

Negotiating Faith: Religious Interplay Among The Hrusso (Aka) Of Arunachal Pradesh Before Indian Independence

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Abstract: *The paper explores the religious interplay of the Hrusso (Aka) tribe of Arunachal Pradesh during the colonial era. The study unravels the belief system of the Hrusso (Aka) tribe before the onset of Christianity. The study focuses on the constant interaction and intersection of the tribe's indigenous belief system with other religions, namely Buddhism and Neo-Vaishnavism. The data was collected through archival and extensive ethnographic fieldwork, which employed in-depth interviews and observation. The paper showcases the nuanced and often overlooked agency of Hrusso's change and continuity of their belief and cultural patterns. The paper finds that there was considerable influence of Buddhism, Neo-Vaishnavism in the material culture of the tribe such as the inclusion of the Vajra Bell and indigenous temples, that led to unique expressions of faith.*

Keywords- *Hrusso (Akas), Buddhism, Neo Vaishnavism, Arunachal Pradesh.*

INTRODUCTION:

Arunachal Pradesh is a tribal-dominated state with a rich and varied cultural heritage. There are twenty-six (26) major tribes with more than a hundred minor tribes residing in Arunachal Pradesh. The cultural heterogeneity of Arunachal Pradesh can be divided into six main cultural areas Bhotia culture area, Nishi-Apatani cultural area, Adi cultural area, Mishmi cultural area, Khampti Singpho- Tangs cultural area, Naga Cultural area¹.

One of the major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, the Hrusso commonly known as Aka settled in the South-eastern part of the Bichom valley in the West Kameng district.² The community identifies themselves as Hrusso (Ġ^uso³). However, for official purposes and colonial writings, they are popularly known as Aka. The word Aka, which translates to 'painted' in the Assamese language (Anka⁴) was used to identify the community due to their custom of smearing their face with a mixture of pine resin and charcoal. Tattooing of women's faces with a uniform pattern was also prominent.⁵ There are numerous legends and myths about the origins and migrations of the tribe. As mentioned by Hesselmeyer, the Hrusso do not consider the place they inhabit as the real home of their tribe.⁶ Kennedy on the other hand gives an entirely different perspective of the Hrusso origins from the legend among the people. The legend follows that they had descended from 'heaven to earth by different golden and silver ladders.'⁷

This paper investigates the nature of the religious expressions of Hrusso when they came in contact with different religions during the colonial period. It also analyses the impact of other religions on the existing Indigenous beliefs and customs. This paper mainly implied qualitative and historical methods of research. Data has been collected through Archival and In-depth Interviews. Data are collected from oral interviews and archives namely the British Library: Asian and African Studies National (London), Archives of India (New Delhi), Assam State Archives (Dispur, Assam), and The State Archives of Arunachal Pradesh (Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh).

The paper is divided into four sections, the first section delves into the religious beliefs and the Indigenous practices of the Hrusso. The second section provides a historical account of the advent of Buddhism and Neo-Vaishnavism into the Hrusso community. The third section depicts the impact of other religions on the material culture, iconography, and general human relations of the Hrusso.

The paper is a historical account dealing with the interaction of Hrusso's engagement with different religions namely Buddhism and Neo-Vaishnavism during the colonial period. It outlines the religious practices of the community and the impact of other religions on the customs, beliefs, and culture of the community. The paper highlights the influence of Buddhist material culture and the cultural impact of Neo-Vaishnavism on the Hrusso

religion. It provides insights into the transition of the Indigenous belief system to its current state and explores the recent trends of new religious scenarios among the Hrusso people.

In different tribal regions of India due to drastic influences and conversion to other religions, the indigenous faith or the traditional practices have been abandoned and neglected. Among the few remaining regions, Arunachal Pradesh is where indigenous faith is still a living system.⁸ The majority religion of Arunachal Pradesh does not fall under the mainstream popular religions.⁹ However, this does not strike out the fact that they were religious as they profess their own indigenous belief and faith. There are several misinterpretations and misrepresentations of the indigenous belief system of the community. There is a prejudiced approach to understanding the dynamics of the traditional system. C.H Hesselmeyer, 1869 remarks:

*The Hrusso despite of being uncivilized had religious ideas of their own without any written religious books.*¹⁰

He further details that the traditional Gods that the Hrusso believed in were *Fuxu*- The God of jungle and water, *Firan and Siman* – the God of War and *Satu*-the God of house and fields.¹¹ There were instances where the Hrusso were depicted as demon worshippers and they believed in the existence of various good and evil spirits.¹²

The Hrusso community in their traditional belief system had a hierarchy of Gods, deities, and spirits who ruled over mankind.¹³ Studies have depicted that the Hrusso had several deities who had their specific roles they had to carry out, prayer and sacrificial rituals were held to please the Gods. The deities, however, were further under the power of the higher Gods. The Hrusso had four main higher Gods they considered- 'The Sky, The Mountains, The Earth, and the Water' which were mainly the force of Nature. According to Macgregor, the Hrusso believed in the God of the Sky as *Netz Au*, the God of mountains as *Phu Au*, the Goddess of Earth as *No Ain*, and the Goddess of Rivers as *Hu Ain*.¹⁴ The rituals for the higher Gods are to be performed by the chief *Mugaw*¹⁵ (Shaman). Apart from them, a fifth and sixth are highlighted namely *Sikchi* who is in control of the habitation and vegetation, and God- a couple who dwell together and are addressed jointly, *Brango-Sikchi-Isinsa*.

One finds various discrepancies in the names and the roles of the deities for instance Macgregor mentions the principal deity as *Karza* while Sinha mentions *Tcharoas* the supreme deity who was the ruler of both humans and animals. *Ju* the Day God-Sun, *Hube* the night God – Moons, and *Neitzi* who was considered the minor deity.¹⁶ However, recent understanding has highlighted that the *Neitzi* who was considered a minor deity is an important deity in the community. Raghuvir Sinha quotes "The next deity in line is *Aphinchi* who had a vital role in the birth of a child, prayers, and offerings devoted to him during pregnancy. After a child is born *Chamrom* becomes in charge of the child after they are born, *Jinte-Pamle-gri* protects the wildlife of the forests. *Wee-Oesche* guided and controlled the agricultural activities and *Humisise-Jumiriri* blessed people with material success in life. There are minor deities who are specifically associated with diseases- *Thamu*, *Chholemus*, and *Nams*. There is a mention of Spirits like *Chigje* in the hierarchy order of the traditional belief system".¹⁷ He also emphasizes that are Magic among the Hrusso community - *Shizou*, *Fukhu-sisto-Chasra*, and *Surrou*. All the magic practices in and among the Hrusso community seem to be connected to Black magic.¹⁸ The above-mentioned observation was made by him during his visit to the Hrusso villages, however it is not generally accepted by the community.

Hrusso accepted notion about their religion is the belief in *Nedzü-No* 'Sky-Earth'.¹⁹ Another important deity of the community is *Taw-Gyew* 'one who sustains and feeds'. They also worship forces of nature like mountains (*Huda-Puda*).²⁰ The *Mugaw* (Shaman) plays a vital role in the Hrusso society. The major festival of the community is *Nyethrii-dow*, celebrated annually in November.

During the colonial period, two major religions are mentioned, one is Buddhism and the other is Hinduism in the form of Neo-Vaishnavism. Even though the arrival of Buddhism is not documented, it is believed to be after the introduction of Buddhism into Monpas and Sherdukpens. Tawang monastery was established in 1681, and Buddhism arrived relatively late in the Dirang region, around 1742.²¹ So, it has to be around the late 18th century that the Hrusso came into proper contact with Buddhism. C.R Macgregor, 1884 remarks:

"This house was built at the instigation and for the accommodation of a Buddhist priest from Thibet (Tibet), who about half a century ago used to pay the Hrusso yearly visits to convert them to Buddhism."

He was referring to the existence of a Buddhist priest who used to pay yearly visits around the 1830s, he then goes on to describe the declining influence of Buddhism among the tribe after the death of the Buddhist priest.²² It is fascinating that the 1830s was also the period when Neo-Vaishnavism under the patronage of Tagi Raja was introduced to the Hrusso people. The coincidence of the period of decline of Buddhism and the advent of Neo-

Vaishnavism raises the possibility that Neo-Vaishnavism propagated by Tagi Raja might have been a reason for the decline of Buddhism in the Hrusso area.

There was evidence of several 'Chortens' near the villages, and numerous prayer flags in the villages and Buddhist relics were found.²³ Most importantly a Buddhist temple was built in the house of the *Kalor*, the *Kovatsun* chief; it housed an idol, even though a description of the idol was not provided.²⁴ A legend among the Hrusso describes a great Buddhist preacher who came to their place whom they call *Ajang Guru*, according to Buddhist tradition *Ajang Guru* is identified as Guru Padmasambhava²⁵. There is also a belief that Guru Padmasambhava came to *Dijingania* village and made a hole in a stone, which is called *Wumpu* and is considered a sacred stone.²⁶ However, the evidence supporting both the legends is minimal, and further research might throw light on it.

The observation made by Alexander Mackenzie, and R.S Kennedy confirms that Buddhism was practiced among the Hrusso. There are many narratives regarding the decline of Buddhism, the most prominent one is probably the induction of Neo-Vaishnavism into the area which was backed by Tagi Raja himself, the other reason might be the aggression of Hrusso on the Buddhist-practiced communities like Sherdukpens, as Tagi Raja blamed Sherdukpens for his arrest.²⁷ Moreover, around 1914, the Hrusso people denied their connections with Buddhism,²⁸ the statement is supplemented by the story of how the forefathers of an interviewee had a confrontation with the Buddhist lamas who came to preach their religion but were denied entry to the Hrusso areas, and he further explains that Buddhism has never been followed by the tribe.²⁹ However, the material remains and the documents argue that Buddhism was practiced among the Hrusso. It is important to understand that even though the Hrusso area is generalised as a whole, it is a conglomeration of various villages and the Hrusso people of some villages might experience the events differently.

Neo-Vaishnavism often mentioned as Hinduism by the colonial authorities was introduced to the Hrusso by Tagi Raja in 1832. After his imprisonment in Guwahati jail (1929), he accepted the teachings of a Vaishnavite priest and it was believed that Tagi Raja while serving his sentence married an Assamese girl with who he had two daughters.³⁰ E.Dalton, 1872 quotes:

"The Tagi Raja after his return from his first forced visit to Asam became somewhat reformed, and introduced his people to the worship of Hari".

The colonial portrayal of the Hrusso indigenous faith as inferior is evident from these remarks, however, what is interesting is they consider the Hrusso adopting Neo-Vaishnavism as a sign of progress. There is a mention of Vaishnavite priest Ram Gohain, who forbade the salt collection and closed the Salt quarry near Gohainthan for fear of quarrels among the people for possession of the rock salt.³¹ It is interesting to note the impact Neo-Vaishnavism had in the naming of various villages such as Gohainthan, Buragaon, and Husigaon, along with others.

The association of Tagi Raja as well as his son with Neo-Vaishnavism introduced the patronage of the religion by the head of the clans, which further helped in the promotion of the religion. However, it is an intricate relationship as the ideals and philosophy practiced by Neo-Vaishnavism contradict the traditional belief system of the tribe. Prohibiting sacrifices and constructing *Naamghars* (Worship places) would have been a very complicated issue for the Vaishnavite priests. The religion did not flourish, but some pockets such as *Naam Ghars* were built in *Jamiri* and Buragaon village, which are in ruins at present. One of the reasons for the decline of the religion might have been the rejection by the later chiefs of Hrusso, as the role of the chiefs (Rajas) in patronising the religion was significant. However, in the later years, the Nikamul Satra based in Tezpur actively participated in spreading their teachings by providing education to several Hrusso children and educating them at the Satra in Tezpur.³² However, the final nail to the coffin was the coming of Christian Missions which is an elaborate discussion for some other time.

Even though Hrusso underwent the influence of Buddhism and Neo-Vaishnavism, their Indigenous faith and belief system remained intact. The worldview of Hrusso survived all the major transformations of religion that the Hrusso people went through. It would be ignorant to expect that the Hrusso did not incorporate nuances from other religions into their belief system.

To examine the influence of other religions, one has to study the Indigenous worldview of the Hrusso such as their cultural practices, beliefs, and their perception of natural forces. From the Hrusso perspective, the world is divided into different realms³³ that are interdependent, and the process of interdependence results in the unity among the realms. In the distant past, there was no concept of showmanship or worshipping of deities, *Mugaw*

was consulted in cases of deterioration of health, crop failure, and hunting expeditions. Even the annual celebration of *Nyetridow* was just a village-level tradition.³⁴

Seeking homogeneity in the practices of the community with other tribes, the Bon religion comes near, sharing some beliefs and practices. Bon is considered to be a religion practiced before the advent of Buddhism in Tibet (Bon,). Various neighbouring tribes such as Monpas and Sherdukpens accept the presence of the Bon religion before the coming of Buddhism among their religious beliefs.³⁵ The supremacy of *Ñedzū-No* (Sky and Earth), rivers and mountains (*Huda-Puda*), and other natural forces have equivalent in Bon elements of Sherdukpens such as *Phus* (mountain deity), *Sadak/Zhibdak* (lord of the ground)³⁶. This is a very loosely based argument since the reverence of nature and natural forces is followed in almost every indigenous belief system. However, the proximity of the tribe geographically and economic dependability with Sherdukpens and Monpas makes it a strong case that Hrusso might had the presence of Bon religion, whether it is the influence of Bon or Tantric Buddhism it is difficult to comprehend; as Rockhill observed:

“The Buddhist influence is so manifest into it (Bon religion) that it is impossible to consider it as giving us very correct ideas of what this religion was before it came into contact with Buddhism.”

Moreover, one can see the similarity in one of the origin myths of the Bon and the Hrusso. According to one of the Hrusso origin myths, “the universe started with Two (2) eggs that were soft and shone like gold”.³⁷ There is a similar myth in the Bon oral tradition that “the creation of the world started with two eggs one black and white”.³⁸ Even though there is a similarity in the myths, one lacks sufficient evidence to conclude that both the myths had a common source.

The narratives of Buddhist advent into the tribe have been discussed prior and their influence is seen in the material culture of the tribe. Vajra handbell is commonly used with the Vajra, the bell has a vajra handle and the part that was not joined to the bell was terminated with prongs (man and Bell). This vajra bell is an important item used by Mugaw which has been imported from the Khampas in recent times,³⁹ the revival movement among the Hrusso also symbolizes the Vajra bell as a major religious component of the community. One can find the Vajra bell in the *Hutrutuuka*⁴⁰ which is used by Mugaw for special rituals; when the spirit energy is considered to be very powerful. There are numerous Buddhist elements in ornaments and attire for instance a head-dress *Ghaga*, a silver cap is not prepared by them but collected from either the plains or the northern tribes like Sherdukpens and Monpa.⁴¹ However, one has to understand that the cultural transitions superseded religious transition, even before Buddhism came into the region and a continuous cultural exchange was prevalent among the communities. Even though evidence of Buddhist elements is visible, it was not a sign of acceptance of Buddhism but more of a cultural exchange with the Buddhist-adopted communities⁴². The Buddhist elements had a religious value when adopted by neighbouring communities, but lost their symbolic significance when adopted by the Hrusso. *Mugaw* were the traditional healers of the community and had their unique way of healing, but there were lots of instances when the Hrusso people consulted Buddhist monks for healing which included prayer and herbal medicine.⁴³ A recent theft in the Hrusso area of Bhalukpong was sorted when the people approached the Buddhist lama and the thief was caught, it shows the trust and position Buddhist monks enjoy among the Hrusso people⁴⁴.

Neo-Vaishnavism, as mentioned, was introduced through Tagi Raja around 1832 and was later adopted by his son Medhi Raja. Hesselmeier, mentions ‘*Deori*’ or Sacrificing priests although *Deori* does not perform sacrifices, as they were the Vaishnavite members who were against sacrifices.⁴⁵ It implies that *Deoris* existed in the community. Another influence is evident in the nomenclature of various villages such as Buragaon, and Gohainthan. ‘*Than*’ is the resting place of a Vaishnavite saint, which explains that a *Gohain* must have taken their last breath in the present-day Gohainthan. In the Hrusso community, like many other communities, child naming is a very important event where a child is named after prominent elders of their community, to honour their legacy⁴⁶. One finds Sanskritised names for various people in the community such as Mahadev, Govardhan, Govind, and Sita; all these words have religious denominations. It might be possible to argue that, due to the constant contact with the people from Assam plains, the practice of naming the child with the newly Sanskritised names suggests the Vaishnavite saints and their followers were respected and revered. The oral history of the ‘*Dususow*’ clan of Hrusso, traces their lineage from King *Bana*⁴⁷, who was part of ‘*Mahabharata*’⁴⁸, this further shows the assimilation of myths and legends into the Hrusso oral tradition.

The Hrusso maintained their worldview and traditional beliefs during this period when Buddhism and Neo Vaishnavism were thriving. The Hrusso certainly assimilated many practices but ensured their belief system was intact. The major changes can be noticed with the coming of various denominations of Christianity late in the 1970s and conversion to Christianity started around 1992. The first convert explains how accepting Christianity has positively impacted her life although she still respects the indigenous belief system.⁴⁹ A small section of the people who were influenced by Neo-Vaishnavism also adopted Hinduism, but they still accepted the worldview and belief system of Hrusso. The influence of Hinduism was accelerated by the employment of people from other states who built their religious institutions in the Hrusso area. A smaller section has adopted Buddhism and a claim is made that a new *Rinpoche*⁵⁰ has been born in the Hrusso land in Thrizino, West Kameng, where the followers of Buddhism have constructed a *Gompa* (Buddhist monastery).

A new revivalist movement has developed after the *Donyi-Polo* movement,⁵¹ the movement is unofficially called *Ñedzû-Noism*,⁵² and two temples have been constructed in Bhalukpong and Thrizino. The Revivalist claims that the only way to save the Indigenous faith is by giving it material expression, which again contradicts the understanding of the Hrusso worldview. However, the followers believe that it is the best way to protect the indigenous faith as there are no written scriptures⁵³. Until the 2021 census report is officially published or further research is conducted, data on religion and population remains uncertain. Nevertheless, observation from fieldwork suggests that most of the population follows various denominations of Christianity.

CONCLUSION:

The paper is a constant conversation with the belief system of the past, it goes back and forth to trace the change and continuity of the belief system of the Hrusso. The approach colonial authorities employed to study the Hrusso was through tracing the homogeneity and heterogeneity of the beliefs of Hrusso with other organized religions known to the officials. The ignorant and ill-informed methods depicted a very primitive and opaque understanding of the worldview and faith of the Hrusso. However, recent researchers and community-based organizations of the community such as Aka Language Academy have debunked most of the false narratives. The paper details the initial contact with the two major religious beliefs Buddhism and Neo-Vaishnavism and traces elements of Bon into the community. The study highlights the concept of realms and their worldview, which divides the world into different realms that are interdependent, through the Hrusso perspective. Moreover, it highlights the use of Buddhist elements such as the Vajra bell and analyses the use of Assamese nomenclature in naming places such as Gohainthan, which shows the influence of Neo-Vaishnavism. Even with the impact of other religions, the Hrusso have maintained their traditional and indigenous belief system, which has been recently bought under the umbrella of *Ñedzû-No* (Sky and Earth).

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- ³³ Spirit realm (Shappumnullu), Earth (No), Huda Puda (water and mountains), Sky (Nedzü), forest, village.
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- ⁴⁴ Extracted from an interview with Mrs Ayamo Deru, A Sajolang community member, brought up in Hrusso society, govt. employee, Bhalukpong, 15 October 2024, 02:59 pm
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⁴⁹Extracted from an interview with Mrs. Abram, first Christian convert of Hrusso, Bhalukpong, 19 October 2024, 02:59 pm

⁵⁰Rinpoche is a Tibetan term that means "precious one", In Tibetan Buddhism, it's often used to refer to a teacher who has been recognized as the reincarnation of a great teacher

⁵¹The Donyi-Polo is an indigenous revival movement that was initially started by the Tani clans of Arunachal Pradesh, this revival movement has now inspired many communities to start their revival movement.

⁵² Interview with Mr. Afo Aglasow

⁵³ Interview with Mr. Afo Aglasow