice within the Heraka movement. It further demonstrates how the understanding of illness was connected with the practice of sacrificing.<sup>3</sup> It discusses the manner in which Heraka cosmology negotiated and interacted with concurrent social changes, such as the move away from using sacrifices and the Heraka's relationship with Christianity. Third, to demonstrate how cosmological change, the role of sacrifices, illness and hygiene interacted, the article examines the renewal of a Heraka village. Importantly, I draw on the connection between metaphor and the management of hygiene, especially as it articulates and reflects the process of religious change for the Heraka. Although ideas of purification, healing and illness can be associated with the intrinsic process of becoming 'converted' from Paupaise/Heraka to Christianity, I however discuss the difficulty of strictly applying a conversion model between the Paupaise and Heraka. I, therefore, argue that the use of metaphors articulated by Paul Ricoeur (1978) is better framed to address the developments between the Paupaise and

<sup>2</sup> 'Paupaise' literally means grandfather-grandmother practice (Pau-pai-se), and is a 20<sup>th</sup> century construction by the Heraka and Christians to separate their own 'practices' from those of their ancestors. Paupaise traditionally encompassed the entirety of a Zeme person's life and made him/her a human (*zemenā*). Gods, rituals, sacrifices, agriculture, household customs, taboos, kin relations, were all intertwined and governed by Paupaise *hingde* (rules governing everyday life). Although the Heraka initially continued in the tradition of Paupaise by reforming only selected practices, both groups now see themselves as different religious communities.

<sup>3</sup> It must be noted that illness is understood here as a patho-physiological process, and a culturally shaped understanding. Disease, on the other hand, is the problem from the medical practitioner's perspective that shows how illness is recast utilising theories of disorder (Kleinman 1988: 4-5).

Heraka, particularly as it pertains to religious change.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the article investigates how the relationship between health and wealth is valued as a result of these changes, and how ultimately ‘advancement’ resonates with the formation of a modern religious community. First, however, let us begin with the geography and context.

## II

### *Geography and context*

The Zeme are a Naga tribe,<sup>5</sup> who were separately classified for administrative purposes by the British between 1834 and 1947, and have remained fragmented even after Indian independence, in the contiguous areas of three North-eastern states: Assam, Nagaland and Manipur. Their desire for a unified administrative area within the Indian Union was championed in the 1960s and 1970s by the leader of the Heraka movement, Rani Gaidinliu (also Gaidinliu, Ranima [queen mother]), under the pan-tribal union known as the Zeliangrong movement which is a combination of the three prefixes of the ‘Naga tribes’: Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei (Ze-liang-rong) (Kabui 1982: 53). Although Zeliangrong was composed of both Christians and non-Christians, Rani Gaidinliu hoped that the Heraka movement would be the emblem of a unified Zeliangrong people, which has not transpired.

The history of the Heraka movement has evolved through various stages.<sup>6</sup> It was principally organised under their second prophet Rani Gaidinliu, who took over the remnants of the movement from Jadonang after he was executed by the British on charges of human sacrifice in the early 1930s.<sup>7</sup> Although some scholars hold the view that Jadonang was the first prophet and the principal founder of the Heraka movement (Yonuo 1982), most Heraka

<sup>4</sup> Change from Paupaise to Heraka historically has been associated with ‘conversion’ by the Paupaise and Christians in the region. Although I argue that the Heraka are a reform movement, ‘reform/conversion’ is a blurred and historically dynamic phenomenon because of evolving Paupaise/Heraka/Christian relations, and the Heraka’s tendency to borrow Christian ideas.

<sup>5</sup> Nanga (naked in Hindi), a young man (in Kachari), ‘Nag’ (snake in Hindi) are all considered as translations of the word ‘Naga’ (Hutton 1965: 17). Due to the ambiguity of ‘Naga’, there are now 68 Naga tribes recorded both in India and Myanmar (Nuh 2006: 24-26), compared to only 9 recorded in the 1891 Assam Census. The use of the problematic word ‘tribe’ here is solely for uniformity as it corresponds with the list of ‘Scheduled Tribes’ drawn up for protective discrimination under Article 342 of the Indian Constitution.

<sup>6</sup> From early descriptions of events in 1929 and over the next 45 years, Heraka has been known by various names, for example, Kacha Naga movement, Gaidinliu movement, *Periese* (old practice), *Kelumse* (prayer practice) and *Ranise* (‘practice of the queen’, a reference to Gaidinliu as people’s queen), all representing the different developments of the movement which finally came to be known as Heraka in 1974. In this article, I have generally used ‘Heraka’ as shorthand to indicate all these stages.

<sup>7</sup> Jadonang was accused of murdering two traders as sacrifices to the gods of his ‘new religion’. He was found guilty and hanged by the British. For an account of his trial see Political and Secret Department: L/PS/13/1002: 441-446. However, it is unlikely that Jadonang was actually involved in murder and human sacrifice. It could have been possible the British feared that Jadonang, who was a popular reformer and leader in Manipur, could initiate a revolt against British rule. Some scholars have suggested that the British in fact engineered these charges to prevent any further problems (see Yonuo 1982; Kamei 2002).

adherents look to Rani Gaidinliu as the initiator of the reforms because the Heraka movement developed separately in North Cachar Hills and in the Peren district of Nagaland after Jadonang's death (Longkumer 2010: 14-16). Therefore, the reforms from Paupaise initiated by Rani Gaidinliu made the Heraka highly popular in the North Cachar Hills; it is now the dominant religious group amongst the Zeme, followed by the Christians, and the Paupaise.

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to provide a detailed examination of Christianity, its spread or reaction to Paupaise and the Heraka, a brief historical summary is useful to help understand its wider relevance to this article. Christianity 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.<sup>8</sup> The first Zeme convert was Ditung Zeme of Kenareram village, six years later in 1910. Unlike the other Naga-inhabited areas of Nagaland and Manipur, Christian conversion among the Zeme of North Cachar Hills was very slow primarily because Christian progress was actively opposed by the competitive other, the Heraka. The Heraka prophet Rani Gaidinliu allegedly said that 'Christians will be the greatest hindrance to the Heraka, but when the Heraka receives [sic] their freedom, Christians will be our slaves' (Pame 1996: 211). However, two revivals in 1948 and 1978 significantly strengthened the growth of Presbyterian Christianity in the North Cachar Hills. Furthermore, the first Baptist mission penetrated Hsongle and other Zeme villages from Manipur, around 1975-76, while the Roman Catholics have entered Zeme villages in the last 20 years through the Salesians of Don Bosco and the Holy Cross missions.

Moreover, it is important to note that Christians have traditionally converted from Paupaise and some recently from the Heraka. The Paupaise, on the other hand, have decreased in numbers dramatically over the years.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the manner in which Paupaise is viewed both by the Heraka and Christians is noteworthy. The Heraka adherents still look to Paupaise as an important basis of Zeme tradition and indeed some older Heraka may say that, aside from eliminating sacrifices and the adoption of Tingwang, they continue in the 'tradition' of Paupaise by observing agricultural practices, kin relations, customs, festivals, and so on, a point I return to later. Similarly, the Christians also attempt to 'preserve' aspects of Paupaise tradition. However, they acknowledge a clearer break from Paupaise in terms of their religious practices. The Paupaise adherents, however, declare the Heraka and the

<sup>8</sup> The Welsh Presbyterians were primarily operating from the Lushai Hills (present state of Mizoram in India) in 1891 (Dena 1988: 41-46).

<sup>9</sup> In the North Cachar Hills, the Paupaise are numerically negligible. There is only one Paupaise village (Lozeihe) comprising of around 12 households (with a population of around 60).

Christians' piecemeal attempts at preserving 'tradition' as a sham. These complex relationships have developed over the years through the following chronology of events.

### III

#### *Negotiating religious change*

##### **1. Reform and colonialism**

In the 1930s, the first Heraka reformers started preaching against the 'old way of life' (i.e., Paupaise), and attacking specific institutions that crippled Zeme economy. Although, it is difficult to ascertain precisely who these early reformers were, oral sources indicate that they were mostly Zeme people whose aim was to spread the message of reform expounded by Jadonang and Rani Gaidinliu. However, their message of reform was sometimes uneven. Some, for example, argued that to partake in the modern world, eradicating sacrifices was necessary, leading to changes in cosmology, and making the Heraka more flexible. Others preached against working in the fields because grains would fall from the sky or said that the Zeme need not attend school, as knowledge could be acquired by using a book as a pillow. Sometimes, I was told, these reformers were vehement about the impending 'end of the world'. These millenarian ideas formed the core of their disillusionment with the economic and social situation.

Part of the reason for their unhappiness could be attributed to the British colonial policy of parcelling land out to new immigrants, particularly the Kuki people.<sup>10</sup> This created a land shortage for the Zeme, leading in turn to a serious shortage of food during the 1930s. Ursula Graham Bower, working in the North Cachar Hills at that time, observed that under these circumstances, 'Progressive over-cultivation followed, with endless encroachments, land disputes, tribal friction, and steady deforestation and degeneration of what jhum-land there was' (Bower 1946: 52).

As a response to these activities, the early reforms incorporated myths of a 'golden age' that sought to attract people who were experiencing famine and loss of land ownership. It claimed that signs of this 'golden age' would appear when the taxes paid to the British government were paid instead to Gaidinliu, and when the Kukis were driven away from

<sup>10</sup> The Kuki are an ethnic group related to the Chins of Mizoram (in India) and Myanmar.

Zeme land, and promised that prosperity could be attained through prayers to the Zeme sky god, Tingwang (see Burrige 1969; Worsley 1970).<sup>11</sup>

Due to these economic pressures, the early reformers reasoned that the economic viability of numerous sacrifices to the many gods was difficult to maintain and therefore had to be curtailed. The Heraka reformers started addressing this problem by arguing for two significant processes: eradicating sacrifices because they were costly, and reconfiguration of the cosmology.

## **2. Sacrifices and illness**

Certain traditional institutions (animal sacrifices) were thought to hinder Zeme development in relation to the modern world. Paupaise involved innumerable sacrifices to the gods and spirits of the village. These were prescribed for illnesses and to ensure good harvests, rain and so on. A sacrifice is a 'purchase' from gods, who set the price on animals (Mauss 1990: 16), through a shaman or priest. This can involve a chicken, cow, or *mithun* (Indian Bison), depending on the occasion or the gravity of the illness: the rule is that the greater the need, the bigger the sacrifice. These sacrifices were an attempt to appease the gods, and a failure to carry them out or to do them correctly could have dire consequences for the village.

The association of sacrifice with illness was widespread during the early 1930s in the region. In a British Administrative Report, it was recorded that a certain Naga *Sadhu* (holy man) was popular because of his healing powers, and it was said that villagers in the North Cachar Hills were bringing him mithuns for sacrifice to enquire about their children's illnesses, as disease and death were rampant.<sup>12</sup> Sacrifices were common in divining illnesses during the 1930s, but they demanded a huge investment, which people could not afford. Therefore, Gaidinliu's reform banning sacrifices of larger animals, while strategically allowing the continued performance of those involving fowls, was an important intermediate step. An outright ban would have been too dramatic a change. In fact, according to Pautanzen Newme, the act of sacrificial obligations gradually decreased from the 1<sup>st</sup> stage (roughly around the 1960s) where small animal sacrifices were permitted, to the 4<sup>th</sup> stage (in

<sup>11</sup> One such song expressing these sentiments was entitled 'Kedeirei Se Keli Wang Jeu' (The World has Changed). It celebrated the changes taking place and foretold a future of joy, freedom and abundance (Longkumer 2007: 505).

<sup>12</sup> Proceedings series: P/11892, No. 50.



1990), which advocated an ‘official’ and complete ban of sacrifices. This is how the event was narrated:

...the preceptress (Ranima) vigorously declared and confessed before the general public that we have fully done the requirement of sacrificial oblation in puja [reverence or worship]. Now, influential sacrifices of animals in any puja are to be totally abolished. And we are free to perform puja with a clean mind and body at any specific time and day (Newme 2002: 4).

### 3. Cosmology

One important effect of eradicating sacrifices was the alteration of the cosmology for the Heraka movement. Since minor gods required numerous sacrifices, they were abandoned and a universal god, Tingwang was adopted. The adoption of a cosmology that was well organised and espoused a high level of integration was paramount in the establishment of a new religious system. It took on a relatively monotheistic and hierarchical structure. Nine smaller gods (who are ineffectual) were at the same time, retained in the cosmology as a way of securing legitimacy based on the Zeme tradition.<sup>13</sup> This image also conveys an idea that the Heraka god Tingwang is positioned over, and to an extent encompasses, the smaller gods of Paupaise. For instance, the very meaning behind Heraka envisages a state where various smaller gods (*hera*) are fenced out (*ka*) to accommodate one god, the sky god Tingwang.

Lévi-Strauss reminds us that myth undergoes transformation due to ‘romantic elaboration’, or ‘historical legitimation’. Such history, he says, is of two types: ‘retrospective—to base a traditional order on a distant past; or prospective—to treat this past as the beginning of a future that is in the process of taking shape’ (1974: 280-281). It is most likely that the Heraka cosmology is a combination of the ‘retrospective’ and the ‘prospective’, legitimising a new order framed on the past, and using the past to recreate something for the present and the future.

Therefore, the manner in which the inclusion and exclusion of gods is understood here is important. In the first instance, ‘encompassment’ is an activity of hierarchical inclusion, which means that the ‘smaller gods’ are incorporated and maintained for traditional legitimacy. There is evidence to suggest that during the early Heraka reforms in the 1930s, the nine smaller gods were also efficacious and relevant. Even today, amongst the smaller gods, *Chuprai* (the god of grain), *Hechawang* (the python king) are still evoked by some

<sup>13</sup> The nine are: Banglawang, Gechingpeu, Heransia, Lhu, Nrak, Mekang, Munseniu, Chuprai, and Hechawang.

Heraka who are anxious of letting go, because of the unanticipated ways in which they could make their presence felt. This view is particularly visceral in some villages whose residents reasoned to me that since Chuprai was traditionally the king of the gods (*Herawang*), to abandon him so suddenly could have dire consequences on their crops, and hence their livelihoods.

In the second instance, ‘fencing out’ suggests a more radical approach by the majority of the Heraka. Gods like Chuprai required innumerable sacrifices and to eradicate the need for constant appeasement, these gods had to be ‘fenced out’. The Heraka believe that the way this is done is by praying to one God, Tingwang, and singing songs that the prophets composed, especially during important rituals such as *Jalua* (full moon day). In these songs, there are special prayers to protect the people and exorcise the gods who are portrayed as ‘evil’ and ‘bloodthirsty’ (see Longkumer 2010: 180-197).

These points unravel in two significant ways regarding the cosmology. First, it could be simply that the gods have been reconceptualised and altered to mirror the changes in the sacrificial structure. Second, it mimics a certain cosmological framework, perhaps incorporated from their Christian neighbours. In this respect, while it is important to bear in mind that the Heraka gods are autochthonous, it is of equal significance to analyse how cosmological views travel. Let us examine this point.

#### **4. Heraka and Christianity**

In instituting new practices, especially in relation to the reorganisation of the place of gods in their cosmology, the Heraka are strongly influenced by the ideas of monotheism within Christianity. Tingwang, who in traditional Paupaise cosmology is a minor god, was and is called upon only when a new settlement or a village is established; a god that establishes community irrespective of the new locale. It was possibly the Christians who first started using Tingwang during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as a way of addressing the Christian high god. In the case of the Heraka, it is only from around the 1960s that the importance of Tingwang starts featuring regularly in their narratives and writings. The Christian influence can also be found in recent literature on the theology of the Heraka. It looks upon Tingwang as the ‘root of all creation’, and the belief in the ‘worship of one Supreme Being, as practised by the Heraka, is the introduction of the concept of monotheism or belief in one God in the Zeliangrong religion’, which was traditionally polytheistic (Zeliang 1980: 7).

## 5. Cosmology and social relations

Since the Paupaise gods and spirits were relatively fixed to their localities, the new cosmology allowed the Heraka to become more mobile, a feature which ties in with developments such as education, employment and trade, integrating the Heraka more effectively in relation to (colonial) governance and labour. By privileging Tingwang, the ensuing reforms encouraged abolishing ties with the smaller gods through sacrifices and the agricultural cycle, making the new movement both simplified and economically viable, in contrast to the complex and ‘burdensome’ practices of Paupaise. This idea points to a larger theoretical point made by Robin Horton (1975), in which he contends that cosmologies reflect the functioning of social relations. In connection to a two-tier cosmology comprising of a microcosm (lesser gods) and macrocosm (supreme god), Horton examines how these relations affect those bounded within a certain locality, on the one hand, and those with access to the wider world, on the other. What Horton concludes is that eventually due to ‘modernity’ and the dissolution of microcosmic boundaries, people gravitate towards more macrocosmic realities. However, Horton has been criticised for focusing on the monolatrous (single-divinity-focused) aspect, as the sole criterion of religious change (see Hefner 1993).

In her study of African cosmologies, Emefie Ikenga-Metuh observes that indigenous forms of worship are incorporated into an already existing pantheon, by circumventing monolatry or monotheism (cited in Hefner 1993: 23). Others, such as David Jordan’s (1993) study of conversion in Taiwan, demonstrate that rather than a replacement, traditional Chinese religion has long been characterised by its inclusive ‘additive’ quality, or what he calls ‘pantheon interchangeability’, in contrast to Christian exclusivism. Is this the reason, he asks, why Christianity has not been well received by the Chinese (Jordan 1993: 286)? This is an interesting theoretical point. With regard to the Heraka cosmology, although there is a strong monotheistic influence, monolatry has been a defining feature. It privileges a single god, Tingwang, without excluding the smaller gods, even if they are less efficacious. Not only have the Heraka moved towards a macrocosmic reality, but simultaneously maintained autochthonous deities that provide legitimacy of tradition. It is for this reason that the Heraka were historically more successful numerically when compared to the Zeme Christians, who had an exclusive cosmology: the Heraka allowed more fluidity and flexibility with their cosmology.<sup>14</sup> This notion not only reflects Lévi-Strauss’ ‘retrospective’ and ‘prospective’

<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Richard Eaton’s (2000) interesting conversion theory amongst the Sema, Ao and Angami Nagas, throws light on some of these issues.

views but is connected to the larger process of conversion in the region (see also Robinson and Clarke 2003).

Certain limitations inhibit the application of a strict 'conversion' model to the Heraka. First, when the Heraka message was spreading, it appears that the reformers were conscious of maintaining the status quo prevalent in the Zeme villages. Therefore, becoming Heraka was seen as a fluid transition from one system to another and not as 'conversion' in the sense of exclusivism.<sup>15</sup> In fact, what we see is incremental replacement of the traditional cosmology with one which, I was told, 'was more effective and attuned with present conditions'. Second, it is difficult to suggest that the reformers were exclusivist in the sense that one is either Heraka or Paupaise. This exclusivist attitude is regarded as the hallmark of Christianity, which saw itself as the true religion. Becoming Heraka did not require its adherents to profess their faith or announce certain doctrines. It was seen simply as changing with the times.<sup>16</sup> All these reasons – flexibility, lack of exclusiveness, and reform – made the Heraka more popular than Christianity in the North Cachar Hills, when compared to other Naga inhabited areas of Nagaland and Manipur, where Christianity became the major religion. However, for both the Heraka reformers and the Christians, Paupaise was seen as expensive, outmoded and too cumbersome.

Due to these exigencies, religious change in the Heraka context occurred on various levels. The change in agricultural practices and the different rituals associated with the reforms also required a certain psychological shift. The need to 'renew' villages meant not only changing certain aspects of Paupaise life, it meant that literally, physically they had to 'scrub the village exteriors' to draw the connection between 'religious change' and 'hygienic practices'.

<sup>15</sup> Of course, I am not arguing that all conversion is exclusivist, sudden, or radical—it can involve prolonged periods, and in some cases dramatic changes can be difficult to pin point (see Buckster and Glazier 2003).

<sup>16</sup> According to the Heraka, each generation supposedly receives a new Hingde (rules governing everyday life), through the regeneration of time. Following this schema, the Heraka believe that it is now the turn of their generation to follow its ascribed religious practices, through a reinterpretation of an outmoded Paupaise (ancestral) practice.

## IV

*Renewal of a village: Name is everything*

This representation of the present and the past in the village renewals was narrated to me by Kuame, a Heraka preacher (*hingde pame*) in Nchubonglo village,<sup>17</sup> in the western part of the North Cachar Hills. He said:

During Paupaise most of the people were sick and eventually died. Wild animals also plagued us and ate our livestock and grains. So we realised that it was time to change our practice and follow what our prophets Rani Gaidinliu and Jadonang taught. So after we became pure Heraka, 25 years or so ago, all these things, which happened during the Paupaise, have not reoccurred. We have our livestock and have no trouble at all. And, the population also increased after we became Heraka. This is because we renewed our village according to Heraka Hingde.

On the day of renewal, we washed all the things in each house with water. We also changed the stone of the hearth and made bamboo jars to carry the water. All the firewood was gathered and, along with the bamboo jars, we put it on the *hezoa*.<sup>18</sup> We changed the altar stone of the *hezoa* as well and plastered the floor of the houses. Before sunset we went outside the village boundary and constructed temporary huts to sleep in for the night. We cooked outside the village and slept in the temporary houses.

As soon as the sun rose (the day of the ritual), from the North side of the village, we sang a song '*Ndi Pumkuna Wangra Chimak Keheu Kum*'. The meaning of the song is 'before we did not know about Tingwang, but now we know about the creator'. So, on this day we asked for blessings on our present generation, our livestock, and agriculture. We sang this song and marched to the *hezoa*; and then we stopped the song and put the new altar stone in the *hezoa*. The priest (*tingkopau*) was standing behind the stone and praying. In his prayer he asked Tingwang to bless this generation, livestock, agriculture, wood, trees, water, to bring wealth, care for the needy and also to keep the wild animals away. After the prayer was over, each and every family of the household gathered near the stone of the *hezoa* and lit a fire using the wood already there, carrying the bamboo jugs and fire to their houses because man

<sup>17</sup> The names of the villages in this section have not been altered for the purposes of the narrative and the argument.

<sup>18</sup> *Hezoa* is a mound of earth which is the ritual centre of the village. It is placed equidistant from the upper and lower gates of the village. All major rituals including the ritual for the foundation of the village are performed here (Betts [also Bower] 1950: 28).

cannot live without water and fire. The women carried the water and men carried the fire (fire and water are the signs of renewal). Once the fire was lit in every household, we cooked, ate and drank. After this renewal ritual, I saw that the prayers had come true—the village had improved.

When the village was originally established, we settled here from the village Ramchiram. No ritual had been performed, but we continued with our *jhum* [swidden cultivation]. At that time it was Paupaise, and the village had ill health, was very poor, and had no paddy. Priests also had a short life. We thought that these problems could have arisen because no proper ritual was conducted when the village was established, so different Heraka preachers advised a renewal ritual.

So I decided to ask Ranima if we could renew the village in this way. I went to Ranima at Lsong and asked her. The villagers contributed 10 Rupees to give to Ranima. This renewal was around 1987. Ranima blessed the 10 rupees and she told me to remind her again in the morning. Next morning, I went to her and asked for the ritual and she said to me, ‘The founders of the village did not have the ritual for foundation. That is why you are having these problems’. I also asked her, ‘Should we follow what the preachers have said?’ So she said, ‘Yes, you can follow as the preachers have suggested’. She said the same thing as the preachers had said but she said when you pray for the village say ‘Nchubonglo’ [a new name given to the village] and not ‘Bolosan’ [the previous name]. The renewal was necessary because the village had been made dirty by the Paupaise practice and we might have displeased Tingwang somehow. Also, we hadn’t prayed to Tingwang [sky god] but to *Tingchura* [god of stone] and evil spirits. So, the ritual was performed to ask Tingwang to forgive us for our mistakes because this ritual symbolises what Heraka is: to overcome evil spirits and *to erase the memory of sacrifices and evil spirits*’ (emphasis added).

### **Renewal, narrative, memory**

As Kuame narrated the renewal of the village, sitting inside the spacious hut in Nchubonglo and warmed by the constant flickering of the flame from the hearth, it became strangely apparent that I was inhabiting two worlds as my host talked about Bolosan (the old name) in the past and Nchubonglo (the new name) in the present. What occurred to me as merely a linguistic preference of Nchubonglo over Bolosan was, for the speaker, a significant change in which the latter with its reference to Tingchura and evil spirits was seen as pejorative. The time shift is a debate that persists: Christians refer to their village as Bolosan, because that

was the name associated with ancestry, and also to exasperate the Heraka. On the other hand, the Heraka prefer Nchubonglo because they are trying to erase the memory of sacrifices and evil spirits associated with the Paupaise and hence Bolosan. The naming of terrain is thus not only linguistic but ideological in its form. With the change in names, the village has also changed.

It is important to note that the use of the concept of hygiene and its relation to advancement and progress comes primarily from Christian attitudes focused on the interdependency of religious change with changing attitudes towards dirt and cleanliness. The epidemiology of these ideas finds its root, as explained below, in the Christian Protestant notion of ‘cleanliness as next to godliness’. In order to differentiate themselves from the Paupaise past, the Heraka have borrowed the language and concepts employed by the Christians to indicate that the Paupaise past was ‘heathen’ and disease ridden. The eradication of ‘dirt’ is also strategically linked with the eradication of sacrifice, and how this abandonment of sacrifice reflects on the perception of progress and advancement the Heraka are making alongside their competitive ‘other’, the Zeme Christians.

### **Metaphor and hygienic practices**

Through the renewal ritual the Heraka people dissociate themselves from the Paupaise past. In a crude way—to borrow a Heraka metaphor—it washes them clean of a ghostly exterior by scrubbing the interior of the village. If Paul Ricoeur is right in pointing out that the rule of metaphor, like language, enables differentiation and varied meanings, then the metaphorical ‘is’ at once signifies both ‘is not’ and ‘is like’ (1978: 6-7). It is in this tension that the route to metaphorical truth is attainable because it confronts not only the verbal and non-verbal, it also produces a new meaning by challenging two domains of thought we do not habitually bring together: the literal and the figurative (Ricoeur 1978: 213-214). Metaphor, importantly for Ricoeur, has the ability to transform abstract language into something concrete until it becomes the ‘language of action’ (Simms 2003: 65). In his own words,

Metaphor is living not only to the extent that it vivifies a constituted language. Metaphor is living by virtue of the fact that it introduces the spark of imagination into a ‘thinking more’ at the conceptual level. This struggle to ‘think more’, guided by the ‘vivifying principle’, is the ‘soul’ of interpretation. (1978: 303)

Similarly, the Heraka metaphor of scrubbing the village clean operates on two levels of the literal and the figurative. In this manner metaphor confers an ‘insight’ (Ricoeur 1978: 87).

Therefore, the metaphor here is used to elicit a way of thinking about the past-present-future that consolidates two different perspectives: the internal and external.

The internal metaphor in this case, I think, could indicate possible Christian resonances, of cleaning the heart, or washing oneself of sins, and the external metaphor could indicate a Heraka motif of cleansing the past (in this case blood sacrifices), through the altering of the hezoa stone and cleaning of the village. It is useful to recall the way in which Mircea Eliade points to the importance of consecrating a territory by making it 'our world' through recreating and renewing it. For example, when Spanish conquistadores took possession of a territory by claiming it for Jesus Christ they raised a Cross, which was equivalent to consecrating a country to 'a new birth' (Eliade 1959: 32). The replacement of the hezoa stone similarly invokes the consecration of place to effect a renewal, even a new birth.

Belongings such as pots and pans are washed, floors scrubbed, and the ritual cleaning of the village begins at its heart, the hezoa. A combination of the internal and external metaphor of cleaning the heart and the past also surfaces in Kuame's narrative: to *erase the memory of sacrifices and evil spirits*. This double metaphor – internal/external; present/past – resonates with the Paupaise *Hgangi* (new year) ritual that propitiates and asks the major spirits to leave the village so that it is healthy and free of illness (Betts [also Bower] 1950: 151-52). However, although the double metaphors appear similar, the key difference is the derogatory reference to Tingchura (god of stone) who is contrasted with God Tingwang, and how this negative view of Tingchura has enabled the Heraka to banish all past references of spirits (read evil spirits). In a double cause and effect, since the evil spirits are now expunged from the village, no blood sacrifices are required for them. Therefore, the village now is figuratively cleansed from the dirt that blood sacrifice represented.<sup>19</sup>

The renewal of Nchubonglo village is also tied in with the role of hygiene, and illnesses associated with its lack. Part of the problem is the habitual patterns of Paupaise life that, as a Heraka elder said, kept the village dirty. Removal of dirt, as I was told, functioned within the village like any other daily routine, informed largely by the priest. For example, it was prohibited (*neube*) to sweep the floor on certain days, or it was *neube* to use water on certain days to clean the plates. So most people would lick the plate clean with their saliva and prop it by the wall. Animals, children, people, would come and go and the 'dirt' and

<sup>19</sup> Heraka adherents say that blood represents 'danger' because of the way it elicits an important connection with sacrifice; it evokes a connection with Paupaise gods. The absence of blood sacrifice mirrors the 'spiritual' cleanliness of the village.



‘bacteria’ would naturally collect until it caused disease and illness, which people then attributed to an evil spirit troubling them. Through reinterpretation of these processes—the adoption of Tingwang, the abandoning of sacrifices, and the renewal of villages—the Heraka have managed to preach hygiene as a crucial tenet in upgrading or ‘advancing’ their lives in a sustainable and healthier way.

Considering the classification of purity and danger in society, Mary Douglas examines them in relation to ideas of cleanliness and dirt. The former gives society a sense of order in contrast to the disorder represented by the latter. In cleaning dirt, an attempt is being made to control the environment positively (Douglas 2003: 2). The disorder that is dirt is also, in this case, ‘backward’, while cleanliness is order and ‘advancement’. In this sense, the notion that dirt was present in Paupaise life clearly represents a system where dirt was ‘matter out of place’ (Douglas 2003: 36). Since the Heraka have reclassified the role of sacrifice, it resonates with Douglas’ classification of cleanliness and dirt: cleanliness (equals renewal and reform) and dirt (equals blood and Paupaise prohibitions).<sup>20</sup> This symbolic understanding is also expressed literally by the Heraka adherents who say that their system distinguishes itself by removing dirt from the village and homes. For example, by sweeping the floors and using water to clean the village or the plates, the new system is seen as orderly, an elevation of personal and collective hygiene and therefore ‘advancement’ from the previous life of disease and disorder. In the Heraka context, by using water to wash the dirt, a renewal takes place. Writing about the religious symbolism of water, Mircea Eliade discusses a common South Asian phenomenon:

Breaking up all forms, doing away with the past, water possesses this power of purifying, of regenerating, of giving new birth...Water purifies and regenerates because it nullifies the past, and restores—even if only for a moment—the integrity of the dawn of things. (Eliade 1958: 194; quoted in Douglas 2003: 162)

There is, however, an important interplay between the past and the present, and how the Heraka negotiate aspects of the Paupaise past with the reform. This is illustrated in the way symbols like water and fire are used in the village renewal. Not only do water and fire symbolise purity (and the act of catharsis), but equally they demonstrate a metonymic connection as they are based on contiguity and association rather than separation from Paupaise ideas—the assertion in the renewal narrative that ‘man cannot live without fire and

<sup>20</sup> The connection between the spilling of animal blood and dirt is context-dependent: for non-sacrificial purposes, it is not seen as impure and dirty.

water'. Even the notion of changing the name of the village suggests a connection with the object (the traditional land) prior to connecting ideas (the name of the village) (Ricoeur 1978: 56). On the other hand, the greater span of meaning accorded to metaphors unleashes a certain capacity for interpretation on the conceptual level that correlates with the message of the reform.

In this regard the 'hygiene' metaphor departs from the traditional Paupaise past and shows how cleanliness signifies 'advancement' to the Heraka. The Heraka preacher, Kuame, told me these hygiene practices, which in hindsight were common sense, were credited to Rani Gaidinliu and her teachings to legitimise the changes. Of course, what worked so effectively is that the reform, side by side with safety and hygienic rituals, safeguarded the community from further illnesses. This in turn eradicated the need for sacrifices, for not only was disease less, but it was believed that these changes happened because their religious lifestyles had been altered for the better.

The emphasis on lifestyle is evident in meetings such as the *Telung Ndui* (cultural meetings; see image 1), where mostly women and children are taught how to cook, clean, and minimise the use of water while achieving maximum cleanliness. The idea of maintaining the home as the inner sanctum is positively reinforced by the Heraka, albeit only recently. The image below illustrates the way women are often instructed by an elder of the village (in this case a male) about the role of women in maintaining the homestead and providing a sanctuary for the overall development of the family. This attitude towards domesticity as a virtue came about when less attention was placed on agriculture and more on the education of children. Previously, the agricultural fields were the primary place of work that involved the participation of the entire family, but now with the economy recast according to present realities, the home is seen as the sanctum around which life revolves. The role of women within the house is thus further validated with these developments. In light of this, the idea of home as the centre of virtue and the woman as the guardian of this sanctum is pivotal to the Heraka notion of domesticity.

The encouragement of these ideals amongst the Heraka is also a reaction against the widespread perceptions of the superiority of Zeme Christian women, who are seen as better equipped and more effective in managing a healthy home—a perception centred on the brewing and use of *zao* (rice beer) in Heraka homes. Christian women contend that domestic brewing of *zao* by Heraka women destabilises the home, due to excessive consumption by the husband and other male family members. The effects are drunkenness and disruption of order in the home, which allegedly, in turn, restricts the educational advancement of the

children. The Heraka leaders take this seriously and routine instructions are communicated to Heraka preachers who entreat the public to desist from brewing zao at home.

These conceptions of cleanliness and its relation to ‘health’ and ‘advancement’ connect with notions surrounding one’s superiority over the ‘other’. This attitude is reflected in a hierarchy envisaged between the Christian, Heraka and Paupaise. The first is seen as being the most ‘advanced’ due to its extreme Puritanism, while the last is viewed as the most ‘backward’ due to its ‘primitivism’. In the Heraka context, therefore, it is most likely that it is with reference to their Christian neighbours that a new set of imperatives has arisen and that the language of cleanliness as well as bodily practices are reformed in this competitive scene.<sup>21</sup> This also reflects the functioning of a collective in its pursuit of health and wealth.

## V

### *The world has changed: The body of practice*

Healing narratives abound in Zeme villages that are not only about altering one’s religious practices (and by extension a new belonging), but also about affirming a better ‘self’ incorporated into a Christian theology of grace and salvation. In one such instance, a convert, now a Baptist preacher, narrated his journey towards Christianity from Heraka, which was connected to a long history of illness in his family.

We were sick with fever and one of my sons also died. The houses where I prayed [when I was Heraka] were all cured, except my house. Later when the Christians came to our house to pray, I refused to convert, until eventually when my wife was really sick, I relented. After that, my entire household was cured.

The relationship between religious attitude, health and illness illustrates the intrinsic connection between conversion and purification. It further demonstrates how a Christian narrative privileges its beliefs over the Heraka’s, just as the Heraka overrides the Paupaise practice, thus reinforcing the Puritanism-primitivism hierarchy. The discipline instilled amongst Puritan adherents is characteristic of the way both the Christian and Heraka compete over the management of hygiene and domesticity. It reflects a healthy social body and therefore mirrors a better ‘self’ in relation to God’s providence. Reflecting on similar

<sup>21</sup> I am using the term ‘body’ in this context as both a physical and symbolic article, natural and culturally shaped, situated in historical instances (Kirmayer 1992).

attitudes regarding cleanliness in America, Suellen Hoy comments that John Wesley's adage, cleanliness as a virtue next to godliness, was adopted by the Calvinists not to suggest that one was ungodly if unclean, but that those who were seen as 'neat' and 'tidy' were also seen to be polite, responsible and orderly and, in a very generalised way, to be associated with godliness (1995: 3-4).

By becoming Heraka, a religious community is affirmed and in the process new memories that evoke a religious history are envisioned. In other words, the renewal of the village is an act of remembrance that creates meaning and symbolises a new beginning, which is also ideologically linked to other changes such as mobility, education, and employment. This point is particularly pertinent to the way religious memory is distinctive for communities of faith because it can be wrested from the past anytime due to the historical foundation that pervades it (Hervieu-Léger 2000: 124). The conception of religious memory becomes normative, according to Danièle Hervieu-Léger, when it is reinforced and centred on a lineage of belief that '...is affirmed and manifested in the essentially religious act of recalling a past which gives meaning to the present and contains the future' (ibid.: 125). Thus when the Heraka recall an event such as the village renewal, it affirms a lineage that allows them to positively reinforce the reforms that legitimise it for the present.

To help draw together the various narrative threads of this article concerning illness, religious attitude, and the notion of change, I quote an anecdote from one of Ursula Graham Bower's accounts (in the mid-1940s) while working with the Zeme (i.e. Paupaise). Bower's narrative recounts her crippling pain caused by a dislocated knee cap as she weeded spinach with one of her Zeme assistants, Hozekiemba. He suggested calling a skilled Zeme to manipulate it, as there were no doctors for miles. She refused and instead strapped on an elastic plaster to hold it still.

After this failed to give her relief, she said, 'The only thing left, then, was an appropriate sacrifice'. An old man was called and the words of the ancient Zeme prophet Herakandingpeu were uttered as he used ginger to 'divine the trouble'. After 'trial and error', 'black magic' was eliminated and it was concluded that one of the evil spirits had seized her and, in return for a cockerel, would release its hold. A suitable cockerel was found and offered to the 'offending spirit'. After this, a blessing was pronounced by the old man who told Bower that 'the ceremony...had been correctly done' and that 'she should most certainly be cured'. 'They left me', she said, 'feeling not one jot worse or better'. Then, in a wistful manner, she concluded,

As I turned painfully over in the small hours of the morning, my knee gave a click and went back. I could limp about next day. It may, of course, have been the elastic plaster. But I never tried to tell the Zemi that (Bower 1952: 125-26).

What was her reason for not telling the Zeme? Did she think that by showing her scepticism of the efficacy of their healing practices, she might offend them? Or was it too sensitive a subject to broach when divine intervention was sought? Bower's account elaborates the importance of sacrifice for the Paupaise, and her own attitude towards it: she saw the Paupaise's appeal to sacrifice as ineffectual/irrational, when her 'modern' or 'Western' approach indicated that the elastic plaster had solved the problem. While Bower's ethnography represents a clear disjunct of the 'rational'/'irrational', the Heraka have had to negotiate the difficulty of reform which maintains continuity with the past. It is the past that legitimises their reform, which although exorcising certain practices like sacrifices, nevertheless is grounded in the reality of everyday life of their adherents. In this way renewal, management of order through hygienic practices, banning of sacrifices, and the alteration of the cosmology contribute to a society that is seen as healthy, secure, and 'developed' in stark contrast to the memory of the past.

## VI

### *Conclusion*

This article has illustrated how economic pressures brought the Heraka to question traditional religious practices that involved expensive sacrifices. In turn this led to altered practices, including, crucially, the abandonment of sacrifice, and the reconfiguration of the cosmology. The effects of these reforms can be exemplified in the renewal of a Heraka village. In order to demonstrate the connection between religious change, hygiene and 'advancement', the renewal substantiates an important theological point for the Heraka. Basing their perception on the view that the Paupaise made the village 'dirty', causing illness and frequent mortality, the renewal explains the important symbolic connections between past practices such as appeasing Tingchura (god of stone), 'evil spirits' and sacrifices. The Heraka's reliance on Tingwang supposedly puts an end to (or greatly diminished) the illness created by Paupaise and brings about prosperity to the village. This is a rationale that has been retrospectively invoked by the Heraka to the extent that it is the *efficacy* of sacrifice that the Heraka now question and not simply the cost. In other words, the focus on cleanliness has called into question the efficacy of sacrifices. It is in fact that 'cleanliness' brings one closer to

godliness, and not sacrifices. What could be viewed largely as a matter of making sense of the changes in relation to the situation—that eradication of sacrifices was cost-effective and practical—the Heraka have retrospectively managed to lend theological validity to the reasons for these changes. Furthermore, the demotion of sacrifice was both made possible by, and reflected in, a change in beliefs and conceptions (from worship of Tingchura to worship of Tingwang) that make the substitution of one set of beliefs and practices with another, ‘rational’. These attitudes are also influenced by the Zeme Christians, whose own religious and social conversion and subsequent transformation has meant that they are now powerful competitors to Heraka adherents both numerically and ideologically.

In a way it would perhaps be apt to argue in a Marxist vein that the ‘real’ explanatory factors in all this are the economic pressures and the beneficial effects of better hygiene. But the Heraka would argue that the improvement in hygiene, with the consequent improvement in health was not valued merely in itself, but evidence of the greater efficacy of the worship of Tingwang and its theological viability, and hence confirmation of the wisdom of religious change. However, it would also be a misinterpretation simply to argue that change is brought about only because such things as cleanliness are understood to have symbolic meaning and hence spiritual value

In a sense, the Heraka enable us to understand the processes by which the changing conditions relating to the practical business of everyday life finds an equal relationship with theological beliefs, validating the experience of illness and its relation to sacrifices to many gods. This religious attitude is exemplified in the way the body is conceived physically, socially and symbolically, and extends the metaphor of God’s providence expressed in the adage, ‘cleanliness is next to godliness’, as crucial to perceptions concerning advancement, progress and even purity.

The various changes of practice and belief were consolidated into one ‘historic’ change by religious procedures of renewal. Its historic character was marked by the change of name for the village, not simply a new name for the same village but rather the name of a new village emerging out of its acknowledged past, from Bolosan to Nchubonglo: the former is pejoratively associated with illness, sacrifices and ‘evil spirits’, while the latter is the symbol of prosperity, renewal, and reform. It is precisely the purpose and function of collective narrative thus to fashion past and future, memory and aspiration into a unity. Through the use of memory, the space between the past and the present is cleared so that a new genealogical succession can be invoked that symbolises what the Heraka is: ‘to overcome evil spirits and to erase the memory of sacrifices and evil spirits’. This enables the

Heraka to posit a new religious lineage that Hervieu-Léger says ‘gives meaning to the present and contains the future’ (2000: 125).

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