

Book Review

Jangkhoham Haokip and David W. Smith, eds., *Voices from the Margins: Wisdom of Primal People in the Era of World Christianity*

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Introduction

Voices from the Margins is divided into two parts and contains 11 fascinating, well-researched, and instructive chapters by authors of various disciplines. The contributors have conducted research and read widely in areas related to their articles. Part one, with the heading “Primal Traditions and Christianity,” has four chapters, while part two, entitled “Primal Traditions and Christianity in Northeast India,” has seven articles. Each part ends with a postscript.

The title of the book buttresses and captures clearly the message or point of the contributors: primal people who were considered physically separated and isolated from the larger population of the globe, whose myths, folklores, worldviews, and culture were rejected and considered useless, are now influencing world Christianity due to the rich wisdom they bring to the understanding of the gospel. Indeed, as with Jesus our Exemplar, the stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

Summary

In chapter one, “The Tribal Peoples of Northeast India,” the author, Virginius Xaxa demonstrates how a tribal people or region once considered animist, neglected, unimportant, and unpopular could metaphase and transform into a prominent region in the country, academia, news reports, and wider discussions, using the Northeast people of India as a case study. Northeast India comprises eight states: Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim. One fascinating fact about the Northeast region is the place it occupies in contemporary India, namely a distinct politico-administrative category (9).

The emergence of certain government agencies brought the people of Northeast India into the limelight. The establishment of these agencies resulted in a separate budget allocation for the Northeast and changed how the Northeast is viewed today by the mainland. There were several political and social transformations that occurred in the region that promoted the image and identity of the region. The state, market, and Christianity were responsible for this transformation.

The strength of Xaxa’s contribution is his ability to present who the tribal people of Northeast India are in such a way that non-Indians will have a better understanding of the people under study. The main weakness is his failure to proffer solutions to the tribal customary practices that hamper more development of the region.

In chapter two, “Unleashing the Power of Orality, Myth, and Folklore,” authors Charles B. Madinger and Rocelyn Anog-Madinger employ the responses of the Hausa people of Nigeria to HIV/AIDS to buttress the power of orality, myth, and folklore in enabling a community/people to respond positively to a pandemic.

The crux of the chapter is that orality, myth, and folklore can be used in diverse disciplines to bring the message or lesson alive, especially where the community is reluctant to accept or understand the problem being addressed or communicated through other means. Orality, myth, and folklore are used to communicate the gospel or any vital information for deeper impact.

The authors’ strength is in how they began their writing with a story. The reader gets fascinated from the beginning and will not want to stop until devouring the article to the end. Again, using a situation (HIV/AIDS) that most people could relate to in bringing home their point is noteworthy.

In chapter three, “West African Insights on Ethnic Identity, Myth, and Sacred Time,” James R. Krabill walks the reader through how the Dida people of the Ivory coast perceive themselves as an ethnic group, even though they do not constitute what some scholars claim is needed to be considered an ethnic group.

The insight into how the Dida’s concept of time differs from people of Eurocentric culture is enthralling. Krabill explains that the Dida people operate on a phenomenon calendar that is grouped into four-time divisions: Nature, Settlement, Migrations, and Origins. The Dida’s concept of time appears similar to that of the Hebrew of the Old Testament, as seen in the account of the prophet Isaiah who recorded his encounter with God using the year King Uzziah died (Isaiah 6).

The use of stories to convey meaning and lessons strengthens the chapter—including the story of Harris the Black Elijah of West Africa, who adopted indigenous beliefs and practices to contextualize the gospel in such an appropriate way that, within a few months, many tribal people embraced Christ. The three creation accounts are enriching and intriguing, especially the third one depicting how the mortar pile came crashing down after the woman’s effort to reach God and settle the score once and for all failed.

The issue with this chapter is the title. It is very general in its reference to West Africa. However, the chapter is specifically about the Ivory Coast. An appropriately specific title would have been preferable.

In chapter four, “The Crucial Role of the Arts in the Identity of Indigenous Peoples in the Southern Philippines,” the author, Rocelyn Anog-Madinger, depicts how her community arts workshops enable indigenous people to appreciate their cultural-linguistic identity, discover how it is connected to Christian identity, and embrace with confidence their personal identity in Christ. She reveals the vital role arts such as music, stories, artifacts, attires, designs, textiles, riddles, proverbs, dances, games, food, and greetings, as well as curses and blessings, play in empowering indigenous people to accept their identity instead of looking down on them. The arts also enable them to worship God in a way that resonates with them. The two case studies she offers bring her point home.

The stories in Anog-Madinger’s chapter, including the way they are told, are captivating. They bring out the message of the title of the book by showing how indigenous people in the Southern Philippines, who were ashamed of their cultural practices in the light of other neighboring communities, could suddenly change their identity and perspective through the lenses of their arts

enabled by the Ethno-Arts workshop. This is a must-read for missionaries, anthropologists, and students of knowledge.

With the beginning of part two in chapter five, “Toward a Kuki Contextual Theology of Khankho,” Jangkholam Haokip argues that the scientific world and its methodology are insufficient to deal with the reality of the spirit world and spiritual powers among indigenous people. He proffers theological perspective and methodology as an additional tool for responding to spiritual powers and the world.

The story of the church elder who allegedly died as a result of the broken egg in the omen planted in his house—despite his faith that God would save him from the evil power—appears to justify the indigenous people’s traditional belief. The weakness of this chapter is the author’s failure to demonstrate that following Jesus does not exonerate Christians from the trials of life, including death by evil powers.

Chapter six, “The Quest for Meaning in Boro Orality” by Songram Basumatary, focuses on the quest for orality and the importance of preserving it. Basumatary writes that “orality relates to the thoughts and verbal expressions of preliterate peoples concerning their worldviews and life worlds” (75). He identifies three forms of orality: primary, secondary, and oral residue.

Primary orality refers to thought and its verbal expression within cultures that are totally untouched by the knowledge of writing or print. Secondary orality is oral culture defined by written and printed words but is made possible by narrations through audio-visual technologies. Residual orality refers to remnants, legacy, or influence of a predominantly oral culture carried over into the written realm (75). The author emphasizes that oral traditions need to be preserved for future generations through textualizing to avoid their extinction by assimilation into dominant cultures.

Chapter seven is “The Inculturation of Christianity among the Khasi People of Meghalaya State,” by Fabian Lyngdoh. The crux of the chapter is the need for Christianity to be inculturated in the tribal cultures of indigenous people, using Northeast Indians as a case study. Lyngdoh opines that this can be accomplished by integrating core cultural values of tribal worldviews that resonate with biblical values while maintaining the accurate meaning of the gospel story. Except for the inculturation of the gospel occurring and addressing both the physical and spiritual (fear of spiritual powers and spirit world) world, tribal Christians will continue displaying dual allegiance.

The author ably identifies the need of tribal people that Christianity has not met and provides how it can be met: inculturation. A good example is the account of the Khasi traditional priest (Mawthod). “According to Mawthoh, God has given authority to his Son, u Rangiar-khadu (sacrificial cock), to be the savior and redeemer of mankind through his self-sacrifice. It is through u Rangiar-khad and his conquest of all the powers of evil that human beings are brought back to peace and unity with God” (93). This oral tradition can be used to bring the gospel account of Jesus alive to the indigenous people with this belief. This process uses the well-known redemptive analogy in missiology—using existing myths of a community to communicate the gospel truth.

I particularly enjoyed this chapter’s different stories, given to illustrate the point of the author. I also appreciated the many Khasi traditional beliefs, teaching, and myths narrated and their connection to biblical narratives.

Chapter eight, “The Integration of Khasi Traditional Music in the Christian Churches of Shillong, Meghalaya,” is authored by Donovan K. Swer and Maribon Viray. The authors

emphasize the harm the early missionaries inflicted on the Christian cause among the Khasi people by the demonization of the indigenous peoples' traditional music, instruments, culture, and thought forms in the church. This egocentric behavior of the Welsh missionaries also led to Thomas Jones's dismissal for promoting the Khasi converts' economic and spiritual well-being. The Welsh missionaries described the Christian use of traditional music, instruments, and rhythm in church worship as animistic and demonic while promoting their own way of worship. I appreciate how the authors demonstrate how Jones became immortalized and honored by the Khasis Christians after some considered him a failure. The chapter shows how gospel hymnals can enrich the local people and brings a sense of ownership when the gospel is contextualized in a way that is appropriate to the culture of the people. It was very discouraging to discover that the Khasi Christians were excommunicated, suspended, and suspected of worshipping God with their local music and instruments.

The authors explain how the rejected local instruments, music, and culture are integrated and accepted into Christian worship today; Khasi Christians are proud of adopting them in their worship. Indeed, the rejected stone has become the chief cornerstone. However, precaution is needed as we call for a revival of cultural practices in Christian worship so we do not go completely native and reject the positive lessons from Western music and instruments. For example, the Khasi people were able to put their music in notes and musical keys, which were imported from the West. This chapter is a beautiful write-up, and I enjoyed reading it.

Chapter ten, "The Relevance of Spirit Consciousness for Tribal Christians in Northeast India," is authored by Elungkiebe Zeliang. Zeliang is precise and concise in his argument on the compatibility of biblical teachings and its relevance to the tradition of tribal spirit consciousness. He notes, "...converts have discovered significant points of contact between the worldviews which underlie the Bible and their own concerns with the realm of the spirit" (134). This claim is in sharp contrast with Haokip's article in chapter five, where he shows how belief in Christ alone did not solve the concern of the spirit world and spiritual power. In fact, Haokip relates a story about the church elder who allegedly died due to the broken egg in the omen planted in his house, despite his faith that God would save him from the evil power. If Zeliang's assertion is to be accepted, how does one explain why some tribal Christians still have dual allegiance? Why do they still resort to traditional practices when certain problems occur when Christ is sufficient?

This chapter shows the vital roles that education, advancement in medical science, and Christianity play in questioning tribal beliefs, especially belief in the power of spirits. I hope to see more of this same progress in tackling witchcraft accusations in Africa.

In chapter eleven, "The Emergence of World Christianity and Its Implications for Indigenous Peoples," David W. Smith avers the end of the era of expanding Europe and that the Western missionary movement has ushered Christianity into a new phase known as *World Christianity*. Christianity is no longer possessed by the West, unlike in the previous era. In fact, it is dwindling in Western societies.

On the other hand, Christianity is experiencing geographical relocation (numerical growth of Christianity is greater in the Southern Hemisphere) and social transformation (a greater number of Christians are today found in areas of economic deprivation and among tribal people once considered inconsequential). This shift appears to be fulfilling the scripture that "this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations..." (Matthew 24:14).

Today the Western possession of Christianity is ending while Christianity is steadily moving to areas where it had not introduced earlier. Smith could have added some suggestions on how the extinction of Christianity in the West could be rescued. On the one hand, Smith alludes to the migration of Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans to the cities of Europe and North America with their faith shaped via interaction between gospel and primal cultures. However, is this faith shared with its Western counterpart, or does it simply challenge long-accepted Western secularization and materialism?

Reflection

Voices from the Margins: Wisdom of Primal People in the Era of World Christianity is easy to read and assimilate. The topics discussed are timely as they address issues most primal people grapple with. The contributors have provided a clear distinction between low orality reliance and high orality reliance and how a people's background determines which they adopt. Instead of focusing on either low orality reliance or high orality reliance, I think the integration of both would enhance learning and provide the best orality reliance.

One of the important marks to note about the book is that it demonstrates the authenticity, credibility, and efficacy of practices, orality, myths, folklore, beliefs, identity, and other traits of indigenous people that were discredited and ignored by the so-called enlightened mind of the West. These relevant indigenous cultural practices were considered uncivilized, irrational, and primitive by Western parameters. However, they are tremendously efficient and useful in ensuring peaceful co-existence among communities and contextualizing the gospel in a way that is appropriate to the indigenous people.

Another positive observation about the book is that it depicts how the decline of Christianity in the West and Europe has given an opportunity for the emergence of tribal religion. The book enables readers to see how tribal religious practices, worldviews, myths, and folklore can be used to communicate vital lessons, maintain peace and harmony in society, and contextualize the gospel.

Furthermore, the book depicts the irrelevance of certain Western and European worldviews and practices to the indigenous people's development and worldviews. The book demonstrates the need to preserve primal people's myths, folklore, and culture for their role in understanding the gospel, the person of God, the Trinity, and the atonement of Christ as the Supreme Saviour.

I strongly recommend this book to students of knowledge, missionaries, anthropologists, pastors, and lecturers. It is a fascinating book, and the contributors have conveyed captivating stories that make you want to read more.