

# *The* Soul Hunters



by MANPREET SINGH

# of Central Asia

The most Baptist state in the world—  
**Nagaland**—  
is vying to become  
a powerhouse for  
cross-cultural missions.



**Bells for Baptists: At Mopochuket Baptist Church, a Naga Baptist calls villagers to a 5:30 am worship service.**

# ‘Y

OUR HEAD would be decorating this drawing room had you met my

forefathers a hundred years ago,” quips Pihoto Khala. He is speaking to a visitor as he recollects the Naga peoples’ century-long journey from headhunting to Christianity.

Today, images of Jesus Christ, not desiccated human skulls, adorn Khala’s small house in the hills around Kohima, the capital of India’s northeast state of Nagaland. The region, once notorious worldwide for its savagery, has now become India’s most Christian-dominant area. It’s known as “the most Baptist state in the world.”

Missions

Nagaland actually lives up to its billing. Some 60 percent of Nagaland’s 1.9 million people are Baptists, worshipping in more than 20 groups. Tucked away in a remote corner of the world, Nagaland’s people are becoming the soul hunters of Central Asia. CHRISTIANITY TODAY recently spent a week with Naga Christians to hear their story.

## FROM ANIMISM TO CHRIST

On a recent Sunday morning, a Kohima sanctuary reverberated with the sounds of “Trading My Sorrows,” by American singer/songwriter Darrell Evans.

Young Naga Christians shouted, “Yes, Lord; Yes, Lord; Yes, Yes, Lord.”

After the service, Alem Terhuja, a young music teacher who trains teenagers for youth fellowship, told CT, “I can’t even imagine life without Christ. Christ is my anchor. I believe Christ is the one who keeps you going through thick and thin.”

Another worshiper, Atola Subong, told CT that she started a ministry to disciple young girls

M. SCOTT MARASKEY / THE DAILY HERALD

in Meghalaya, an Indian state neighboring Nagaland.

“Christianity is the best thing that has happened to me,” Subong said. “Christ has fulfilled my deeper yearnings. It has done so much good for us. We want to share with others.”

This desire is audacious, considering Nagaland’s geography and history. Nagaland is a mountainous and landlocked area. Located on the border of Myanmar (Burma), it is one of India’s smallest states, about the combined size of Connecticut and Rhode Island. The first American Baptist missionaries, Edward W. Clark and his wife, Mary, arrived in 1872, when it was considered extremely risky to minister to the Nagas’ head-hunting culture. But the Clarks served faithfully for 21 years in the hill country and helped establish a lasting Christian influence. By the 1890s, the British, who maintained a colonial

**A Study in Contrasts:** Naga Christians (left) give a warrior’s welcome to visiting outsiders. It remains a culture scarred by violence. Around village campfires (right), they sing praise songs to God.



presence in Nagaland, had outlawed headhunting.

The church grew slowly at first, and then in great spurts during revivals in 1956 and 1966. A third revival took place in 1972, the same year evangelist Billy Graham and an associate, Akbar Haqq, held a three-day November crusade in Kohima with 500,000 people attending.

However, politics and tribal divisions have complicated the church’s growth and mission. After India achieved independence in 1947, Naga separatists (many of them Christians) fought fiercely for independence from India. India’s government expelled all foreign missionaries from Nagaland, suspecting them of fueling the Nagas’ desire for independence. Finally, after years of violence, India permitted Nagaland to become a “self-governing” state inside India. But entry into and exit from Nagaland is monitored closely, even today, since Christian rebels still advocate complete independence (their slogan: “Nagalim for Christ”). A tenuous ceasefire has been in place for about 10 years. An esti-

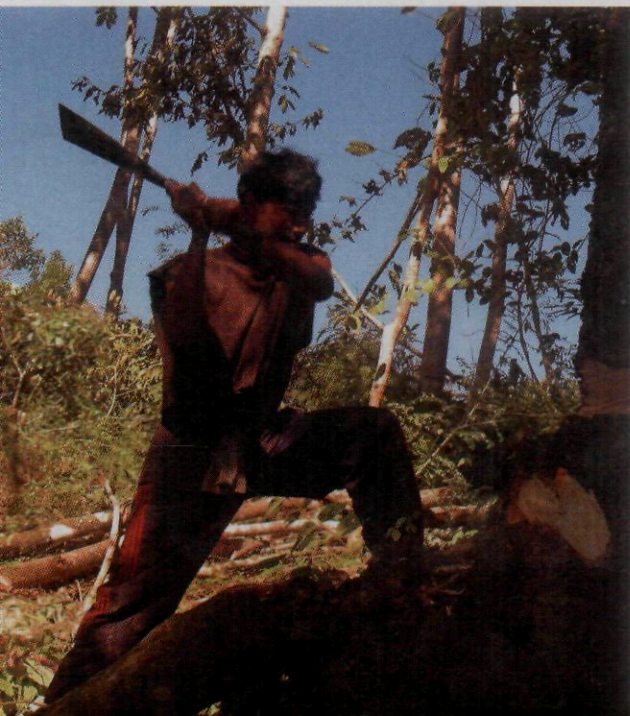
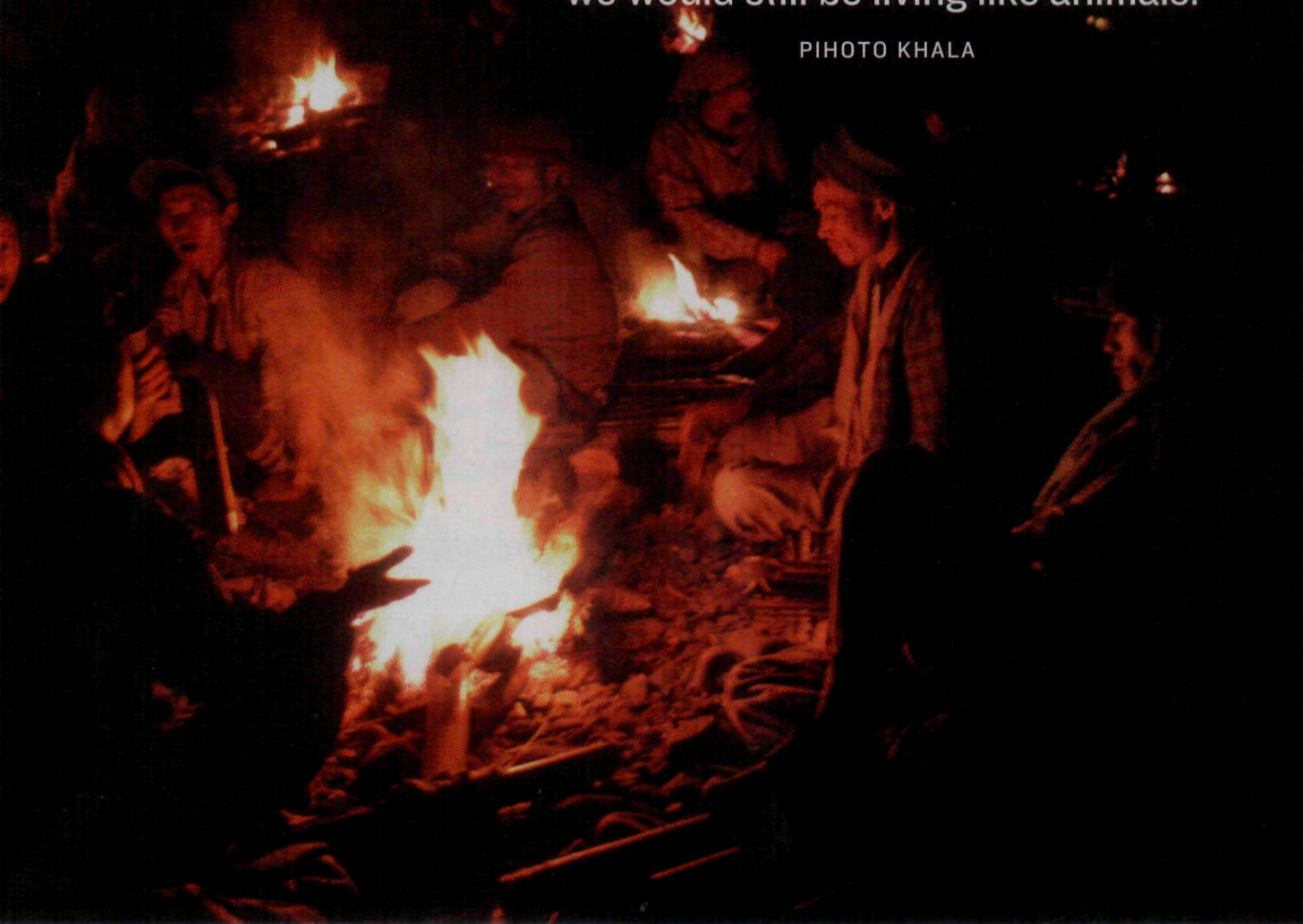
**Rugged and Remote:** Most Naga Christians are subsistence farmers in remote villages. The average family income is less than \$2 per day.



MAP • KERBY ARMAND

'Christianity taught us tolerance.  
As God said, "Revenge is mine."  
Had missionaries not come, maybe  
we would still be living like animals.'

PIHOTO KHALA



PHOTOS • IAN HOMER / PHOTOMISSION.COM

...mated 200,000 have died since 1947 in the low-level conflict, but most recent violence has occurred between tribal Christians over the issue of independence from India.

Despite the unrest, the gospel has taken root, so much so that the region's headhunting heritage is now a distant memory. Khala, a 46-year-old veterinarian, belongs to the Sumi tribe, one of the major groups. "My forefathers were the most ferocious headhunters among the Naga tribes. We were living in the Stone Age. What could we do? We were like animals. Tit for tat. We didn't know any other way of doing things.

"Christianity taught us tolerance. As God said, 'Revenge is mine.' Had missionaries not come, maybe we would still be living like animals."

The life of Khala's forefathers was one of fear. They lived in an animistic world. They thought angry spirits caused sickness. To find healing, they sought to appease the spirits' anger. Superstition was predominant, and people relied heavily on good and bad omens in making decisions.



“For Nagas, introduction to Christianity was a new experience of peace, hope, love, and the future in Christ. It freed them from fear,” says Wati Aier of Oriental Theological Seminary in Dimapur, Nagaland’s commercial center.

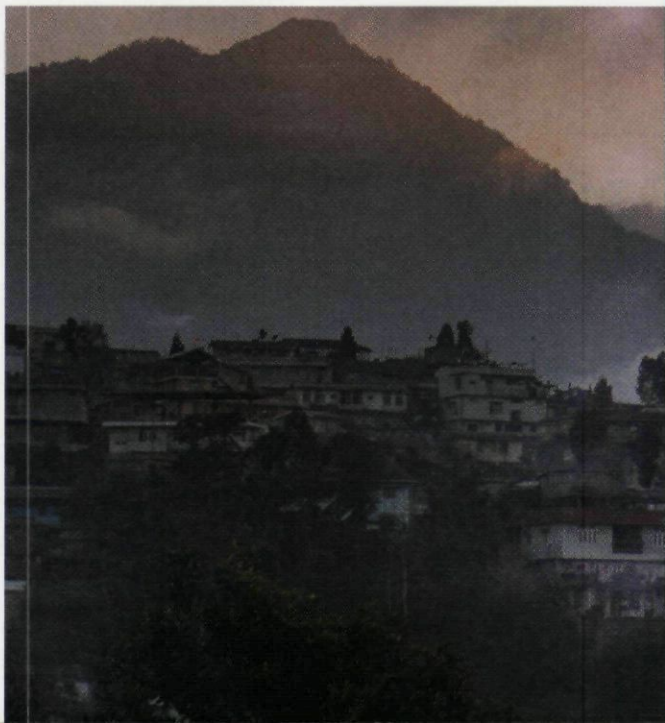
Khala was born into the devout Christian family of a Naga missionary pastor. Khala’s father helped to plant 200 churches in Arunachal Pradesh, an Indian state north of Nagaland.

“God through my father did many miracles, like healing the sick and casting away demons from people. Those who were born between the 1900s and 1930s witnessed with their own eyes God’s miracles,” says Khala.

As a child, Khala heard stories of how people were expelled from villages and tribes for becoming Christians. But others saw that those who became Christians also

**High Places: Naga Christians (above) often worship outdoors. Nagas have developed ‘revival hour’ prayer meetings to combat materialism. Below, Kohima, the capital, is situated in the shadow of Mt. Japfu.**

ABOVE • ADRIAN BAILLIE-STEWART / PHOTOMISSION.COM





**During the three revivals within 16 years, a vision emerged to send 10,000 missionaries from Nagaland to the world.**

became responsible, dependable, and prosperous. “As they say, seeing is believing. Others saw it and followed. God blessed them as they converted to Christianity,” says Khala.

**New Family Values:** Many Naga families have moved from animism to Christianity in two generations.

Khala’s relationship with Christ deepened as he grew into adulthood. “I became born again the day my father died in 2003. Only after my father died did I come to my senses.

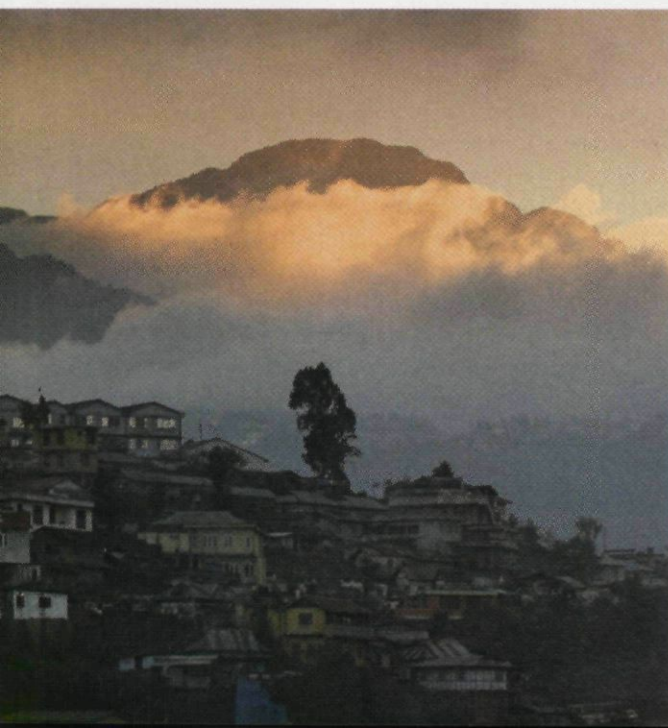
“All these worldly things I wanted. Instead of pleasing the physical body, why not pray to God and live happily for eternity?”

Since his father’s death, Khala has rarely, if ever, missed a Sunday service. He prays three times a day with his five sons and is a deacon at Sema Baptist Church. His wife teaches at the church’s Sunday school. Khala prays for the extension of God’s kingdom and contributes generously to missions. He says the story of his family is one of transformation from animism to Christianity in two generations.

**MOVING TOWARD MISSION**

During the three revivals within 16 years, a vision emerged to send 10,000 missionaries from Nagaland to the world, starting with other states in India. Because of the decades of deep civil conflict, the church had done little missionary work. But that’s beginning to change, as more Naga churches put a priority on cross-cultural missions.

Nagaland is strategically located near large populations with few churches and even fewer missionaries, including Bangladesh, Myanmar, Butan, Nepal, and western China. S. A. Walling, a well-known lay leader and scholar of Naga Christianity, told CT, “The Holy Spirit has been working continuously. The seed sown by the American missionaries has grown to become a healthy tree, bearing fruit from one



LEFT AND TOP RIGHT: IAN HOMER / PHOTOMISSION.COM



generation to the next. God has a definite plan for Nagas in missionary work.”

Naga Christians have become accomplished church-planters and builders of schools and seminaries. Vilodi Sakhrie, the young pastor of Union Baptist Church, located in the heart of Kohima, told CT, “There must be at least 15 churches in a one-kilometer area from the place you’re sitting now.”

Zhabu Terhuja, general secretary of Nagaland Baptist Church Council (NBCC), told CT, “The growth of churches in Arunachal Pradesh is because of Naga churches. Twenty years ago in Sikkim, there were no Baptist churches. But today we have them there in good numbers. Churches are growing rapidly in Uttar Pradesh. We have mission fields in Orissa, West Bengal, Manipur, and Assam.”

Terhuja says Naga Christians are active in Nepal, working with the assistance of Nepali Christian converts living in Nagaland. Missionaries are also spreading God’s word in Cambodia, Burundi, Japan, Thailand, South Africa, and Hong Kong.

Naga church leaders have developed “revival-hour” prayer meetings as one method to build spiritual discipline and com-

munal mission. At these gatherings, believers pray and sing praises to the Lord. “Revival prayers are a very important part of our churches,” says Terhuja. “We have to be careful. The Western influence and materialism is sweeping the whole society. Unless people are grounded in the Word of God, things will go bad.”

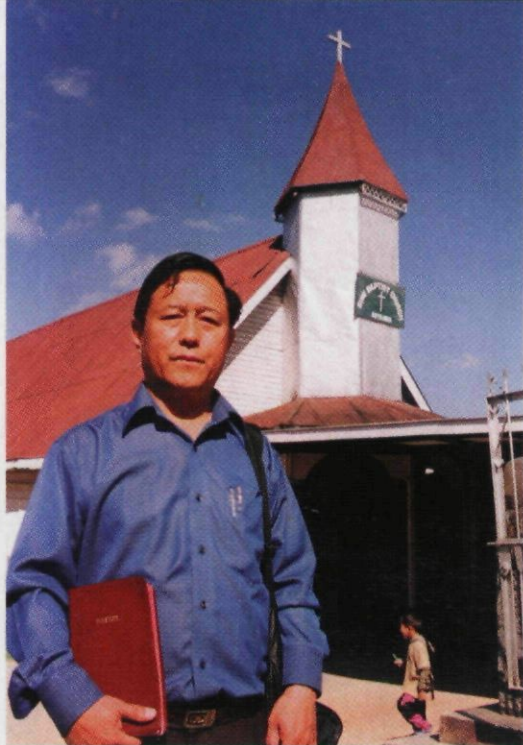
In November, the Nagaland Missionary Movement (NMM), the mission wing of NBCC, organized the first Naga missionary conference, with the theme “The Field is the World,” to renew its commitment to world evangelization.

“Naga churches are seriously trying to follow the mandate of Jesus—going to the world,” says Wati of Oriental Theological Seminary. Nagaland churches are self-supporting and self-propagating. The missionary movement is supported by contributions from local churches, associations, families, and individuals.

Nagaland is growing in its role as a regional resource for missions training. With at least eight theological colleges,

**Naga’s Next Generation:** Christians in Nagaland put a priority on education. Literacy rates in many areas are 65 percent. Below, Christians gather for a traditional worship service.

ABOVE AND RIGHT • IAN HOMER / PHOTOMISSION.COM



**Heaven on Earth: Pihoto Khala and Sema Baptist are committed to evangelism.**

Asian students are drawn to Nagaland. Christ for the Nations Bible College in Kohima has students from Myanmar, Nepal, Arunachal Pradesh, and Assam. Alem Jamir, a lecturer at the college, says, "Our students are working in areas where there are no churches. We have a lot to do."

But, says Walling, many prospective, talented young people are too poor to pursue

theological education and training. "Students from the other parts of the country, mainly from Hindu-dominated areas, are supported by individuals and families. After training, they are sent back to the areas they've come from. I myself support such students."

Also, Jamir told CT, many students "didn't go to schools for formal education." "Some have even been in prison," he said. "Our college's vision is to fill students with the Holy Spirit and send them out to the world to share the

good news. God can use a nobody."

One student, Michael, 29, brims with enthusiasm when talking about missions work. "God willing, I will go as a missionary," says Michael. "I am young. May the Holy Spirit lead us. I will do my best, but God will show us the way. It's a joy to go on a soul-winning mission."

The hunger among Naga youth to spread the gospel is palpable. "The young people are the life of our churches. They are very active in evangelizing and prayers. All they need is direction and resources," says Terhuja.


In addition to financial challenges, liberal theology, denominational splintering, and nominalism also present challenges, according to Naga church elders. Tribal culture remains strong throughout Nagaland. Unity among Christians is hard to maintain, in part because there are more than 30 languages spoken in Nagaland. "Christianity didn't make us saints overnight. We struggle as everyone struggles in the world. The challenge is to live out the true Christian life in historical context," says Wati.

In Nagaland's church-oriented culture, though, Christians have an unusual opportunity to work openly. In December, for example, Baptist leaders agreed to ring their church bells each morning at 5:30 A.M. in a public call to Christian prayer. "Let the praises of God flow and fill the hills and valleys throughout Nagaland," they proclaimed in launching the program. Pastors decided on one specific prayer item each day. Families were provided hymns to sing at 7 P.M. each evening.

For Khala, this kind of communal spirituality is nothing new or unusual. He typically gets up every morning at 5 A.M. to pray.

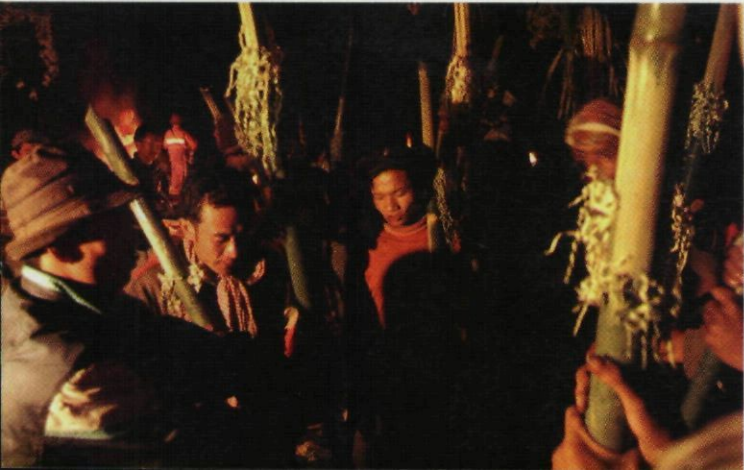
On one calm, cold, and sunny November Sunday morning, while the sounds of church bells fill the Kohima valley, Khala takes his seat at Sema Baptist for the 10 A.M. service. Soon the church is full with more than 1,000 worshipers; many others sit outside in white plastic chairs.

During the sermon, Sema's pastor tells an inspiring story of 15 Myanmar tribesmen who walked for three days through violence-prone border areas in order to attend a mission training camp organized by Sema Baptist. It's yet another example of how Nagaland's churches are reaching out to meet new demands for leadership training.

Khala, his rough face turned soft, says, "People talk about heaven after life. I've found my heaven in this life. I feel like sharing with others this happiness. I feel like telling them to come and feel happiness instead of a sinful and worried life." 

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