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Breaking the cycle of violence: The church as a space for dialogue towards restorative reconciliation, justice, and forgiveness in Naga society

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journals.sagepub.com/home/trn**Chongpongmeren Jamir** 

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Abstract

Political conflicts thrive on a cycle of violence, the short-circuiting of which is essential for lasting peace. The essay argues that it requires more than a political solution to usher in lasting peace. Breaking the cycle of violence once and for all requires a restorative experience of reconciliation. While many stakeholders are at play towards bringing a solution to the political impasse in Naga society, the essay argues that Naga churches have a vital role to play, by providing an alternative to the geopolitical solutions and offering a space for dialogue, reconciliation, and restoration.

Keywords

Political conflicts, church, reconciliation, justice, forgiveness

‘They will be responsible for youth joining the insurgency now. All these years, we waited for peace. Now, the young have witnessed the bloodshed here,’ says Nyamto Konyak in the aftermath of the gunning down of 14 Naga civilians at Oting, Nagaland, by the Indian army on 4 December 2021 (Sinha, 2023). Amit Shah, the Union Home Minister of India, called the killing a case of ‘mistaken identity’ (*The Indian Express*, 2021), whereby the civilians were misidentified as ‘insurgents’ and shot at.

The Oting incident brings to the fore four realities in Naga society. First, the ongoing Naga political demand for independence. The nationalist movement among the Naga people started in the 1920s with a demand to the British colonial government to leave them on their own instead of including their territory in the Indian Union as and when the British would leave the region (see Naga Hills Memorandum to Simon Commission, 1929). After India’s independence in 1947, the Naga nationalists continued their demand for independence. Second, the militarization of the region. In particular, the imposition of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), 1958, declared the region a ‘disturbed area’ and empowered the security forces to ‘fire upon or

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otherwise use force, even to the causing of death' at any person suspected of involving in insurgency activities. Third, the cycle of violence. Konyak's fear of the 'youth joining the insurgency' was not without historical precedence. Ayimneken, a veteran nationalist shared during an interview (2016) that he joined the nationalist movement after experiencing the killing of his friend by the military during which the rented house in which he was staying was also burned down. Similarly, M.I. Luen, a former nationalist, shared in an interview (2015) that he joined the movement after experiencing military excesses including hard labour. Violence begets violence and the cycle continues. Fourth, the Naga people's desperation for peace as Konyak noted, 'All these years, we waited for peace'. On 5 August 2022, a public rally organised by the Nagaland People's Action Committee to demand an early solution to the Naga political issue attracted thousands of participants, who voiced their anguish over 'the unending negotiations that have dragged' on without bringing 'any solution', and which had 'taken a huge toll on the governance, security, and safety of the people' (*Outlook*, 2022). After years of living amidst conflicts and uncertainty, there is a desperate desire among the Naga people for a peaceful resolution of the protracted political issue.

Political conflicts thrive on a cycle of violence, the short-circuiting of which is essential for lasting peace. The need to address the cycle of violence to resolve long-running political conflicts has been identified in several studies (Finlev, 2012; Lumsden, 1997; Miller, 1991; Staub, 1989). John Lederach (2002) speaks of the need to have a plan of action that not only redress the injustice committed ('historical event', 'threatened identity', and 'sustained exclusion') but 'promote change that breaks the cycle of violence' (2002: 1). The idea is not to return violence for violence, but to reorient the way we perceive of the situation and act towards the other. This warrants a revisit of the statement, 'They will be responsible for youth joining the insurgency now'. Here, the burden of responsibility is on the other, which in effect justifies one's part in the cycle of violence (p. 1). While the cry of anger and retribution is a deeply human response, it is vital to seek ways that would break the cycle of violence if peace is to become a reality in society.

Efforts towards breaking the cycle of violence are not a novelty in Naga society. Since the 1950s, several attempts have been made to upset the cycle of violence, in particular by the church. However, lasting peace remains elusive in the region, with periods of lull disturbed by events such as at Oting. This essay reflects on how to give a lasting blow to the cycle of violence. Taking an approach that is 'explanatory, practical, and normative' (Malloy and Boulder, 2019: 12), the essay analyses the problems in current social reality, identifies the actors who can change it, and suggests practical goals for transformative action. The essay focuses on the Naga churches as actors of change, which, along with other stakeholders, have been involved in the search for peace and reconciliation in the Naga society. It argues that the Naga churches can provide an alternative to geopolitical solutions by offering a space for dialogue, reconciliation, and restoration.

Political conflicts and peace interventions

Armed conflicts between the Indian army and the Naga nationalists started in the 1950s. On 14 August 1947, the Naga Nationalist Council (NNC) declared the Naga independence (NNC, 1993: 16). However, the Indian leadership, which at the time was engaged in negotiation for union with several former constituents of the erstwhile British colony and independent kingdoms in the region, insisted that the Naga territory should be included in the Indian Union. They were particularly mindful of the proximity of the region to China, which made the Indian leaders weary of future complications (Vashum, 2005: 69). In April 1955, the Indian army was brought into the Naga territory and large-scale military action against the Naga nationalists began (KRWE,

1956: 15276). The subsequent violent conflict between the government of India and the Naga nationalists is the longest-running political conflict in the region today.

Against this backdrop, there were four key interventions by the Naga churches to upset the cycle of violence. The first intervention was in 1964 with the formation of the Peace Mission by the Nagaland Baptist Church Council (NBCC). Already in February 1957, the leaders of the Naga Baptist churches had formed the 'Naga Church Minister's Mission for Peace' (Linyu, 2004: 149) and sent appeals calling for peace and toured the Naga areas 'having meetings and prayers with [the] underground fighters inside deep forests and with those in prison' (Ao, 1964, 1974). This nascent expression of the call for peace was followed up with a more concrete initiative with the formation of the Peace Mission consisting of a three-member team – Jayaprakash Narayan, Bimala Prasad Chaliha, and Michael Scott – tasked with the responsibility of liaising with the Government of India and the Naga nationalists to bring them to the negotiation table and exploring 'ways and means for the speedy restoration of peace and normalcy in Nagaland' (NBCC, 1964). This initiative comes out of the conviction among Naga Christian leaders of the time that it was a Christian thing to be a catalyst of peace, as Kenneth Kerhou, the then Executive Secretary, states, 'the church leaders felt called upon to take the risk of bringing peace in the strife-torn land of ours in conformity with the Christian principle of peace and reconciliation' (Linyu, 2004: 210–211). The Peace Mission brought both the warring parties to the negotiation table for the first time. Subsequently, a ceasefire was signed leading to a cessation of conflict, which lasted for eight years. However, in 1972, the peace talks broke down and armed conflicts between the Naga nationalists and the government of India resumed with renewed hostility (Sharma and Sharma, 2006: 325).

To address the resulting escalation of violence, the Naga churches intervened again (the second intervention) with the formation of the Nagaland Peace Council (NPC) in 1974 (NBCC, 1974). The NPC was successful in bringing the warring parties to the negotiation table again. The negotiation between the representatives of the Government of India and the NNC resulted in the signing of the Shillong Accord in 1975 (Shillong Agreement between the Government of India and the Underground Nagas, 1975). The Accord proposes that the Naga nationalists lay down arms and unconditionally accept the Constitution of India. However, this proposal turned out to be controversial as many saw it as a betrayal of the Naga aspiration for freedom (see the Statement of the Naga Goodwill Mission from China, 1975). A public meeting organised by the NPC in Kohima on 28 October 1981, to garner public support for the Accord was met with protests from Naga students (NBCC, 1981). The differences in opinion regarding the Accord led to a division among the Naga nationalists. The opponents of the Accord formed the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), after severing ties with its parent NNC. In the subsequent years, both the NNC and the NSCN underwent further divisions leading to the formation of several factions (NNC-Accordist, NNC-Non-Accordist, NSCN-Isak-Muivah, NSCN-Khaplang, NSCN-Khole-Ketovi, NSCN-Unification, and NSCN-Reformation), which engaged with each other in violent confrontations.

With the fragmentation of the nationalist movement into various factions, the Naga society was confronted with a new challenge involving infighting between fellow Naga, which caused much violence and killings, as Charles Chasie (1999) laments, 'Factional fights became a regular feature and many, including non-factional and innocent Nagas, have died at the hands of fellow-Nagas who claim to be Naga nationalists!' (p. 43). In light of this, the church intervened for the third time with the formation of the Peace Committee by the NBCC in 1998 with the objective of bringing 'mutual understanding and reconciliation to the different groups of the Naga national workers' (NBCC, 1998). Here we see a shift of focus of the church's peace effort from a focus on reconciliation between India(n) and Naga to reconciliation between the Naga factions.

A further development in this direction (the fourth intervention) was the formation of the Forum for Naga Reconciliation (FNR) in 2008, which is at present spearheading the effort towards reconciliation in Naga society. The proposal for the formation of the FNR was made during the three-day Naga Peace Convention organized by Naga Shisha Hoho, a Naga Christian prayer group, at Dimapur in February 2008. Consequently, the FNR was organized on 25 March 2008. The FNR has achieved unprecedented success in bringing together all the civil societies and churches to work for peace and reconciliation in the Naga society. It provides a unified platform for a peace initiative, whereby represented by all Naga civil societies it managed to galvanize peace lovers among the Naga people. One of the major achievements of the FNR was the signing of the 'Covenant of Reconciliation' by the leaders of three major Naga nationalist factions – NSCN-IM, NSCN-K, and NNC – on 13 June 2009 (see *Covenant of Reconciliation*, 2009).

There has been a continuum of interventions by the Naga churches to break the cycle of violence in the Naga society. A couple of observations can be made. First, the church holds a privileged position in the Naga society to speak of peace and reconciliation. The numerical dominance of the Christian community (about 87.9% of the total population of Nagaland) and the church's track record as a promoter of peace and reconciliation in the Naga society merited this status. Second, earlier efforts towards peace and reconciliation in the Naga society tend to work like a fire extinguisher – reactionary and sedative. It has been instrumental in bringing the warring parties to the negotiating table resulting in temporary suspension of violence through ceasefire, extended periodically. However, it has not been able to set the agenda for a long-term solution and total cessation of hostility.

Reconciliation, forgiveness, and restorative justice

Reflecting on the Naga 'memory of pain' resulting from the loss of lives in the political conflict, Temsula Ao (2006) states,

These stories, however, are not about 'historical facts': nor are they about condemnation, justice or justification of the events which raged through the land like a wildfire half a century ago. On the contrary, what the stories are trying to say is that in such conflicts, there are no winners, only victims and the results can be measured only in human terms. For the victims the trauma goes beyond the realm of just the physical maiming and loss of life – their very humanity is assaulted and violated, and the onslaught leaves the survivors scarred both in mind and soul (x).

Here, Ao brings to the fore the centrality of the victims – their pain and trauma – in the story of violent conflicts. It follows that reconciliation is not just about coming to an amicable political agreement, it must address the experiences of the victims and initiate restorative actions. Speaking of what reconciliation entails, Trudy Govier (2002) argues that people can 'come together and work towards a common good without taking time to reflect on the wrongs of the past'. However, such an understanding of reconciliation comes across as a case of pragmatic 'cooperation' (pp. 141–142). If reconciliation in the Naga society is just to stop the guns from firing, it only amounts to a pragmatic act of cooperation. True reconciliation, however, must seek 'restoration ... toward an intended wholeness' (Petersen, 2001: 3). Any attempt towards reconciliation without addressing the history of hurt and the path to restoration will not have the desired effect. This corresponds to the twin concepts of forgiveness and justice, which have found much traction in discussions on political reconciliation.

Reconciliation, argues Kethoser Kevichusa (2017), 'cannot take place without some form of forgiveness' (p. 129). On a personal level, forgiveness is a 'process of overcoming attitudes of resentment and anger that may persist when one has been injured by wrongdoing' (Hampton, 1998: 54). The Human Development Study Group defines forgiveness as a 'willingness to abandon one's right to resentment, negative judgment, and indifferent behaviour toward one who unjustly injured us, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity, and even love toward him or her' (Enright and North, 1998: 46). Experiences of violence create a strong sense of resentment against the perpetrators, which takes time and effort to let go of. Holding on to resentment only prolongs the crisis, as the cycle of revenge and hurt continues. Kevichusa (2017) speaks of a personal experience of the loss of his family members in the Naga political conflict and how his family forgave the perpetrators of the hurt. Having had an experience of forgiveness on a personal level, he asked, 'if [forgiveness] had any power in the wider world of politics and political conflict' (p. 1). The legitimacy of transposing the fundamentally interpersonal practice of forgiveness to the socio-political realm has been questioned in certain quarters. Charles Griswold (2007) speaks of the 'complexity of [the] public realm' (with its 'multiplicity of perspectives, interests, and passions'), the anticipation of 'consequences' ('money, liability, and power'), and the poxy nature of politics ('political authority is inseparable from representation') as elements that could be involved in political apology, apart from a moral exchange (p. 139). Others, however, have argued that forgiveness is not only possible but necessary in politics (Jeffery, 2011: 81). Without being forgiven, writes Hannah Arendt (1998), 'release from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever' (p. 237). Kevichusa (2017) concurs that where there are conflicts and differences, whatever the realm, forgiveness is necessary (p. 55). He further argues that 'politics is an inherently forgiving enterprise and that it is forgiveness that creates the space for political activity that breaks the cycle of violence' (p. 263). In recent years, the essentiality of forgiveness in political reconciliation has been expressed in many contexts. Forgiveness, noted Nir Eisikovits (2004), allows us to escape the 'never-ending violent cycle[s]' of revenge that has the potential to destroy all those involved (p. 33). 'No Future without forgiveness' is the title of Archbishop Desmond Tutu's (1999) fascinating narrative of South Africa's journey out of Apartheid. Tutu narrates how a lot of hurt had been caused over years of inhuman treatment of a certain section of society. How to heal a wound so deep? The Archbishop concludes with a humble appeal to forgive, for there is no future without forgiveness.

A critical element in the discussions on forgiveness is the issue of justice. Will forgiveness circumvent or even obstruct justice? Forgiveness, Peter Digeser (1998) argues, has the 'potential of short-circuiting justice' (p. 701). On the other hand, others have argued that forgiveness is not 'accepting or tolerating the injustice', but rather overcoming resentment, condemnation, and indifference (Enright and North, 1998: 47). Rather than a 'passive relinquishing of the hurt', it is, as Renne Jeffery (2011) argues an 'active undertaking on the part of the forgiver' in the reconciliation process (p. 81). To forgive, yet uphold true justice, is a healing process whereby the dignity of the victim-forgiver is upheld through active participation. Conflict situations leave behind serious wounds. How to heal these wounds? It requires more than a solution to the political impasse. There is a need for restorative justice. Restorative justice, according to Jean Cahan (2013), 'underscores the usefulness of a variety of gestures and policies which include truth commissions, statements of apology, restitution efforts of various kinds, and reparation payments as means of furthering reconciliation' (p. 174). An example of such in recent memory is the United Nation's declaration of 1992 (the year commemorating 500 years since Columbus arrived in the Americas) as the Year of Indigenous People. It provided an avenue for indigenous people in the

erstwhile Western colonial lands to ‘testify to their suffering’ (Schreiter and Jorgensen, 2013: 11). On the other hand, apologies were offered by those who in one way or another were responsible for the hurt: F.W. de Klerk, the former president of South Africa, apologizing to victims of Apartheid; Germany apologizing to the Jews, and so on. Restorative justice is an active, dynamic, and constructive process, whereby neither the reality of the hurt and injustice done is undermined, nor the voices of contesting parties, both apology as well as testimony, are shunned.

Forgiveness and justice are not novel concepts in the discourse on reconciliation in Naga society. Yet what is suggested here is a more active, dynamic, and constructive process geared towards restoring wholeness in society. It requires taking hold of the burden of responsibility and being proactive in forgiving and advocating justice.

Space for dialogue

Ioan Saucă (2022) speaks of the pressure on the church to take a position amidst polarization in political conflicts. However, he posits that though it would be ‘very easy to use the language of politicians’, Christians are ‘called to use the language of faith’. The differing approaches of the NPC and the FNR to the Naga political aspiration illustrate Saucă’s point of the church taking sides amidst polarization in political conflicts. In the case of the NPC, the church leaders took a political stand within the context that was polarized between those favouring and opposing the Shillong Accord. In a letter written to A.Z. Phizo (the president of the NNC, who was then in London), Kerhou (the president of the NPC) tried to convince the former to accept the Accord stating that it is being accepted by all the churches in the region and that ‘peace is now a reality after ... many years of conflicts and sufferings’ (Medom, 2000: 241–243). An NSCN statement in 1984 alleges against the church leaders of the time: ‘[T]hey called us “criminals” and branded us “communists” and organized “Christ soldiers” to eliminate the patriots who were indeed for Christ’ (NBCC, 1981; NSCN, 1984). This experience shows that neither the political aspiration of a people can be undermined nor can peace be forced. In contrast, the FNR has refused to drag itself into the quagmire of political polarization. The FNR’s penchant to remain neutral is well-represented in its purpose statement: ‘to facilitate reconciliation among the Naga political groups based on the historical and political rights of the Nagas’ (*Morung Express*, 2011). Analysing the FNR’s basis for reconciliation, Kevichusa pointed out that it seems ‘incongruous’ that the acknowledgement of Naga ‘historical and political rights’ could be the basis of both conflict and reconciliation; yet, he continued, ‘apart from this clear basis, it is very unlikely that the different political groups would have agreed’ (Kevichusa, 2013: 307–308). Thus, unlike the NPC in the aftermath of the Shillong Accord, which tried to enforce a solution that undermined the basis of the nationalist movement, the FNR recognized the rationale for the existence of the movement. As Kevichusa noted: ‘The basis serves as a sort of guarantee that the Naga nationalist struggle will not be sacrificed on the altar of reconciliation’ (p. 308). Saucă suggests that instead of ‘excluding’ (or taking sides), churches need to provide a ‘space for dialogue’, where peace and reconciliation are to take place.

Since the latter part of the twentieth century, the language of reconciliation has come to the fore in mission theology and practice. The document, ‘Mission as Ministry of Reconciliation’ (2021), prepared for the World Council of Churches Conference in Athens in 2005, states,

The language of reconciliation has come to the fore in many different contexts and catches the imagination of people inside and outside the churches. In this situation, we have come to discern anew that reconciliation is at the heart of Christian faith.

The document further affirms the act of reconciliation as the work of the triune God:

The reconciling love of God shown in Jesus Christ is an important biblical theme and a central element in the life and ministry of the church. We affirm thus now that the Holy Spirit calls us to a ministry of reconciliation and to express this in both the spirituality and strategies of our mission and evangelism.

Building on this document (and other similar ones), Schreiter and Jorgensen (2013) speak of three ‘overlapping realms of brokenness’ that need to be healed through reconciliation: ‘reconciliation between God and human beings; reconciliation of different groups of human beings; and reconciliation of the cosmos’ (p. 4). The vertical element of reconciliation, that is, between God and humans, has always been at the centre of the Christian message. However, what was new in the recent development ‘is the deeper exploration of the “horizontal” dimension of reconciliation; that is, reconciliation between humans, as individuals and as groups’ (p. 13).

In the Naga context, Baptist theologian, Wati Aier, was concerned with the utter commitment of the Naga Christians in the 1980s towards reconciliation with God (vertical reconciliation), while neglecting the horizontal dimension of reconciliation. In his *A Cry from the Rice Fields* (1989), he laments that the Naga Christians of the time were ‘Saints’ rather than citizens. He further urges the ‘Saints ... to prove themselves in Christian service in the community’ (p. 56). The context in which he speaks was the overwhelming spirit of otherworldly attitude among the masses after experiencing a spiritual revival in the 1970s, thus neglecting the socio-political concerns in the society. He argues that churches ‘must witness with more than words’. ‘Through the life, service and sacrifice of their members’, he continues, churches ‘must make their contribution to justice and peace, to the improvements of human conditions and to the care of the needy and of the homeless’ (p. 12). Aier also argues that churches needed to deal with socio-political concerns or else they would end up being ‘something irrelevant to humanity’s struggle for freedom and meaning in life’ (p. 56). He further appeals to the churches to be an inspiration ‘of forgiveness, of love and of service’ (p. 57).

Much had happened since Aier wrote his treatise. Aier himself, as convener of the FNR, has been an active participant in the effort towards bringing reconciliation to the Naga society. All these efforts have resulted in a drastic reduction in cases of violence between the Indian military and the Naga nationalists, and between the nationalist factions. However, incidents like the one at Oting remind us that the problem remains unresolved. Along with the search for a political solution, there is a need for restoration in society, where the church can play a key role. First, the church can provide a space for advocacy of justice. The military personnel responsible for the Oting incident were protected by the AFSPA from persecution in law court. Alok Asthana, an Indian army veteran, wrote in *The Wire* (2023) that it was like adding ‘insult to injury’ that the culprits go unpunished. Systemic injustice such as this results in many social problems including exclusion, threatened identity, and misrepresentation. The church can provide the space to articulate the problem of injustice and initiate practical steps such as truth commissions, statements of apology, restitution efforts, and reparation. Justice in political conflicts entails not only dealing with hurts but also addressing the aspirations and vision of the warring parties – Naga’s aspiration for independence and India’s vision of a nation. This will require a change of perception of the way one looks at the political problem from confrontation to dialogue. The church can provide the space for this dialogue by inviting the warring parties to focus on the main thing rather than resorting to delaying tactics and petty squabbles. Second, the church can provide the necessary platform where forgiveness can be sought and received. True justice, according to Croatian theologian, Miroslav Volf (1996), is possible only in the context of forgiveness: ‘Only those who are forgiven and who are

willing to forgive will be capable of relentlessly pursuing justice without falling into the temptation to pervert it into injustice' (p. 123). Here, Volf hit the right nerve on the biblical basis for forgiveness: as humans, we have experienced forgiveness from God; we are to mirror this by forgiving others. As Schreiter and Jorgensen (2013) wrote, 'It is God who forgives, and we participate in that forgiveness' (p. 20). That God, the forgiver, took the initiative shows that one does not wait for the aggressor (which in the Naga context would be either the Indian military or Naga nationalists) to take the initiative; rather, forgiveness is an active process where the forgiver takes the lead.

Conclusion

'Now, the young have witnessed the bloodshed here'. The sight of bloodshed at Oting caused alarm in the Naga society which has seen cycles of violence for over 70 years. Will it generate another generation of young Naga taking up arms? I have argued that rather than responding in revengeful rage and putting the burden of responsibility on the other (in this case, the Indian military), Nagas need to respond with measured maturity to ensure that long-term peace becomes a reality in society. Rather than retorting in violence, I have argued for the need to reorient the way one looks at the political problem and the other (Indian, other tribes, factions, and so on), whereby Nagas can play a proactive role in positively affecting the course of the political process. Beyond achieving an amicable political solution, Naga society needs a restorative experience of reconciliation. Here the Naga churches have a vital role to play by providing a space for dialogue where forgiveness, justice, and restoration can take place.

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