Original article

Madang: Journal of Contextual Theology (Madang J Contextual Theol) 2025 December Vol.44, 41-60
https://doi.org/10.58302/Madang.2025.44.4

**Received**: November 29, 2025
**Revised**: December 22, 2025
**Accepted**: December 22, 2025
**Published**: December 30, 2025

# Mother Tongue as a Tribal Hermeneutics

**Rm Mashungam**[1], **Lanmi Khamrang**[2]

[1]New Testament, Assistant Professor in Southern Bible College, India

[2]Master of Theology in Old Testament at United Theological College, India

Correspondence to Rm Mashungam, E-mail: Mashungamraman@gmail.com

## Abstract

Mother tongue hermeneutics is recognized as a crucial approach for tribal communities in Northeast India, not just a Bible translation method. It highlights the historical marginalization of tribes, colonial influences, and the dominance of Western interpretive ideas that have made tribal communities dependent and unheard. The article traces how Christianity in local forms grew through missionary language work, showing both how Bible translation strengthened ethnic identity and how Western ideas still shaped key concepts. By applying mother tongue reading and ideas, the study shows how communities reclaim intellectual independence. Examples like the translation of the "holy kiss" in 1 Thessalonians 5, and unfamiliar renderings of "hate," "fear," and "virginity," reveal how uncritical adoption of Western meanings distorts biblical intent and emotional experiences. The article concludes that mother tongue interpretation, especially when it influences the understanding of Christ through symbols like ancestor, elder brother, pasaltha, tlawmngai, or rooster, creates a lively conversation between the biblical and tribal worlds. Here, the Bible becomes relational, culturally meaningful, and organically connected to the community's life and memory.

### Keywords

Mother Tongue Hermeneutics, Tribal Identity, Bible Translation, Colonial Influence, Cultural Context

## 1. Introduction

The question of how tribal communities in Northeast India read, interpret, and embody Scripture has become increasingly urgent in the face of historical marginalization, colonial inheritance, and the continuing dominance of Western hermeneutical categories. Although Christian faith came to tribal communities relatively late and under missionary mediation, the Bible has come to occupy a central and authoritative place in tribal identity formation. Yet the assumption that Scripture has a single, universal, absolute meaning (often equated with Western interpretation) has prevented many tribal Christians from recognizing the need for mother tongue[1]–based hermeneutics that speak within their cultural and linguistic world. This

1 A mother tongue differs from a vernacular, which refers to the commonly spoken language of a region or community, regardless of one's fluency or familiarity with it. Instead, the mother tongue is an individual's native and indigenous language, deeply woven into their personal and cultural identity. It serves as a marker of who one is, where one originates, and how one understands oneself. The mother tongue embodies indigenous wisdom, knowledge, worldviews, science, theology, and philosophy. It is the language in which a person first thinks and dreams before expressing those thoughts in other tongues.
The Northeast region of India is home to numerous tribal groups, and each tribe typically speaks its own distinct mother tongue. This linguistic diversity is reflected in the wide range of languages and dialects spoken across states such as Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, Assam, Tripura, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, and Sikkim. These languages stem from several language families, including Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryan, Austroasiatic, and Tai-Kada, Biswajit Das, "Language Ecology in Northeast India: An Overview," *International Journal of Novel Research and Development*



**pISSN:** 1738-3196 **eISSN:** 3091-7824

article, therefore, argues that mother tongue hermeneutics is not merely a translation technique but a necessary liberative practice through which tribal communities reclaim theological agency, restore cultural memory, and encounter Scripture in a relational and meaningful way. This article traces the linguistic and missionary history that shaped vernacular Christianity in the region and critically examines persistent Western mediations of key scriptural concepts. Employing illustrative cases such as the translations of "holy kiss" in 1 Thessalonians 5, and culturally foreign renderings of "hate," "fear," and "virginity," the discussion underscores how mother tongue hermeneutics counters semantic distortions and fosters a dynamic integration of biblical and tribal worldviews. Through this convergence, Scripture transcends textuality to become embodied within the living memory and cultural fabric of the tribals.

## 2. Historical and Colonial Context of Northeast Tribal Bible Engagement

Northeast India, comprising Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim, is linked to mainland India by the narrow Siliguri Corridor and is inhabited largely by communities of Mongoloid origin. The term "tribe," introduced by British colonial anthropology, imposed an evolutionary hierarchy that labeled tribal peoples as primitive, a view later continued by the Indian state through the Scheduled Tribes category and reinforced by dominant Hindu society's association of tribal identity with impurity and low status. In cities across India, Northeast tribals still face racial slurs such as "chinki," "momo" and "King-Kong." Wati Longchar notes that tribal communities remain culturally uprooted, socially oppressed, economically dependent, and theologically voiceless, as modernization has weakened traditional structures and left the church unprepared to address new social realities.[2] He further explains that this dependency has deepened the tribal identity crisis, turning once self-sufficient cultivators into passive recipients of state aid.[3]

Zhodi Angami defines a tribe as a people united by common ancestry, dialect, culture, territory, and customs, forming a coherent social world not captured by colonial categories.[4] For this reason, constitutional labels such as Scheduled Tribes offer only administrative recognition and cannot express the depth of tribal identity rooted in shared memory, kinship, and land. The historical experience of colonial anthropology, racial stereotyping, and continued marginalization has shaped how tribal communities have received and interpreted Scripture. This background underscores why a hermeneutical shift is crucial: tribal Christians need interpretive tools that emerge from their own cultural and linguistic worlds rather than from inherited Western frameworks.

8, no. 4 (April 2023): 259–68; Anup Kapoor, *Tribes of India's North East, in Tribal Cultures: Tribes of India*, https://ebooks.inflibnet.ac.in/antp05/chapter/tribes-of-indias-nort-east/.

2 A. Wati Longchar, "Indian Christian Theology and Tribals in India," in *Tribal Theology: A Reader*, ed. Shimreingam Shimray (Jorhat, Assam: Eastern Theological College, Tribal Study Series, 2023), 52–53.

3 A. Wati Longchar, *An Emerging Asian Theology: Tribal Theology: Issue, Method, and Perspective*, Tribal Study Series, no. 8 (Jorhat, Assam: Tribal Study Centre, Eastern Theological College, 2000), 25.

4 Zhodi Angami, "An Introduction to Tribal Interpretation of the Bible," in *Encountering Diversity in India Biblical Studies: A Biblical Masala*, edited by David J. Chalcraft and Zhodi Angami (New York: Routledge, 2023), 256.

The translation of portions of Scripture, a Testament, or the entire Bible into tribal mother tongues can be traced to the colonial missionary enterprises of the 19th and 20th centuries.[5] Though the bible reached tribal areas in north-east India in the late 19th century, and the bible was brought to most parts of tribal quite late, nevertheless, tribal Christians hold the bible in high esteem. It is considered unquestionable as the 'word of God.' People asking too many questions were labeled hypocrites or not spiritual people.[6] However, in the later century, when the Bible was translated and published in the mother tongue, has made a significant impact on the people of the region, especially among the many tribal communities. It enabled them to deeply connect with the powerful message of Christ's salvation and embrace the Christian faith. Through the Bible, they discovered not only a strong affinity with their own worldviews and cultural values but also a renewed sense of identity that inspired them to strengthen their ethnic and cultural heritage.[7]

Keitzar observed that Bible translation serves as an important form of biblical hermeneutics. Before British rule, tribal communities lacked written literary traditions. The earliest translations of the Bible into various tribal languages were produced by foreign missionaries who, having limited knowledge of tribal culture, were unable to draw upon the rich resources of tribal oral literature. Consequently, Keitzar urged for a more meaningful translation of the Bible that utilizes the wealth of tribal oral traditions and conveys the original meaning of the source text through an appropriate hermeneutical approach. He further pointed out that earlier translators often avoided using terms associated with traditional tribal religions, instead coining new theological expressions that failed to convey the biblical message accurately. Keitzar argued that translators should not hesitate to employ words derived from traditional religion, but rather should aim to interpret biblical concepts faithfully in ways that harmonize with the cultural frameworks of tribal belief. In doing so, Bible translation can become a vital and creative source of theological terminology.[8] In a similar vein, Huang Po Ho emphasizes that a contextual reading

5 Bible translation work in Northeast India has developed steadily over many years. The first Assamese translation was completed in 1883, followed by translations into several tribal languages, including Khasi (1891), Garo (1924), Tangkhul (1936), Mizo (1959), and Ao (1967). Numerous translation projects are still ongoing today, reflecting the continued commitment to making the Scriptures accessible to diverse linguistic communities in the region.

6 Tribal communities often hold a deeply fundamental understanding of the Bible. For generations, they have believed that the Bible comes directly from God, that God himself dictated its words. Consequently, they regard the Bible as a sacred object possessing divine power. In many cases, people even keep the Bible near their pillows, believing that doing so will ward off evil spirits. Traditionally, tribal believers have not viewed the Bible as a collection of books inspired by God but rather as a single divine book given directly by Him. Among the Tangkhul tribe, for instance, theologians have at times attempted to revise the names of biblical books—many of which were originally borrowed from English translations. However, such efforts often meet resistance, as people fear that altering these names would mean tampering with the very words of God.

We have also come to believe that the Bible should be interpreted literally, which has often shaped our spirituality as emotional and sometimes irrational reactions. Only recently have we started recognizing how deeply Western ideals have influenced how tribal communities interpret the Bible. Now aware of this, we understand that to make the Bible truly relevant to tribal people, we must move beyond interpretations filtered through Western perspectives. This isn't to say Western views are wrong, but rather that what's needed is a conscious, intentional tribal way of reading and understanding Scripture, Angami, "Tribal Interpretation," 256.

7 Geogge Plathottam, "Contribution of Christian Missionaries to the Linguistic and Ethnic Identity of the People of Northeast India through the Bible," published September 25, 2025, https://linguistic-and-ethnic-identity-of-the-people-of-northeast-india-through-the-bible.

8 Renthy Keitzar, "Tribal Perspective in Biblical Hermeneutics Today," *Indian Journal of Theology* 31, no. 3–4 (1982):

of the Bible is not merely about taking contextual realities seriously in interpretation; rather, it seeks to bridge and ultimately eliminate the distance between the text, its author, and its reader. Such an approach underscores the dynamic interaction between Scripture and context, suggesting that meaning is not fixed but realized within lived cultural experiences.[9] Zhodi Angami also rightly pointed out that Common tribal Christians generally assume that the Bible has a normative, universal, absolute meaning and that any talk of interpretation is an attempt to deviate from the truth. However, what is generally perceived as the authoritative meaning of the bible is, in fact, the dominant Western interpretation. From the onset of missionary activity in India, we have been made to believe that our ways of thinking and doing are inferior to our Western counterparts. The cultural imperialism of the Western missionaries appears to have been widespread.[10]

## 3. Mother Tongue as a Tribal Hermeneutics: Biblical Foundations and Constructive Approach

Language has an important role in social interaction as well as the generational and cultural transfer of religious and socio-cultural knowledge and beliefs.[11] The mother tongue, often acquired in early childhood, plays an especially pivotal role in this process. It is not merely a communication tool but a repository of cultural memory and identity, influencing how individuals think, feel, and relate to their surroundings.[12] As the first language a child learns, it serves as the medium through which individuals build foundational interpersonal and critical thinking skills.[13] Through the mother tongue, individuals internalize cultural values, engage with traditions, and form lasting bonds with family and community, thereby preserving the continuity of cultural heritage.[14] Language is more than a means of communication; it is a foundational element of human society and identity. It shapes and conveys a community's customs, values, beliefs, and social structures, forming a critical bridge between individuals and their cultural heritage. As social beings, humans rely on language to exchange ideas, emotions, and experiences, a dynamic that underscores why being human is synonymous with being social.[15]

308–9; Angami, "Tribal Interpretation," 241–9.

9 Huang Pao, "Re-Confessing as a Method of Contextual Biblical Interpretation in Asia" (paper presented at the AFTM Refresher Programme, Jorhat, Assam, October 2025).

10 Angami, "Tribal Interpretation," 241.

11 Frederick M. Amevenku, "Decolonised Knowledge Production for Social Transformation: Potentials of Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics as a Source of New Theological Insight," *Journal of Applied Science, Arts and Business* 1, no. 1 (May 2025): 4.

12 Rene Zeelenberg, Diane Pecher, Mirthe E. M. van der Meijden, Sean Trott, and Benjamin Bergen, "Non-Native Language Comprehenders Encode Implied Shapes of Objects in Memory," *Cortex* 182, (2025): 100-111, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cortex.2024.09.008; UNESCO, "Why Mother Language-Based Education Is Essential," uploaded September 5, 2025, https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/why-mother-language-based-education-essential.

13 Anad Pal Singh and Shagufta Imtiaz, "The Impact of the Digital Divide in Rural and Semi-Urban Schools in U.P.," *International Journal of Innovations in TESOL and Applied Linguistics* 8, no. 1 (2022): 25–33.

14 Amin Karimnia, review of *Language and Identity: An Introduction*, by J. Edwards, *Canadian Journal of Linguistics / Revue canadienne de linguistique* 57, no. 1 (2012): 159–62, https://doi.org/10.1353/cjl.2012.0011.

15 Cheryl E. Abbate, "'Higher' and 'Lower' Political Animals: A Critical Analysis of Aristotle's Account of the Political

Kwame Bediako perhaps identifies a theological meaning of the mother tongue in his observation that it is the language in which God speaks to mankind. God does not speak "in a sacred language, but in ordinary language," so that humans may hear God and realise the gospel is about mankind who have been invited to join a company drawn from every people, tribe, nation, and language.[16] because God revealed Himself within each cultural and linguistic context. One's mother tongue is the indigenous language, which identifies him/her or confirms and affirms who a person is, where he/she comes from, and his/her sense of identity. The Bible itself demonstrates that God communicates through the languages that people already speak. In the story of Balaam, God speaks through a donkey in a language Balaam understands, showing that divine communication meets humans within their own linguistic world rather than through an unfamiliar sacred register (Num 22). The same pattern appears in the New Testament at Pentecost, where the Spirit enables each listener to hear the message in his or her own mother tongue, affirming that the gospel does not erase linguistic identity but fulfils it. Acts 2:1–13 offers a canonical grounding for linguistic plurality, showing that each listener hears the gospel "in our own native language" (Acts 2:6, 8; ταῖς ἰδίαις διαλέκτοις). Rather than imposing a sacred lingua franca, the Spirit validates diverse mother tongues as legitimate vessels of revelation.[17] Pentecost thus portrays linguistic difference not as an obstacle but as the very medium through which divine truth becomes intelligible across cultures.

As Walter Brueggemann observes, revelation is always mediated through the idioms and speech worlds of human communities rather than outside of them.[18] For this reason, mother tongue hermeneutics is not optional but essential for tribal readers, because Scripture becomes fully alive only when interpreted through the languages that carry their worldview, imagination, and cultural meaning. For Zhodi Angami:

> There is no getting around the fact that my views and perspectives as a reader will shape my interpretation of biblical texts. It is not only unavoidable but also necessary. Why do I think the way I think? Where do my values come from? Where do my perspectives arise? All these questions can be simplified as, 'Who am I?' …. 'Who am I?' is not the straightforward question it appears to be at first. 'I' am inseparable from the family, clan, and tribe I belong

Animal," *Journal of Animal Ethics* 6, no. 1 (2016): 54–66; "Why Are Human Beings Called Social Animals?" *Psychologs*, published September 5, 2025, https://www.psychologs.com/why-are-human-beings-called-social-animals.

16 Kwame Bediako, "The Hermeneutic of Culture and Tradition," *Journal of African Christian Thought* 4, no. 1 (June 2001): 2–11; Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 60.

17 Luke's choice of διαλέκτος signals not merely "language" but the textured speech of one's homeland — accent, idiom, and cultural resonance. The event reverses Babel by transforming difference into a site of revelation rather than erasing it, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Anchor Yale Bible 31 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 235; Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 784–786. Thus, the Spirit affirms both cognitive and affective dimensions of language, grounding the claim that Scripture is most fully received when heard within the world shaped by one's own tongue. This supports reader-response insights that meaning emerges in the interaction between text and culturally situated readers, Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 34–38.

18 Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 121.

to.[19]

In tribal contexts, where identity is collective and deeply relational, the mother tongue is not only a way of speaking but a marker of belonging and shared experience. It binds one to family, clan, tribe, and community, forming a linguistic space in which personal and communal identity is experienced and expressed.

Mother-tongue hermeneutics in tribal contexts operates within a reader-response framework, which understands meaning as emerging through the dynamic encounter between text and culturally situated readers.[20] Because tribal languages encode distinctive affective, semantic, and relational worlds, they shape how biblical imagery is recognized, valued, and appropriated. Reading Scripture through these linguistic categories is therefore not a deviation from the text but an activation of its meaning potentials within a particular interpretive community. Such an approach treats tribal readers as legitimate co-producers of meaning, whose linguistic intuitions uncover dimensions often muted in dominant languages. At the same time, such contextual readings do not isolate tribal interpretation but open a dialogical space in which locally grounded insights can speak meaningfully to the wider theological community.[21]

John D. K. Ekem defines Mother Tongue Hermeneutics as an interpretive approach that employs "viable tools for the scientific analysis of the phonetic, phonological, morpho-syntactical, and semantic components" of a mother tongue language in the process of interpreting the Bible for a particular society. It involves a deep engagement with both biblical languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) and the distinct mother tongue of the interpreter or community, emphasizing not just literal word-for-word translation but also the dynamic or functional equivalence that respects cultural concepts and ideologies.[22] Similarly, Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah's proposal of a "vernacular hermeneutics" seeks the recovery and reinscription of cultures that have been degraded or effaced by colonialism. Vernacular hermeneutics interprets the Bible through the cultural, linguistic, and social experiences of indigenous peoples rather than through Western frameworks, reclaiming marginalized identities and challenging dominant

19 Zhodi Angami, *Tribals, Empire and God: A Tribal Reading of the Birth of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 64.

20 Reader-response theorists argue that texts generate meaning only as readers fill interpretive gaps and activate the text's possibilities, Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 21–38; Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 1–17. See also Angami, *Tribals, Empire and God*, 12; 23–59, esp. "Method of Research," and "Reader-Response Criticism," where he argues that tribal linguistic worlds function as legitimate interpretive horizons that interact dialogically with the biblical text rather than stand apart from it.

21 Kwame Bediako argues that the gospel's translatability allows Christian faith to be locally embodied while remaining open to wider theological exchange (*Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa*, rev. ed. [Oxford: Regnum, 2000], esp. ch. 5). Andrew F. Walls' "translation principle" likewise shows that vernacular interpretations contribute to the universal Christian tradition when brought into dialogical engagement (*The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996], 26–28).

22 John D. K. Ekem, "Professorial Chair Inaugural Address," *Journal of Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics* 1, (2015): 166; Daniel Nii Aboagye Aryeh, "Contemporary Hermeneutics: An Examination of Selected Works of John D. K. Ekem on Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics for the African Context," *The Journal of Inductive Biblical Studies* 4, no. 2 (2017): 182–210.

scholarly narratives. It affirms indigenous traditions as vital to meaningful biblical interpretation and calls for critical engagement that respects local voices.[23] Thus, when Scripture is translated and interpreted through the mother tongue, it creates a hermeneutical bridge between the world of the biblical text and the world of the tribal reader. This bridge enables deeper personal engagement while facilitating a genuine encounter between the biblical authors' worldview and the worldview of the community receiving the text.

## 4. Importance of Mother Tongue Hermeneutics

The authentic encounters with God take place when people can hear and respond to the divine message in their own language, because the mother tongue is the space where revelation becomes relational rather than distant.[24] He further notes that God speaks within the idioms of each culture and that theology arises when communities hear the great works of God in their own languages.[25] Zhodi Angami deepens this insight by arguing that when tribal readers use Western assumptions and methods, they arrive at conclusions shaped by Western concerns rather than their own, which perpetuates intellectual domination and obscures the meaning of Scripture for tribal communities.[26] He does not reject Western tools but insists they must be used in conversation with tribal experience, since Western-oriented readings naturally serve Western interests while tribal communities require readings that address their social realities, cultural memory, and spiritual concerns.[27] As Volker Kuster reminds us, context includes cultural, social, economic, political, ecological, and gender dimensions, all of which shape how communities interpret biblical texts.[28]

## 5. Mother Tongue Translation: Challenges and Opportunities

Mother tongue as tribal hermeneutics allows interpreting scripture from a tribal worldview. Translating the bible into any language is also a part of contextualized. The mother tongue provides an awakening to tribal heritage and affirms the value of non-Western ways of understanding scripture. Ekem's point is that the mother-tongue Bibles have issues that need interpretations, and as such, a person who wants to engage himself or herself in this adventure must, of necessity, include formal exegesis that reflects a dynamic encounter between Christian and traditional tribal world-views, both of which continue to exert a powerful impact on communities.[29] Mother-tongue biblical interpretation uses the mother-tongue Bibles – the

23 R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Postcolonial and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 175–95.

24 Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Gospel in African History and Experience* (Akropong: Editions Clé and Regnum Africa, 2000), vi.

25 Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel and African Religion*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 60.

26 Angami, *Tribals, Empire and God*, 2.

27 Angami, *Tribals, Empire and God*, 3.

28 Volker Kuster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ: Intercultural Christology*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 2001), 1–6.

29 John David Kwamena Ekem, "Interpreting 'The Lord's Prayer' in the context of Ghanaian Mother-tongue

translations of the Bible into such languages into which people are born and nurtured. Mother-tongue Bibles give tribals the opportunity to interpret Scripture from their own worldview.[30] When tribals read the Bible in their mother tongue, it evokes a strong sense of identity and belonging. The use of familiar language allows them to connect with the text more personally, and the message of the Bible is more relevant for the tribal people. When the Bible was translated into tribal languages, the tribal readers found a range of similarities between the Bible stories and tribal cultural traditions. The Bible becomes easy to understand and feel close to the tribe because the customs, traditions, culture, and practices it talks about are like the ones people already had in a tribal community. This is the reason why tribal people find it remarkable easy to connect with biblical stories and perceive them as profoundly real within their everyday lives.

Before entering the field of theological studies, I once assumed that the biblical names—such as Matthew, Mark, Luke, John[31]—were the original forms derived directly from the Greek Scriptures. Only later did I realize that these names do not actually appear in their current English form in the original biblical texts. Instead, they have been adapted through layers of linguistic and cultural translation, often shaped by Western tradition and convenience. Consequently, many tribal Bible translations, which rely heavily on English versions rather than the original Hebrew and Greek sources, tend to convey nuances and theological meanings that differ from the initial intent of the Scriptures. Within a mother-tongue hermeneutic, such recognition becomes crucial. Reading the Bible through one's own linguistic and cultural lens allows tribal communities to reclaim interpretive agency, to rearticulate biblical meaning in resonance with their lived realities, and to challenge the Westernized linguistic structures that have long mediated and, at times, distorted the original message of Scripture.

## 6. Missionary Linguistics, Script Formation and the Rise of Mother Tongue Christianity

The story of Christianity in Northeast India cannot be told apart from the story of its languages. From the late nineteenth century onward, the arrival of Christian missionaries did more than introduce a new religion. It initiated a cultural and linguistic transformation that reshaped the identity of entire tribal communities. Among the Tangkhul of Manipur, for instance, the

Hermeneutics," *Journal of African Christian Thought* 10, no. 2 (December 2007): 48–52.

30 Richard Osei Akoto, "Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics within the Context of African Biblical Hermeneutics: It's Origin, Trends and Challenges," *Journal of Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics and Theology* 6, no. 3 (May 2024): 20–21, https://doi.org/10.38159/motbit.2024631.

31 Many mother-tongue Bible translations have relied heavily on English versions of the Bible. As a result, the names of biblical books and characters in these translations are often borrowed directly from English. For instance, the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—are rendered in similar forms across several tribal languages: the Tangkhul translation uses *Matthew*, *Mark*, *Luke*, and *John*; Maram and Rongmei versions render them as *Methiu*, *Mark*, *Luk*, and *Jon*; while the Chakhesang version keeps *Matthew*, *Mark*, *Luke*, and *John*, and Poumai translation uses *Mathiu*, *Mark*, *Luke*, and *Johan*. These examples illustrate the extent to which many tribal Bible translations depend on English sources. Furthermore, the contextualization of biblical names, places, and concepts often reflects a Western worldview, making these translations largely Western-centric. Consequently, such dependence on Western translations and interpretations tends to obscure the original message intended for indigenous and tribal readers.

pioneering missionary William Pettigrew's *Tāngkhul Nāga Grammar and Dictionary* (*Ukhrul dialect*) (1918)[32] was far more than a linguistic record. It was the beginning of a new way for the Tangkhul people to see themselves through words. Pettigrew's decision to use the Roman script gave permanence to their spoken language, turning hymns and oral stories into Scripture. As A. S. Shimreiwung notes, this marked the transition "from oral to print culture" in Tangkhul society.[33] Over time, local translators and church leaders deepened this process. Taimaya Ragui identifies four stages (missionary, local, revision, and re-editing) that gradually transferred interpretive authority from foreign translators to indigenous scholars.[34] What began as an evangelizing task evolved into an act of linguistic self-affirmation, allowing the community to hear its own soul through its sacred text.

A similar transformation unfolded across the Naga Hills. For the Ao Nagas, the American Baptist missionary Edward Winter Clark's translation of the *Gospel of Matthew* (1883) and his later *Ao English Dictionary* (1911) gave form to a language that could now bear the weight of Scripture and theology.[35] Among the Lothas, missionary W. E. Witter created a Roman orthography and produced *An Outline Grammar of the Lotha Language with Vocabulary and Illustrative Sentences* (1942), which led to the first New Testament in Lotha.[36] The Angami and Sema tribes experienced similar developments. Later linguist-theologians such as Nitoy K. Achümi refined these translations and provided more precise terms for concepts like "soul" and "God" in their respective languages.[37] These efforts together tied literacy and faith to the very idea of being Naga, as written language became a vessel for spiritual as well as cultural identity.

The same rhythm of translation and transformation continued in the Mizo and Khasi hills. In Mizoram, J. H. Lorrain and F. W. Savidge of the Arthington Mission created a Roman script and compiled the *Grammar and Dictionary of the Lushai Language* (1898).[38] Their work gave structure to the Mizo language and eventually to the complete Mizo Bible in 1959. In Meghalaya, the Welsh missionary Thomas Jones introduced the Roman script for Khasi in 1841 and prepared the first primers.[39] His translation efforts laid the foundation of Khasi literature. Among the Garos, the American Baptist missionaries shifted from Bengali to Roman script and prepared hymns, primers, and translated Gospels that made reading a communal activity.[40] As George Plathottam

32 William Pettigrew, *Tāngkhul Nāga Grammar and Dictionary* (*Ukhrul Dialect*) (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1918), v–vi.

33 A. S. Shimreiwung, "Tracing the History of Print Culture in Tangkhul Language," *Journal of North East India Studies* 3, no. 2 (2013): 72, https://neistudies.in/article/view/112/101.

34 Taimaya Ragui, "Tangkhul Bible Translation: Retrospect, Concerns and Prospect," *Journal of Asian Theology* 26, no. 1 (2022): 8–9, https://www.academia.edu/93647834/Tangkhul_Bible_Translation.

35 A. S. Bendangyabang Ao, "Bible Translation in Ao Naga," *Language in India* 1, no. September (2001), https://www.languageinindia.com/sep2001/bibleaonaga.html.

36 W. E. Witter, *An Outline Grammar of the Lotha Language with Vocabulary and Illustrative Sentences* (Kohima: Naga Baptist Press, 1942).

37 N. K. Achumi, "The translation of 'nephesh' in the Sema Naga Bible," *United Bible Societies Bulletin* 148/149 (1987): 69–80.

38 J. H. Lorrain and F. W. Savidge, *Grammar and Dictionary of the Lushai Language* (Calcutta, 1898); see also "J. H. Lorrain," Wikipedia, last modified November 23, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J._H._Lorrain.

39 H. Bareh, *A Short History of Khasi Literature* (Shillong: Don Bosco Press, 1962), 18–21.

40 George Plathottam, "Contribution of Christian Missionaries to the Linguistic and Ethnic Identity of the People of Northeast India through the Bible," *Opinion Articles*, September 2, 2022, 4, https://www.necarf.org/home/

observes, for most tribes of the region, the Bible and the tracts surrounding it were the first printed works in their languages.[41] The translated Bible became the first mirror through which communities began to read, write, and imagine themselves in a new light.

Still, this long history is not free from complexity. When missionaries selected one dialect for translation, it often became the "standard," overshadowing others. Likewise, many biblical terms filtered through English or Bengali before reaching the tribal languages, displacing local expressions of the divine. The choice of script also continues to provoke debate, especially among the Bodos, Karbis, and Kokborok speakers.[42] Yet these tensions reveal the continuing need for reading and interpreting Scripture in one's mother tongue. Translation reaches its true meaning only when it allows Scripture to speak within the worldview of the people. Jonathan E. T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor's study of African translations highlights that the vernacular Bible "embodies worldview," not just language.[43] In this sense, the mother tongue is the living space of revelation. When tribal Christians read the Bible in Tangkhul, Ao, Lotha, Angami, Mizo, Khasi, or Garo, they hear the divine word spoken in the rhythm of their own stories, landscapes, and metaphors. Reading in one's own language becomes an act of freedom and restoration – it returns the Word to the soil of the people. Sashi M. Jamir reminds us that authentic contextual theology arises only when "the biblical horizon and the tribal horizon interact."[44] Jesudas Athyal and K. Lama similarly argue that theology in Asia must draw from oral traditions, kinship relations, and rural life so that Scripture is not an imported text but a living experience.[45] In this interaction between language and revelation, translation fulfils its sacred purpose. The Word becomes flesh once again, speaking with the breath and beauty of the hills.

## 7. Hermeneutical Issues and Mother Tongue as a Liberating Approach

The practice of handshaking in tribal contexts today is inherited from Western culture. In Western history, the handshake represented showing an empty hand and assuring the other that one came in peace. The tribal communities do not have this gesture. The tribal expression of *shalom* is rather given through vocal exclamations such as *Hui* or *Eya* among women and *Ahui*, *Aow*, or *Ahei* among men, which carry the deepest communitarian meaning. The unexamined use of the handshake, therefore, shows the imperial influence that remains within tribal settings. In the same way, many nuances of scriptural meaning entered tribal languages through Western

articles/233/contribution-of-christian-missionaries-to-the-linguistic-and-ethnic-identity-of-the-people-of-northeast-india-through-the-bible.

41 Plathottam, "Contribution of Christian Missionaries," 4.

42 Plathottam, "Contribution of Christian Missionaries," 6.

43 Jonathan E. T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor, "A Comparative Study of Mark 1:12 in Some Ghanaian Mother-Tongue Translations of the Bible," *Journal of Higher Education and Theology* 1/1 (2011): 67–73. https://www.academia.edu/24915857/A_Comparative_Study_of_Mark_1_12_in_Some_Ghanaian_Mother_Tongue_Translations_of_the_Bible.

44 Sashi M. Jamir, "Inductive Bible Study: Contextual Appropriation in Northeast India," *The Asbury Journal* 68, no. 1 (2013): 44–46, https://place.asburyseminary.edu/asburyjournal/vol68/iss1/5/.

45 Jesudas M. Athyal, *Doing Christian Theology in Asian Ways*, ATESEA Occasional Papers No. 12 (undated), 5–7; K. Lama, "Re-Envisioning Seminary–Church Relationship: A Response from the Baptist Churches in NE India," *Baptist News* 61, no. 3 (2012): 22–24.

interpretation. As Zhodi Angami notes, Western hermeneutics is also contextual, based on Western history, Western experience, and Western worldview.[46] Therefore, these readings need to be examined critically and without bias for true liberation to take place. As long as one remains held within interpretive categories that are foreign to their culture, there can be no real transformation.

This hermeneutical challenge is precisely illustrated by the problems for tribal Bible readers with translating 1 Thessalonians 5:26 because greetings differ in local culture. The phrase "holy kiss" is literal but unfamiliar and uncomfortable in tribal, showing the need for translations that fit tribal customs better. In the ancient world, people expressed respect or friendship through different forms of kissing—on the hand, knee, foot, or cheek—and the Persians even kissed on the lips, a practice possibly adopted by the Jews. By the New Testament period, the kiss functioned as a sign of hospitality and goodwill and later became associated with early Christian communal life, though it was not initially a formal liturgical act.[47] Clement of Alexandria already criticizes excessive and improper expressions of the holy kiss in Christian gatherings, warning that such practices could cause scandal and undermine moral discipline, a concern that later contributed to increasing regulation of the gesture in early church practice.[48] Although Paul exhorts the community to "greet all the brothers," the wording does not imply a prescription of greeting form but rather extends his personal greeting to the entire community.[49] Language evolves with culture, and the term *kiss* has acquired meanings in many tribal contexts that are associated with privacy or sexuality. Consequently, a literal rendering of "holy kiss" in mother tongue translations raises serious cultural concerns.

## 7.1. Greek Literal Translation

**1 Thessalonians 5:26 *Ἀσπάσασθε*[50] *τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς πάντας ἐν φιλήματι ἁγίῳ.***

a. *Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss*[51]

46 Angami, *Tribals, Empire and God*, 2.

47 Leon Morris, Tyndale New Testament Commentary, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, Vol 13 (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 103.

48 Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* 3.11, in *The Instructor*, trans. Simon P. Wood, Fathers of the Church 23 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1954), 290–292.

49 Philemon Ebrahim, in his research concludes that the "holy kiss" (φιλήματι ἁγίῳ) in Paul's letters is primarily a cultural expression of Christian love within the context of Jewish and Greco-Roman greetings rather than a theological mandate for a universal practice. It symbolizes affectionate fellowship among believers appropriate to their cultural setting, not a prescriptive ritual requiring physical kissing in all contexts. The term "holy" emphasizes the purity and sincerity of the greeting. Misuse of the "holy kiss" as a license for literal kissing can undermine Christian witness today, especially where cultural norms differ significantly from the original context. Philemon Ebrahim, what is so "Holy" About the "Holy Kiss"?, *The American Journal of Biblical Theology* 20/32 (August, 2019): 1-10, Morris, Tyndale New Testament Commentary, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 103, Valerity Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering: Origin, Development and Content of the Christian Gathering in the First to Third Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 235-36.

50 The verb *ἀσπάζομαι* (*aspazomai*), appearing here in the aorist middle imperative *Ἀσπάσασθε*, is a common Hellenistic term meaning to greet, welcome, or bid farewell. In the New Testament it occurs nearly sixty times, predominantly in the Pauline epistles, and does not in itself prescribe a specific physical gesture. Rather, it denotes the act of extending a greeting within a relational or communal context, BDAG, s.v. "ἀσπάζομαι"; Lee Hann, "To Kiss or Not to Kiss? Understanding New Testament Epistolary Imperatives," Reformed Theological Seminary (2017), 1.

51 Paul's label of "holy" for the customary kiss—a Thessalonian cultural sign of love, respect, and loyalty—sparks scholarly debate, elevating a routine greeting to sacred status. The writer questions what truly makes this "holy kiss"

**"1 Thessalonians 5:26" in some of the major tribal mother tongue translations**

**i. Ao:** Temeshi temeim agi adianu ajak nem salem agüjang[52]

a. *Convey a greeting to all our brothers and sisters with holy love*

**ii. Tangkhul:** Shimkhurwui mili leishilak eina samphangkakhui thada shitkasanga mi saikorali shālam sākhuilu[53]

a. *Regard all believers and greet them with love as you would do to your family*

**iii. Poumai:** Sheeyuvei mü mupeiyu sünanou thaihou jürai khemai hrülaiye sasa-a khurü peikhaio[54]

a. *Greet all your brethren with the holy kiss joyfully*

**iv. Mizo:** Unau zawng zawngte kha fawh thianghlimin chibai mi bûksak rawh u.[55]

a. *Greet all our brothers with a holy kiss for us*

**v. Sumi:** Akimthe kümma pesü kümtsü sasü petha shilo[56]

a. *Greet all the people with a Holy kis*s

**vi. Maram:** Kamatei mah kamatwum tei kasuisa meihang go.[57]

a. *Greet all men with a Holy kiss*

The adjective "holy" attached to the verb "kiss" does not make the act sacred; in traditional tribal contexts, kissing is considered profane, a private act linked to sexual arousal rather than holiness. In north-east India, modern films that highlight kissing scenes never appear, and if they appear, to promote promiscuity and premarital sex, while those who object to such depictions often lack a voice to express their disapproval. Similarly, many tribal mother-tongue translations of 1 Thessalonians 5:26 and its parallels seem to endorse the idea that Christians should literally "greet one another with a holy kiss[58]," overlooking Paul's true intent—to extend his greeting to all believers. Both translations faithfully communicate Paul's greetings to his audience, aligning with the author's intended message. However, since greeting customs in tribes differ, these versions intentionally omit the "holy kiss," likely viewing it as a practice foreign to tribal culture. This variation among tribals' mother-tongue translations of 1 Thessalonians 5:26 indicates a translational challenge—how best to render the text in a way that resonates with tribals' cultural

holy: simply adding the adjective to the verb "kiss" doesn't sanctify it. Paul used "holy" to guard against abusive, unholy uses in Thessalonica's church that could harm Christ's body. Its holiness stems from pure, heartfelt love—free of wrong motives—symbolizing spiritual oneness in Christ, not romance, but Christian agape (1 Pet. 5:14), James Everett Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1912), 216.

52 Ao Naga C.L. Bible (Bible Society of India 2023).

53 Tangkhul Naga Bible-Kathara Bible (Bible Society of India 2014).

54 Poumai Naga Bible-Sheeyu Baibel (Bible society of India, 2009).

55 Mizo Ov-Re-edited Bible (Bible Society of India 2007).

56 Sumi Naga CL Re-edited Bible (Bible Society of India, 2023).

57 Maram Naga-Karanu Kabi Samtam (Bible Society of India 2007).

58 There is evidence to suggest that the kiss was a regular part of Christian worship, incorporated into the observance of the Lord's Supper, at least as early as the second century and perhaps before. Since "brothers" (generically including "sisters" also) are particularly those to be so greeted, Paul likely employed "holy" to underscore believers' mutual bond as those belonging to God, Jon A. Weatherly, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Joplin, Mo: College Press Pub. Co., 1996), 261.

norms.

This raises a broader translational and hermeneutical question. Did tribal translators rely primarily on earlier Western versions, or did they intentionally adopt paraphrastic strategies to communicate meaning faithfully within their own cultural worlds? The evidence suggests that many tribal translations employ a hybrid approach, combining formal and dynamic equivalence. This tension is not unique to 1 Thessalonians 5:26 but reflects a wider pattern in which Western categories have long shaped biblical interpretation. Mother tongue hermeneutics, in this context, emerges not as a deviation from biblical authority but as a liberating practice that enables Scripture to speak authentically within tribal life.

### 7.2. Other Areas of Misinterpretation Arising from Western Translational Influence

In many tribal languages, including Angami, there is no direct equivalent in English word equivalent for *hate*[59]. People say *I nngo metsu*, meaning "when I see you, I feel lazy," or *I nngo anomo*, meaning "when I see you, I feel sad." In the Tangkhul tribe, people say *I nali ningkachai*, or *thuikhanam*, meaning "I do not want to see" or feel disgusted. In the Phom tribe, people say *Jiuhitnyeih* literally can be understood close to the English terms disgust or dislike. These expressions describe emotional heaviness or discomfort, not hostility. This shows that the culture does not imagine hatred as active rejection. When translations insert the strong Western emotional category *hate* into passages such as Psalm 5:5, tribal readers meet a word that is foreign to their own emotional world. The Hebrew *śānē* carries meanings of moral opposition or covenant disfavour, not the violent emotional intensity of the English term.[60] Mother tongue reading would therefore seek expressions that convey moral distancing rather than importing a foreign emotional concept that never existed in the tribal worldview.

The same issue appears in the translation of *fear*[61]. In tribal languages such as Tangkhul, Ao, Angami, Sema, and Phom, the word for fear describes real trembling, physical fright, or mental anxiety, often in the face of danger or consequences. Yet when the Bible says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Proverbs 1:7), the Hebrew *yirah* means reverence, awe, respect, and covenant loyalty. Colonial translation history carried the English word into tribal languages without considering this difference. As a result, many tribal Christians imagine that spiritual maturity begins with dread or terror before God.[62] A mother tongue hermeneutic would

59 HALOT (The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament) defines אָנַשׂ as "to hate, reject," frequently denoting covenantal or moral opposition rather than emotional hostility (Koehler and Baumgartner, *HALOT*, vol. 3 [Leiden: Brill, 1994], 1231–32). BDB likewise lists meanings ranging from personal hatred to formal rejection (Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 971). For covenantal nuance, see R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1980), s.v. 1185.

60 Eitan Bar, "Hebrew Word Study: HATE (SANE)," *Eitan Bar Studies*, May 24, 2025, https://eitan.bar/articles/Hebrew-word-study-hate-sane/.

61 On the semantic range of הָאָרִי, HALOT lists "fear, reverence, awe," noting its frequent use for covenantal reverence rather than terror (Koehler and Baumgartner, *HALOT*, vol. 2 [Leiden: Brill, 1994], 434–35). BDB similarly defines it as "fear, awe, reverence," with religious reverence as the primary sense (Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 432). See also Gerhard von Rad, who interprets "fear of the LORD" as covenantal loyalty expressed through reverent obedience (*Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1 [New York: Harper & Row, 1962], 224–25).

62 Eitan Bar, "Hebrew Word Study: Fear (Yirah)," *Eitan Bar Studies*, May 24, 2025, https://eitan.bar/articles/hebrew-word-study-fear-yirah/.

instead use terms that express respectful regard, listening and honouring, not trembling fright, so that the meaning aligns with both Scripture and tribal relational understanding.

A third example concerns the idea of *virginity*[63]. In many tribal cultures, virginity is traditionally expressed in terms that mean "blameless woman, "dotless," or "pure" or "untouched" in the sense of moral integrity and social reputation rather than a biological condition[64]. Western missionary influence gradually elevated virginity into a rigid moral ideal not originally present in the tribal worldview. This becomes more complicated when we look at Isaiah 7:14, where the Hebrew *almah* means "young woman of marriageable age," not necessarily a virgin. The Septuagint translated it as *parthenos* ("virgin"), and this Hellenistic influence shaped later Christian tradition and then entered vernacular tribal translations. As a result, the idea of virginity became exaggerated and idealized to an unrealistic standard, creating moral pressures and expectations foreign to the tribal context.[65] Mother tongue hermeneutics helps correct this distortion by restoring the original meaning of *almah* and by using tribal terms that express moral character rather than unattainable purity shaped by imported theological categories.

These examples demonstrate the importance of returning to sources and evaluating customary usage and meanings within both the Hebrew context and the receptor tribal language. False or reductive interpretations historically have produced serious theological and practical distortions – corrections will often bring richer, culturally resonant, and theologically faithful readings for indigenous Christians.

## 8. Mother Tongue Hermeneutics and Theological Interpretation in Indigenous Contexts

We can also see that doing theology in such a context poses significant challenges when seeking to make it meaningful for the local people. As Renthy Keitzar observes, "*The tribal thought forms, ideas, theological terms, life situations, and so on, are adopted with adaptations in interpreting Christian ideas so that the gospel truth can be made relevant to whom it is proclaimed.*"[66] For centuries, the Gospel message passed down to us – whether through Western missionaries or our own church leaders trained within foreign frameworks of thinking and expression – has often reflected external modes of conceptualization. Consequently, this

63 See HALOT, s.v. "הָעַלְמָה," which defines the term as a "young woman of marriageable age" without specifying virginity (Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 1 [Leiden: Brill, 1994], 835). BDB likewise glosses הָעַלְמָה as "young woman (marriageable)" distinct from בְּתוּלָה (*betulah*) (Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1907], 761). On how the LXX rendering παρθένος ("virgin") shaped later Christian interpretation, see J. J. M. Roberts, *First Isaiah* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 112.

64 The term for virginity in the Phom terminology is closely linked to the newly weaved shawl freshly trimmed from the loom which is untouched by any shoulder or in simpler sense not worn by anyone. This aligns the understanding of virginity as something that is untouched and intact referring both to bodily wholeness and to moral integrity, dignity, and social honor. Lydia Bujem, Old Testament researcher (third-year), interview by the author, United Theological College, Bengaluru, India, 15 November 2025.

65 Ronald L. Troxel, *LXX-Isaiah as Translation and Interpretation: The Strategies of the Translator of the Septuagint Isaiah* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 110–115.

66 Renthy Keitzar, *In Search of a Relevant gospel Message* (Guwahati: CLC, 1995), 1, cf. 19.

process has largely involved translating an "outside" gospel into our cultural idioms, effectively transforming a "foreign" gospel into something made to appear indigenous.[67] This situation creates a serious challenge in striving for true relevance in understanding the Gospel; rather than bringing liberation, it can leave individuals spiritually confined. Within this reality, a Mother Tongue Hermeneutics provides a meaningful way forward – it opens the possibility of genuine liberation and allows people to encounter the authentic power of the Gospel in their own cultural and linguistic setting. We can explore some examples of this below.

In a mother tongue hermeneutic, Christological imagination must rise from the people's own linguistic and cultural soil rather than from externally imposed theological categories. If we refuse to consider Christ through tribal symbols such as the rooster,[68] *pasaltha*, or *tlawmngai*,[69] we end up forcing communities to understand Jesus through foreign metaphors that silence their own conceptual worlds, and the result is not doctrinal purity but a continued captivity to imported imagery that prevents Scripture from speaking in the people's own voice. Yangkahao Vashum's formulation of Jesus Christ as Ancestor and Elder Brother addresses precisely this concern. In the traditional Naga world, the eldest son bears ritual responsibility, mediating between the household and the Supreme Being, while the ancestors themselves sustain the relational and spiritual life of the community. Vashum, therefore, argues that Christ's mediatorship is best understood through these kinship categories, and Jesus becomes the *Amei*, the eldest brother who performs sacrifice for the family and intercedes for the community before God.[70] This aligns with Renthy Keitzar's insistence that Christ must be real to us as a fellow tribal, living in our culture and speaking our language,[71] in this reading, the elder brother metaphor is not merely an accommodation but a hermeneutical necessity. Similarly, Takatemjen's reinterpretation of Jesus as *Lijaba*, the Ao divine figure who maintains cosmic and moral order, demonstrates how Christ's creative and sustaining work resonates naturally with Ao cosmology.[72] In this framework, Christ does not emerge as an alien metaphysic but as the

67 Renthy Keitzar, "The Indigenization of Naga Christian Theology" in *In Search of a Relevant gospel Message*, 17-30; Roger Gaikwad, "Doing Theology with Tribal Resources: Caution Remarks" in *Doing Theology with Tribal Resources Context and Perspectives*, eds. A. Wati Longchar, Larry E. Davis (Jorhat, Assam: Tribal Study Centre, 1999), 127 – 142.

68 Rooster is considered by the tribal people as sacred animal used for sacrifices as a substitute for human to be saved when evil spirit disturbed them or believed to bear away sickness, sins, and misfortune from individuals or the community. Such sacrifices are performed to appease spirits, invoke blessings, and renew life, reflecting deep spiritual and ritual meanings within these traditions, Yangkahao Vashum, *Christology in Context: A Tribal-Indigenous Appraisal of North East India* (Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2017), 134–136.

69 For Mizos, a "pasaltha" is a traditional hero upholding tlawmngaihna, the ultimate selfless code. Tlawmngaihna means being helpful, brave, and always putting others before oneself. Mizo Christians see Christ as the perfect pasaltha, whose sacrifice and love express the highest tlawmngaihna. This makes Christ's life deeply relatable to Mizos, connecting Christian love with their own core values, Lalnuntluangi, "Theologizing Tlawmngaihna in Mizo Culture for National Integrity," *Heritage Research Journal* 71, no. 8 (2023): 6–15, accessed November 16, 2025, https://heritageresearchjournal.com/; K. Thanzauva, *Theology of Community: Tribal Theology in the Making* (Aizawl: Mizo Theological Conference, 1997), 129.

70 Yangkahao Vashum, "Jesus Christ as the Ancestor and Elder Brother: Constructing a Relevant Indigenous/Tribal Christology of North East India," *Journal of Tribal Studies* Vol. XIII (July–December 2008): 21–23.

71 Renthy Keitzar, "A Study of NEI Tribal Christian Theology," in *Good News for North East India: A Theological Reader* (Guwahati: CLC, 1995), 38.

72 Takatemjen, "40 Years of Tribal Theology in the Making," *Sathri Journal: A Journal of Contextual Theology* 8, no. 2 (September 2014): 36–37; Takatemjen, *Studies on Theology and Naga Culture* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998), 55–68.

fulfilment of the community's oldest intuition of divine governance.

Such mother tongue hermeneutics also clarify why existing tribal Christological images such as the Naga Christ as the Rooster and the Mizo images of Jesus as *tlawmngai* or *pasaltha* carry real theological force. For the Nagas, the rooster's call marks the transition from darkness to dawn, announcing renewal, vigilance, and communal order, and to reject this symbol is to reject the people's own sensory and ecological vocabulary for expressing resurrection and new creation. Among the Mizos, *tlawmngaihna* signifies relentless self-effacing service, while *pasaltha* evokes the protective warrior hero, qualities that resonate profoundly with Christ's kenosis and liberating struggle.[73] In these readings, the mother tongue becomes not a decorative tool but the matrix of revelation, ensuring that Christ is confessed in categories that speak to the heart of tribal moral imagination. As Sashi M Jamir affirms, authentic tribal theology emerges only when the biblical horizon and the tribal horizon interact.[74] These adaptations, therefore, do not romanticize culture; they restore to tribal Christians the right to hear Christ in the rhythm of their own metaphors, enabling Scripture to become truly incarnate, spoken with the breath, memory, and moral texture of the people.

## 9. Conclusion

Mother tongue hermeneutics is not a secondary or optional approach for tribal communities but a theological necessity rooted in the very nature of divine revelation, which encounters people within their lived linguistic and cultural worlds rather than through abstract or universalized meanings imposed from outside. For tribal communities in Northeast India, whose engagement with Scripture has long been shaped by colonial histories and Western interpretive dominance, mother tongue hermeneutics functions as a liberating practice that restores interpretive agency, cultural memory, and theological dignity by enabling Scripture to be read through indigenous languages, symbols, and relational categories. The analysis of translations such as the "holy kiss" in 1 Thessalonians 5:26, together with key concepts like hate, fear, and virginity, demonstrates how uncritical transmission of Western semantic frameworks can distort biblical meaning and lived faith, while mother tongue interpretation seeks deeper fidelity by holding the biblical languages in dialogical engagement with tribal linguistic and cultural realities. When Christ is interpreted through indigenous images such as ancestor, elder brother, rooster, pasaltha, or tlawmngai, Scripture becomes embodied rather than imposed, allowing the Word to be encountered as relational and transformative. There remains significant scope for further research in this field, particularly in lexical studies, translation theory, oral traditions, and contextual theology, through which tribal communities can continue shaping interpretations that are textually responsible, culturally rooted, and life-giving, so that the Word may be heard and lived in the full resonance of the people's own tongue.

73 L.H. Lalpekhlua, *Contextual Christology: A Tribal Perspective* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2007), 155.

74 Jamir, "Inductive Bible Study, 44 – 46.

## References


**Books**

Alikin, Valeriy. *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering: Origin, Development and Content of the Christian Gathering in the First to Third Centuries*. Leiden: Brill, 2010.

Angami, Zhodi. Tribals, *Empire and God: A Tribal Reading of the Birth of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel*. New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017.

Angami, Zhodi. "An Introduction to Tribal Interpretation of the Bible." In *Encountering Diversity in India Biblical Studies: A Biblical Masala*, edited by David J. Chalcraft and Zhodi Angami. New York: Routledge, 2023.

Athyal, Jesudas M. Doing Christian Theology in Asian Ways. *ATESEA Occasional Papers* No. 12 (undated).

Bareh, H. *A Short History of Khasi Literature*. Shillong: Don Bosco Press, 1962.

Bediako, Kwame. *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of Non-Western Religion*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995.

Bediako, Kwame. *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel and African Religion*. 2nd ed. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004.

Bediako, Kwame. *Jesus in Africa: The Gospel in African History and Experience*. Akropong: Editions Clé and Regnum Africa, 2000.

Brueggemann, Walter. *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997.

Clement of Alexandria. *Paedagogus*. Book 3. In *The Instructor*, translated by Simon P. Wood. Fathers of the Church 23. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1954.

Fish, Stanley. *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980.

Gaikwad, Roger. "Doing Theology with Tribal Resources: Caution Remarks." In *Doing Theology with Tribal Resources: Context and Perspectives*, edited by A. Wati Longchar and Larry E. Davis. Jorhat, Assam: Tribal Study Centre, 1999.

Iser, Wolfgang. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

Keitzar, Renthy. *In Search of a Relevant Gospel Message*. Guwahati: CLC, 1995.

Keitzar, Renthy. "The Indigenization of Naga Christian Theology." In *In Search of a Relevant Gospel Message*, 17–30. Guwahati: CLC, 1995.

Kuster, Volker. *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ: Intercultural Christology*. Translated by John Bowden. London: SCM Press, 2001.

Lalpekhlua, L. H. *Contextual Christology: A Tribal Perspective*. Delhi: ISPCK, 2007.

Longchar, A. Wati. "Indian Christian Theology and Tribals in India." In *Tribal Theology: A Reader*, edited by Shimreingam Shimray. Jorhat, Assam: Eastern Theological College, Tribal Study Series, 2023.

Longchar, A. Wati. *An Emerging Asian Theology: Tribal Theology—Issues, Methods, and Perspectives*. Jorhat, Assam: Tribal Study Centre, Eastern Theological College, 2000.

Lorrain, J. H., and F. W. *Savidge. Grammar and Dictionary of the Lushai Language*. Calcutta: 1898.

Pettigrew, William. *Tāngkhul Nāga Grammar and Dictionary* (*Ukhrul Dialect*). Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1918.

Sugirtharajah, R. S. *The Bible and the Third World: Postcolonial and Postcolonial Encounters*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Takatemjen. *Studies on Theology and Naga Culture*. Delhi: ISPCK, 1998.

Thanzauva, K. *Theology of Community: Tribal Theology in the Making*. Aizawl: Mizo Theological Conference, 1997.

Vashum, Yangkahao. *Christology in Context: A Tribal-Indigenous Appraisal of North East India*. Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2017.

Witter, W. E. *An Outline Grammar of the Lotha Language with Vocabulary and Illustrative Sentences*. Kohima: Naga Baptist Press, 1942.

**Commentaries**

Fitzmyer, Joseph A. *The Acts of the Apostles*. Anchor Yale Bible 31. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

Frame, James Everett. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912.

Keener, Craig S. *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*. Vol. 1. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012.

Morris, Leon. *1 and 2 Thessalonians*. Tyndale New Testament Commentary, vol. 13. Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press, 2009.

Roberts, J. J. M. *First Isaiah*. Hermeneia. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015.

Troxel, Ronald L. *LXX-Isaiah as Translation and Interpretation: The Strategies of the Translator of the Septuagint Isaiah*. Leiden: Brill, 2008.

Weatherly, Jon A. *1 & 2 Thessalonians*. Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing, 1996.

**Lexicons & Reference Works**

Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907.

Danker, Frederick W., Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Harris, R. Laird, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1980.

Koehler, Ludwig, and Walter Baumgartner. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. 5 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1994.

von Rad, Gerhard. *Old Testament Theology*. Vol. 1. New York: Harper & Row, 1962.

**Journal Articles**

Abbate, Cheryl E. "'Higher' and 'Lower' Political Animals: A Critical Analysis of Aristotle's Account of the Political Animal." *Journal of Animal Ethics* 6, no. 1 (2016): 54–66.

Achumi, N. K. "The Translation of 'Nephesh' in the Sema Naga Bible." *United Bible Societies Bulletin* 148/149 (1987): 69–80.

Akoto, Richard Osei. "Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics within the Context of African Biblical Hermeneutics: Its Origin, Trends and Challenges." *Journal of Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics and Theology* 6, no. 3 (May 2024): 19–34.

Amevenku, Frederick M. "Decolonised Knowledge Production for Social Transformation." *Journal of Applied Science, Arts and Business* 1, no. 1 (May 2025): 1–12.

Aryeh, Daniel Nii Aboagye. "Contemporary Hermeneutics: An Examination of Selected Works of John D. K. Ekem." *The Journal of Inductive Biblical Studies* 4, no. 2 (2017): 182–210.

Bediako, Kwame. "The Hermeneutic of Culture and Tradition." *Journal of African Christian Thought* 4, no. 1 (June 2001): 2–11.

Das, Biswajit. "Language Ecology in Northeast India: An Overview." *International Journal of Novel Research and Development* 8, no. 4 (April 2023): 259–68.

Ebrahim, Philemon. "What Is So 'Holy' About the 'Holy Kiss'?" *The American Journal of Biblical Theology* 20, no. 32 (August 2019): 1–10.

Ekem, John D. K. "Professorial Chair Inaugural Address." *Journal of Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics* 1 (2015): 158–174.

Ekem, John David Kwamena. "Interpreting 'The Lord's Prayer' in the Context of Ghanaian Mother-tongue Hermeneutics." *Journal of African Christian Thought* 10, no. 2 (2007): 48–52.

Jamir, Sashi M. "Inductive Bible Study: Contextual Appropriation in Northeast India." *The Asbury Journal* 68, no. 1 (2013): 42–55.

Karimnia, Amin. "Review of Language and Identity: An Introduction, by J. Edwards." *Canadian Journal of Linguistics* 57, no. 1 (2012): 159–62.

Keitzar, Renthy. "Tribal Perspective in Biblical Hermeneutics Today." *Indian Journal of Theology* 31, no. 3–4 (1982): 308–9.

Lalnuntluangi. "Theologizing Tlawmngaihna in Mizo Culture for National Integrity." *Heritage Research Journal* 71, no. 8 (2023): 6–15.

Lama, K. "Re-Envisioning Seminary–Church Relationship." *Baptist News* 61, no. 3 (2012): 18–27.

Ragui, Taimaya. "Tangkhul Bible Translation: Retrospect, Concerns and Prospect." *Journal of Asian Theology* 26, no. 1 (2022): 7–24.

Shimreiwung, A. S. "Tracing the History of Print Culture in Tangkhul Language." *Journal of North East India Studies* 3, no. 2 (2013): 70–81.

Singh, Anad Pal, and Shagufta Imtiaz. "The Impact of the Digital Divide in Rural and Semi-Urban Schools in U.P." *International Journal of Innovations in TESOL and Applied Linguistics* 8, no. 1 (2022): 25–33.

Takatemjen. "40 Years of Tribal Theology in the Making." *Sathri Journal* 8, no. 2 (2014): 36–37.

Vashum, Yangkahao. "Jesus Christ as the Ancestor and Elder Brother." *Journal of Tribal Studies* 13 (2008): 21–23.

Zeelenberg, Rene, et al. "Non-Native Language Comprehenders Encode Implied Shapes of Objects in Memory." *Cortex* 182 (2025): 100–111.

**Websites & Online Articles**

Ao, A. S. Bendangyabang. "Bible Translation in Ao Naga." *Language in India 1* (2001). https://www.languageinindia.com/sep2001/bibleaonaga.html.

Bar, Eitan. "Hebrew Word Study: Fear (Yirah)." *Eitan Bar Studies*, May 24, 2025. https://eitan.bar/articles/hebrew-word-study-fear-yirah/.

Bar, Eitan. "Hebrew Word Study: Hate (Sane)." *Eitan Bar Studies*, May 24, 2025. https://eitan.bar/articles/Hebrew-word-study-hate-sane/.

Hann, Lee. "To Kiss or Not to Kiss? Understanding New Testament Epistolary Imperatives." *Reformed Theological Seminary*, 2017.

Kapoor, Anup. "Tribes of India's North East." In *Tribal Cultures: Tribes of India*. https://ebooks.inflibnet.ac.in/antp05/chapter/tribes-of-indias-nort-east/.

Kuwornu-Adjaottor, Jonathan E. T. "A Comparative Study of Mark 1:12 in Some Ghanaian Mother-Tongue Translations of the Bible." *Journal of Higher Education and Theology* 1/1 (2011): 67–73. https://www.academia.edu/24915857/A_Comparative_Study_of_Mark_1_12_in_Some_Ghanaian_Mother_Tongue_Translations_of_the_Bible.

Plathottam, George. "Contribution of Christian Missionaries to the Linguistic and Ethnic Identity of the People of Northeast India Through the Bible." *NECARF Review* September 2, 2022. https://www.necarf.org/home/articles/233/contribution-of-christian-missionaries-to-the-linguistic-and-ethnic-identity-of-the-people-of-northeast-india-through-the-bible.

Psychologs. "Why Are Human Beings Called Social Animals?" Published September 5, 2025. https://www.psychologs.com/why-are-human-beings-called-social-animals.

UNESCO. "Why Mother Language-Based Education Is Essential." Published September 5, 2025. https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/why-mother-language-based-education-essential.

**Conference Papers**

Pao, Huang. "Re-Confessing as a Method of Contextual Biblical Interpretation in Asia." Paper presented at the AFTM Refresher Programme, Jorhat, Assam, October 2025.

**Bible Translations**

*Ao Naga C.L. Bible*. Bible Society of India, 2023.

*Maram Naga–Karanu Kabi Samtam*. Bible Society of India, 2007.

*Mizo OV Re-edited Bible*. Bible Society of India, 2007.

*Poumai Naga Bible–Sheeyu Baibel*. Bible Society of India, 2009.

*Sumi Naga CL Re-edited Bible*. Bible Society of India, 2023.

*Tangkhul Naga Bible–Kathara Bible*. Bible Society of India, 2014.