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Reimagining the Cross of childbearing: towards a Naga constructive Christology of natality

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Dissertation

**REIMAGINING THE CROSS OF CHILDBEARING: TOWARDS A NAGA
CONSTRUCTIVE CHRISTOLOGY OF NATALITY**

by

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Boston University

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ABSTRACT

The Naga women in North East India suffer in silence because of the unjust practices of child-birthing in their patriarchal culture, which privileges the birth of sons over daughters. Naga theology narrates suffering largely through Jesus' redemptive suffering on the cross, and Naga Christian women embrace this narrative, seeing in Jesus' suffering both a vision of Jesus as a friend who understands their pain and as a call to share in his suffering. Contemporary theologians have approached the symbol of the Christian cross in order to interpret it anew in light of marginalized communities. This dissertation examines Christology through the lens of the experiences of Naga women. It takes the issue of child-birthing practices within Naga culture as a starting point for re-reading the Christian cross by drawing on the theological writings of Jürgen Moltmann,

Serene Jones, Rita Nakashima Brock, and Wonhee Anne Joh. This work turns to the theme of ‘natality’ in the work of feminist theologian and philosopher of religion, Grace Jantzen. Rooting Naga Christology in the concept of natality, it focuses on three dimensions of the life-bearing work of Jesus: embrace, respect, and nourishment. The central thesis is that a theology focused on natality provides not only a way to affirm the birth of girls in the Naga context, but it also provides a way to re-narrate the story of the cross in Naga Christian theology.

In chapters one and two, this dissertation outlines the problem of child-birthing via the term ‘mascu-surrogacy.’ The birthing mother becomes the surrogate for the male who seeks his progeny through dominating the female body. These chapters highlight the poetry and stories of Naga women, ancient and modern, to express the situation of Naga women; they also identify the centrality of the story of Jesus for Naga Christians. Chapters three and four turn to the contemporary theologies of the cross with the question of child-birthing in mind. Chapter five examines Grace Jantzen’s philosophy of natality. The final chapter develops three aspects of a life-affirming Christology, based in the work of Mary Elizabeth Moore and concludes by reimagining the practice of the Eucharist for Naga women.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I have always wondered about the life of Naga women and mothers since I was a young girl because of the life they live, the work they do, and the treatment they receive, but my quest deepened after I got married and had children of my own. I was confronted with the question of my own rights and authority. How do I think and perceive my understanding between my daughter and my son? How am I treating them? Is one less than the other? How should I treat them? As a Naga woman, I realized that I have lived a life without a voice, because no one told me that I have a voice. The birth of my daughter and my son confronted me with the question of birth and life. Birthing them has opened my mind to alternative possibilities¹ for women as well as to discover my potential to bring my suppressed voice to speak. I asked, “What is the meaning of birthing life?” Thus, this dissertation birthed.

The Problem of Mascu-surrogacy

For Naga² women in North East India the consequences of mascu-surrogacy are severe. The term mascu-surrogacy indicates that the female body becomes a mere

¹ Feminist philosopher of religion Grace Jantzen, in her book *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), which is a principal source for my work, aptly discusses the “alternative possibilities.” The prominent North American theologian Mary Elizabeth Moore, in her assessment of Jantzen’s philosophy of natality, shows the alternative possibilities as “creativity and imagination.”

² The Nagas are tribals also called the people of the hills in Nagaland in Northeast India. They belong to the Mongolian race and derive from Tibeto-Burman families. They are comprised of more than forty tribes; sixteen major tribes reside within Nagaland. Each tribe has its own language and cultural features. They should not be mistaken for the *Naga* understood in Hindu and Buddhist mythology, which means snake. For more details on the Nagas see Mar Imsong, *God – land – People: An Ethnic Naga*

instrument for furthering male power agendas. The word “mascu is an abbreviated form of “masculine” that has a two-fold work: masculinity is what is sought for in so far as a male child is privileged; and the female becomes the surrogate for the adult male seeking a male child and thus, he turns to the female body to bear for him his likeness. In this sense, "surrogacy" does not so much mean being a substitute for another woman, but rather in its more primitive form, "to bear for another," and in this sense she bears for the male who is unable to conceive but who seeks his progeny through dominating the female body to produce his likeness especially his gender.³ The responsibility for bringing a male child into the world to carry on the family lineage is solely placed on the woman. The consequences range from negative views of sexuality to economic restraints.⁴ Christian churches in Nagaland are not responsive to the suffering of women that results from these birthing customs and constraints.

Identity (Dimapur, Nagaland: Heritage Publishing House, 2009); V.K. Nuh, *165 Years History of Naga Baptist Churches* (Kohima, Nagaland: MEK Computers for Research Dept., Council of Naga Baptist Churches, 2006); A. Bendangyabang Ao, *History of Christianity in Nagaland: Social Change 1872-1972* (Bangalore: Shalom Ministry Publications, 2004); Bendangangshi and I.T. Apok Aier, *The Religion of the Ao Nagas* (Mokokchung: Bendangangshi, 1990); J.P. Mills, *The Ao Nagas* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1973); Panger Imchen, *Ancient Ao Naga Religion and Culture* (New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 1993); Bendangjungshi, *Confessing Christ in the Naga Context: Towards a Liberating Ecclesiology* ed. by Prof. Dr. Volker Küster, *ContactZone: Explorations in Intercultural Theology* Volume 8 (Berlin: Lit; London: Global [distributor], 2011).

³ I define this term through my analysis of the problem.

⁴ Without a male son, she has no claim to the family's property and she and her daughters may be evicted from their home when the husband dies. According to Imsopangla, the *Watsu Mungdang*, which is a women's organization among the Ao Nagas, concerned with issues of women and their empowerment in their society, recognizing the discrimination against women by the Law of Inheritance nominated a *Senmang* (Inheritance) Committee in the year 1989. Today this committee is defunct. Many people, even their husbands and other women, did not support their cause. [They were rumored to be threatened]. It has been more than 20 years since it held its last meeting. See Imsopangla, "A Liberative Theology of Inheritance: A Critique of the Ao Naga Customary Law of Inheritance," in Limatula Longkumer and Talijungla Longkumer eds., *Side By Side: Naga Women Doing Theology in Search of Justice and Partnership* (Jorhat, Assam: CCA-EGY & NWTF, 2004); A. Wati Longchar, "The Land Ownership System in Nagaland," *Journal of Tribal Studies*, 3 no. 2 (July-December 1999).

The suffering of Naga women from mascu-surrogacy has never been exposed outside the Naga community; it has not been published in books or through any other media.⁵ There have never been marches, protests or resistance in their name. There are countless girls growing up who are unaware of the consequences in store for them. Not only them, but eighty percent of working women are still unaware of their legal rights.⁶ The cultural norms and customary laws are the deciding principles that govern the lives of Naga people. The status, privileges and roles are differentiated in respect to gender. In all aspects women are the inferior sex and are relegated to an inferior status built on male hierarchy. Every family is expected to abide by these laws. Young scholars and theologians are presently protesting such practices. On January 28-29, 2011, a two-day seminar on “Women, Law and Social Change” in Nagaland was held in order to “review customary laws in the context of contemporary Naga women and to do away with norms and conditions no more relevant in today’s society.”⁷ This was a follow-up of the

⁵ Naga women have spoken out in their speeches and writings against the value system of patriarchy where male child is preferred to girl child to carry on the family lineage. No study has gone beyond this.

⁶ Anungla Aier, a Naga woman scholar reported this in her presentation of “Customary Laws and Gender Issue in the Context of Nagas.” See <http://www.morungexpress.com/frontpage/56354.html>; Grace Kikon, “My Daughter Too is Human” *Nagaland Post*, 18 June 2010.

⁷ “Naga Women Take on Customary Law” *Nagaland Post*, 29 January 2011. The seminar was organized by Human Rights Law Network (HRLN), Nagaland unit in collaboration with Naga Women Hoho Dimapur, Prodigal’s Home, and Nagaland Voluntary Consumer Organization (NVCO). Women representatives from various tribes, NGOs, public leaders and citizens expressed the need for women’s participation in decision making bodies to bring about social change and transformation in the society. Speaking on the topic ‘women and customary law,’ Anungla Aier stated that respect for women in patriarchal set-up like Naga society did not necessarily provide any fundamental provision. She argued that old laws should be replaced by new ones that would provide space to women for decision making and inheritance of property as well. She described the customary laws as “women unfriendly” as it failed to deliver justice to victims of violence. Some of the topics discussed were ‘Women land rights,’ ‘Violence against women,’ ‘Justice: A far cry,’ ‘Reservation for women,’ and ‘Women and consumerism.’

previously held meeting on October 12, 2010 to discuss the discriminatory customary laws that deny legal rights to women and to develop strategies to challenge this.⁸

In this context, the consequences of childbirth constitute an acute form of suffering. Because the birth of a male child is required, the inability to fulfill this requirement is the start of existential death for Naga women. Failing to bear a son and bringing only young daughters into the world adversely affects a woman's body, sexuality, social status and economy, and negatively impacts her daughters as well. Women's sexuality is suppressed and functions solely for purposes of procreation, prompting fear and anxiety. Her body is used for generating babies against her will even when she is not ready, prohibiting her to own her own body. Pregnancy is an annual affair aiming for a male heir. They are seen as deficient beings and thus oppressed within this function.⁹ A woman is solely blamed for no fault of her own; she becomes the familial and societal scapegoat.

⁸ Some prominent female speakers in this meeting were Ms. Anungla Aier, Lecturer, Kohima Science College, Ms. Abeiu Meru, President Naga Mothers' Association and Grace Shatsang, President Naga Women Union of Manipur. The Naga customary law has been legalized by the rules of Administration of Justice and Police Act 1937, article 371 A of the Indian Constitution and the Village Council Act 1978. See Akang Ao, *Practicing Naga Customary Law* (Dimapur: Modern Press, 1999), 3. The Nagas claim that from the primordial times their ancestors lived and conversed with God and they learned the codes and norm from God; to violate these was considered a violation against God. Imsopangla, in her "A Liberative Theology of Inheritance: A Critique of the Ao Naga Customary Law of Inheritance" wrote: "The customs and laws were considered to consist of truth, justice and public utility and were observed by people as the moral, religious and social codes," which was formerly expressed by Tajen Ao in his unpublished paper, "Naga Customary Law and its influence on Legislation." Young Naga scholars are voicing out against such practices. They question the preference of male children, the oppression and exploitation of women and young girls and the deprivation of their rights. See Eyingbeni Humtsoe, "Women's Experience of 'Sorrow' as a Source for Doing Theology from Naga Perspective," in Limatula Longkumer ed., *No More Sorrow in God's Garden of Justice: Tribal Women Doing Theology*. A briefing is available at <http://www.morungexpress.com/frontpage/56354.html>. Also, see "GBs [Gaon Buras meaning village elders, runners of British-India administrators] for Women in Municipals" in *Morung Express*, 15 October 2010; *Tir Yimyim*, an Ao-Naga Vernacular Daily in Nagaland, 12 October 2010.

⁹ Rita Nakashima Brock has powerfully constructed the concept of the Christology of erotic power. However, her work on *Eros* cannot be made relevant for Naga women, without further explanation, since this very *Eros* is suppressed and misused, which is the cause of suffering for them. See Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1988). In a

The burden is heightened when girls reach marriageable age, because men prefer to marry girls who have brothers. It is understood and practiced that brothers-in-law are needed for support in times when disputes and arguments arise within the society. To make life worse, the mother and daughters have no share in the inheritance. If the husband dies without a son, the wife and daughters¹⁰ may be evicted from the house she built with her husband and the property will be divided among the husband's brothers and male cousins.¹¹ All this suffering comes due to birthing the wrong sex. This suffering that comes to women *via* child-birthing is a public issue, but it is also a Christian issue because Nagaland is a Christian state with its slogan "Nagaland for Christ." Therefore, the problems of the state are implicitly theological problems.

The suffering which accompanies child-birthing for women is my primary focus in this dissertation. In a real sense, every time a woman gives birth to a child she is bringing a new life into the world. Birthing involves waiting, watching over, giving, and receiving of new life. In the Christian teaching, people are taught to be born to new life in

similar vein, Wonhee Anne Joh has discussed her theology of *Jeong* in her book, *The Heart of the Cross: A Postcolonial Christology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006). If the erotic power gives all it touches life and hope, and if *jeong /eros* are rooted in relationality, what method needs to be tested to apply and make it sensible to the Naga women? This is critical because the Naga traditional view has a strong concept of the human being as relational beings, which does not narrowly relate to humans alone but to God, fellow-beings and nature. The biological basis of the birth of either sex is ignored by those who know about this fact and moreover, it is not discussed in public. Unfortunately, cultural customs are far too strong to be challenged.

¹⁰ A brief time is given to the wife to vacate the house, and normally a small cottage is constructed by the relatives and clans people for her in the outskirts of the village. This particular area depicts that she no longer is a part of the society; she has neither voice nor usefulness anymore. If they are lucky, they will be allowed to live in the house. The irony is that if the mother has a baby boy, she will remain in the home as a guardian.

¹¹ Imsopangla. "A Liberative Theology of Inheritance: A Critique of the Ao Naga Customary Law of Inheritance," 41; J.P. Mills, *The Ao Nagas*. 190; Jeuti Barooah, "Property and Women's Inheritance Rights in the Tribal Areas of the North East," in Walter Fernandes & Sanjay Barbora ed., *Changing Women's Status in India: Focus on the Northeast* (Guwahati: North Eastern Social Research Centre, 2002), 105.

Jesus Christ. In line with this teaching, the Naga Christian theology affirms new life and salvation through Christ's death on the cross. The cross, for them, becomes the place where new life is birthed. However, birthing – the bringing of new life into the world for Naga women is the beginning of their suffering. They suffer the consequences of birthing in the absence of the birth of a male child. Against such problematic theology, I intend to develop a life-giving Christology, turning to the compelling work of the feminist philosopher of religion Grace Jantzen who has extensively developed a concept of natality. Jantzen has pointed out the problem of the necrophilia of the western symbolic, the masculinist imaginary of death. She has “done so in order to open the way to a feminist symbolic of natality and flourishing, a symbolic of becoming divine.”¹² Building on her philosophy of birthing and flourishing that replaces death and violence, I develop a “theology of natality” that does not exclusively tie women to the sufferings of Jesus but, instead, reinterprets the work of Jesus in relationship to natality.

I aim to bring to light the complexity of the tragic situation of Naga women. At present, there is no theological engagement with the issue of childbirth in the Naga context. It has not been studied, either fully in terms of a study of the history or the implications of this situation as it relates to Naga Christian theology. This study is unique for the ways in which it highlights the connections between this historical situation and the dominant theology operative within the Naga churches. The Christian message is enmeshed in the Naga culture and operates within it.¹³ The churches are not simply silent

¹² Grace M. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, 4.

¹³ Renty Keitzar, *In Search of a Relevant Gospel Message: Introducing a Contextual Christian Theology for North East India* (Guwahati: CLC, 1995), 76. He says, “The Church has already adopted, rather adapted, to local culture in many ways and so is indigenized and localized, rooted in local “customs and attitudes,” reflecting a distinctive character of North-East Indian Christianity.”

about the problems of birthing; they are unresponsive to the multiple dimensions of suffering experienced by women.

Through researching the social and ecclesial contexts of Naga women, I intend to bring theological resources to bear on the problem of childbirth within this context. I propose a Christology rooted in the concept of natality—of Jesus as “life-bearer”—that is informed by the context of women’s experiences within the Naga Christian context and also in conversation with feminist Christian theology. Feminist interpretations of theologies of the cross, particularly of Jürgen Moltmann’s will be central to the study. My proposal of a Christology of natality is a Naga Christology that develops three dimensions of the life-bearing work of Jesus: embrace, respect, and nourishment. Since Nagaland claims to be a Christian state,¹⁴ a theological proposal for addressing masculinist surrogacy is critical.

This dissertation will advance scholarship in the fields of theology, tribal theology,¹⁵ feminist theology, cultural and theological anthropology, postcolonial theologies and emerging contextual ecclesial theologies. It will particularly provide

¹⁴ “Nagaland for Christ” is a state slogan. V.K. Nuh, a dedicated Naga Christian leader who witnessed the early days before the advent of Christianity and spearheaded the Christian state in its political and religious matters from the beginning, has affirmed the declaration of the slogan “Nagaland for Christ” as the state’s motto. See V.K. Nuh. *My Native Country: The Land of the Nagas* (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 2002), 24.

¹⁵ Tribal Theology is a contextual theology of liberation that arose out of the experiences of diverse forms of injustice and exploitation. They attempt to express Christian faith in their socio-cultural, traditional and religious thought patterns, seeking to liberate people from their inferiority complex, oppression and discrimination. The goal being liberation, this theology attempts to rediscover the liberative motifs in the tribal culture and reinterpret the Bible and Christian traditions. Some prominent tribal Naga theologians who have pioneered in doing tribal Christian theology are Renty Keitzar, *In Search of a Relevant Gospel Message: Introducing a Contextual Christian Theology for North East India* (Guwahati: CLC, 1995); Keitzar, “Tribal Cultural Ethos and Christianity in North-East India”, *ETC Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Jan-May 1998; A. Wati Longchar, *The Traditional Tribal Worldview and Modernity: Focus on North East India* (Jorhat: N. Limala Lkr, 1995); Longchar, *An Exploration of Tribal Theology* (Jorhat: ETC, 1997); Walu Walling, *Sacrifice and Salvation in Ao Naga Concept* (Impur: The Author, 1997); Wati Longchar and Y. Vashum ed., *Tribal Worldview and Ecology* (Jorhat: ETC, 1989); K. Thanzuava, *Theology of Community: A Tribal Theology in the Making* (Aizwal, Mizo Theological Association, 1998).

awareness to the religious communities and their leaders about the complexity of Christian thought and yet to seek to identify and understand the “fitting connections” between doctrine and concrete actions in the Christian community.¹⁶ The faith communities live and witness in and through constant negotiation with the messiness of the world in which they live. Therefore, attentiveness to the discharge and reception of the Christian message and the practical aspect of it is critical. What is needed is a conscious effort to do critical theological analysis of the context of Naga women and the present practices of the church. This would include gaining awareness of the prevalent forms of suffering among Naga women in the church and society; identifying marginalization; reinterpreting the scriptures in light of this issue; challenging the prevailing hermeneutical and homiletical work; and rewriting the laws. Moreover, they need to shape and be shaped by the everyday life that brings new birth and meaning into the world.

Sources

The primary sources of this research are available written resources and oral tradition that have been textually recorded.¹⁷ One set of the written materials include the

¹⁶ Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 18.

¹⁷ Oral tradition has been the primary medium of socio-cultural and religious expression of the Naga life that has been handed down for generations in their context. Every child is educated about their socio-cultural norms and systems from birth through symbols, stories, myths, legends, poems, songs, and folklores. Even though the older generation dies off there is instilled in the younger generation the story of their life. They can be called walking stories. More than what has been generally accepted in the patriarchal Naga society, it is crucial in this research to look at the oral narratives with new eyes to reclaim women’s place in the society. Sashikaba Kechutzar, a tribal theologian has a clear explanation of the absolute necessity of oral traditions in the tribal Naga context and has argued for a rereading of the oral narratives from the perspective of tribal women. See his “A Discursive Reading of the Oral Traditions: A Tribal Woman’s Perspective” in Longkumer, Limatula ed., *No More Sorrow in God’s Garden of Justice: Tribal Women Doing Theology*; See also, C. Patrick, *The Role of Oral Traditions in Theology* (Shillong: Don

non-theological literature and historical documents that describe the Naga cultural and traditional policies and practices and the status of women in the Naga society. I will draw on the already available resources on Naga culture.¹⁸ I will also include the wisdom stories of ancient Naga women.

The second set is literature written by Naga theologians and contemporary scholars, with particular emphasis on the writings of Naga women scholars, which will provide useful theoretical background to my research. The focus here is on the formation of women's religious views within the Naga Christian communities, the professions and practices surrounding Christian understanding of Jesus and how these religious views affect the common life of women. Narola Imchen's work *Women in Church and Society* presents the limitations placed upon the Naga women in the ecclesial context as well as the imposition of their subordinate status by the socio-cultural tradition of the Nagas. Her work addresses women's economy, education, and their place in politics, and ecclesial context, exposing Naga theology. In their edited work *Side By Side: Naga Women Doing Theology in Search of Justice and Partnership*, Limatula Longkumer and Talijungla Longkumer have collected the work of fourteen Naga women creating awareness first

Bosco Centre for Indigenous Cultures, 1999); Tamo Mibang and Sarit K. Chaudhuri eds., *Folk Culture and Oral Literature from North-East India* (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2004).

¹⁸ It is common for Naga authors to write a chapter on the Naga culture, the land and its people, for which there are a number of literature that gives a comprehensive description of the people and their ethos. One will find the same resources of the early anthropologists and sociologists being used and quoted by researchers and authors. It is shown in the recent work of my colleagues and theological contemporaries. Given this fact, I will not repeat the account of the Naga culture but will draw from them. Some of the widely used early writings are W. C. Smith, *The Ao Naga Tribe of Assam: A Study in Ethnology and Sociology* (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1952); J.P. Mills, *The Rengma Nagas*, 2nd ed. (Kohima: Directorate of Art and Culture, 1982); *The Ao Nagas* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1973); J.H. Hutton, *The Sema Nagas*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1968); Christopher von Furer Haimendorf, *The Konyak Nagas* (USA: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969). The most recent research is by a Naga theologian, Mar Imsong, *God – Land – People: An Ethnic Naga Identity* (Dimapur, Nagaland: Heritage Publishing House, 2009). See also his dissertation, Imkong I. Imsong, "The Role of Land in Ethnic Naga Identity: Exploring a Contextual Naga Christian Theology and Social Ethics" (Th.D. diss.: Boston University School of Theology, 2007).

among themselves and then the whole Naga society, identifying their causes of subjection, and searching for ways of emancipation, exposing the patriarchal cultures and customary laws of the Nagas that have kept Naga women in bondage for so long. Monalisa Changkija's *Weapons of Words on Pages of Pain* speaks about her deep felt sympathy and concern for the suffering of women.¹⁹ Her poems express her anguish for the condition of women and, at the same time, she questions and puts to shame all doctrines that justify man's control and dominance over women. Longkumer's and Longkumer's work supports this sentiment. *No More Sorrow in God's Garden of Justice: Tribal Women Doing Theology* edited by Limatula Longkumer is a compilation of articles by Naga theologians covering the issues and themes relating to women's concerns in Northeast India. Theological analysis of women's roles and status in their societies are reflected upon in this volume. These authors discuss the status of Naga women and the need to liberate them from the evil structures of patriarchy and the refusal to internalize such systems. They have touched on issues of women and economics, education, culture, politics, and the church. However, the issue of women's birthing and mothering and the pain arising from it has not been addressed.

The third set of literature is the work of Asian feminist postcolonial theologians whose particular works have addressed Christology in light of the experience of Asian Christian women, both in and outside of North America. I will draw on particularly Rita Nakashima Brock's *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* and Wonhee Anne Joh's *The Heart of the Cross: A Postcolonial Christology*. Brock engages and

¹⁹ She is the first Naga journalist, a poet and writer, and a feminist. She is the owner and editor of the English daily *Nagaland Page*. She presented her 2007 publication of *Monsoon Mourning* at the International Indigenous Peoples' Forum in 1997 in Oslo, Norway. Her poems are being taught in schools and colleges in Nagaland. She is also the recipient of the Chameli Devi Jain Award (2009) honored as Outstanding Woman Media person in India.

critiques the atonement theories and moves towards a life affirming salvific theology and Joh brings us once again to the cross in her rereading of the cross as abjection and liberation. They are rethinking the Christian narrative of the salvific work of Jesus in relationship to women's experiences. The Pacific Asian North American Asian Women in Theology and Ministry (PANAAWTM) is an important resource for the research as much of Asian women's literature has emerged from this group of women within the academy and ministry exploring these issues.²⁰ Feminist postcolonial literature is invaluable in this study because it provides me with a way to think about the interaction of Christian theology and Naga culture. Through this literature, I can examine the mixed legacy of Christian thought and begin to think about language and practices that arise within the Naga culture as a way of expanding the theological landscape of Naga Christian theology.²¹ This literature also provides ways of attending to the political, social, and economic dimensions of women's lives.²² Looking at Christology from a postcolonial perspective is pertinent for an imaginative and constructive Christology.²³

²⁰ For a selected bibliography on PANAAWTM theologies, articles and publications go to <http://www.panaawtm.org>

²¹ When I use the broad term "Christianity" in various aspects of Naga women Christians' experiences, I am generally referring to the expression of Western Christianity associated with the tradition brought by American Baptist missionaries and that remains quite dominant within the Global North. The incarnational and contextual nature of the Christian tradition yields many other expressions outside Western culture but a thorough analysis of these in relation to Naga women Christian's experience lies beyond the scope of the present work.

²² See Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 5. She probes "the deep interior material life of evil and its manifestations" and embarks on dismantling the cultural production of evil. In her "Theology and Social Theory" Kwok Pui-lan opines that this insidious cultural production of evil maintains "a particular quality of life for a privileged few – has subjected people to slavery, colonialism, and genocide," in Kwok Pui-lan, Don H. Compier, & Joerg Rieger ed. *Empire and the Christian Tradition: New Readings of Classical Theologians* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2007), 26; Rita Nakashima Brock, "The Cross of Resurrection and Communal Redemption," in Marit Trelstad ed., *Cross Examinations: Reading on the Meaning of the Cross Today* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), Wonhee Anne Joh, *The Heart of the Cross: A Postcolonial Christology* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).

The fourth set of literature consists of western theological literature. My engagement with their work is a helpful resource for this research. Given that the Christocentric nature of Naga theology significantly embraces the cross as redemptive I will examine central aspects of Jürgen Moltmann's theology that articulate well Naga Christians' general understanding of the redemptive nature of the cross. I will examine his theology of the cross by engaging his feminist theological interlocutors, especially the systematic feminist theologian Serene Jones' maternal reinterpretation of Moltmann's theology of the cross.²⁴ Her critical scholarship raises the question of natality. Jones explicitly examines Moltmann's theology of the cross in relationship to the issues of childbearing and reproductive loss. In chapter 8 of her book *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World*, Jones develops the image of God through the lens of reproductive loss.²⁵ I will also engage the compelling writings of the feminist theologian and philosopher of religion Grace Jantzen whose work on the feminist symbolic of natality is profound and helpful for the purpose of this study. Her book *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, will be a principal source for this research. I will draw on the work of the North American theologian Mary Elizabeth Moore who has best expressed the insights of Jantzen's in her dialogue with her. Moore provides a compelling theology of life-bearing that is critical to the Naga context. I will engage

²³ Despite criticisms of the incompatibility of postcolonial theology for constructability, Susan Abraham has confidently pointed out the creative and re-imaginative side of postcolonial theology. See Susan Abraham, "What Does Mumbai Have to Do with Rome? Postcolonial Perspectives on Globalization and Theology," *Theological Studies*. 69, no. 2 (2008): 376.

²⁴ Serene Jones, "Rupture," in Nadine Pence Frantz and Mary T. Stimming ed. *Hope Deferred: Heart-Healing Reflections on Reproductive Loss* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2005); Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009); Jones, "Hope Deferred: Theological Reflections on Reproductive Loss," *Modern Theology* 17 no. 2 (April 2001): 227-245.

²⁵ Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World*, 146.

other Christian feminist theologians who have attempted to explore Christian claims about redemption in relationship to the lives of women. I am assessing their relevance for the situation of Naga women.

Rosemary Radford Ruether and Delores Williams have critiqued the problem of redemptive suffering of the cross. In her *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, Williams critiques traditional understandings of atonement, arguing that Christ's passion cannot be a combination of coerced and voluntary surrogacy.²⁶ Ruether, in her *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* exposes the patriarchalization of Christology by calling into question the masculine Jesus who saves humanity. Is this a redemptive figure for women or merely another patriarchal depiction of women in need of salvation via men?²⁷ The work of the medieval theologian Julian of Norwich will also be extensively used for the interpretation of the cross for the Naga Christians.

Research on human subjects was not employed as the primary textual resources are sufficiently found in books, journals, daily newspapers, articles and unpublished written records of historians, activists and NGOs, and oral tradition. I have not obtained first-hand testimonies of women but, rather, examined the dominant theology of the cross preached, taught and practiced in Naga churches.

As a practitioner and scholar within the Naga context, I have already been involved in shaping Naga Christian theology. My experience as a Naga woman living for

²⁶ Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 162; Delores Williams, "Black Women's Surrogacy Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption," in Marit Trelstad ed., *Cross Examinations: Reading on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, 20.

²⁷ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 135.

thirty years among the Naga people, and my own research done in the past is significant.²⁸ This research provides a critical exploration of gender and issues confronting women in the Naga context. This aspect is absent from the works of my theological contemporaries.²⁹ I feel responsible as a Naga woman theologian to do this research.

Method and Content

This study employs the methodology of feminist constructive theology. Feminist constructive theology identifies appropriate relations between Christian theology and lived reality, including the realities of faith communities. Theology needs continual investigation to discern whether theological confessions are practiced in reality, and whether Christian theology takes adequate consideration of the actual lives of women.³⁰ Feminist constructive theology recognizes and gives attention to experiences of patriarchy by listening conscientiously to women's experiences. Feminist theologians then develop new theological constructs that are grounded in women's experiences of God and the world, in conversation with other theological constructs and traditions. This

²⁸ A helpful resource is my book, *The Naga Images of the Human Being: A Resource for a Contemporary Theology Anthropology* (Jorhat, Assam: Tribal Study Centre, 2001).

²⁹ See recent dissertations by Tezenlo Thong, "A Clash of Worldviews: The Impact of Modern Western Notion of Progress on Indigenous Naga Culture" (Ph.D. diss.: University of Denver, 2009); Pangernungba, "The Naga Peoples' Struggle for Creative Integration: The Competing Moral Visions of *Ali-Rongsen* (cultural economy) and *Sen* (monetized economy)" (Ph.D. diss.: Princeton Theological Seminary, 2009); Imkong I Imsong, "The Role of Land in Ethnic Naga Identity: Exploring a Contextual Naga Christian Theology and Social Ethics" (Th.D. diss.: Boston University School of Theology, 2007).

³⁰ Ibid. Serene Jones talks about identifying "fitting connections" between doctrine and concrete actions in the Christian community. "This means at least two things. First, Feminist systematic theology asks whether the church practices what it confesses. Second, feminist systematic theology requires that doctrinal dramas be tested in the concrete lives of women." "Feminist theologians insist that if the lives of women are taken into consideration when interpreting doctrines and church practices, new and challenging insights promise to emerge."

theology lifts women's voices to forge new feminist theologies and transformed societies, marked by equality and the dignity of each person. These theologies have practical implications, seeking to promote the full human flourishing of women and others who are oppressed in churches and society.

Identifying myself as a feminist constructive theologian, I aim to revisit the Naga culture and literature to expose the cultural and theological characteristics of Naga Christians and to examine their relevance today. This move will destabilize the negative elements that destroy women's lives and at the same time construct new possibilities for women's flourishing. This move will also attend to the religious experiences of Naga women. I seek to broaden the theological horizon by going beyond modifying and readjusting an already existing tradition; I seek to imagine a theology that is life-giving.

The major approach of this study is to create a dialogue across three major bodies of literature in order to understand the situation of Naga women, especially in relation to childbirth; to analyze and critique Christologies in relation to that experience; and to construct an alternative, life-bearing theology and Christian practice. The literature includes descriptive material of Naga women's experience, both poetic and social scientific; Christological discourse; and resources for a life-bearing theology. I engage this literature in four movements, moving from the more descriptive to the analytic to the constructive.

In the first movement, I portray the lives of women through a study of women's poetry and narratives, alongside the history and policies of Naga people. The Naga woman poet, and activist, Monalisa Changkija, through poetry portrays the life of suffering of Naga women through her own experience of suffering and the suffering of

other women in Naga culture. In relation to her, the Asian American poet, writer, film maker and composer Trinh T. Minha's method of storytelling helps in narrating the story of Naga women's lives, brings them alive in the present and imagines them to the future.

In the second movement, I bring theological sources into dialogue with the experiences of Naga women. Jürgen Moltmann's theology of the cross relates to the theology of suffering that Naga women embrace; they can identify themselves in Moltmann's description of the Father's deep pain in the Son's death on the cross. This suffering-love dynamic of Moltmann's is reinterpreted by Serene Jones through the lens of women's reproductive loss, imagining an anti-maternal image of God. Further, I explore the Christological formulations of the Asian feminist theologians Rita Nakashima Brock and Wonhee Anne Joh to find ways for Naga women to identify and develop their theology of the cross.

This leads to the third movement in which I turn to the feminist theologian and philosopher of religion Grace Jantzen, whose philosophy of natality offers Naga women a life affirming theology. In working out a theology that is accessible, meaningful and life-giving, I also turn to postcolonial theologies. Colonialism, a form of patriarchy, has had chronically destructive effects on women, and it continues to colonize women within their own social and ecclesial contexts.³¹ This is the condition of Naga women and it is

³¹ My colleagues, in their recent research, have strongly critiqued the colonization of the Naga people by the British, North American missionaries, and India but the colonization of Naga women in different forms in their own context have not been mentioned. Mar Imsong, in his discussion of "Land as Mother Earth" have briefly mentioned, "the Naga women are respected because of the feminine power of fertility and procreation;..." Mar Imsong, *God – Land – People*, 199. Anungla Aier, a Naga feminist contradicts with this statement. Speaking on the topic 'women and customary law,' Aier said "respect for women in patriarchal set-up like Naga society did not necessarily provide any fundamental provision." This was spoken during a two-day seminar in Nagaland held on January 28-29, 2011. For more on colonization of the Nagas see Tezenlo Thong, "A Clash of Worldviews: The Impact of Modern Western Notion of Progress on Indigenous Naga Culture." Thong, "'Thy Kingdom Come': The Impact of Colonization and

the condition of many women within the larger context of Asia. Thus, I seek to reconstruct theology.

In the fourth movement, I engage in this construction, inviting Naga women to reclaim the power to tell their own stories, stories of the colonized “other,” and to reconstruct theology and contextual realities. I encourage the oppressed female subalterns to claim the power to narrate their own stories in their own voices, through creative language and imagination.³² My own feminist constructive project aims to identify places of deconstruction and replacement. I seek to subvert the current thought structures and practices which diminish life for women and to open new possibilities for people to recreate the thoughts and practices of Naga people to enable women to be subjects and flourish.

Using this dialogical methodology, Chapter 2, *Birthing and Mothering in the Naga Culture*, studies the problem of childbirth in the Naga culture, focusing on the problem of birthing only daughters and not sons. The policies and practices within the Naga context are studied with the aim to identify and examine the suffering of female children and mothers. This exploration includes an analysis of the symbols, oral traditions, and literature that have been promulgated throughout their history. This investigation promises to uncover the Naga women’s identity that has been suppressed

Proselytization on Religion among the Nagas,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 45 no 6 (2010): 595-609.

³² To the question, “Who are the women who can do postcolonial feminist theology?” Kwok Pui-lan argues that “both the (former) female colonizers and the (former) colonized women” are able to do it. But she “also insists that female subalterns who experience the intersection of oppressions in the most immediate and brutal way have epistemological privilege in terms of articulating a postcolonial feminist theology that will be more inclusive than others.” See Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005, 127.

from the very beginning. Naga women's own voices, language, and being will be lifted up to address the problem they face.

Chapter 3, *Suffering on the Cross: Naga Women, Jürgen Moltmann and Serene Jones*, studies the theology operating among the Naga Christians with particular emphasis on Naga women's understanding of Jesus and their Christological narrative. Here, Naga women's interpretation of the cross will be brought into conversation with the German theologian Jürgen Moltmann's theology of the cross. This conversation centers around suffering and the solidarity the people experience with the cross. I will bring Serene Jones into the discussion by presenting her reinterpretation of Moltmann. This will identify the Christological understanding of the Naga Christians and recognize the sensitivity of the notion of suffering and the cross within their communities. Chapter 4, *Asian Women and Asian Feminist Postcolonial Christology*, critically studies the Asian feminist literature on the suffering of Asian women and scholarship on Christology. This chapter will necessarily highlight the pain of Asian women and my hope to illumine the condition of the Naga women who suffer in ways common among other Asian women. The women have remained insignificant and forgotten for a very long time. Two Asian feminist postcolonial theologians, namely Rita Nakashima Brock and Wonhee Ann Joh are selected to discuss this problem.

Chapter 5, *The Symbolic of Natality*, focuses on the importance of celebrating birth and the goal to discover and create a theology that supports the flourishing of life on earth. This will be done by studying Jantzen's compelling and undeniably powerful literature *Becoming Divine*, to move toward an imagination of "natality and the desire for flourishing" as she explores the possibility of developing a new imaginary of religion,

one that would replace the rigid structures of the masculinist, necrophilic symbolic and move towards a feminist symbolic of natality and flourishing. Mary Elizabeth Moore will be put in dialogue with Jantzen here because she best expresses Jantzen's thought for the Naga Christians. I will follow Jantzen in my attempt to deconstruct the childbirth theory and practice of the Naga tradition in conjunction with the Christian theology's fascination with death. These views have prevailed a long time and have been the foundation for the church's teaching and understanding of the life and work of Jesus Christ and the destiny of the believers. Chapter 6, *Towards a Constructive Christology of Natality*, proposes a constructive Christology of natality that will focus on three aspects of Jesus' 'life-bearing': embrace, respect and nourishment. I will then draw from this Christology practices of Eucharist that will have implications for practice within the Naga context.

Definition

Mascu-surrogacy is a term I coined to explain the situation of Naga women who could not bear sons. "Mascu" is an abbreviated form of "masculine" that does a double work: masculinity is what is sought for in so far as a male child is privileged; and the female becomes the surrogate for the adult male seeking a male child and therefore he turns to the female body to bear for him his likeness. The term indicates that the female body becomes a mere instrument, vehicle, or mechanism for furthering male power agendas (patriarchy). In this sense, "surrogacy" does not so much mean being a substitute for another woman, but rather in its more primitive form, "to bear for another," and in this sense the Naga woman bears for the male, who is unable to conceive but who seeks

his progeny through dominating the female body to produce his likeness, including or especially his gender.

Limitations

The scope of this research is limited to the Naga Christians in Nagaland in North East India. This is intended because it is a Christian state, and my investigation involves a Christian theological response to the suffering of Naga women who do not bear male children. Though the issue of birthing only girls is a huge problem in India, as Uma Girish has argued “For India’s Daughters, a Dark Birthday,”³³ the consequences arising from this practice are severe and unique in the Naga context, which is predominantly Christian. In the present study, I limit my research to written resources and the research done by cultural anthropologists, sociologists, historians and theologians. This investigation will cover the major tribal communities in Nagaland, where diverse elements of the practice of birthing are to be expected, though the preference for male sex and its consequences remain the same.

³³ *The Christian Science Monitor* Vol. 97 no. 53, 9 February 2005, 11.

CHAPTER TWO

BIRTHING AND MOTHERING IN THE NAGA CULTURE

The tragic paradox in patriarchal cultures is found among women themselves, who, although they are oppressed, replicate the socio-cultural norm that men construct. Women have unwittingly perpetuated this intergenerational replication of power dynamics by internalizing the prevailing birth-value of the dominant gender – male children over female, in the patriarchal cultures, particularly, in the Naga culture. In this chapter, I will describe the birthing policies and practices, and other gendered traditions in the Naga context in order to examine the suffering of female children and mothers who have been barred from attaining their rightful place in the Naga society. I will begin the description of the Naga birthing policies and practices by first outlining some basic ideas and practices behind the Naga birthing system. The literature is slim when viewed through a Western lens. This is true because, written literature is minimal about the birthing system in the Naga context. However, the experiences of Naga women are conveyed primarily through the oral tradition with its rich symbolism. I will highlight several aspects of that tradition and symbols that are related to the birthing system. Then, I will draw out themes in the poetry of the Naga poet Monalisa Changkija that express the experience of Naga women. I focus on poetry, because it tells the story of Naga women's experience in a vividly imagistic way that linear narrative cannot convey.¹ Poetry is the

¹ Adrienne Rich beautifully explains the meaning and purpose of poetry: "Poetry is above all a concentration of the power of language, which is the power of our ultimate relationship to everything in the universe. It is as if forces we can lay claim to in no other way, become present to us in sensuous form. The knowledge and use of this magic goes back very far: the rune; the chant; the incantation; the spell; the kenning; sacred words; forbidden words; the naming of the child, the plant, the insect, the ocean, the configuration of stars, the snow, the sensation in the body. The ritual telling of the dream. The physical reality of the human voice; of words gouged or incised in stone or wood, woven in silk or wool, painted on

space where the Naga women's raw experience of violence and suffering is narrated and the readers are led step-by-step to see and feel what these women are really enduring.

Identifying a Problem

In Victorian Vienna over a century ago, pioneering psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud postulated that women could only resolve their incomplete identities via birthing a son. He theorized that women who did not bear sons could never attain a sense of mature completion. This hypothesis relied upon his, now disproven, adherence to women's lacking a governing autonomous superego, the cornerstone of his differential view of men versus women.² In the present Naga culture, women as the oppressed subgroup identify with the aggressor, which makes them active replicators of their own oppression.³ These women need to be liberated from their oppressive culture as well as to identify their own participation in the oppressive system, so they can emerge in newness with a voice of their own. These women will need to identify who and what animates that voice, who must listen and to what end. To do this, the Tribunals for Genocide in

vellum, or traced in sand." Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (London: WW. Norton & Co. 1980). www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/295513-on-lies-secrets-and-silence-selected-prose. (Accessed December 10, 2013).

² Sigmund Freud, "Lecture XXXIII: "Femininity" (1933)," in Leticia Glocer Fiorini and Graciela Abelin-Sas Rose ed. *On Freud's "Femininity"* (London: Karnac Books, 2010), 23-24.

³ A portion of the Statement of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) Asian Women's Consultation in 1994 states: "What is shocking and painful to us is the participation of women in their own violence. Patriarchal culture has alienated woman from herself by the internalization of oppression and guilt, and the suppression of anger and hatred. Patriarchy has turned woman against herself, her daughters, her daughters-in-law, her sisters, her mother, and her mother-in-law." EATWOT Asian Women's Consultation, "Spirituality for Life: Women Struggling Against Violence" (The Philippines: EATWOT, 1994): 15-27, 20. See Frank Elbert Davis, *The Nature of Science Today-Denial of the truth "Forms" as Reality* (Pittsburgh, PA: Dorrance Publishing Co. Inc., 2011), 377.

Rwanda are a fitting example.⁴ The Tribunals illustrate the victims of the Rwandan genocide narrating their stories to the perpetrators. The perpetrators are required to listen to the victims' stories and then, ask for forgiveness from the victims.

In the Naga culture, mascu-surrogacy has remained a continuous problem that has adversely affected the lives of women. Even though the treatment of daughters and sons may not appear unequal, there is tension between the genders in most families. The attitude of the parents toward their daughters differs markedly from their attitude toward their sons. Based on the anecdotal reports of Naga women, a girl's life is restricted to a large extent. Male superiority has never been questioned. If the male child is preferred and elevated at the expense of the female child then the pain and suffering for the women originates at birthing because her fate is determined by whether she bears a girl or boy. The Naga mothers and women are not exempted from the gender-biased perception of their own children.

Many Naga mothers without sons regard themselves as living unfulfilled lives of lament. They live in a culture where women are regarded as the object, the "other," and men are regarded as the subject, the "norm." In the Kyong Naga community practice, the birth of a daughter is announced as *oyam ka*, which means 'other/stranger' while the birth of a son is announced as *ete ka*, meaning 'us/one of us.'⁵ This clearly indicates that

⁴ See William A. Schabas, *The UN International Criminal Tribunals: The Former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and Sierra Leone* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Also see, "Report of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Prosecution of Persons Responsible for Genocide and Other Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law Committed in the Territory of Rwanda and Rwandan Citizens Responsible for Genocide and Other Such Violations Committed in the Territory of Neighbouring States between 1 January and 31 December 1994." <http://www.unictt.org/>; <http://voicesofrwanda.org/>; <http://www.kigalimemorialcentre.org/old/index.html>.

⁵ Eyingbeni Hümtsoe, "Kyong Women: Issues and Challenges" in Narola Imchen and Eyingbeni Hümtsoe ed. *Women Then and Now: Sharing Untold Insights on Women of North East India* (Jorhat, Assam: Women Study Center, ETC, 2011), 29.

daughters are the second choice. A daughter has no permanent home to be called her own. The home she lives in is not her home but her father's. The home she will live in after marriage is not hers but her husband's. Because women are regarded as "other" within the family structures and the larger society, they have no say in the family and societal matters. Referencing these women as "other" denotes their silence and invisibility, without agency. They follow the rules laid down in the family and the society. Both mothers and daughters cannot inherit the family properties, especially the landed and immovable properties. The ancestral inheritance is automatically passed on to the sons. While discussing the place of women in Naga society, Bendangjungshi, a Naga tribal theologian gives a fleeting comment that "women were not allowed to inherit land," on the pretext that they involve in inter-cultural marriages, in which case the land will go to her husband who is not a Naga.⁶ This is very sad. If there are no sons, properties are passed on to the paternal brothers, nephews, cousins or other male relatives. Out of nowhere, the male relatives, like birds of prey, will come and take away the inheritance at the death of a sonless father.⁷ The Anthropological Survey of India (ASI) has clearly attested to such practice.⁸ It *has* happened, and *continues* to happen but it has to stop. Women are invisible and owned as objects and are silenced by the dominant group. More

⁶ Bendangjungshi, *Confessing Christ in the Naga Context: Towards a Liberating Ecclesiology* ed. by Prof. Dr. Volker Küster, *ContactZone: Explorations in Intercultural Theology* Volume 8 (Berlin: Lit; London: Global [distributor], 2011), 27.

⁷ Simply put, daughters do not inherit the family property. No matter how many daughters one has, the sons are entitled to the property. Even though the daughters may have contributed to the upkeep and development of the property, they are not entitled to any share. Those beautiful places of childhood memories especially the one they were born in is lost to them forever.

⁸ "A daughter does not get any share of landed property from the father...the property goes to the nearest of the male kin in the absence of a son." Eyingbeni Hümtsoe, "Kyong Women: Issues and Challenges," 29.

than thirty decades ago, Adrienne Rich saw that “where language and naming are power, silence is oppression, is violence.”⁹

Destabilization of such an oppressive practice is long overdue. This leads to the search for resources in global feminist theologies. One especially important resource for this work is Grace Jantzen, whose focus on natality offers a liberating inversion for theology. I will turn to her theology more fully in Chapters 5 and 6, but her word on women’s voice is apropos here. In her search for her own feminist voice in the philosophy of religion, Jantzen found insight in Sandra Bartky, whose words also resonate with and encourage Naga women: “As long as their situation is apprehended as natural, inevitable, and inescapable, women’s consciousness of themselves... is not yet feminist consciousness... feminist consciousness is the apprehension of possibility.”¹⁰ Jantzen also said of Margaret Fell, the seventeenth-century champion of Quakers, on the power of voice: “Unless she could find her own voice, discern what she could say, she would be living her life at second hand, speaking in someone else’s voice.”¹¹ Naga women are called to find their own voice and discern what they are compelled to say; they need to speak out against this misogyny and name it for what it is: unnatural. Unless Naga women find their own voices, and speak out, they will continue to live as disenfranchised beings whose value depends on whether or not they bear a male child.

⁹ Adrienne Rich, “Conditions for Work: The Common World of Women,” in S. Ruddick & P. Daniels ed. *Working it Out* (xiv-xxiv) New York: Pantheon, 1977); Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*.

¹⁰ Grace Jantzen quotes Sandra Bartky, “Toward a Phenomenology of Feminist Consciousness” in Mary Vetterling-Braggin, Frederick A. Elliston and Jane English ed. *Feminism and Philosophy* (Totawa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977), 25; Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, 1.

¹¹ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 1.

They should not resign themselves to the norm that has been set forth by the dominant group because to do so is not morally right according to the Christian paradigm.

Gendered Policies and Practices: Birthing and Other Gendered Traditions

The Naga context includes many taboos, regulations, and common practices related to birthing. What makes the birthing system among the Nagas peculiar is the preference for male children. The inability of women to bear a male child has been, historically, one of the major bases for the grave treatment of Naga women not only by the menfolk but also by the womenfolk. This birthing system is a misogynistic practice supported by the Nagas in general. This misogyny has remained as an unwritten sanctioned policy. The unwritten birthing policies of the Naga people require a male child in the family to continue the ancestry and run the affairs of the society. Naga women writers have critiqued the Naga birthing system. Limatula Longkumer, a Naga feminist theologian sees much injustice done to women due to their gender.¹² She explains that women “suffer humiliation, oppression, dehumanization, and pain under the male dominated culture and its structure.”¹³ Vimeno Lasetso, a Naga woman theologian, in her discussion of the “Angami Women in the Life and Ministry of the Angami Baptist Churches in Nagaland,”¹⁴ stated that patriarchy projects women as mere objects of sex to

¹² Limatula Longkumer, “Daughters, Wives, Mothers... Their Status and Role in Ao Society” in Narola Imchen and Eyingbeni Hümtsoe ed. *Women Then and Now: Sharing Untold Insights on Women of North East India* (Jorhat, Assam: Women Study Center, ETC, 2011), 151.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Angami tribe is one of the major tribes in Nagaland.

fulfill the sexual desire of men and to bear children.¹⁵ Bearing children here refers to all children but with particular reference to male children. Lasetso agrees with her feminist predecessor Longkumer that men “restrict women’s freedom of choice, behavior, actions and even thought.”¹⁶ Both Lasetso and Longkumer state that Naga women have no freedom of choice to give birth or not to give birth. They have continually been coerced into bearing children until one or more sons is born. The worth of a woman is determined by her ability to bear children, specifically male children. While studying the female and male ratio in Nagaland and the declining proportion of females in India, Narola Imchen stated that there are inadequate maternal and child health services, whereas there is excessive child bearing and a consequently shorter life expectancy among women. She has concluded that, “women are valued chiefly for their function of producing children, especially male children.”¹⁷ Anne Dondapati Allen also exposes the plight of women in India who cannot produce healthy sons to continue the ancestral line: “Unable to fulfill her procreative functions, a woman is ostracized from the marital home and from her social and religious communities.”¹⁸ Parents who have sons feel blessed that they are not

¹⁵ Vimeno Lasetso, “Angami Women in the Life and Ministry of the Angami Baptist Churches in Nagaland” in Narola Imchen and Eyingbeni Hümtsoe ed. *Women Then and Now: Sharing Untold Insights on Women of North East India*, 355.

¹⁶ Ibid. Also see, N. Limatula Longkumer, “Rediscovering Women’s Role and Status in Society,” in R.L. Hnuni ed. *Transforming Theology for Empowering Women* (Jorhat: ETC Women Study 1999), 33.

¹⁷ Narola Imchen, *Women in Church and Society: The Story of Ao Naga Women* (Jorhat, Assam: The Author, 2001), 77.

¹⁸ Anne Dondapati Allen, “No Garlic, Please, We are Indian: Reconstructing the De-eroticized Indian Woman” in Rita Nakashima Brock, Jung Ha Kim, Kwok Pui-Lan, Seung Ai Yang ed. *Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women’s Religion and Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 184. See also Pauline Chakkalal, “Asian Women Reshaping Theology: Challenges and Hopes,” *Feminist Theology* Vol. 9 No. 21, 2001 (21-35), 25. They find in Christianity a partner in this discrimination. An example is found in Psalms 127 acknowledging that sons are a blessing because they provide a strong force at one’s back in the face of enemies.

like those sonless parents. The birthing system of preference for male children has deprived Naga women of their rights. This birthing system is a major unwritten customary law, which is executed according to patriarchal values. Such customary laws encompass the whole life of persons within the family and society, and the various cultural practices within this law are gender-based.

The Naga patriarchal cultural system has instituted rules to govern villages and communities in all aspects of life - social, political, religious and economic. For instance, the male descendants execute the established rules in the society in which women are assigned their place. In the political sphere, women are openly discouraged and barred from political positions in the state. In the religious sphere, women still remain the inferior subgroup who are neither accepted as pastors in the churches nor allowed to assume executive position in the apex religious Associations. Due to all these restrictions, women become economically dependent on men. “Social ostracization sets in motion a series of penalties that are physically, psychologically, socially, and spiritually debilitating and render the woman incapable of providing for herself or her children.”¹⁹ In her research, Toshimenla Jamir, a Naga feminist scholar, has found that tradition and customary laws are the key to determining gender equality in Naga society.²⁰ She has attested to the early researchers’ discovery of the masculinist image of the Naga society and of women’s confinement in the privacy of their homes.

¹⁹ Anne Dondapati Allen, “No Garlic, Please, We are Indian: Reconstructing the De-eroticized Indian Woman,” 184.

²⁰ Toshimenla Jamir, “Political Consciousness and Participation of Naga Women: A Sociological Enquiry.” (Ph.D. Thesis, Nagaland University, Lumami, 2005); “Engendering Public Space in Naga Society: Tradition and Modernity,” *Indian Folklife* A Quarterly Newsletter from National Folklore Support Centre Serial No. 33 July 2009 (18-21): 18.

Historically the public image of Naga society has been a male one, women's role being largely confined to the private sphere. While the public and political sphere remains a male domain, women are responsible for looking after the domestic affairs where they are indeed the 'mistresses' of the house. This is often interpreted as 'freedom' by many outsiders. The flip side however, is that such a social arrangement severely restricts the mobility of women in the public/political and social spheres rendering them politically incapable and even ignorant of many civic issues that concern them.²¹

Jamir has stated clearly along with others that Naga women's "freedom" in the domestic space as interpreted by the society does not make them decision makers. "When it comes to making major decisions, the husband or father or son has the last say in the matter."²²

This includes the decision-making by the husband regarding childbearing, even against the wife's will, in the pursuit of a male heir. Jamir continues:

The socio-cultural system that systematically excludes women from the mainstream, keeping them less able and denied equal opportunities is based on and strengthened by the values embodied in patriarchy, the traditional power structure that operates at the core of Naga society, i.e. the village. The traditional governing system of the Nagas is either chieftainship, under the Village Council or a selected council of elders. Only males have the right to chieftainship while memberships in the village councils are on the basis of clan, which only males can represent.²³

Women cannot attend the annual citizens' meeting that is presided in the villages among the Naga tribes. This annual citizens' meeting is attended compulsorily by the menfolk to make decisions for the village for the whole year. Jamir laments that, until today, "calls for 'public' meetings elicit response only from men with women generally shying away from them."²⁴ She says: "It can be argued that the perception that only males constitute the 'public' is a logical outcome of the customary practices of female exclusion from

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Toshimenla Jamir "Engendering Public Space in Naga Society: Tradition and Modernity," 19.

²⁴ Ibid.

traditional meetings and decision making institutions.”²⁵ No matter how highly educated a woman may be or how prominent a job she holds, she is never free from the tribal customary laws and patriarchal culture.²⁶ She is still bound by the laws of discrimination. Her status is acknowledged in connection to her being the mother of a male and the number of children she has borne.²⁷

Current daily newspapers have become resourceful types of literature, as these papers are printing the daily struggles of women for the public. But it is to be understood that there are still very few women journalists from Nagaland and the rest of North East Indian region working to publicize the situation of Naga women. Patricia Mukhim, the editor of *The Shillong Times*, on her recent trip to Mon and Tuensang districts in Nagaland saw the plight of the Naga women, who were completely cut off from the rest of the State. These women have no idea what is going on in the rest of the State.

[They] were busy pursuing their jhum cultivation to keep home fires burning. They went out to the fields early in the morning and returned in the evening, unconscious of the progress that Kohima, Mokokchung and Dimapur²⁸ boast of, leave alone the rest of India and the world beyond. These simple women know little about the schemes touted by the government as women’s empowerment schemes.²⁹

²⁵ Ibid. Such practices reminds us of the history of women in the west - “Women screamed when animals were put to death in blood sacrifices; they cried as they accompany the body of a dead household member to the cemetery; they chanted in choruses during festivals; they gossiped at home behind closed doors...But did women speak? Cries, lamentations, chants, gossip, foreign tongues – all these were within women’s grasp, but did they have access to the only general recognized language?” See “The Woman’s Voice” in Pauline Schmitt Pantel ed. *A History of Women in the West: From Ancient Goddesses to Christian Saints* (Cambridge, MA & London, England, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), 473.

²⁶ Longkumer, “Daughters, Wives, Mothers...Their Status and Role in Ao Society,” 153.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Kohima is the capital of Nagaland; Dimapur is the cosmopolitan city in Nagaland which is a strategic city to the wider world. It is the city where the only airport in Nagaland is built; Mokokchung is one of the largest and most developed towns in Nagaland.

²⁹ Patricia Mukhim, “Nagaland’s Gender Paradox,” *The Statesman*, 12 June 2011.

These Naga women are living in the dark as Mukhim proves, particularly by her visit to the Mon and Tuensang districts. She claims, “the real Nagaland is where women labor without knowing their rights. This Nagaland is too disempowered to lay claim to their entitlements.”³⁰ Seeing the situation of these women, a one-day legal awareness program for the women of Mon district was held under the theme “Know Your Rights” on October 20, 2011. At this awareness program, Angau I. Thou, the Deputy Commissioner of Mon,³¹ referred to the Holy Bible saying that since women were created partners of men, it is men’s responsibility to see that they do not deprive women of their rights and duties, but rather respect the rights of women and work hand in hand with them. She also urged the women folk not to neglect their rights and responsibilities and invite discrimination by depending on men folk.³²

As discussed earlier of the identification of the oppressed women with their aggressor, which makes them active replicators of their own oppression, both the oppressed and privileged Naga women fall victim to this thought behavior. Sadly, women leaders and top government officials like Ms. Lithrongla G. Chishi assert that “Naga society is a classless society where there is no gender discrimination.” This statement, declared at the conference of an Ao Women’s Organization called the *Watsu Mungdang*,³³ reflects the fact that Chishi accepts the general perception of the Naga

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Mon is one of the Naga tribes that has the lowest literacy rate with 52.39 percent.

³² *Morung Express*, 21 October 2011. This program was organized by the Nagaland State Commission for Women (NSCW) in collaboration with the National Commission for Women, New Delhi.

³³ The *Watsu Mungdang* is a socio-cultural organization formed within a tribe called the Ao Nagas. In the words of Toshimenla Jamir, the objective of forming this organization was to recreate “interest in traditional socio-cultural values and to help women maintain their socio-cultural identity and promote self-reliance. Its activities were initially directed at aiding families with no male members or who

society as a classless society; however, she neglects to study the plight of the majority of women suffering in the remote and unreached areas of Nagaland, and even among the educated women, women leaders and top government officials. She is one of the few privileged women who does not see through their glass walls the reality, even when she believes she is fighting for Naga women's rights. The differences in attitudes towards each other among women themselves, which Chishi represents, makes it difficult for Naga women to break through the walls of customary laws and traditions. These women become replicators of their own oppression. There is a need for these women leaders to be educated in order to create awareness that women are neither neglecting their rights and responsibilities nor inviting discrimination upon them. Discrimination and oppression are forced upon them. There is a need to examine the details of the social fabric most torn where women in such places suffer the most.

While attending the legal awareness program mentioned above, the President of the Nagaland State Commission for Women (NSCW), Sano Vamuzo, declared that denial of women's rights represents a serious violence against women and directly indicates that women are not equal with men.³⁴ Jamir states that "as long as the customary laws and traditional power structure remain unaltered, it is unlikely that there would be any substantial change for women in the fabric of Naga society."³⁵ She laments that the

had no resources. Gradually, it gravitated into issues of women rights. Recognizing that the traditional practice of patrilineal inheritance threatens the physical security of many women, some of whom are rendered destitute upon the death of their husband or father, a long standing demand of the organization is for equitable distribution of the parental property amongst all children irrespective of sex." Jamir "Engendering Public Space in Naga Society: Tradition and Modernity," 19-20.

³⁴ *Morung Express*, 21 October 2011.

³⁵ Jamir "Engendering Public Space in Naga Society: Tradition and Modernity," 20.

cultural practice of gender marginalization and exclusion from decision making bodies have impacted negatively on the political socialization of Naga women.³⁶

Gender-Differentiated Practices

In the next section, I will outline several gender-differentiated practices in the Naga tradition including some of the birthing practices that vary because of the gender of the child. These practices are both the outcome and basis of the gender marginalization and exclusion of women in the Naga patriarchal culture.

Practices of Mourning

The Naga people believe in the possession of spirits and souls. Having this strong belief of possessing souls and spirits, each Naga tribe has their own way of describing it. Possession of souls and spirits is significant for mourning. The Ao Naga men are said to have three personal spirits called *Tiyar* and three souls called *Tanula*, whereas the women have three spirits and two souls.³⁷ More than a decade ago, Panger Imchen, an Ao Naga scholar wrote about the Naga men having three souls and women having two souls.³⁸ It is

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Panger Imchen, *Ancient Ao Naga Religion and Culture* (New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 1993), 38. Also see, N. Talitemjen Jamir, *Asen Kin Sobalibaren* (Kohima: The Author, 1986), 120.

³⁸ It is believed that the first soul is in a person's eyes, and at death they believe that it travels from the body to the land of the dead. The second soul lives in the form of a tiger, wildcat, locust or rat, which on the death of a person either dies or escapes death and lives elsewhere. The third soul is a hawk and on the death of a person, it flies to the land of the dead along with the deceased and becomes the messenger between the dead and the living family members. See Imchen, *Ancient Ao Naga Religion and Culture*, 39; Sashikaba Kechutzar, "Ecological Values from Ao Naga Tradition and Culture" in Razouselie Lasetso, Marlene Ch. Marak, and Yangkahao Vashum ed. *Tribal Ecology: A Search for Ecological Values from the Cultures and Practices of the Tribes of North East India*. Tribal Study Series No. 20 (Jorhat Assam: Eastern Theological College, 2012), 223. Also, see, Tajen Ao, *Ao Naga Customary Laws* (Mokokching: Tarepkaba, 1957), 7.

unclear which soul is not attributed to the women and why these limitations were set. However, a Lotha Naga legend says that God granted to both men and women six hearts each, but the women complained that six was too little and refused to take them. While refusing to take the hearts, a cock came, picked up a heart and went away. Therefore, today, women have only five hearts while men have six.³⁹ The Naga people's different versions of the possession of souls and spirits determine the duration of the mourning of the dead in their context.

Mourning is an important element in the life of the Naga people. They do not leave a family or an individual to mourn alone but the whole community comes together and mourns the dead. There are several ways of being part of the mourning period, which extends throughout the year. They are constantly with them for the first few days and weeks singing songs, praying, entertaining and sharing stories and comforting words. Along with their presence, they offer food and monetary gifts to the bereft family. If there are housework and outside tasks to be done, neighbors, and villagers offer to finish the work. For example, they help in the rice fields, which need to be weeded or harvested at a certain time. Community mourning continues to be a healthy and healing practice for the Naga people.

Within such communitarian spirit of being in solidarity with those who are grieving the death of their loved ones, rules and rituals come to play their part. When a person dies, the community mourns the dead for several days. The number of days of mourning concurs with the number of souls and spirits a person possesses. Among the Ao

³⁹ Ezamo Murry interviewed by Narola Imchen on August 6, 2013 at Eastern Theological College (ETC) Jorhat, Assam.

Naga tribe,⁴⁰ a man is mourned for six days, and a woman five days.⁴¹ This denotes the power dynamic of the dominant group that is subtly acknowledged in the Naga society. In addition, among the Lotha Nagas, the wife of the deceased husband is said to mourn her husband's death for the double of his souls, that is, twelve days because it was believed that the spirit of the dead must be sent off after twelve days.⁴² However, no limits were in place for a man to mourn his wife.⁴³ Restrictions are placed upon women to follow the number of days set to mourn by the dominant group but it is not so for the men. Men do not mourn as much as the women for the dead.⁴⁴ Furthermore, among the Konyak Nagas, when a man dies, a big feast is prepared on the day the grave stone is erected or constructed. This is not so when a woman dies.⁴⁵ Even though the number of days vary from tribe to tribe, and the rituals are observed and described in different accounts among the Nagas, it has been proven that each tribe is analogous to the other tribes in their treatment of women. Even at death, the egalitarian respect for male and female is absent. Instead, the lines between them are clearly drawn.

⁴⁰ The Ao Naga tribe is one of the largest and most advanced tribes among the tribes in Nagaland. The mourning ritual is practiced by all the tribes with slight differences but having the same meaning.

⁴¹ N. Talitemjen Jamir, *Asen Kin Sobalibaren*, 120. Today, as the world advances and people become busy in their works, the age-old traditional ritual and observation of mourning, especially the number of days cannot be followed practically. Therefore, in most of the villages, they have reduced the observation to three days. Beyond that, it depends on the immediate family. However, the duration of days and months for the visitation of the grieving family by the villagers, and friends is unlimited.

⁴² Ezamo Murry interviewed by Narola Imchen on August 6, 2013 at ETC Jorhat, Assam.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Yamyap Konyak interviewed by Narola Imchen on August 8, 2013 at ETC Jorhat, Assam.

Practices of Gifting

Not only in death are the Naga women differentiated but also in birth. The consumption and gifting of material things portray the sex of the child at birth. The child's gender will determine the gift and attitude of the parents and the community. At the birth of a son, close relatives, normally the grandparents would fetch a huge, colorful live rooster to signify the birth of a son. This rooster is killed at home, and there is much celebration. The rooster is a symbol of bravery, strength and splendor, especially assigned to highly admired warriors. Its colorful feathers signify the colorful attire that adorns the strong, courageous and respected warrior.⁴⁶ It is of great significance depicting that an heir has been born, that the parents have every reason to rejoice and celebrate because a pillar of the family and society has been born. It is not the same case at the birth of a girl. In the occasion of the birth of a girl, a hen is gifted with no significant gifting ceremony.⁴⁷

The presence of grandparents, or older relatives, in the absence of grandparents is important at the birth of a child. They bestow blessings upon the child. They bring with them their cultural tradition that is deeply ingrained in them. They bless the child according to the gender of the baby. Since the older folks are highly respected in the Naga culture, what they say and do becomes acceptable in the community. The deep-seated patriarchy blinds the people from seeing the pain and suffering entailed in this gender-based practice of gifting. They are also unaware of their involvement in the reinforcement of their gender-based tradition.

⁴⁶ The rooster have double significance, that is, to be consumed as well as to signify a joyous birth of a son to head the family and society.

⁴⁷ Lovely James interviewed by Narola Imchen on August 2, 2013 at ETC Jorhat, Assam.

Such practice of gender-based gifting can also be called “preferential payment.”⁴⁸

In the recent past, there have been reports of preferential compensation for male babies born. On December 14, 2011, Rosemary Dzüvichü, Advisor to the Naga Mothers’ Association in Nagaland, reported widespread corruption and maladjustments. She brought to light the case of “preferential payment for institutional delivery, wherein a mother who delivered a baby boy was paid Rs. 500,⁴⁹ while a mother birthing a girl was given Rs. 300 on the same day.”⁵⁰ This symbolizes the ongoing Naga conception that male heir is the archetype of Naga society at the expense of their female counterparts.

Divorce Practices

In Naga society, a man whose wife cannot bear him male progeny has the right to divorce her and marry another woman.⁵¹ Society is apathetic to the pathetic condition of the woman due to the decision of the man because she is taught to act, think, and live her distinct role as a female. She has no choice but to leave the house in which she had lived with him. Though they may have built the house together, it does not belong to her.⁵²

⁴⁸ “Naga Customary Laws Come Under Scrutiny,” *Eastern Mirror*, 14 December 2011.

⁴⁹ 500 Indian rupees is approximately equivalent to 10 US dollars.

⁵⁰ “Naga Customary Laws Come Under Scrutiny,” *Eastern Mirror* 14 December 2011.

⁵¹ In 1998 I interviewed Naga men and women who had been divorced due to the issue of birthing. One of them who wanted to remain anonymous said that she had to leave her home that she and her husband had built together, having lived together for several years, and still in love, unwillingly and with a painful heart because she could not bear him any children, not to talk about sons. Another woman said that she had to live her whole life serving her husband and remaining silent lest she angered him. See Nungshitula, *The Naga Images of the Human Being: A Resource for a Contemporary Theological Anthropology* (Jorhat, Assam: Tribal Study Center, 2001), 38.

⁵² Narola Imchen in her interview with Yamyap Konyak, was informed that the Konyak Nagas find it pointless for a husband and wife to stay together without any children/sons, so, the man tells the wife to leave. It is practiced among the Konyak Nagas that when a woman returns to her parents’ home after divorce, when she dies, her body will not go out of the same door as when she got married. A new door

According to Ezamo Murry, a Lotha Naga theologian and a prominent Naga leader, women are often blamed for the inability to bear children and sons, and so they are asked to leave the house or to live with the husband marrying another wife.⁵³ This is attested to strongly by Lovely James, a Sumi Naga theologian that this practice of child-birthing divorce and marrying more wives is prevalent. James states that the woman is blamed for not bearing sons, and therefore, she is the reason for her husband's infidelity in search of a male heir.⁵⁴ Visakulie Vakha, an Angami Naga theologian and scholar is aware of the practice of an adult male in search of a male heir. Vakha narrates one such story of a Naga father in Kohima, himself an only son desperately seeking a son, resulted in marrying a second wife.⁵⁵ The obligation to have a son is so strong that men put their family relationship at stake.

I have seen firsthand, the husband-wife relationship dynamic in the case where the husband leaves his wife for another or asks her to leave the house for failing to produce a child. When I was young, I knew a couple in my village who were happily married. The wife was a very nice woman, but she could not bear any children. After years of married life, the husband divorced her, making her to leave their home. The law does not say that the wife must leave the house, but it does not protect her; thus, it indirectly endorses her leaving since neither her parents' home nor her husband's are

will be built in the wall. One cannot go through the same door twice. Interviewed on August 8, 2013 at ETC, Jorhat, Assam.

⁵³ Ezamo Murry interviewed by Narola Imchen on August 6, 2013 at ETC Jorhat, Assam.

⁵⁴ Lovely James interviewed by Narola Imchen on August 2, 2013 at ETC Jorhat, Assam.

⁵⁵ Visakulie Vakha interviewed by Narola Imchen on August 8, 2013 at ETC, Jorhat, Assam.

legally her home. As a young girl, I felt very confused and very sad for the wife, and I disliked the man very much. He married another woman, and they have sons now.⁵⁶

Also, embedded within this problem of divorce is the painful irony of a wife remaining wedded to the husband but he has the freedom to openly have a mistress. In case of the birth of a son by a man's mistress, the son is brought to his wife to be raised, but if the child is a girl, she is left with her mother and forgotten. The irony is that if a husband and wife have no sons, the wife herself receives the son from her husband's mistress as an advantage because she would be less mocked by the society, and she will remain wedded to her husband. The pain from her husband's infidelity takes the backstage. She bears the pain silently.

Dreaming Practices

Dreams play an important role in the Naga culture. The Nagas believe that dreams are a medium of communication by the divine for their day to day living and activities. Dreams are considered for prosperity and adversity, health and sickness, birth and death, marriage and divorce, successes and failures, natural calamities, and more. It concerns the overall existence of the people. Some dreams can be self-interpreted and others are interpreted by the traditional interpreters of dreams. Dreams show what is to happen in the future and by interpreting them, some impending negative situations may be averted

⁵⁶ A similar pattern emerged in other Asian countries, particularly in China. Authors Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn talks about Sheryl's grandfather who traveled from China to the United States with his first wife. His wife gave birth to only daughters so her grandfather decided to leave her. They returned to Shunshui. There, he married a younger woman and they traveled together to America. She gave birth to a son – Sheryl's father. The first wife and daughters were "wiped out of the family memory." Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression to Opportunity for Women Worldwide* (New York: Alfred A. Knof, 2009), xviii-xix.

and some interpretations make people to be prepared for whatever may happen. The Nagas believe that dreams also come to them to teach them lessons and to move forward.

There are both negative and positive approaches to dreams in the Naga culture, which is largely influenced by their patriarchal cultural thought form. In the Naga culture, to dream of a baby boy is a blessing and to dream of a baby girl is a burden. When a person says that she/he had a dream carrying a baby, the first thing she or he will be asked is, “Was it a boy or girl?” Then only they will analyze and interpret the dream accordingly. This depicts the treatment of women and girls in the Naga society, which has a clear patriarchal influence.

Dreaming practices are also connected with the moments before going to bed and waking up in the morning. These moments may be called the evening and morning rituals, particularly, of the women. This ritual involves the material things that belong to men or all things that are regarded as masculine. This is specifically practiced by pregnant women who fixed their gaze on the things when they go to bed and in their waking. A pregnant woman yearning for a son would surround her home with material things that symbolize a man. These things are placed where she can see them every day. It is intended so that these masculine objects would be the last and the first things her eyes fall upon when she goes to sleep and wakes up the next morning respectively. They believe and hope that this may help them bear a son. They also keep male accessories under their pillow as they lay their head at night hoping to dream. They believe that if they dream of men’s weapons such as spear or dao,⁵⁷ they would bear a son and if they

⁵⁷ A *dao*, which is a long and wide knife used for all cutting activities such as cutting a whole animal, in war times to cut off enemies’ heads, cutting new dense forests and many more. A man carries one everyday, when he goes to the field, or help in constructing neighbors’ homes.

dream of implements that women use, they would bear a daughter.⁵⁸ These women go to bed hoping that they will not dream of things related to women. Women try different things in desperation for a male heir because they alone know what life is like without a son.

Having outlined some basic ideas and practices of the consequences of the preference for male children in the Naga birthing system, I will now show that the experiences of Naga women are conveyed primarily through the oral tradition with its rich symbolism.

Oral Tradition and Symbols

Oral tradition provides the richest resources for knowledge about Naga culture and daily life. Transmitted through generations, stories in the form of myths, folktales, songs, poems, legends, symbols, dances, and festivals teach children about their socio-cultural norms and systems. For centuries, young children have learned who they are, what they are supposed to do, and how to perform their duties as children, as adults and as male and female through stories; their identity is imprinted in their minds. Lanusashi Longkumer, a Naga scholar, in his study of the significance of oral tradition has stated that

In the ancient pre-literate world of tribal societies, oral tradition played the dominant role as the chronicles of history, source of knowledge and wisdom which guided and influenced the people in all aspects of their lives. Naga culture and oral history flourished without any written script of their own. Yet they had an effective medium of communication and records that have been preserved for many centuries through the oral tradition based on deep-rooted and time-tested foundations. Any oral narrative of traditional history, origin and migration of people (tribe, clan, individual, etc.), formation of the village, events of war, peace,

⁵⁸ Ezamo Murry interviewed by Narola Imchen on August 6, 2013 at ETC Jorhat, Assam.

festivals and so on are transmitted by word of mouth from one generation to another through songs, poetry, ballads, prayers, sayings, stories and tales or as public oration when situation demands. Through such means youngsters were trained not only to learn but to master them...the very history of the Naga people, their religion and entire social life is shaped by their oral tradition.⁵⁹

Oral tradition is the center of education for the existence of life for the Naga people. It is still prevalent. Who they are and what they must adhere to is etched out. Their rich resources of songs and stories and others are ubiquitous in their life and culture. For example, a song is enough for them to tell the story of a war in their history. Oral tradition is, thus, a lived experience from generation to generation. I see two things that are clearly visible in the oral tradition in the Naga context. On one hand, oral tradition forms the Naga culture, which is hierarchical, patriarchal and oppressive towards the Naga women. On the other hand, oral tradition is a resource for the Naga women's struggle and their reclamation of power and their rightful place. I will show this dynamic by referring to the Naga preference for male children, and the power of story-telling in favor of Naga women's freedom.

The requirement or preference for a male child is not written anywhere but it is deeply rooted in the minds of the people of all generations and therefore, they automatically practice it as a norm. They do not question it because it is fixed in their mindset, and they believe that it is their way of life that has been practiced from time immemorial. The men do not question it because they think it is their right, and the women do not dare to go there. Eyingbeni Hümtsoe, a Naga woman theologian clearly states that "cultural elements, unwritten but expected, continue to bind them [women] to

⁵⁹ Lanusashi Longkumer, "Oral Tradition in Contemporary Conflict Resolution: A Naga Perspective," *Indian Folklife*, 11-13: 11.

traditional roles.”⁶⁰ The oral laws rule the society.⁶¹ The superiority of the male figure is deeply ingrained in them, and the desire for a male child continues to be a necessity. Uncritical acceptance of this resource has been the quandary for centuries and is prevalent even today.

While oral tradition has preserved negative elements that are oppressive and destructive to Naga women, it also has preserved positive elements to be used in favor of Naga women. The Naga woman theologian, Limatula Longkumer has rightly expressed that oral tradition is still a “powerful tool” in the Naga socio-cultural and political life. Longkumer asserts that oral tradition can “prove or disprove, substantiate and support any dispute/claims or for resolving any dispute or conflict. It is instrumental in peace negotiation or to conduct truce in times of war or confrontation.”⁶² A Naga woman scholar, Temsula Ao argues that “oral tradition, the source of all folklore is now being hailed as the chronicle of human history by providing evidence to the origin of people and their subsequent migrations to their final destinations.”⁶³ While she is aware that “the relevance of orality and oral cultures is still being debated in a world which has gone beyond mere writing to unimagined realms of scientific innovation,”⁶⁴ she believes that oral tradition continues to play a significant role in the relationship of human beings.

The oral world cannot be fully penned because it involves the experience of the people, and experience makes a difference when it is heard, seen, touched, and felt.

⁶⁰ Hümtsoe, “Kyong Women: Issues and Challenges, 25.

⁶¹ Longkumer, “Daughters, Wives, Mothers...Their Status and Role in Ao Society,” 154.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Temsula Ao, “From Antiquity to Modern” in *Indian Folklife*, 18-21: 3.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Gerald Vizenor does not think it is possible to translate the native language and experience, but he thinks that they could be “reimagined and re-expressed.”⁶⁵ Re-imagining and re-expressing the language and experience of the people can be performed through the method of storytelling, which plays a significant role in the oral tradition, particularly, in the Naga culture. The prominent anthropologist Michael Jackson, in his exploration of Hannah Arendt’s view of storytelling, sees storytelling “as a vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances.”⁶⁶ Storytelling as a powerful tool of oral tradition in the Naga culture has reinforced the patriarchal Naga society by retelling the stories of their power, and by suppressing the stories that tells of Naga women’s power. Therefore, the use of oral tradition in this project is critical to look at the oral narratives with new eyes to tell Naga women’s stories and reclaim their rightful place in the Naga society.

Sashikaba Kechutzar, a Naga theologian has a clear explanation of the absolute necessity of oral traditions in the Naga context and has argued for a rereading of the oral narratives from the perspective of tribal Naga women.⁶⁷ Since oral tradition is still the major tool of communication, I agree with Kechutzar and see the necessity for a rereading of the oral narratives. Kechutzar strongly argues by presenting significant oral

⁶⁵ As quoted in “Intersection with the Oral Tradition” in K.M. Blaeser, *Gerald Vizenor, Writing in the Oral Tradition* (OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 16. Also see, Temsula Ao, “From Antiquity to Modern,” 3.

⁶⁶ Michael Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression, and Intersubjectivity* (Denmark: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2002), 15.

⁶⁷ Sashikaba Kechutzar, “A Discursive Reading of the Oral Traditions: A Tribal Woman’s Perspective” in Longkumer, Limatula ed. *No More Sorrow in God’s Garden of Justice: Tribal Women Doing Theology*; See also, C. Patrick, *The Role of Oral Traditions in Theology* (Shillong: Don Bosco Centre for Indigenous Cultures, 1999); Tamo Mibang and Sarit K. Chaudhuri ed. *Folk Culture and Oral Literature from North-East India* (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2004).

traditional narratives that portrays the dominant culture's control over the weaker group.

In his own words,

Oral tradition is the mirror of the tribals. It reflects the socio-cultural context of the people. Thus the narration of oral traditions has its motives and perspectives. It is true that any kind of oral narratives impart cardinal virtues, socio-cultural values, and moral lessons etc. for the lives of individuals and communities alike. However, oral traditions are often the expressions of the dominant culture and are used as an instrument to perpetuate its control upon the weaker sections of the community.⁶⁸

Retelling and rereading the oral narratives is crucial in order to reclaim the Naga women's rightful place in their society. Oral stories are authoritative for the lived experience of women in the Naga context. Therefore, people need to pay attention to them. They carry a lot of weight, even more so than some of the stories that are written down. There are numerous narratives of women's natural power and wisdom that have been altered or suppressed. They have been pushed into a condition of struggle and discrimination. I will narrate some of such stories.

To tell the stories, I am following Trinh T. Minh-ha's method. Minh-ha is a writer, film-maker and composer, who emigrated from Vietnam to the United States in 1970. She has written books, poetry and produced films extensively on women's struggle, politics, culture and postcolonialism.⁶⁹ Her book *Woman, Native, Other: Writing, Postcoloniality and Feminism* discusses how stories must be told. "Something must be said. Must be said that has not been and has been said before."⁷⁰ She goes on to

⁶⁸ Ibid., 74.

⁶⁹ Some of her works are *Un Art sans oeuvre* (1981), *En Miniscules* (poems, 1987), *African Spaces: Designs for Living in Upper Volta* (1985) in collaboration with Jean-Paul Bourdier, and the films *Reassemblage* (1982), *Naked Spaces*, *Living is Round* (1985) and *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989), an essay "A Special Third World Women Issue" published in *Feminist Review* No. 25, 1987.

⁷⁰ Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 119.

say that “the story depends upon every one of us to come into being. It needs us all, needs our remembering, understanding, and creating what we have heard together to keep on coming into being.”⁷¹ There is truth in the stories. It is the fact and history of life. Women have, through history been powerful storytellers. According to her

the world’s earliest archives or libraries were the memories of women. Patiently transmitted from mouth to ear, body to body, hand to hand. In the process of storytelling, speaking and listening refer to realities that do not involve just the imagination. The speech is seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched. It destroys, brings into life, nurtures.⁷²

I want to draw attention to one influential Naga story called the “The Three Primeval Beings,”⁷³ about three brothers born to a mother.

Of old a Spirit, a Tiger and a Man were born of one mother. When the Spirit looked after his mother, he washed her and fed her with rice and gave her rice beer to drink so that his mother fared well. When the Man looked after his mother, she fared well. When the Tiger looked after his mother he used to scratch her and lick up his own mother’s blood so that she withered. One day the mother said to the Spirit and the Man, “I am going to die today. Let the Tiger go to the field. When I am dead bury my body and cook and eat your meal over my body.” After the Tiger had gone to the field, his mother died. The Spirit and the Man together buried the mother’s body. Over her body, they cooked and ate their meal. Just then the Tiger came back from the field and searched for his mother. But when he could not find her, he cried out, “Where is my mother?” He scraped about for his mother’s body but being unable to find, he fled into the jungle.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 121.

⁷³ J.H. Hutton, *The Sema Nagas* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 317-318; Sashikaba Kechutzar, “A Discursive Reading of the Oral Traditions: A Tribal Woman’s Perspective,” 72. J.H. Hutton has written this nearly a half century ago, but we do not much refer to his book for the story. These stories were told at home, on our grandparents’ lap in the kitchen, and while working in the fields. They would begin the story with an introductory note: “*obula, otsiila nunger mapang nung tar nunger otsi yamai lir*” meaning “in the days of our grandfathers and grandmothers [ancestors], the ancient story goes like this.” For the purpose of this project, I am using Hutton’s version of the story.

⁷⁴ J.H. Hutton, *The Sema Nagas*, 317-318.

This story has been traditionally interpreted depicting the mother as ailing and weak and eventually dies. The moment she dies, her family disintegrates, and each child goes their own way, making their own world. When the mother was alive, she had kept her family connected and at peace with one another. Mother earth, as she is depicted in the story is the Spirit that holds the whole universe. By attempting a subversive reading of this story Kechutzar brings out the long buried treasures of the power of women. His examination of the image of the Mother brings to light the suppression of the Mother deity, showing how her image as the Spirit from whom all creation came into existence was altered and gradually conceptualized into a male deity. She is the ancestress of the animals, supernatural beings and humans, which depicts her original state as the Supreme Being, the Creator who expects service and respect from all her children.⁷⁵ Each Naga tribe has their own version of this story and they all point to the same ancestress, who evolved into a male deity. The Angami Nagas call her *Ukepenoupfü*, which means “birth spirit.”⁷⁶ J.H. Hutton, a British anthropologist, who studied the culture and tradition of many Naga tribes stated, “Many Angamis, it is true, think and speak of *Ukepenoupfü* as a male being.”⁷⁷ Veprari Epao, a Naga scholar writes about *Ukepenoupfü* as a benevolent God who is believed to be the progenitor.⁷⁸ This God is also called *terhuomia* who is a spiritual being.⁷⁹ Kechutzar asks, “Is the primal ancestress as a female deity, no longer

⁷⁵ Ibid., 73.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ J.H. Hutton, *The Angami Nagas* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 181.

⁷⁸ Veprari Epao, *From Naga Animism to Christianity* (Dimapur, Nagaland: Dimapur, 1993), 39.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

relevant in the given social structure?”⁸⁰ There is neither an extensive study being done on why the female deity was transformed into a male deity nor is the acceptance of a male deity critiqued because the Nagas have a common belief in a male Supreme Being. The subversive reading of these stories is critical in order to bring out the true meaning of the stories for a just and peaceful living of the Nagas, particularly Naga women.

Another oral story tells of a spinster named “Longkongla.”⁸¹ One day, Longkongla was at her loom weaving a cloth outside her house. While there, she saw a hornbill flying over her in the sky. On seeing the bird, she exclaimed with longing, “Oh! I wish I had a lovely hornbill’s feather to put on my chignon.” She continued to weave. After a little while, to her delight, she saw a feather lying on her warp. With great pleasure, she picked it up and carefully kept it inside her basket. She could not concentrate on her weaving thinking about her feather. So, she gave in to her desire and opened the basket. And what did she see to her utter disappointment? A piece of stone in place of the beautiful feather. Then the stone turned into a hollowed bamboo vessel. It was useless to her, so she threw it on the floor. The following night, she saw that the hollowed bamboo had turned into a baby boy and would not stop crying. She picked him up and held him in her arms. Longkongla raised him up as her own and named him Pongdang meaning “perfection.” Pongdang grew up true to his name and got married and bore a son and named him Tsungpi. Tsungpi grew exceedingly good looking that the village girls fought among themselves to win his heart. The menfolk became jealous and

⁸⁰ Kechutzar, “A Discursive Reading of the Oral Traditions: A Tribal Woman’s Perspective,” 73.

⁸¹ I have heard this story from my grandmother, who was a village chronicler, over and over again. Today, this story has been penned by scholars and preserved in state government documents. I am narrating this story as I have heard from my grandmother in consultation with the Directorate of Art and Culture, Government of Nagaland and other Naga writers.

plotted to kill him on a community fishing day.⁸² This tale relates the longing of a spinster for a male child to make her life secure. Simultaneously, it portrays the significance of her courage and strength to subvert societal norms. This is a birthing story in which the male progenitor is symbolized by a hornbill. She wished for a son and dared to go beyond the norm by giving birth to and raising an illegitimate son bearing the society's contempt of her actions. "She dared to bear the brunt and challenged her social structure and brought forth a male progeny."⁸³ Longkongla did not give in to the societal norm. However, it has to be understood that on many levels, an illegitimate son encounters ostracization, loss of privileges and is regarded as lower than the other sons born out of wedlock. Still then, it is better to have an illegitimate son than not having any, although, these women remain victims of the dominant masculinist society. The father of Longkongla's son is not identified in the story but symbolized only by the hornbill. He is nameless, which is quite surprising because the male is the most visible figure in the Naga culture in all aspects of life. His name is a very important aspect of his identification in the society, but if circumstances lead to tarnishing his image, he becomes nameless for his own safety and to avoid being shamed. Kechutzar has rightly pointed out that the narrator masks the identity of the father in order to safeguard and protect him from the social and communal rebuke.⁸⁴ The bird, the feather, the hollowed bamboo, the stone, the male baby are all symbols of birthing within a system of patriarchy where

⁸² For the full story, see Directorate of Art and Culture, *Folktales of the Nagas* (Kohima: Government of Nagaland, 1989), 1-4.

⁸³ Kechutzar, "A Discursive Reading of the Oral Traditions: A Tribal Woman's Perspective," 69.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

women always remain the victims. It should be noted that Longkongla is an example for the Naga women to move beyond the boundary of their societal norms.

These oral stories are highly symbolic. Symbols play a significant role in the Naga culture. The Nagas express their socio-cultural and religio-political lives through diverse symbols. Symbols command their daily activities as well as the auspicious occasions related to festivals, worship, longings and celebration. Symbols do the work of divination and mediation too. Women have been powerful mediums in the Naga past, but they also yielded to the power of patriarchy that limited their work of mediation and divination.

Despite the interference of patriarchy in mediation and divination, Naga women diviners persevered. Regarded as *Tsungremkumer* meaning women of God, they mediated between the living and the dead. Often what they divined supported patriarchal norms. Here is one such divination that depicts the reinforcement of the preference for male child in the Naga culture. An ancient woman by the name Chinkokla was a diviner. Those who wanted to send messages to their deceased relatives would go to her, and she would deliver the message and bring back response from the other world. There was a couple who were childless and yearned for children, making sacrifices and sending prayers to the Supreme Being and their ancestors. One day, Chinkokla took a message from the couple and went into a trance. When she returned from her spiritual journey into the land of the dead, she had five seeds in her palm and she gave them to the couple saying that they were from their relatives - a significant blessing for them.⁸⁵ Not long after, they gave birth to five sons. The five seeds were a symbol of five sons. Her

⁸⁵ As told by a village chronicler Bendangangshi Pongen from Ungma village. For more details on trance in the Naga culture see his book *The Religion of the Ao Nagas* (Mokokchung: Bendangangshi, 1990), 10-13; also see Panger Imchen, *Ancient Ao Naga Religion and Culture*, 72.

powerful work of divination and mediation was controlled by the societal norm. She brought the news of the birth of sons and not daughters. Her work became significant only in relation to the dominant culture of her time. As a result, men and women respected Chinkokola because she fulfilled their work.

Another *Tsungremkumer* by the name Ongangla was the most renowned prophetess, a woman of God whom people contacted for help. There is a story that she specifically got involved in. There was a newly married couple living a very happy life. Unfortunately, their happiness was cut short by the premature death of the husband. On his sick bed, he told his dearest wife to remain unmarried and not to commit to any man saying that he will come back from the land of the dead and remarry her. She agreed. She waited for him to return. The waiting days turned to months and years, but he did not come back. She became restless and thought about remarrying. She told her mother-in-law about this, and every time she told her, her mother-in-law would burst into tears and would tell her that her son will return one day as he had promised. Seeing her mother-in-law in grief, she agreed to wait. Years passed in vain, so she persuaded her mother-in-law to contact the soul of her husband through Ongangla to ask him whether he was coming back to remarry his beloved wife, otherwise, she would like to marry someone else. The wife sent this lyrical message to him:

*Kongro ngangpha odita,
Kujum jangazapong tevijepya teline,
Sendi dangkhu among war shilanglasang,
Mengangphaiang ataa lidene,
Atali mere kongro ngangpha odine*⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Bendangangshi Pongen, *The Religion of the Ao Nagas*, 12.

Interpretation:

My mother-in-law weeps when I say I wish to remarry. If my husband is coming back from the land of the dead, I need not remarry but wait for him. I waited, and he did not come back. Therefore, let me remarry.⁸⁷

Ongangla took this message and contacted the soul of the dead, and he sent back a message to his wife:

*Denkha limkhu Panger Jongpongchi yim
Sakhu tera yuyim,
Bendanger amonger medem, Dipu temlen
Ayir temlen nanem batem leni yarang
Tanaben soa limier
Panger Jongpongchir kimakhu yarjaya line,
Yar mapang kanone, kujem azungthongja naro
ladang ngangpa oangte sang.*⁸⁸

Interpretation:

In this place comrades are sacrificing mithuns and carrying home heads, even ten. It is like living in a foreign land. In this heaven, the best and most pleasant land, I want to live and even be reborn here. There is so much time in this place for dancing. Tell my beloved wife, most desired flower, to remarry as she wished, because I am not willing to come back from here.⁸⁹

Men rule over women even from the land of the dead.

I have explored stories from the ancient Naga past to show how patriarchy is oppressive towards Naga women, and to rediscover women's power that has been repressed. Also, women have been controlled to limit their work in favor of patriarchy. I now turn to poetry to explore the experiences of Naga women's suffering.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.,13.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

Poetry

Since there is no major literature existing specifically on the policies and practices of childbirth and mothering in the Naga culture, it is difficult to know the effect of these practices on Naga women. Therefore, I turn to poetry because it is in poetry the voices of those who struggle are heard. I find the works of Trinh T. Minh-ha and Monalisa Changkija compelling, particularly because their voices are heard in the own works. As mentioned above, Minh-ha's approach to her works is a helpful methodology for my theological work. She integrates her personal voice into her theoretical projects that is moving, using poetical language. For Minh-ha, poetry is the "place from which many people of colour voice their struggle."⁹⁰ She has no doubt that poetry is the "major voice of the poor and of people of colour."⁹¹ In her own words,

... it can also be the site where language is at its most radical in its refusal to take itself for granted. As feminists have intensely pointed out, women are not only oppressed economically, but also culturally and politically, in the very forms of signifying and reasoning. Language is therefore an extremely important site of struggle. Meaning has to retain its complexities, otherwise it will just be a pawn in the game of power."⁹²

She points out theorists like Julia Kristeva who recognizes that "only in poetic language lies the possibility of revolution."⁹³

The other Asian woman of interest is Monalisa Changkija who is a Naga feminist writer, journalist and poet, who has deep sympathy for the suffering Naga women in all spheres of life, and who has overtly critiqued the dominant Christian doctrines that hold

⁹⁰ Pratibha Parmar and Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Woman, Native, Other: Pratibha Parmar interviews Trinh T. Minh-ha," *Feminist Review* No. 36 (Autumn 1990), 65-74: 69.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

men as the authority over women. She writes intensely from pure practical experiences of women. Changkija takes the reader through the experience of pain and suffering of Naga women through her poems. She writes about her own experience of domestic violence. Memories of the experience of domestic violence are, she writes, “deeply etched in my mind and the pain still in my heart.”⁹⁴ The picture behind the suffering of Naga women is exposed in Changkija’s poem such as this:

“A battered wife
is a living testimony of man’s inability
and fear of inferiority
well-concealed by a
mask of “masculinity”
in a patriarchal society.”⁹⁵

I will bring out the experience of the Naga women’s pain and struggle through her.

Analyzing some of her writing, especially her poems, will dramatize and clarify the situation of Naga women. Changkija’s powerful poems, particularly from her book, *Weapons of Words on Pages of Pain*, clearly depict the condition of Naga women. She is empathizing and crying out along with women who are suffering in a discriminatory society. It is personal for her because she says, “I am a woman.”⁹⁶ Alongla P. Aier, a Naga woman scholar, commenting on Changkija’s book, *Weapons of Words on Pages of Pain* said, “Writing poetry often involves the risk of exposing one’s vulnerability, as one attempts to bare the soul. Monalisa has taken this risk. Yet in so doing, we too are made to feel the more painful side of life and the courage to rise above this struggle.”⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Monalisa Changkija, *Weapons of Words on Pages of Pain* (Dimapur, Nagaland: Write-on Publication, 1993) [np].

⁹⁵ Changkija, *Weapons of Words on Pages of Pain*, 8.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, [np].

⁹⁷ Alongla P. Aier, “Back Cover” in Changkija, *Weapons of Words on Pages of Pain*.

Changkija exposes her own vulnerability, writing her poems in a context of pain, violence, and insult of Naga women.

Changkija's poems expose the provisional status of Naga women in the society that begins at home. A Naga woman is seen to have only a temporary place in the home of her parents because she is assumed to be transferred to her future husband's family. Even there, she remains the shadow of her husband. She is defined by the imagery of a leaf that finds its place wherever it eventually lands.⁹⁸ It is neither a permanent place for her nor is it her space, but she is like a leaf which rots where it is being blown by the wind.⁹⁹ Along the same line, among the Kyong Nagas, there is a saying, *eloe ekum jo limonro esua tiiv* meaning "a woman's life is like that of a tender leaf" portraying the perception that a woman's identity and place in the society is established only in connection with the husband, who is seen as a permanent member of a village, clan and family.¹⁰⁰ Sumi Nagas perceive women in the way their traditional saying goes, "Women are the left-out fragments of meat on a butcher's cutting board."¹⁰¹ Lovely Awomi James interprets this: "women are not at all important, or women are insignificant like the

⁹⁸ Hümtsoe, "Kyong Women: Issues and Challenges," 29.

⁹⁹ Nungshitula, *The Naga Images of the Human Being: A Resource for a Contemporary Theological Anthropology*, 39.

¹⁰⁰ Hümtsoe, "Kyong Women: Issues and Challenges," 29f.

¹⁰¹ Lovely Awomi James, "Eco-centered Tradition of the Sumi Nagas: Retrieving Eco-spiritual Insights for Today" in Razouselie Lasetso, Marlene Ch. Marak, and Yangkahao Vashum ed. *Tribal Ecology: A Search for Ecological Values from the Cultures and Practices of the Tribes of North East India*. Tribal Study Series No. 20 (Jorhat Assam: Eastern Theological College, 2012), 210.

wastes to be brushed off or thrown.¹⁰² In such a context, Changkija's poems become relevant. One of her poems talks about the end of the road for Naga women. It goes,

“...
Penny-less Wives, and
Son-less Mothers
have their
destinies written
on invisible
tongues of flames.”¹⁰³

This poem illustrates that mothers without sons carry the heaviest burdens of Naga society's sexist norms. Failing to bear a son leads a woman into economic poverty. Without a son she has no benefactor or protector. Her identity does not matter for her family, her clans-people and villagers; both she and her destiny are, as the poem states, “invisible.” In fact, she has no identity. She is the reason for the ill fate of her daughters. Suitors are hard to find for her daughters because she has not given birth to sons to support her daughters. These mothers are the constant scorn of the society even of their own women counterparts who have born sons. Their destinies are sealed to doom. These son-less mothers carry the double burden for being born a woman.

The superiority of men in the Naga patriarchal society is held high and strong. Their religious tradition and cultural customs sanction this hegemonic system. Challenging the male in any way will have serious repercussions on the women because men fear to lose. They will do anything to keep their place in the society. The quest for

¹⁰² Ibid. Lovely Awomi James' interviews with Tozuli (60 years) (Ex-Women Leader), Thilixu Village, Dimapur on May 20, 1999 and Visheni (Ex-Women Leader), Shokhevi Village in Nagaland on May 4, 1999.

¹⁰³ Changkija, *Weapons of Words on Pages of Pain*, 3.

justice is a far cry for the women in the Naga society. They think about giving up the life they live now.

“Walking alone
Through the
passage of time
and falling into
the abyss of
the irredeemable
would be paradise,
than living in
“sacred matrimony”
with anyone who sees no
difference between
animals, servants and wives.”¹⁰⁴

Women have become victims of unspeakable violence. These women are trapped in a marriage considered sacred because they are not treated the way sacredness denotes.

They are put within the category of animals and servants. It is better for them to fall into the abyss of no return. They think that death would be bliss. These women carry untold grieving souls in their Naga households where injustice and discrimination reigns.

Women see and know it, but this vicious cycle is beyond their control. They talk of the deep burrows on their brows and say that “they are the ashes of a girlhood singed at the stakes of violence,....”¹⁰⁵ Their premature aging is a sign of their struggle and pain.

“I stand in sorrow, swallow my tears
to strip away my facades,
a few, no, not all.
I must, my sanity’s at stake.
.....
Now I see, decades of new years
will not alter all that within us.
We will remain the way we were.
You, the man on the pedestal,

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 9.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 17.

I, the woman under it.
But even if you emphasized
what society would have women be,
I being what I am, and
imprisoned within an invisible cell,
shall not be stilled.
I know I will pay
for what I have to say.
But I must write against
unseen chains,
on these pages of pain
or pay more in silence.”¹⁰⁶

Naga women have long ago recorded the violence against them in every vein of their bodies but today, they are penning them so that others can read them and know their situation. These words are not simply recorded but with pain and dignity. These poems written page after page is not enough. They are written to speak to people to never allow such injustices to happen. Naga women are determined to come out of their invisible prison cells. They can no longer remain there. Eyingbeni Hümtsoe states that their experience of sorrow is not just an emotional hurt but the pain of the innermost being. “It includes the conscious dimension, which communicates the intensity of disappointment caused by unfair circumstances of being ignored, of being treated as the ‘other’, and of being considered less than who they really are; whether uttered or borne silently within her.”¹⁰⁷ She argues that this sorrow dreams of friendship, peaceful relationship, and an egalitarian community. They are broken but their spirits are not. These women whom all children call “mother” and society defines “wife” are broken, bruised and bent but their

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 14.

¹⁰⁷ Hümtsoe, “Women’s Experience of “Sorrow” as a Source for Doing Theology from Naga Perspective,” 3.

spirits continue to live.¹⁰⁸ Naga society may look at these women as wives but they are the ones who bring life into the world through their bodies. They can be rightly called the mothers of humanity. Every human being that creeps on this earth is a child of a mother, a woman. The man who oppresses women is the son of a mother who is also a daughter and sister. Without this mother, a person cannot be. In the midst of all the violence, silences and pain Naga women have the courage to rise above these.

Words of these strong women who are suppressed within their cultural contexts and the male attitudes in the patriarchal society are not anything new. These women are strong; they feel the pain of violence, suppression and discrimination; they know what is right and wrong; they know that they are being wronged; they are aware that equal rights are denied them and they are without power because of the dominance of the male authority. It is rigid, unyielding and merciless that they are forced into the inertia of status quo. They will write the “weapons of words on pages of pain.”

In her poem “At my funeral”¹⁰⁹ Changkija expressed the assumptions, pretensions and lying of those who attend her imaginary funeral of a woman. The tradition and norms

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 5.

¹⁰⁹ “At my funeral
They beat their breast
and wept.
While my lifeless body
laid there,....

The right people
said the right things
but failed to say anything right;
no, not one of them.
They were, after all,
never there
when I was here.
And those who were there
when I was here
wished me elsewhere,
so they would not,

are well preserved but the dead are dead, and these dead women cannot retort against the eulogies and rites performed for them. They know too well the fallaciously hyperbolic renderings that these men proffer. This rich literature describes the imagination of women about their own death. Their powerful imagination points to the indestructibility of their life. This further reveals the concept that the dead can hear and know. The truth must be said before the dead lest the dead intercept.¹¹⁰ Although her body is still, she knows that nothing right is uttered at her death. This conception illustrates the unspeakable scenario of nothing but the truth about her and her experiences that should be spoken at her funeral. It is unthinkable and fearful for the oppressors to have the truth spoken. The dominant power would prefer a silent funeral for the dead woman instead of speaking nothing but the truth about her experiences because it would reveal the stark suffering that women endure. But the dead are not dead.

Conclusion

Despite their suffering in a patriarchal culture for centuries, some Naga women are determined to speak about their pain and pen them. Powerful women of the Naga past have contributed to the welfare of their society in the religious, social, political and economic spheres of life. Such Naga women can be traced to the pre-Christian era.¹¹¹ A

could not say
anything right.”
Changkija, *Monsoon Mourning* (Dimapur, Nagaland: Write-on Publication, 2007), 27.

¹¹⁰ The Nagas believed in and practised conversation between the dead and the living. If the living had not performed a rite well then the dead will come to them in dreams and tell them what they had failed in, and to redo it right. The next day the living would perform the task for the dead.

¹¹¹ J.P. Mills, *The Ao Nagas*, 211f.

rediscovery of those women and their strength and wisdom will supplant the age old activities that still exist in the present time.

Massive changes need to be enacted within the traditional Naga culture because ongoing gender bias in Nagaland is destructive in every aspect to the Naga people in general and Naga women in particular. In the twenty first century, the Nagas are no longer an isolated sub-culture. Nagaland is part of the global community, and gender based discrimination is intolerable.¹¹² The need to examine and deconstruct the birthing system that prioritizes the son over daughters in the Naga culture is necessary.

Continuing to prioritize son over daughter reinforces abuse and denigration of women within the family and the larger society. What Ren Ozukum, a Naga woman theologian rightly said has to be retold, “A baby girl is a sister, wife, mother, daughter, friend. When you kill a girl you kill many others.”¹¹³ The irrelevant patriarchal legislation should be replaced by new and relevant legislation that encompasses the whole Naga society, particularly a legislation that liberates and supports women. While pursuing the liberation for Naga women, Toshimenla Jamir is doubtful that change will come soon because of the rigidity of the patriarchal mind-set in the Naga society. She laments, “any attempt in this direction would mean undoing the very foundation on which Naga society stood for generations. How responsive would an all-male legislature be in engaging with

¹¹² One striking example of fighting against gender based violence is found in Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDun’s, *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity Worldwide*. Irshad Manji reviews the book saying that it “tackles atrocities and indignities from sex trafficking to maternal mortality, from obstetric fistulas to acid attacks, and absorbing the fusillade of horrors can feel like an assault of its own.” Irshad Manji, “Changing Lives,” *The New York Times* 17 September 2009.

¹¹³ Ren Ozukum, *Facebook*, 2013.

the demand of the Naga women for distributive justice?”¹¹⁴ But the work of emancipation must continue.

Patriarchy is deeply rooted in the arrogance of the men responsible for its perpetuation and its detrimental effects on women. Women *consciousnessraising*¹¹⁵ will prove transformational when there is a parallel *consciousnessraising* among their male counterparts regarding gender stereotypes. Only then will gender justice be attainable in the Naga culture. The state government needs to shed its masculinist attitude and create new approaches to bring constructive changes to the corrosive customary laws that are still in existence today.¹¹⁶ The birthing rights of Naga women needs to be addressed urgently, and the scholarly feminist works and personal voices of Naga women written in the form of poems have to be claimed as resources.

Moreover, the reinterpretation of the traditional and Christian narratives by women themselves is necessary not only for Naga women but also for the Naga Christians in entirety. Women’s storytelling of their experiences in their own voices and their version of the stories of their life and of other women become helpful tools for the transformation of their own lives and their society.

Since Nagaland is a predominantly Christian state with all the leaders identifying as Christians, it is a travesty that their theology is not genuinely reflected in their praxis.

¹¹⁴ Jamir, “Engendering Public Space in Naga Society: Tradition and Modernity,” 20.

¹¹⁵ The term *consciousnessraising* was suggested by a Naga Biblical scholar and theologian late Dr. Renty Keitzar in 1992. This term was adapted by a group of Naga theological students who decided to follow God’s call by going around the state of Nagaland bringing the message of justice and liberation through music. Jantzen also talks about *consciousness-raising* in *Becoming Divine*, 98.

¹¹⁶ Article 5 of the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women needs to be strongly implemented. Article 5 “holds government responsible for taking steps to modify practices based on stereotypes about women’s role as well as beliefs about women’s inferiority.” See Mohini Chatterjee, *Women’s Human Rights* (Jaipur: Aavishkar Publishers, 2005), 86.

It is my steadfast belief that these so-called Christian leaders have a moral imperative to act upon and resolve this gender oppression according to the true meaning of Christianity and Jesus Christ. In the words of Saint Paul's letter to the Galatians: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, *there is neither male nor female*; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."¹¹⁷ This is the truth that has yet to be found among the Naga people.

¹¹⁷ Galatians 3:28.

CHAPTER THREE

SUFFERING ON THE CROSS: NAGA WOMEN, JÜRGEN MOLTSMANN AND SERENE JONES

In this chapter, I will discuss the Naga women's cross in relation to Jürgen Moltmann's theology of suffering. I will show how Moltmann's theology of the cross connects well with the Naga women's understanding of the suffering on the cross, and how it is relevant in giving meaning to the Naga women's cross. I will then examine Serene Jones' maternal reinterpretation of Moltmann's Christology. This will give the Naga women the avenue to see new possibilities of moving forward from their situation.

Naga Context

Nagaland is a Christian state that is more than ninety five percent Christian in a country that is less than three percent Christian.¹ No other religions have had any major impact on the Naga people or have dominated the minds and philosophy of the Nagas. Prominent Naga religious leaders like V.K. Nuh and others have stated that the Naga social habits and cultural patterns differ greatly from the rest of India. According to Nuh, "for centuries no Naga was attracted to Hinduism, Islam or Buddhism."² No other Indian ethnic groups and philosophies influenced the Nagas.³ No other religion but Christianity appealed to the Naga people, and they embraced it leaving their tribal Naga traditional

¹ Tezenlo Thong, "'Thy Kingdom Come': The Impact of Colonization and Proselytization on Religion Among the Nagas," in *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 45 no 6 (2010): 595-609.

² V.K. Nuh, *My Native Country: The Land of the Nagas* (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 2002), 23.

³ Imchen, *Ancient Ao Naga Religion and Culture*, 153.

religion. This is a rare situation among the rest of the states in India. The Naga Christians are the result of the advent of the Gospel of Christ brought by the North American Baptist missionaries in the late nineteenth century.

A prominent Naga political leader and theologian said, “The new faith had taken root in the Naga soil and after a few years, the gospel expanded far and wide, throughout Nagaland.”⁴ The rapid spread of the gospel is a clear indication of their strong adherence to Christianity. Once converted to Christianity, the Nagas did not waver but kept the faith. Even today, in all circumstances, their religious identity as Christian comes first and all things are considered under this belief. The state of Nagaland thus employs the slogan “Nagaland for Christ.”⁵ As the Gospel of Christ flourished in the land, churches began to be built everywhere, particularly at the center of each village. A.

Bendangyabang Ao, a Naga theologian rightly pointed out that the church stood as the central place of identity and a platform for the solidarity and integrity of the Nagas.⁶ It became a strong social and religious institution as well.⁷ Therefore, the problem of the state vis-a-vis people is implicitly a theological problem. The life of the Nagas revolves around their Christian beliefs, and they understand who they are within this Christian identity.

⁴ Bendangangshi, *Glimpses of Naga History* (Mokokchung, Nagaland: The Author, 1993), 21. For the Naga historian Bendangangshi, the most significant result of the Christian faith in Nagaland was the eradication of slavery in Nagaland. But he is not without criticism. He laments that the progress of the Christian spiritual life of the people led to the disappearance of precious cultural heritage of the Nagas. The missionaries warned the believers to part with their old culture condemning them as sinful, godless and useless, and adopt the culture they brought. See Bendangangshi, *Glimpses of Naga History*, 19-22.

⁵ The impact of Christianity was so powerful on the Naga people that they chose their motto “Nagaland for Christ.” Thus, it became a national slogan. See V.K. Nuh, *My Native Country: The Land of the Nagas* (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 2002), 24.

⁶ A. Bendangyabang Ao, *History of Christianity in Nagaland: Social Change 1872-1972* (Bangalore: Shalom Ministry Publication, 2004), 176.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 175.

In all their works, the Naga Christians invoke the presence of Jesus Christ. Given that Naga theology is highly Christocentric, the exploration of the significance of the person and work of Jesus Christ is the key to addressing the problems Naga women face. Naga women deeply identify with Jesus Christ as the one who bears life and brings life to all. So, the issue of childbirth for Naga women cannot be addressed apart from an examination of Christian theology because Christology is central to the Naga Christians. Therefore, the next section will describe the theology of Naga women, and the story of their understanding of the life of Jesus, and their relationship with Jesus.

Naga Women's Understanding of Jesus and their Christological Narrative

Within this Naga context, three important theological themes emerge for Naga women. First is their embrace of Jesus as the incarnate son. Second is their cross-centered theology. Third is their understanding of God's nature. In discussing these themes, I will draw particularly on Naga women theologians, but also reference a few male theologians who advocate for Naga women's emancipation from their oppressive situation. Following the discussion of the three Christological narratives of the Naga women, this introduction to Naga women's theologies will provide background for engaging Jürgen Moltmann's theology of the cross and a comparison between Moltmann and Naga theologies. Since Moltmann's theology of the cross has profoundly influenced feminist theologians, I will also explore one of the most compelling feminist theological interpretations of Moltmann, investigating Serene Jones' rereading of Moltmann's theology of the cross from a feminist perspective. Jones' interpretation opens the possibility of creatively

imagining birth and life in the midst of death. We begin here with the Naga women, however.

Jesus the Incarnate Son

According to Naga women, Jesus Christ is the perfect embodied revelation of God. He is the Savior and Redeemer, the incarnate Son of God, who understands their suffering and lives in solidarity with them. Naga women make sense of their suffering through the narratives of Christian discourses. God speaks and acts in the world through the person and work of Jesus Christ. K. Terhüja, a Naga woman theologian, asserts that Nagas have no voice but the voice of God in Jesus Christ.⁸ She affirms the humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ. Jesus was human and he demonstrated his humanity by living on earth like any other human being. On the other hand, Jesus was divine by showing that he was sinless, holy, and set apart to do the work of God, and having authority over all life and the universe. His rule is eternal, and this rule begins in a person's life.

Terhüja's emphasis on the significance of Jesus' rule beginning in a person's life is demonstrated in her own words: "To know and experience this existentially, is to know the truth and to be set free."⁹ This incarnate Son of God came to proclaim the desires of God on earth, to move the believers to help the poor and oppressed and to make known to all the love of God.¹⁰ Terhüja strongly argues that life without Jesus is dehumanizing as it destroys the image of God in human beings, and she fears that such condition creates

⁸ K. Terhüja, "The Biblical Concept of the Anointed One," in V.K. Nuh (compiled), *Crusade on Naga Morality* (Kohima: Research Wing, CNBC, 1996), 20.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

conflicts in all areas of life.¹¹ She even believes that human beings lose empowerment, particularly, women's empowerment.¹² She strongly proclaims that without Jesus people's lives are fragmented. It makes sense because the Naga Christians strongly affirm their acceptance of Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior.

The Naga Christian women believe that having Jesus in their life will prevent them from destroying the image of God. In the midst of this tension, they struggle to understand why they continue to be dehumanized even when they intimately cling to Jesus. Despite this struggle, they still hold dear to their heart the God who has become flesh, who has become one of them and who dwells with them. A Naga male theologian sympathetic to the Naga women, discusses the relevance of Jesus in their context, saying that Jesus needs to be thoroughly understood within the Naga culture, as one of them.¹³ Even though, this theologian is sympathetic to the women, he is simply referring to the patriarchal culture. This uncritical attempt to contextualize the event of incarnation may be one of the reasons why the Naga women feel dehumanized even when they are close to Jesus. The danger here is the longing of the Nagas for Jesus to be one of them in the patriarchal Naga context where men are the privileged group in the society. They do not indicate clearly why Jesus is not fully relevant to their context. It appears that these theologians are reading Jesus from their patriarchal lens. They may see clearly who Jesus is for them when they use an inclusive lens.

¹¹ Ibid., 25. The notion of the *imago dei* is very important for the Naga Christians. They strongly believe in humans created in the image of God. For Terhüja, the loss of empowerment for women is due to the loss of the image of God.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Renthly Keitzar, *In Search of Relevant Gospel Message*, 25.

The Naga women believe that in the action of Jesus Christ, sin and the suffering of humanity is removed and the loving nature of the divine is revealed. They believe that in sacrificing God's beloved son, God illuminates the divine love for all humanity. They regard themselves as the least deserving of the atonement of the Son of God but they only live by sheer grace. They are taught to bear the suffering they face because God suffered for them. They remain indebted and dependent on God believing that walking the way of suffering is to be Christ's followers. To live a life independent of God's work is understood as sin. Their sole dependence on God's grace also helps them to believe in shared faith within their communities. When a person is healed and renewed physically, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually she or he sees the responsibility for the transformation of the evil structures and to care for others. The Naga Christians believe that this is their response to Jesus Christ.

The Naga Christians believe in the incarnate son of God as the victor who conquers the world of evil and brings deliverance to all people. They emphasize the faithfulness of the people to share in what they perceive as the victory of Christ over evil. This sharing in the victory does not give them credit because victory belongs to God alone. The sheer grace and mercy they receive from God moves them to be faithful and be triumphant. This notion of being faithful and triumphant has led them to hold a theological position that they will be delivered for being faithful. This position emphasizes that severe judgement will come upon those who are unfaithful. The unfaithful are not saved by Jesus, who is not only the victor but also the Savior. Jesus is the single conqueror who defeats death, injustice, and evil. They hold the understanding of the separation of the sheep and goats on judgment day as recorded in the gospels. To

believe in the Christ incarnate constitutes an individual's personal faith and makes an impact upon decision-making. These believers are destined by their faith to reap what they sow.

The Naga women hope in their future with Christ. Christ's incarnation gives them hope that goes beyond their human experiences to a hope that human existence has meaning and possibility. It is hope that gives them a clear understanding that God is a God of new things, and that all things are possible with God. Throughout the centuries of Christian worship God has revealed God's self to be a God who makes all things new, possible and redeemed. The Naga Christians hope that God will come again into the world, and into their lives, to make known to them that God can bring about newness, making the seemingly impossible, possible.

The Naga women understand incarnation as hope in the midst of suffering. They hope in the God who was embodied, enfleshed, and incarnated in the birth of an infant, who represents the symbol of what is new and possible. This hope is about finding a way to live truthfully in the midst of all the problems of life with a faith that continues to see possibility when what seems ahead is blurry and uncertain. These women believe that God will be ever vigilant in seeing their situations, and knowing their yearnings for a better life. The central focus in all this, for them is Jesus Christ, and the hope of eternal life. Thus, the Naga Christian women live out their faith by their theological interpretation of the incarnation and by embracing the traditional atonement theories.

Cross-Centered Theology

From the earliest centuries until today, Christians have adopted various models for interpreting and explaining the salvific work of God in the world that culminated on the cross. The theological interpretation of the cross among the Naga Christians is not altogether different from the dominant atonement theories articulated in the Western thought. They embrace the model that God sent God's only Son into the world to die for the sins of humanity. It reflects atonement theories that identify with the Anselmian model of substitutionary atonement, largely espoused in the West. Mark Heim, a Baptist minister and professor of Christian Theology, in his development of a constructive theology of the cross has explained the various atonement theories that began to develop in early Christianity, in the New Testament and systematized by theologians in the medieval period. In his strong critique of the traditional understanding of the cross and the dark and horrible belief of sacrifice, Heim defines substitutionary atonement as "the belief that God's redemptive plan revolves around offering an innocent Jesus for punishment and death in place of a guilty humanity, allowing a just God to practice mercy by saving sinners whose debt had been paid by God's suffering on their behalf."¹⁴ Also, Heim observes that despite the dominance of substitutionary theologies in the post medieval West, different parts of all other atonement theories have been woven through the Christian tradition.¹⁵ Heim, thus shows that "Christ can be at once a sacrifice, a teacher, a victor, and a healer."¹⁶ This interweaving of the atonement theories is seen in

¹⁴ S. Mark Heim, *Saved From Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmanns Publishing Company, 2006), 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

the Naga Christians' understanding of Jesus Christ. For them, Jesus Christ is at once the teacher, victor, healer, sacrifice, friend and savior.

The Naga women's embrace of Jesus Christ reaches its climax in their strong affirmation of and belief in the cross. They believe that Jesus stands in their place to take away their sins, believing that Jesus' suffering on the cross is real and that their suffering is nothing compared to what Jesus suffered for their sake. These Christians base their belief strongly on John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."¹⁷ God willingly allowed God's son to be sacrificed for the salvation of the world. He is, for them, the Self-sacrificial one who conquers evil and is on their side, in solidarity with their own suffering, feeling their pain and bearing them. His grace is sufficient for them.¹⁸

For Jesus to die was to spill his blood and be crucified on the cross so that the sinners would be redeemed and be set free from the clutch of Satan, who constantly lurks behind the believers to tempt them into sin, always on the prowl waiting for someone to devour.¹⁹ Christ's death is the one sacrifice, which once and for all washed away human sins. Naga women believe that God is a compassionate God because God sent God's only son into the world. Only a God whose heart is filled with love could willingly give up

¹⁷ *New Revised Standard Version*, 1993. I have not used inclusive language in this verse to retain its originality, and in order to show the prevalence of dominant patriarchal structure that ruled over women for centuries.

¹⁸ Jesus says, "My grace is sufficient for you." 2 Corinthians 12:9 *NRSV*.

¹⁹ I Peter 5:8.

even God's very own son. They exclaim in both preaching and prayer, "What love is this! How amazing this heart of love is!"²⁰

The women embrace contradiction in their understanding of God the parent and the Son. They fail to see the God whom they regard as compassionate has also sent the only child to die on the cross. A Naga theologian, speaking in the context of a corrupt Naga society discussed the mission of Jesus: "[H]e came proclaiming the Kingdom of God and living a life of humble service. He died for us, becoming sin and a curse in our place, and whom God vindicated by raising him from the dead."²¹ These women believe that they are suffering wrongly but must accept the suffering because to follow Christ involves suffering, patience and endurance. They believe that God will surely bring justice to them and that, one day, their suffering will be alleviated, while their oppressors will be punished. The timing of this punishment remains unknown, but it will occur on the last day of mortal time. This is the hope of salvation that keeps them going and yet simultaneously trapped in false hope.

These women cannot see the freedom and justice due here and now. Such false hope is reinforced in them through teachings that continue to keep them in their oppressive place. For example,

Jesus conquered the kingdoms of this world by the way of the cross. And today, all who would follow him must also go by the way of the cross. The Christ of Calvary does not walk up Calvary's road with ten thousand angels, but with a cross. And today, he walks upon our ground with a cross. We too, must follow him with our crosses.²²

²⁰ Changkija's poem on the sacrifice of Jesus "Sentence So Severe" expresses this better: "A sentence so severe, a sacrifice so supreme. [T]his was the decree not to condemn, but to save, emanating from a love unconditional, uncompromising and complete." See Changkija, *Monsoon Mourning*, 32.

²¹ Takatemjen, "A Study of the Kingdom of God with Special Reference to Luke 4:16-30," 50; L. Bizo, "Reconciliation and Human Existence," in V. K. Nuh, *Crusade on Naga Morality*, 69.

²² *Ibid.*, 55.

Naga women are blinded by the cross story and future salvation.²³ They are trained to rationalize their own victimhood through the story of Jesus's crucifixion. There is absolutely uncritical acceptance of the suffering and death of Jesus. An ordained minister said, "The Good News of Jesus Christ is the hope of the world. It is the most powerful weapon to conquer the darkness of the world to save mankind [sic]."²⁴ Though the Naga Christians believe in the self-giving of Christ for all, women and girls are never treated as equal with men in their culture. The inferior treatment of Naga women in their culture is reinforced by their uncritical acceptance of the sacrificial offering of Jesus Christ on the cross. The Naga Christians have interpreted the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross as obedience to God. Jesus willingly walks the way to the cross and gives himself up for the sake of humanity. He does this because of his compassionate heart and an exemplary obedience to his parent. The Naga Christians, particularly, the women continue to express the amazement at his self-giving death, "What love is this? Who are we to receive such love?" They feel themselves worthless before God and men.²⁵ They have been subtly forced to accept their weakness and worthlessness in the eyes of the society. Their hearts cannot comprehend such profound love of Jesus as they have understood it. This is a concern for the Naga Christians, which requires a reassessment of their notion of the hope of salvation.

²³ Phuveyi Dozo, "Prophetic Role of the Church," in V. K. Nuh, *Crusade on Naga Morality*, 18. At a three-day meet of the Naga Ordained Ministers on the theme "Crusade on Naga Morality, P. Dozo called on them to return to the cross on their knees for repentance.

²⁴ L. Suohie Mhasi, "Witnessing the Truth in our Society," in V. K. Nuh, *Crusade on Naga Morality*, 45.

²⁵ In her poem "Sentence So Severe," Changkija says it best: "Tell me, Lord, why do you believe I am worth that sentence so severe that sacrifice so supreme of a Sinless Lamb, Your Only Begotten Son? Tell me, Lord, why do you believe I deserve deliverance when I would not tear myself from the offerings of the flesh?" See Changkija, *Monsoon Mourning*, 33.

Naga women are being nourished and healed by the cross story. They feel a strong positive connection with Jesus in the midst of Christ's passion; yet, their understandings of the cross and its benefits conflict with their actual lives. There is a Naga expression that makes this clear: "the living say that the dead have left but the dead say that they have not come." This means that the Naga women believe in the redemption on the cross, but in reality, they experience suffering, not redemption. Their lives are dictated by the teachings and pronouncements of the religious patriarchy.

In 1995, a group of Naga Ordained Ministers came together in a conference to address the issue on Naga life principles with special emphasis on the need for rooting morality in Jesus Christ and His Gospel. In their concluding statement they stated, "The message of the crucified Christ inspires us to make sacrifices for justice and liberation."²⁶ But in their work for justice and liberation, the emancipation of Naga women from patriarchal oppression was never included. One of the speakers during this conference said, "The concern for the human beings are of utmost relevance to our society today because we are involved in the task of removing sub-human conditions of living,..."²⁷ These men have discussed holistic salvation, political salvation, human rights, among other things, but they neglected to address the concern for Naga women's rights and salvation.²⁸ Denial of justice and rights to women in the Naga culture is found clearly in the near-absence of women in electoral politics, and the massive resistance to a move to

²⁶ V.K. Nuh, *Crusade on Naga Morality*, 115.

²⁷ Piano Pani, "Witnessing the Truth in Society," in V.K. Nuh, *Crusade on Naga Morality*, 28-29.

²⁸ "Appendix: In Search of a Theological Statement," in V.K. Nuh, *Crusade on Naga Morality*, 109-110.

reserve a third of seats in urban local bodies for women.²⁹ The same group of ordained ministers and theologians proclaimed,

The message of the resurrection gives us hope in the midst of hopelessness challenging us to wake up to action with courage and confidence. This message should be preached not only in words and statements, but also through programmes, actions and campaigns.³⁰

Nearly two decades after this proclamation, Naga women continue to struggle still clinging to the resurrection hope.

The theological understanding of the Naga Christians and their treatment of women is a paradox. Shitio Shitiri, a political science professor, while addressing the status of women in India and particularly in Nagaland, expressed his sadness about the condition of women, whom he believes to be the noblest of God's creatures on earth. He lamented the treatment women receive at the hands of men in the male-dominated chauvinistic society in India. He admitted that gender-related socio-economic biases are still in existence, naming the evils that women are experiencing, such as female infanticide, poverty, rape, prostitution, physical domestic violence and other forms of atrocities. He went on to say that "India is the fourth most dangerous country in the world for women, and the worst among the G20 countries" in its treatment of women according

²⁹ "The Gender Faultline in Nagaland," *Nagaland Post*, 24 February 2012. These gender faultlines are said to have been more exposed in Mokokchung, the district where municipal elections with women's reservation were to be first held, and where the opposition first began. Mokokchung district is the home of a major Naga tribe called the Aos, which was the first to convert to Christianity and is perhaps the most advanced in education than any other tribes. It has the highest literacy rate in the state — over 90 per cent for both men and women. But the Ao Senden, the all male apex body of the Ao tribe, has been locked in a riveting battle with the Watsu Mungdang, its women's organisation. The Watsu Mungdang has supported 33 per cent reservation for women and is part of the Joint Action Committee, while the Ao Senden is opposed to it. In 2011, relations between the two organisations hit an unprecedented low when the Ao Senden suspended its women's organisation over differences.

³⁰ "Appendix: In Search of a Theological Statement," 109-110.

to the global poll conducted by Thomas Reuters.³¹ He expressed his surprise at the paradox that India ranks as the country with the maximum number of social legislations for women.³² Ironically, Shitiri, after his lamentation, advises the women, in his concluding remarks, to know their duties and responsibilities towards their family, society and nation.³³ The Christian concept of bearing the cross of suffering is once again imposed upon these Naga women. These women are told once again to stay in their place. They have been living this life for centuries, from which they want to be set free. A Naga woman lawyer Inotoli Zhimomi, denounces the empty and phony rhetoric of the Naga leaders.³⁴ The Naga ministers and theologians need an honest evaluation of their understanding of Christ's teaching and their cultural stance, if they are serious about discussing the Naga life principles grounded in Jesus Christ.

In my assessment, Naga women cling to a theology of the cross that subordinates and denies their very existence. They see redemption on the cross but the Naga culture denies them redemption. The cross is a symbol of hope, power, and life for them. It is important, then, to ask several questions: What is in the cross that is so appealing to Naga women? Why is the cross story healing for them? Do they truly get it? How is it possible then, to help these suffering women discover a clear story of the cross?³⁵ It is critical,

³¹ *Morung Express*, 17 January 2013. Also see, Ariel Zirulnick, "The Five Most Dangerous Countries for Women," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 2011.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Inotoli Zhimomi, "Women Should be Respected," *Morung Express*, 17 January 2013.

³⁵ Serene Jones, knowing the fact of the multiplicity of the cross stories asks the question herself, "how is it possible to offer a clear story to those who suffer?" In addition to offering a clear story, it will be helpful to help these women discover their own cross story, which would work for them. Trying to offer another story would once again be oppressing them – telling them what we offer is clear and fit for them.

then, to revisit the notions of sacrifice that underlies Naga Christology and to include women in the vision of liberation enacted by the cross.

God's Nature

I will discuss God's nature that has been understood in a dualistic manner by exploring the Naga traditional concept of God and the Christian concept of God. The concept of God in Naga Christian theology has remained twofold. From time immemorial, like all the Naga tribes, the Ao Nagas had an awe-inspiring feeling of the Supreme Being who was perceived to be the Creator, Sustainer and the Controller of all things,³⁶ who is conceived as male. He was believed to be both in their midst and away from them.³⁷ O. Alem Ao, a Naga tribal theologian, has undertaken an in depth, critical analysis of the concept of the Supreme Being in the Ao traditional worldview. Ao claims that the Aos conceived the Supreme Being as both transcendent and immanent, who revealed himself through nature.³⁸ They "have very rich terminology for the attributes of God which show the reality of God, the owner of all the universe....He is the friend of men[sic] who helps them in their trouble and blesses their hard work."³⁹ The different names for the Supreme Being are given according to his character and reality. These people perceive the Supreme Being as higher than all the things in the world. This Being

There is a danger of colonialism here. See Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 82.

³⁶ This understanding is similar to the rest of the Naga tribes in Nagaland.

³⁷ The masculine gender "He" is not changed.

³⁸ O. Alem Ao, *Tsungremology: Ao Naga Christian Theology* (Aolijen, Mokokchung: Clark Theological College, 1994), 28.

³⁹ *Ibid.* Although, I am a strong critic of the masculine gender used for God, I have retained the masculine pronoun for the Supreme Being in the manner in which it was narrated.

is responsible for the birth, life and death of a human being. Therefore, he is called *Soba-Tiyaba*.⁴⁰

According to another prominent chronicler of the Naga tradition, *Soba* means ‘give birth to’ and *Tiyaba* means ‘destiner.’ Thus, the Supreme Being is the Destiner of human beings, and their fate whether good or bad, comes from him.⁴¹ Functional names are given to the Supreme Being, and among them three are commonly used. First, the Supreme Being is *Lungskitsüngba*, the one who dwells in the stone house, located high in the sky who is the Destiner and dispenser of life. Second, He is *Meyutsüngba*, who is the Supreme Judge of all humans after their death. Takosüngba, a seasoned pastor and chronicler, before his death, described that the Supreme Judge guards the gate of death, and everything is revealed before him. A commonly used example of standing before the Supreme Judge is this: If a person had stolen a chicken in his/her earthly life, when he/she dies, he/she stands before the Supreme Judge, to determine which way he/she will be sent. As much as the person tries to hide his/her act of stealing, a chicken’s leg would force itself out from his/her pocket.⁴² Nothing could be hidden from the Judge. Everything would be revealed. In order to receive justice from him, people tried to live an honest life while on earth. Third, the Supreme Being is *Lijaba* who indwells the earth and cares for it. These three attributes can be used interchangeably because they refer to one

⁴⁰ Takosungba, a reputed chronicler who was interviewed by the researcher on May 4, 1998 and recorded in her book *The Naga Images of the Human Being: A Resource for a Contemporary Theological Anthropology*, 59-60.

⁴¹ Bendangangshi, interviewed on May 7, 1998, in Nungshitula, *The Naga Images of the Human Being: A Resource for a Contemporary Theological Anthropology*, 60.

⁴² Interview with Takosungba on May 4, 1998, recorded in Nungshitula, *The Naga Images of the Human Being: A Resource for a Contemporary Theological Anthropology*, 60. See A. Wati Longchar, *An Emerging Asian Theology: Tribal Theology, Issue, Method and Perspective* (Jorhat: Tribal Study Centre, 2000), 89-92.

Supreme Being. Among the three attributes of the Supreme Being, *Lijaba* affects the everyday life of the people. He is the source of life, nourishment and reproduction who is closely attached to the earth.

Wati Longchar, a tribal theologian, prefers to use *Lijaba* in his theologizing because of *Lijaba*'s nearness and relationship to the earth. *Li* means "earth," *jaba* means "enter" which means "the one who enters or indwells the earth."⁴³ According to N. Talitemjen Jamir, *Li* means "earth," *Ja* means "creation and care taking," *Ba* means the "male." Hence, He is a male God, who is the creator and caretaker of the earth.⁴⁴ Takosungba agrees with Jamir's interpretation.⁴⁵ Ao has given the interpretation of *Lijaba* from both the *Chungli* and *Mongsen* dialect.⁴⁶ In the *Chungli* interpretation *Li* is *Lima*, meaning "earth" or "country," and *Jaba* is *jajaba*, meaning "walk". It literally means "earth walker." Hence, *Lijaba* means the one who walks upon the earth, visiting humans from time to time.⁴⁷ According to Judisang, an authority in the Naga history of origin, *Lijaba* is the one who walks the earth in disguise to bless people who are hospitable.⁴⁸ Since *Lijaba* is the one who is in touch with humans and close to the earth, the attribute *Lijaba* is preferred for common usage by most Aos. Thus, *Lijaba* is the one who enters the earth, which shows that he is related to the earth; *Lijaba* walks the earth,

⁴³ Longchar, *The Traditional Tribal Worldview and Modernity*, 37.

⁴⁴ Jamir, *Ao Naga-Cultural Heritage*, 15.

⁴⁵ Interview with Takosungba on May 5, 1998, in Nungshitula, *The Naga Images of the Human Being: A Resource for a Contemporary Theological Anthropology*, 61.

⁴⁶ These two are the two major dialects of the Aos. *Chungli* is the common literature and *Mongsen* poetic.

⁴⁷ O. Alem Ao, *Tsüngremology*, 35.

⁴⁸ Interview with Judisang on May 10, 1998 in Nungshitula, *The Naga Images of the Human Being: A Resource for a Contemporary Theological Anthropology*, 61.

which indicates his closeness to the earth; *Lijaba* creates, blesses and takes care of the earth, which shows his attachment to humanity and the whole earth.

Lijaba is considered to be more commonly known and embraced by the Nagas because of his intimate connection to earth. According to Longchar, the Aos observed three days of *anempong*⁴⁹ annually to honor *Lijaba*. They called this *Lijaba mong* meaning “*Lijaba’s Day*.” This is observed in the month of March/April which is the Aos’ sowing season.⁵⁰ Ao suggests that it is the month of May.⁵¹ It is believed that on this day *Lijaba* enters the earth along with the seeds to be sown and rises again after three moons together with the crops.⁵² This is a holy observation. On this occasion priests will initiate the sacrifices, and nobody tills the earth. Slaves are free from work on this day. Every family puts *tsünpet songojong*⁵³ on the door of their house. People go from house to house revelling, singing and dancing.⁵⁴ The timing and duration of *Lijaba’s Day* may differ slightly among the writers and chroniclers, because of the difference in timing among the various tribal communities according to their geographic locations. However, the season, time and celebration of the practice contain the same meaning. *Lijaba* performs the earth entering annually in order to recreate and rejuvenate the land.

⁴⁹ The word *anempong* cannot be expressed sufficiently in any language. Therefore, the closest meaning could be *taboo* in English and *genna* in Assamese.

⁵⁰ Longchar, *The Traditional Tribal Worldview and Modernity*, 37.

⁵¹ Ao, *Tsüngremology*, 59-60.

⁵² Longchar, *The Traditional Tribal Worldview and Modernity*, 37, cf. Ao, *Tsüngremology*, 59f.

⁵³ Genesis 12: 22. *Tsünpet songojong* refers to the hyssop leaves in the Hebrew Bible.

⁵⁴ Interview with Takosüngba on May 6, 1998 in Nungshitula, *The Naga Images of the Human Being: A Resource for a Contemporary Theological Anthropology*, 63.

This is the picture of the conception of God in the Naga worldview. The God who is the Creator, Destiner, Controller and Supreme Judge of the universe is conceived hand in hand with the God who enters the earth and lives with humanity – a God exercising his supremacy seated high in his pedestal, and a God who comes to the level of human beings and creatures.

Similar dual concept of God is seen among the contemporary Naga Christians. Naga Christians believe simultaneously in the God of classical theism who cannot suffer, and in the God who suffers in Jesus Christ. The Naga Christians are both theistic and cross-centered from the time they accepted Christianity as their religion. This does not mean that the Nagas believe in two gods, but their dual understanding lies within their concept of God. Since the pre-Christian Naga traditional belief system was deeply rooted in theism, it is possible that when Christianity was introduced, the deep rooted traditional religion easily tied in with the traditional Christian theism.

The dualistic concept of the nature of God is seen in their firm belief that God is the Creator of the universe,⁵⁵ all-powerful, all-perfect, fearful and infinite as opposed to Jesus Christ as the Son of God who gave his life and suffered on the cross for humanity. The all-powerful God stands in complete detachment to human creatureliness, and the human qualities of absolute helplessness, worthlessness, frailty and finitude. This God cannot be angered and is unapproachable. Humans are helpless without God's help and so they present their plea before the heavenly God for all their needs. The Naga

⁵⁵ One of the Naga tribes called the Sumi Nagas understand God as Alhou-u which means Creator. They understand this God as the sole creator and originator of all life and the rest of creation. They perceive this God as the ground of all existence. See Lovely Awomi James, "Eco-centered Tradition of the Sumi Nagas: Retrieving Eco-spiritual Insights for Today," in Razouselie Lasetso, Marlene Ch. Marak, and Yangkahao Vashum ed. *Tribal Ecology: A Search for Ecological Values from the Cultures and Practices of the Tribes of North East India*. Tribal Study Series No. 20 (Jorhat Assam: Eastern Theological College, 2012), 205.

Christians try to live an upright life lest the anger of this God falls upon them. Out of fear of retribution from this God they try to live a good life.

On the other hand, the Naga Christians firmly believe that God who came in Jesus Christ lived with humanity and gave his life for their sake and suffered on the cross. The pre-Christian Nagas were ardent sacrificers. They believed that they were surrounded by spirits – both good and evil. Therefore, they realized that sacrifice was required to appease the spirits. They were always ready to sacrifice in order to express gratitude for the blessings they received from the benevolent spirits and to appease the malevolent spirits.⁵⁶ Sacrificial elements consisted of livestock such as cows, mithun,⁵⁷ pigs, chicken, eggs, and other staple food like rice.⁵⁸ When Christianity taught them about the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, it might not have been surprising to them. The exception was the difference in the sacrificial object/subject. Unlike their sacrificial livestock, it was God in human form to be crucified on the cross for the sins of humanity. This also may not have come as a surprise to them because they were used to the practice of the cutting off of their enemies' heads during war and kept them to adorn their homes, which was prestigious. Women were exempted from these practices.⁵⁹ Moreover, the Nagas kept the

⁵⁶ Ibid., 209.

⁵⁷ Mithun (*Bos Frontalis*) is also known as Gayal and belongs to bovine species. It is a semi-domesticated food animal of North Eastern States of India, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar. It is a crossbred between gaur (*Bos-gaurus*) and domestic cattle (*Bos-Indicus*). Rakesh Kr Churasia, "Mithun 'the Pride of North East'" *Nagaland Page* vol. II No. 99, September 7, 2000), 5. Among the Nagas, mithun is sacrificed by the rich acknowledging God's bountiful blessings by sharing their wealth with the whole community. Nungshitula, *The Naga Images of the Human Being: A Resource for a Contemporary Theological Anthropology*, 55.

⁵⁸ Jamir, *Asen Kin Sobalibaren*, 87; Imchen, *Ancient Ao Naga Religion and Culture*; Bendangangshi & I.T. Apok Aier, *The Religion of the Ao Nagas* (Mokokchung, Nagaland: Bendangangshi, 1990); Bendangangshi, *Glimpses of Naga History*.

⁵⁹ Longkumer, "Daughters, Wives, Mothers...Their Status and Role in Ao Society," 156; Henitoli Kiba, "The Role and Status of Sumi Women in the Traditional Society and Present Society," in Narola

dead bodies on high bamboo platforms outside their homes.⁶⁰ So, the image of the dead body of Jesus hanging on a wooden cross may not have come as a shock to them. These two different narratives can meet because of the meaning and comfort they find in the image of the cross. It portrays the symbol of the powerful versus the powerless; death versus life.

For the Nagas, the Creator, the all-powerful, perfect, fearful and infinite God, sends Jesus Christ to die in place of sinful humanity so that they may be saved. This double conception of a God of power and a God who suffers has implications for the subjugation of women in the Naga context. Such dual conceptions of God have contributed to the retention of the age-old belief in male supremacy and the interminable subordination and discrimination of women. The more the all-powerful and Almighty God is exalted, the more the power of men is reinforced, and the more the women embrace the suffering Jesus on the cross, the more women's victimization is increased because of their dependence on a suffering God who suffers with them, and in return demands their suffering. This reinforces patriarchal power and leaves women helpless. They resign themselves to the power of the oppressive system. Elizabeth A. Johnson rightly argued that "one of the key ingredients in the maintenance of systems of oppression is inculcating a feeling of helplessness in those oppressed. Without knowledge of their own power, those being victimized have no energy to resist."⁶¹ The question

Imchen and Eyingbeni Hümtsoe ed. *Women Then and Now: Sharing Untold Insights on Women of North East India*, 240.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), 253.

remains as to how could one relate to this absurdity of the concept of God, but at the same time dare to imagine God.

The centrality of the cross is fiercely upheld among the Naga Christians. In the church, the homily of the preacher reaches its climax at the proclamation of the crucifixion of Christ on the cross for sinners: “Jesus died for you and me.” The congregation is led on an imaginative journey to the cross, showing the physical appearance of Jesus on the cross: the nail marks on his hands, feet, pierced side, the crown of thorns and blood dripping gruesomely from his brow and all the wounded parts of the body.⁶² “This is what he did for us sinners” says the preacher, and the congregation is led to go through emotional pain and suffering, and repentant prayers erupt from all those listening as mass spoken prayer is announced. Such invitation and eruptions happen more frequently in evangelistic revivals in the Naga Christian churches. The centrality of the cross of Christ is paramount. This involves physical, emotional and psychological aspects for the Naga Christians. There is a coercive spirit that makes the people respond to the calling of the cross even though they may not be convinced, but respond out of fear. Heim sees the cross as “a religious symbol soiled with persecution and psychological conflict. It entangles destructive ideas of original sin and overpowering guilt with unhealthy fixation on blood and death.”⁶³ The highly Christocentric Naga theology is unreasonable in many ways although Naga women feel that there is healing there.

⁶² S. Mark Heim is reminded of the piety and tradition that often lingered graphically on Jesus’ bodily suffering and spilled blood. Heim, *Saved From Sacrifice*, 2.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 3.

In such a context, Naga women live a paradoxical life. They believe in the Son of God who is one of them, lives with them and embraces them. They believe in the suffering and death of the son of God on the cross for the redemption of the world. As followers of Christ, they maintain that it is their duty to suffer patiently and carry their cross. Their earthly burdens emulate Christ's willingness to suffer on the cross. What they do not realize is "it is your cross to bear" approach that is forced upon them. They believe in the power of God and yet acknowledge the helpless suffering of Jesus on the cross. Because Jesus allowed himself to be helpless, Naga women believe that their helplessness is emulating Jesus and it will not be in vain. Johnson warns of a dangerous system saying that

structurally subordinated within patriarchy, women are maintained in this position, not liberated, by the image of a God who suffers in utter powerlessness because of love. The ideal of the helpless divine victim serves only to strengthen women's dependency and potential for victimization,.... The image of a powerless, suffering God is dangerous to women's genuine humanity and must be resisted.⁶⁴

It is difficult to understand that these women, at the same time, hold the doctrine of God that describes God as invincible, angry and impassible. They uphold both the concept of divine powerlessness and divine impassibility. They maintain both a strong metaphysical apathy of God and the empathetic suffering of Jesus on the cross. Because of such concepts of the nature of God, theologians like Moltmann raise questions like this: "Is God the transcendent and untouched stage manager of the theatre of this violent world, or is God in Christ the central engaged figure of the world tragedy?"⁶⁵ Among the Naga

⁶⁴ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 253-254.

⁶⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, "The Crucified God: Yesterday and Today: 1972-2002" trans. Margaret Kohl in Marit Trelstad ed. *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 129.

Christians, theism and the suffering God of the cross appears to be a pressing theological problem to be addressed. For Johnson, “what is needed is to step decisively out of the androcentric system of power-over versus victimization and think in other categories about power, pain, and their deep interweaving in human experience.”⁶⁶

To show the problem of the Naga Christian concept of the nature of God, I will focus on the issue of God’s Father-Son nature. Turning to the work of Moltmann who raised this issue will be significant for the Naga context. With such a conflicting understanding of the doctrine of God among the Naga Christians, it is still convincing that the Naga women reflect Moltmann’s affirmation that God can suffer, will suffer, and is suffering in the world.⁶⁷ Studying Moltmann and a comparative exploration of their theologies would, I believe, bring change, transformation and a chance to rediscover an authentic Christian life. Despite the suffering of Naga women in their society, due to their inability to bear sons, they cling to the suffering Jesus on the cross whom they believe is suffering with them. They embrace him as their friend and savior; Jesus can feel their pain and sorrow because he knows what it is like to suffer. In a similar vein, in Moltmann’s theology of the cross, the Father and Son are suffering together on the cross. In the context of the Naga women’s theology of the suffering God in the midst of their own suffering, exploring Moltmann’s theology will help me find how their theologies bear on those who suffer, in the hope of discovering new theologies that would bring healing to them.

⁶⁶ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 254.

⁶⁷ Moltmann, “The Crucified God: Yesterday and Today: 1972-2002,” 131.

Jürgen Moltmann's Theology of the Cross

Although the majority of the Naga Christians have never heard of the German theologian Jürgen Moltmann, their understanding of the suffering solidarity of the event of the cross reflects central aspects of his theology. He notes: "When I wrote *The Crucified God* – and I wrote it so to speak with my lifeblood – once again I saw the whole of theology in a focal point. For me the cross of Christ became the 'foundation and critique of Christian theology'."⁶⁸ It was the suffering that he witnessed in the Holocaust that caused him to rethink the Christian cross. Moltmann provides a strong and systematic understanding of the theology of the cross. In this section, I will discuss three main aspects of his theology, namely Jesus Christ, the Trinitarian cross, and the theology of life.

Jesus Christ

Moltmann has developed a dynamic theology of God as incarnate in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ brings God's being into the world of human finitude, the world that is home to the most tragic reality of human existence: grief, violence, rejection, suffering, abandonment, godlessness and godforsakenness. God became incarnate in this reality of existence as the perfect reject, a person abandoned by friends, family, society, and ultimately by God. His death was identical to a criminal's death in order that the rejected, godless and godforsaken will know God through Jesus Christ. Moltmann clearly stated that God did not become incarnate in Jesus Christ as the perfect law or as the perfect

⁶⁸ Moltmann, *How I have changed: Reflections on Thirty Years of Theology* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity International Press, 1997), 18.

idea.⁶⁹ Instead, Moltmann states that God is in solidarity with those who suffer. Christ took upon him all humiliation and suffering in order to become a brother and savior to the forsaken and humiliated. He brings hope to the prisoners and the abandoned. Moltmann grasped and experienced this idea while he was in a prisoner-of-war camp in Belgium in 1945.⁷⁰ Christ the suffering brother and liberator is Moltmann's crucified Jesus, the bringer of God's kingdom to the poor. This Jesus heals the sick, accepts the despised, calls people to discipleship and draws and wins life with his hope and his tasks.⁷¹ Jesus Christ brings God into full communion with humanity at its point of deepest despair, so that God is always with us, even when we are in the most godless or godforsaken situation. Moltmann's theology conveys a fully human Christ, and through this, a very present God. In 1970, two years before Moltmann wrote his *The Crucified God* he wrote in his *Umkehr zur Zukunft*,

In a civilization that glorifies success and happiness and is blind for the suffering of others, people's eyes may be opened to the truth, if they remember that at the centre of the Christian Faith stands the assailed, tormented Christ, dying in forsakenness. The recollection that God raised the crucified one and made him the 'Hope of the world' must lead churches to break their alliances with the violent and enter into solidarity with the humiliated.⁷²

More than thirty years later and especially after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, he saw the need to "discover anew the face

⁶⁹ Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R.A. Wilson and John Bowden (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 276.

⁷⁰ Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today's World*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 2.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 3.

⁷² Moltmann, "The Crucified God: Yesterday and Today: 1972-2002," 128-129; See Moltmann's *Umkehr zur Zukunft* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1970), 14.

of the Crucified One in the faces of the victims of violence....”⁷³ He searched for the decisive theological question in the midst and aftermath of this tragic situation:

Should we ask, “Why did God let this massacre happen?” Would this not say that our God is the God of the terrorists, and that they were unconsciously God’s obedient servants? Or should we ask, “Where was God in these attacks?” and find God as the suffering God among the victims? Is God not weeping and crying over the death of his beloved children? Jesus wept over the destruction of Jerusalem (Luke 19: 41), and so tears rolled down the face of God at Ground Zero as surely as they did over Jerusalem, and we are called to participate in these suffering of God with all our compassion.⁷⁴

All those who carry their cross daily look at the cross and know that God is present with them in their own suffering. “Christ’s cross stands between the countless crosses that line the paths of the powerful and violent, from Spartacus to the concentration camps and the “disappeared” in Latin American dictatorships, *and to the mascu-surrogate mothers and their daughters in Nagaland in the extreme northeast of India.*”⁷⁵ God takes part in our suffering as we see the cross of Christ standing between our crosses. Moltmann believed that in the incarnation, God entered into human finitude in Jesus of Nazareth; God entered into human’s godforsaken situation by dying on the cross.⁷⁶ For Moltmann, this is the coming of the kingdom of God. To talk about the kingdom of God is to know Jesus because Jesus is the kingdom of God in person. The kingdom of God and Jesus are inseparable. God’s kingdom makes Jesus the Christ, the savior and deliverer of us all. So, if we want to learn what that mysterious kingdom of God really is, we have to look at

⁷³ Ibid., 129.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 131. Emphasis added.

⁷⁶ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 276.

Jesus, and if we want to understand who Jesus really is, we have to experience the kingdom of God.⁷⁷

The Naga women need to understand what the concept, responsibility and benefit of the kingdom of God means for them. What would the kingdom of God look like for the Naga women, and how would they relate to Jesus who is the kingdom of God in person? Naga women may find it challenging to find an answer to this question in the context of the society in which they live. It would be difficult for them to understand the meaning of “Jesus is the kingdom of God” in the face of death and despair. What does it mean to talk about Jesus on the cross and Jesus the kingdom of God when these women are in need of salvation? Moltmann challenges us to reach beyond the easy answers to expand our notion of salvation. These women need salvation now and not somewhere in the otherworldly future. Salvation is not about a new discovery but that which is already present and operating and yet denied to them. Salvation for these women is to be loved and respected as persons with dignity. They need comfort and holistic freedom in their everyday life. They want to live a life intended by God. Jesus shows this salvation in the life that he lived and the discourses he made. This kind of salvation for these women is the most difficult to attain in this world because they have to break through the hard and rigid walls of patriarchy that controls them, which they continue to serve. Salvation for these women cannot be just merely looking to the cross but the mindset of humanity has to be drastically transformed.

⁷⁷ Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today's World*, 7.

Trinitarian Cross

The cross is a Trinitarian event for Moltmann. The event of the cross cannot be understood apart from the Trinity. He writes: “The content of the doctrine of the Trinity is the real cross of Christ himself. The form of the crucified Christ is the Trinity.”⁷⁸ Moltmann argues that God must grieve Christ’s being forsaken and humiliated on the cross, by humanity’s turn against God’s love in Christ. God’s grief nonetheless gestures towards God’s presence in the moment of Christ’s suffering, showing God’s suffering along with Christ. God’s passionate love and solidarity with humanity and the world in redemptive, reconciling suffering shows God’s ever-present love. God is not just revealed on the cross but God is also revealed in disclosure of the depth of God’s commitment to thoroughly share in the suffering of the world. God’s revelation is far from an abstract notion because it is about God becoming present in the world, a theology of incarnation and at that a Trinitarian one. In his radical turn to the cross, he has said, “The death of Jesus on the cross is the centre of all Christian theology. It is not the only theme of theology, but it is in effect the entry to its problems and answers on earth.”⁷⁹ Moltmann describes the cross as the place where Jesus willingly takes on suffering because of love. What affects the Son necessarily affects the Father. An important turn takes place here, for Moltmann, when the question “What does the cross of Christ mean for me?” turns to “What does the cross of Christ mean for God?” There is deep meaning in this question Moltmann asked. He began from the “essential passion of God.”⁸⁰ Christ gave himself up

⁷⁸ Moltman, *The Crucified God*, 246.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁸⁰ Moltmann, *How I have Changed*, 18.

as a slave, in death, walked to the cross to offer God's embracing presence to humanity.⁸¹

The event of the cross deeply involves the experience between the Son Jesus and his Father on the cross.

The Son suffers dying, the Father suffers the death of the Son. The grief of the Father here is just as important as the death of the Son. The Fatherlessness of the Son is matched by the Sonlessness of the Father, and if God has constituted himself as the Father of Jesus Christ, then he also suffers the death of his Fatherhood in the death of the Son.⁸²

In the crucifixion, Jesus the Son suffers death, and God the Father loses the Son so that in the work of Jesus, God experiences both sides of suffering.⁸³ God's experience of suffering finds significance in the Trinitarian relationship in the midst of suffering.

The death of Christ reaches deep into the nature of God; it is an event that takes place in the innermost nature of God, the Trinity. For Moltmann, Christ's death on the cross is an intra-trinitarian event grounded in love before it assumes significance for the redemption of the world. God allows Godself to be crucified, in which consummates God's unconditional love that is full of hope. The Godself becomes the condition of this love.⁸⁴ Moltmann continues, "The loving Father has a parallel in the loving Son and in the Spirit creates similar patterns of love in man in revolt."⁸⁵ Moltmann is aware of the contradiction of this love. "It can be crucified, but in crucifixion it finds its fulfillment and becomes love of the enemy."⁸⁶ The heart of crucifixion is love and the profundity of

⁸¹ Moltmann, "The Crucified God: Yesterday and Today 1972-2002," 127.

⁸² Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 243.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 248-49.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 248-49.

its result is love. Moltmann's understanding of God's love is pained love that opens avenues for us to imagine how to love the unloved. As Joy Ann McDougall has shown, Moltmann, in his revision of his dialectical Christology of the *Theology of Hope*, now puts crucifixion as the focal point of God's identification with the acute suffering and injustices of human history.⁸⁷ At the cross, "God reveals God's self as 'the event of suffering, liberating love'⁸⁸ that mediates forgiveness to the godless sinners and hope to the innocent godforsaken ones of human history."⁸⁹ On the cross, the Father experiences and grieves his beloved Son's death. It is a God event taking place between the abandoned Son and the abandoning Father. We can only understand this as far as our human experience goes. However, this event opens possibility for all those who are going through the pain of being abandoned in this world to be in relationship with this God by identifying themselves with the Son's experience of abandonment and the Father's experience of the Son's death. Salvation happens in the activity between the three persons of the Trinity. Moltmann insists that Christian understanding of salvation is not simply a reading of the reason and effect of the event of the cross, but the most critical thing is to understand and know the one that is crucified on the cross at Golgotha.

For the Naga Christians, John 3:16 is central: God loves the world, and God's love is expressed in the surrender of the Son.⁹⁰ This resonates with Moltmann where Christ's death is the revelation of what God has done and who God is in God's

⁸⁷ Joy Ann McDougall, *Pilgrimage of Love: Moltmann on the Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 39.

⁸⁸ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 252.

⁸⁹ McDougall, *Pilgrimage of Love*, 39-40.

⁹⁰ L. Bizo, "Reconciliation and Human Existence", 68.

relationship to humanity and the whole world. There is no cross for Moltmann without talking about the relationship that exists within the triune God. Moltmann shows both Jesus and God as subject as formulated in the Pauline and synoptic gospels account of Jesus' way to the cross. It is not just God the parent who gives up God's Son to die godforsaken on the cross, but the Son gives himself up. The Father suffers that loss, in grief. The passion narrative clearly depicts Jesus walking the way of the cross with purpose and willingness. His death was neither an unfortunate fate nor an evil lot chanced upon him. He was not crushed by death. God and Jesus as subject find clarity in the expression of a deep conformity between their will in the event of the cross. This event of God's delivering up for humans involves the unity of the Trinitarian self-distinction of God.⁹¹ Moltmann concurs with Hans Urs von Balthasar's claim that a "theology of the delivering up can only be maintained in a Trinitarian fashion."⁹²

In the godforsaken death of Jesus on the cross and the ultimate bereavement of God was the deepest separation between Jesus and God, and it is there at that dying moment the deep community of their will is seen at its best and clearest.⁹³ In the abandonment of the dying Son by the grieving Father on the cross, there is no moment when the Father is absent from the Son. The Father suffers as a father with the dying Son. They are in deep communion. The community in separation carries profound meaning.

The Son suffers in his love being forsaken by the Father as he dies. The Father suffers in his love the grief of the death of the Son. In that case, whatever proceeds from the event between the Father and the Son must be understood as

⁹¹ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 54.

⁹² Moltmann, "The Scope of Renewal in the Spirit," *Ecumenical Review* 42 no 2 (1990): 98-106, 111.

⁹³ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 243f.

the spirit of the surrender of the Father and the Son, as the spirit which creates love for forsaken men [sic], as the spirit which brings the dead alive. It is the unconditioned and therefore boundless love which proceeds from the grief of the Father and the dying of the Son and reaches forsaken men [sic] in order to create in them the possibility and the force of new life.⁹⁴

The power of love is deep in this suffering and dying relationship of the Trinity. This Trinitarian theology of the cross is centered on love. Hence, the trinitarian cross is empty of its meaning without love. God loves, and God suffers in this traumatic experience on the cross. It is a persistent love that will not let life go, a love that holds life and releases it to the suffering and dying. Moltmann argues that if God's existence is love, then God is also capable of suffering. God shares in the suffering of God's creatures, and hence, reveals the suffering of the passionate God for us on Golgotha.⁹⁵ This relationship of the dying Son and grieving Father and the ever present Spirit is not impassible. They suffer, in contrast to the classical conception of omnipotence, the idea of an impassible God, which Moltmann rejects. The presence of the Holy Spirit is fluid and holds them. God and Son are kept alive by the spirit of love they shared between them. The love that exudes from each other and reaches out to each other creates the bond they share. The motive of this event is love and it speaks to people and deeply affects their hearts.

Moltmann, indeed, argues within the relational function of the Trinity for the full entrance of this God into the suffering of the world and redeems the dehumanized.⁹⁶ He argues for the Trinity as the theological background for what really took place on Golgotha between Christ and God, while saying that the crucified Christ is the revelation

⁹⁴ Ibid., 245.

⁹⁵ Moltmann, *How I have changed*, 18.

⁹⁶ McDougall argues that "the concept of the Trinitarian fellowship is more than a recurring rhetorical figure in Moltmann's diverse works. Trinitarian fellowship is actually the structuring theological principle that unifies his *Messianic Theology*." McDougall, *Pilgrimage of Love*, 10.

of the Trinitarian mystery of God.⁹⁷ This Trinitarian mystery is a challenge for the Naga Christian theology. “The cross of Christ modifies the resurrection of Christ under the conditions of the suffering of the world so that it changes from being a purely future event to being an event of liberating love.”⁹⁸ This event of liberating love is necessary for the Naga women in their present life. It is also a resource for understanding the Trinitarian mystery in their Naga Christian context.

I want to see how this event of liberating love and the Trinitarian mystery affect the Naga women suffering from the consequences of birthing in the Naga patriarchal society. These women carry the brunt of their society’s customary law that prefers male children. They look at the cross as the place of comfort and healing but rather become victims of religion, culture and society. Despite their suffering these women continue to profess their belief in the cross. They continue to look at the cross as a resource for redemption and healing. It is important to see whether there is a place for these women in the God event, where God identifies with them and their specific experience of birthing. Can the linkage of the cross to patriarchy, and patriarchy to the male child and birthing be dismantled by the God event? This is a place for the women to see if they are truly redeemed by the death of Christ, and whether their cries of suffering are included in Jesus’ cry of dereliction from the cross at his death. Moltmann’s platform challenges them to ask a tough question: Is God really in solidarity with *their* suffering? There is no problem with the image of God’s solidarity with the women. The problem is that the Father-Son dynamic is still the dominant model in contrast to the dynamic of mother-daughter relationship in suffering. The Father-son suffers for the sake of humanity and

⁹⁷ Moltmann, “The Crucified God: Yesterday and Today: 1972-2002,” 133.

⁹⁸ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 185.

the mother-daughter suffers under patriarchy, in which the Father-son give themselves up to alleviate women from their suffering. Still, the primacy of the Father-Son dynamic is reinforced.

The deep relationship of the Father and Son in Christian theology, as seen in Moltmann's theology of the cross, has aided in strengthening the Naga cultural tradition of the absolute preference for a male child among the Nagas. Though the dynamics of the Father-Son suffering on the cross shows God's solidarity with all those who are suffering, sadly, in the Naga context, it reinforces the presence of male dominance in the patriarchal Naga society. This reality of dominance is also experienced by other women in their unique oppressed situations.⁹⁹ Moltmann provides a vision of the Trinity in familial terms—a moving picture of Father and Son, giving and sacrificing in the love that binds them together in the Spirit. This resonates with Naga Christians because it is in this sacrificial relationship of the Father and Son, the Naga Christians see themselves acting out their duties to each other. It is here they see the love of the Father and the obedience of the Son, which aligns with their cultural practice of the relationship of father and son by way of the son inheriting the legacy of the father to carry on the family lineage. When such patriarchal tradition is reinforced by the Christian concept of the Father and Son, the cross event is not helpful to the Naga women because they are further silenced.

⁹⁹ Delores S. Williams, "Black Women's Surrogacy Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption" in Marit Trelstad ed. *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, 19; *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993, 2004).

Theology of Life

Even before his formal theological education, Moltmann was confronted with the theology of life. He saw the power and powerlessness of life at the very sound and fatal effect of bullets that took his friend's life and many others at war. His quest for life and his theology stems from absolute devastation as a soldier in action. He recounts the incident that changed his life and philosophy of life forever:

The friend standing next to me at the firing predictor was torn to pieces by the bomb that left me unscathed. That night I cried out to God for the first time: 'My God, where are you?' and the question 'Why am I not dead too?' has haunted me ever since. Why are you alive? What gives your life meaning? Life is good, but to be a survivor is hard. One has to bear the weight of grief. It was probably on that night that my theology began, for I came from a secular family and knew nothing of faith.¹⁰⁰

The question about life is undoubtedly a pressing theological issue for Moltmann. The meaning of life and its worth and the grief it entails in the world is not far from him. Moltmann sees life in relation to the kingdom of God. His theology of life is clearly an "imagination of the kingdom of God in the world and for the world in the kingdom of God,"¹⁰¹ a theology "towards the future of God and of life."¹⁰² In his later life, he has clearly stated that "the theology of the future may very well become a 'theology of life.'"¹⁰³ He has said this because he has seen the world of violence today more than ever, and says "today life is fatally threatened by violence."¹⁰⁴ He is confident that "a new

¹⁰⁰ Moltmann, *The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the theology of Life*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1997), 2.

¹⁰¹ Moltmann, "The Adventure of Theological Ideas," *Religious Studies Review* 22 no 2 (1996): 102-105, 103.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Moltmann, *How I have changed*, 109.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

‘reverence for life’ and the will to protect it is coming into being inside and outside Christianity. Those who really love life break with the norms of the market society, for what one really loves cannot either be bought or sold.”¹⁰⁵ To love life is to simply love the other with no strings attached. Life simply cannot be traded. Even death cannot extinguish the drive to life. Truly loving life that includes others is the portrayal of the love of God on the cross. The cross of Christ and the crucified God of Moltmann’s are all about a response to and for life and the justification of life of all humanity. Only with God’s engagement in the suffering of those who suffer can God identify with them and bring life out of the death. God suffers death and shares in the suffering of the world; Jesus was resurrected to life bringing the promise of hope and resurrection to all the godless and forsaken ones.¹⁰⁶ There is no doubt, in his later years, Moltmann has continued to be open to the new age and time in his theological interpretations.

Life is the goal and victory for Moltmann, and he looks to the present and future for the God of life. He speaks of “the crucified God tomorrow” by confessing his long search for a secret goal: a search “for a theological reflection of the Easter joy and a theological anticipation of the eternal glory in the new creation of all things.”¹⁰⁷ While searching for this, he looks at the cross and resurrection of Christ – “the depth of the cross” and “the height of the resurrection” and sees no balance between them. This is his reason:

There is a surplus value of the victory over the defeat, of the resurrection over the crucifixion, of grace over sin and joy over pain. Good Friday is at the center of

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 216.

¹⁰⁷ Moltmann, “The Crucified God: Yesterday and Today: 1972-2002,” 137.

this world, but Easter morning is the sunrise of the coming of God and the morning of the new life and is the beginning of the future of this world.¹⁰⁸

He calls this theology of joy and jubilation, of the coming of God, the promise and the future of the crucified God.¹⁰⁹ Moltmann's understanding of the resurrection of the crucified Christ is one where Christ's life has an added value and surplus over against Christ's death. Christians are united to this risen Christ through faith and begin to live a totally new existence. While living this life, still, we will continue to face death and violence. The coming of the world where death will cease is in the future but we live in hope. This hope, in the present life, provides the spirit to resist and protest against the powers of death and injustice in the world. The longing for redemption of humanity and the whole of creation is clearly demonstrated in Moltmann's theology of life when he asserts that in Jesus' cry of dereliction on the cross the cries of all the abandoned victims of violence are contained within God, giving a sense of hope that their cries will be heard. This is profoundly meaningful for Moltmann. In the resurrection of the one who cried in dereliction on the cross, all the cries of the suffering victims are redeemed. Moltmann insists that in the cross and resurrection of the Son of God, the cries of the suffering become meaningful, their cries are clearly heard and redeemed. This goes beyond the cry of humanity to the whole of creation groaning in pain and longing for redemption.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 137.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 138. He has expressed about his finding about the joy and jubilation theology in his book written in 1995 entitled *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*. He makes it clear that this book does not deal with the end of the world and those who may be left behind but the coming of God. Interestingly, he ends his book this way: "The feast of eternal joy is prepared by the fullness of God and the rejoicing of all created being... The laughter of the universe is God's delight. It is the universal Easter laughter in heaven and on earth." He calls this the promise and the future of the crucified God. Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 338-39).

¹¹⁰ Romans 8:22.

In his theology of life, the Holy Spirit is crucial for Moltmann.¹¹¹ He conceives the Holy Spirit as the power of new life in whom we experience the presence of God. New life is living in a community of God, human beings and all of creation bringing about a holistic living and not giving attention to a particular group. Moltmann also conceives the Spirit as the divine love that keeps the fellowship of God, that overcomes the conflicts in suffering and resolves the tension of the cross and resurrection. He also points to a possibility of an eschatological future for the suffering world in this Spirit as divine love. Moreover, this Spirit is identified as the agent of glorification.¹¹² This Spirit, for Moltmann, is “the life-giving spirit of love that emerges from the death of the son and the grief of the father.”¹¹³ This Spirit is the labor of love that permeates the world, which has been present from the beginning of life on earth but which made its significant appearance and impact on the world at the event between the Father and the Son at the site of the cross. Moltmann’s admission, “I wrote it so to speak with my lifeblood,” when he wrote the *The Crucified God* is a reminder to us to talk about life when we are still living and not just when we encounter death. The meaning of life finds its place in life and not in death. Death indeed is an inescapable part of life, but it also belongs to the ongoing, life-giving power of God in Jesus, the power that determines our existence, not the power of death.

¹¹¹He has been criticized by theologians that his pneumatology is inadequate or absent in his articulation of the Trinitarian cross.¹¹¹ Wonhee Anne Joh has criticized Moltmann for being too preoccupied with the Spirit when the suffering of humanity is at its peak, and the godhead was immersed in their own suffering. He has also been critiqued for his insistence on the Trinitarian theology of the cross when he has not sufficiently dealt with the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. Joh has pointed out the business that goes on solely between the father and son on the cross Wonhee Anne Joh, *The Heart of the Cross: A Postcolonial Christology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 76-77.

¹¹² Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*.

¹¹³ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 252.

Appraisal

Moltmann's work on the theology of the cross is undeniably one of the most important contributions made to Christian theology in the past 75 years. It presents a profound theological and imaginable understanding of the suffering of humanity and the whole of creation and its relationship with God. Moltmann's response to the theological problems of the presence of evil in the world and the suffering of the innocent victims is profoundly theological, political, social and practical, and speaks across cultures and generations.

Moltmann has had his share of criticisms especially from feminist theologians like Dorothee Soelle, Rita Nakashima Brock and others. Feminist theologians accused him of strengthening the stronghold of patriarchy in Christian tradition that has subjugated women and minors for centuries. He is accused of producing a form of Christianized masochism by one of his German feminist critics Dorothee Söelle.¹¹⁴ Others have criticized him for glorifying suffering that implies acceptance of suffering in order to receive life. Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker states,

By confusing 'suffering with' with action that does something about evil instead of asserting that testifying for life is what sustains justice, the suffering God theologies continue in a new form the traditional piety that sanctions suffering as imitation of the holy one. Because God suffers and God is good, we are good if we suffer. If we are not suffering, we are not good. To be like God is to take the pain of all. In this form of piety, pain becomes attractive – the more we suffer the more we can believe we approach God. By interpreting Jesus' suffering as a sign that chosen suffering is salvific the Suffering God theology baptizes violence done by people resistant to grace and abundant life, and uses Jesus' death to invite people to be open to all of life. This theology is offensive because it suggests that acceptance of pain is tantamount to love and is the foundation of social action.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Dorothee Söelle, *Suffering* trans. Everett R. Kalin (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 26.

¹¹⁵ Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, "For God so Loved the World?" in Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn ed. *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A feminist Critique* (New York, NY: Pilgrim Press, 1989) 1-30, 19.

Moltmann has addressed and responded to many of the critiques in the subsequent years. He has been asked to evaluate: What does the cross say to the sufferers? What is the meaning of the cross among the sufferers? Does the cross make any difference between the perpetrators and the victims? Can we talk about struggle and transformation between the oppressors and the oppressed in this theology of the cross? Where does the cross stand in their confrontation? Moltmann's efforts to recognize the reality of the suffering of the world and how God engaged in the suffering is a significant response to the events of his day.

Moltmann's theology of the cross is helpful for my project in my analysis of the Naga women's understanding of the cross and their possible theological move beyond Moltmann. He takes the present reality seriously, which is critical to the suffering Naga women clinging to the cross. His work will help these women to reinterpret their notion of the suffering on the cross. The hope visible in Moltmann's theology will help the Naga Christians identify the hope that Jesus brings, not just a future hope but a hope for present liberation that comes in the form of love – an event of liberating love. Moltmann's suffering God on the cross is important for Naga women to examine the meaning of the cross in relationship to their suffering, and to move forward to get themselves involved and become a part of the liberation work. It calls for a critical reinterpretation of the symbol of the cross in their experience of failing to bear sons. To do this, a particular feminist re-reading provides an even more powerful picture of God's love that would speak to Naga women in their oppressive birthing conditions. I will assess Moltmann's Christology by exploring feminist theological engagements with his theology of the cross. One of the most captivating feminist theological interpretations of Moltmann is set

forth by the feminist and systematic theologian Serene Jones. To explore this powerful image of God's love, I turn to Jones.

Serene Jones' Maternal Reinterpretation of Moltmann

I will give an overview of the issue surrounding birthing in the Naga context to explain why I chose to explore Jones' story of women's pain of reproductive loss.

Although Naga women are capable of bearing children, birth is only authentic when a male child is born. Unless a son is born, they are regarded as failure, cursed, empty and unfulfilled. A baby girl is not welcomed with joy as much as the birth of a baby boy. A mother fears throughout her pregnancy for the fear of birthing a daughter. If she gives birth to a daughter, her "subjective experience" of grief and pain begins in addition to the fear that she has been carrying throughout her pregnancy. Naga women's biological event of birthing becomes an occasion of grief not just at birth but even before birth. The situation of grieving before the birth of a child contributes to lifelong subjective suffering, which is neither attended to nor disclosed to the world. It is kept within the innermost part of the grieving women. It is this reality that I want to place in conversation with Jones' reading of the Trinitarian event of the cross.

Jones' women's pain of reproductive loss bears resemblance to Naga women's painful consequences of birthing. Even though Jones' focus may not be analogous to the problem Naga women face in their societies, it touches on grief in a profound way and that this grief is shared. What is similar between them is the effect of reproduction – both groups suffer. Their pain stems from birth, and their womb.

Jones explicitly examines Moltmann's theology of the cross in relationship to the issues of childbearing and reproductive loss. In the eighth chapter "Hope Deferred: Theological Reflections on Reproductive Loss" of her book *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World*, Jones develops the image of the Trinity through the lens of reproductive loss.¹¹⁶ This image presents a profound picture of the depth of God's love even when death is at its most extreme. Death inhabits God's innermost part, the womb, and it becomes a grave to hold the death, lifelessness, grief and suffering. Yet, this grave persists; it does not surrender herself to death but in her darkest and deepest womb resides life, the resolute energy of life.

Jones' maternal reinterpretation of Moltmann brings to light the agony of God when the son dies, in maternal terms. The solidarity expressed there would speak powerfully to Naga women.¹¹⁷ A feminist engagement with Moltmann's view of God taking the death of the Son into the depths of God's self presents possibilities of space for women searching for a safe space that would hold them, and to move forward led by a light, in their suffering, that may linger with them, which they would call their own. It is a place for these women to imagine God. I read Jones, hoping to find support and resources for Naga women who suffer due to the inability to bear male progeny. It will also support my search for redemptive images of God for these suffering mascu-

¹¹⁶ Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 146. This type of constructive theological work reflects the kind of Christological work that I am pursuing to develop a theology of natality that embraces and nurtures life before death, which is a corrective to the notion that death is the gateway to life, which has pushed Christians to hope for the life beyond the neglect of the reality of human life in the present, particularly women who are the physical agents of God to birth life into the world. It argues for the cross of Christ as a call to and an affirmation of life.

¹¹⁷ Serene Jones, "Rupture," in Nadine Pence Frantz and Mary T. Stimming eds., *Hope Deferred: Heart-Healing Reflections on Reproductive Loss* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2005); *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World*; Jones, "Hope Deferred: Theological Reflections on Reproductive Loss," *Modern Theology* 17 no. 2 (April 2001): 227-245.

surrogates in the Naga context. I will discuss in this section three sub-themes, namely biological loss and grief, the grave inside God, and life amidst death.

Biological Loss and Grief

Jones narrates a true story of biological loss and grief of her friend. This story speaks to women who are going through this painful experience. In her work, Jones makes it clear that she is focusing principally on “women who desire to have biological children, who are biologically unable to do so, and who experience this bodily inability as failure, a desire thwarted, a loss of a potential child they hoped for and expected.”¹¹⁸ She is trying to address the subjective experience of these women for whom these biological events become the occasion of grief.¹¹⁹ Her theological interpretation, reinterpretation and imagination of a space for these women is compelling. Jones looks at the grief of these women fully aware that the problem of women is always socially mediated.¹²⁰ “It is a grief, which like all griefs is shaped by its cultural context, and this cultural shaping occurs at many levels.”¹²¹ One’s cultural context have and continue to set invisible regulations that demands women to live in a certain way and how they fit into the so-called proper women that the society sees as normative.

To grow up a “woman” in this culture is to grow up formed by a thickly gendered identity script wherein one’s body is assessed in terms of its treasured capacity to give life and thereby to make one “a mother.” To be a full woman is thus to bear children and then to lovingly raise them.¹²²

¹¹⁸ Ibid.,130.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 132.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

Beyond such a “thickly gendered identity script” a Naga woman’s worth and value is measured by the gender she produces – a male. The birth of a son will make her a full woman. In the absence of a son, she grieves and bears insults. Besides being helpless and insulted, she develops a great sense of guilt and shame. She feels cursed, wondering what wrong she did that God has not given her a son. Jones shares such similar expressions of anguish from her friend Wendy and other women in their moments of biological loss.¹²³

The biological event of the inability to bear a son has affected Naga women gravely. Birthing is a time of mourning for them if only girls are born. It is an unnatural mourning. In response to Jones, while discussing the mourning of a lost fetus, Stephen H. Webb argued, “when a parent, friend, or child dies, something in us dies as well. We feel like we have lost something essential to ourselves, even as we recognize that what we have lost is more than who we are.”¹²⁴ It is pertinent to ask what kind of mourning exists for those girls who are born and mothers who bore them, or should there not be mourning because they are not physically dead? This raises a critical issue of the loss or death of girl children and grief of mothers while they continue to exist. Their existence consists of dying in the present and the loss of an imagined future. Of her four features of grief, Jones’ second feature: “the enormous sense of a future lost, a hope forever deferred,”¹²⁵ describes the experience of women grieving biological loss. In her own words,

And with it dies a passionately imagined future, a future that is both the child’s and the woman’s. She thus grieves not only an immediate loss, but also the loss of an entire lifetime, a lifetime lived vividly in the drama of her hoping.... As the

¹²³ Ibid., 135.

¹²⁴ Stephen H. Webb, “Response to L. Serene Jones, “Hope Deferred,”” *Modern Theology* 17 no 4 (October 2001): 509-511, 510.

¹²⁵ Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 136.

future she imagines collapses, so too collapses her capacity to envision the future with any sense of expectancy.¹²⁶

Expectation dies for these women.

An antimaternal image of the self rather begins to emerge in these women. Jones describes that the woman's body becomes "the space of death."¹²⁷

She carries death within her body, ... but she does not die. Death becomes her. It fills her, a final death, and yet she lives to remember not a death diverted but a death accomplished and completed in her loins.¹²⁸

Jones' subject lives to narrate the story of death in her womb, living with the thought of herself killing the child and his/her future. Jones points to these women holding themselves responsible as the "active agent of that dying."¹²⁹ This thinking seems similar to the Naga women's thought who feels themselves responsible for bringing girls into the world to have their full life taken away from them. What image of God do these women need to hold their experiences? Jones looks to the Christian doctrines for her project, and she finds a "theological way" in the Trinity.¹³⁰

The Grave Inside God

Jones' reinterpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity gives us an understanding of the divine act of love and compassion in the very heart of God. She imagines the Trinity as a grave where God holds death. When God's Son, the second person of the Trinity, is

¹²⁶ Ibid., 136-137.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 138.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 139.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 146.

crucified on the cross, God's own child is ripped from God and dies. God undergoes the death of the child as God's own death. "In this dying, the borders of divine identity are also confused and made fluid as the One who is the source of eternal life bears now the stamp of complete, full death."¹³¹ Jones' maternal reinterpretation of Moltmann presents us with the image of maternal loss. Moltmann's God suffered the heart wrenching loss of God's son on the cross. The "father" experiences the maternal loss as his son is violently ripped from his womb, which is supposed to be a safe space for the most dependent child. In this death, God's maternal love is clearly revealed as God experiences wrenching pain of watching God's own child, born of God's womb die and there is nothing God could do. Even as God suffers this death, this death happens inside God. Jones says, "this is a death that happens deep within God, not outside of God but in the very heart - perhaps the womb - of God."¹³² Jones reinterprets Moltmann's theology of the cross, which shows God taking into the depths of Godself the Son's death on the cross. "This death is held in the Trinity. The first person holds the second, who undergoes death, united with the second by the power of the Spirit."¹³³

The quest for what happens in the Trinity when Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity dies, has been and continues to be a significant study for theologians. What is revealed or what emerges when one of the members of the Godhead is dying on the cross? How is the Godhead seen in this light and what does it go through? What happens when the son dies is heartbreaking. Imagine God's son dying and God watching him die. One can imagine the position of their bodies, the look in their eyes, and the heartfelt

¹³¹ Ibid., 148.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

experience in the midst of this. I imagine this darkest moment of death as fluid and alive and full of agonizing movements as God stretched God's hands to hold the dying child whose hands are outstretched as well. God and child are seemingly far from each other, and yet, they embrace, surrounded by a vaporous atmosphere and connected in that very action. The son holds on to his loving parent, and the parent immerses himself in the dying of the child; every hard breath of the son takes away a part of the parent and slowly their breath become one in death and the misty atmosphere continue to surround them even when they are dead and eventually this atmosphere remains as the Trinity that suffered death. When the son dies, a hole is formed in God's heart. A huge part of God is torn apart. God the Trinity becomes a grave to hold the death.

Jones rightly ponders, "How can a living God hold death within it?"¹³⁴ In the context of the cross and the death of God's son, this question makes sense to women who are grieving biological loss but this same question is beyond understanding for others. When we are confronted with such a question of shock and amazement, Jones says, "Tradition has told us that at this point in the story, our language breaks down, and we must simply ponder the cross and its mysteries."¹³⁵ She makes this reference at the question of how the living Godhead could hold death inside it.¹³⁶ There is absolute silence and mystery that stops one from thinking further. There is no place for imagination. This mystery that goes to the extent of keeping one silent is no good news for Naga women because keeping silent and being silenced is the problem they face.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 148-149.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

They are barred from imagination. Jones points out that the morphological imaginations of the dominant male theologians perhaps put the limitation to the imaginative resources,¹³⁷ and so, she attempts to break the spell to allow the imaginative breath to resume its place that includes women's experience and imagination.

This antimaternal Godhead that Jones describes is a powerful image for those women who are broken, and who feel hopeless with a sense of maternal failure. These women are in need of healing. They may find the antimaternal Trinity in solidarity with them. In what way might this antimaternal image of the Trinity be a resource for Naga women who bear the pain of birthing only daughters and not sons? A Naga woman is culturally constrained and taught to long for a son and not a daughter. The daughter becomes a liability to her because a son means her freedom and a girl means her burden. A son connotes political, social, and economic freedom but it is not so for the daughter. The son has a predetermined social standing but the daughter has no support. It is critical to examine what really keeps these women going. It has been clearly explained that these women have found in Jesus the ultimate support, which have led them to cling to the cross of Jesus where they see the image of Jesus in solidarity with them. If Jesus the second person of the Trinity is embraced by these women, perhaps, they may find the antimaternal Godhead in solidarity with them. It is thus appropriate to ask whether God who suffers the death of God's own son understand the pain of these women who could not bear a son. Will this suffering God provide an image that would help these women to know that this God understands their pain of birthing only daughters?

Like Jones, I look for images of God that would hold the experiences of these women, with an intention to provide resources and space for these women to explore

¹³⁷ Ibid.

images of God in their experiences. They could start with Jones' description of the God of the women in her stories. Will the God Jones is describing stand with these women? How will they know that this God regards a daughter as equally God's child in their present life? How may the society they live in be transformed by this God? Will they be willing to erase this social construct? As long as the society remains unchanged, Naga women cannot live a free and fulfilled life.

Life Amidst Death

Jones' antimaternal image sheds light on the maternal love of God and the pain of the maternal loss of God. This antimaternal image holds all the experiences of women and yet lives. Jones imagines the womb of God as a grave that holds death; it is a space of death; death happens there, and yet, She is not dead. There appears to be a vacuum, but She is full - full of death - yet She lives to love.¹³⁸ For Jones, "this death-bearing grave of a God paradoxically does not die but lives. And She lives to love yet again and to offer to the world the gift of the future."¹³⁹ The persistence of divine love in the writings of theologian Shelly Rambo links with Jones' death-bearing grave that does not die but lives. Rambo's development of a theology of the Spirit, which is remarkably real, human and healing focuses on Holy Saturday in her reexamination of the Christian story of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Rambo speaks about what living is in the aftermath of trauma. She explores that which "remains" and offers a "vision of the Spirit's witness

¹³⁸ Ibid., 148-149.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

from within the depths of human suffering to the persistence of divine love.”¹⁴⁰ The persistence of love in the midst of suffering, for Jones, is the source of redemption.¹⁴¹

Jones suggests a

morphological space within which they might imagine God’s solidarity with them as those who lose a future they had hoped for and who carry the weight of this loss inside themselves. As an image of God with them, this rupturing, antimaternal tale of the Trinity won’t stop their sorrow, but it might lessen their sense of isolation, which is no small step in the process of healing.¹⁴²

The constant presence of this Trinitarian image with Jones’ women reveals to them the persistence of love that would not let them walk alone but remains with them. How does this image make sense and be a source of redemption to those women who are punished for birthing a girl? Rambo’s theology of the Spirit in the context of trauma and aftermath gives a clear picture of the Spirit as “a sustaining power that continually witnesses the ruptures, moving between life and death.”¹⁴³ Her theological development of the witness of the Spirit may open space for the mascu-surrogate woman to imagine, or further, reimagine this God with her, the God who remains and sustains.

Jones also develops a powerful theology of mourning. The miscarriage of a longed for baby bleeds away in the woman’s body that flows outside of her and wastes away, and she painfully and bitterly weeps and mourns for it. This could be nature’s doing unfortunately, or abuse that entails consequences for her emotionally, psychologically, physically, socially and religiously. On the other hand, much pain and

¹⁴⁰ Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), back-cover blurb.

¹⁴¹ Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 149.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*, 13.

wounding is inflicted upon a woman who is unable to bear a son because it is a social norm. She is forced to bear the pain of ridicule, battery, guilt and shame, that is, suffering forced upon her throughout her life. In both these instances, there is brokenness, mourning and despair. Also, both suffer the consequences of birth. These women need a God who heals. They need to radically reimagine both the cross that Christianity has given them and the one that they carry.

Jones interpretation of the cross towards the end of her book is that of mourning and wonder. She believes that we are “God’s inevitable broken children and God’s constantly renewed beloved.”¹⁴⁴ In the context of brokenness God’s healing spirit continues to bless us and renew our lives. The middle path between brokenness and beloved is healing. However, in a context where the suffering is forced upon the weaker group of human beings, how would the meaning of Jones “inevitable” brokenness be interpreted? How would Jones’ cross look like before the audience of both the inevitable brokenness and coerced brokenness? Jones still maintains a focus on death and grief that reflects a death-centered theology, and I suspect that Jones’ focus remains at the cross. Indeed, death has been an obsession in the Western theological thought that has dominated the entire Christian thought. The cross tells a story about divine suffering, but if it is to be a divine in solidarity with Naga women, it needs to reflect the particular aspects of the birth-death experience that Naga women are going through. The conditions placed on birth and the consequences of reproductive loss that is peculiar to their context needs to be addressed. In this context, the maternal pain of God reinterpreted by Jones becomes clear but the patriarchal practices, which are the external

¹⁴⁴ Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 165.

intervening forces of death, play the dominant role in the Naga society and continue to shape their theological vision.

Jones' antimaternal image of God envisions God without control over the loss of a life and yet remains with the suffering women. My aim is to make sense of this profound image in a context of mascu-surrogacy where an adult male seeking a male child turns to the female body to bear him his likeness. Failure to bear him his male progeny is the beginning of suffering death for the female. This is specifically critical for me because Naga women experience the pain of the hopelessness of their wombs. Their wombs are worthy of its space if and only when male babies are nurtured there. They experience the pain of giving birth only to daughters, as well as, seeing their daughters suffer because of their gender. The daughter who is formed in her mother's womb does not know what is awaiting her as she matures to birth out into the world. But the mother already feels the tension of her physical heaviness, emotional stress and the fear of birthing a girl again. The tension mounts as the delivery date approaches.¹⁴⁵ They imagine in pain the future of their daughters. Being the minority group, these sonless mothers quietly suffer the consequences of their traditional cultural norm.

As Jones reinterprets Moltmann's theology of the cross, I posed questions to both of them in this regard, in relation to the dynamics of the Father-Son relationship. How well can Moltmann and Jones theologially interpret the experiences of these women? To what extent will Moltmann's and Jones' God be the God of the mascu-surrogate women? Will Jones' and Moltmann's God hold these women's experiences? The dynamics of the Father-Son relationship on the cross have exposed the violent tearing apart of the father and son and the suffering love and grief they shared between them. It also provided an

¹⁴⁵ Majority of them do not go for sex determination, ironically, for religious purposes.

image of God that wraps around those suffering women from the consequences of birth and maternal loss, gently comforting and suffering with them. Moltmann's and Jones' interpretation of God consoles these women and is in solidarity with them, with a compassionate love. Moreover, I think Jones' God may provide a revolutionary theological route for these women to bring about their own liberation. There is hope and consolation for all in this God. This God who has been shattered in the depth of God's womb still breathes and gives life. The son who was taken out from God has returned to the womb of God.

Conclusion: A Mascu-Surrogate Vision of the Cross

Naga women look up to the cross for redemption, and yet, they carry their own crosses of grief, pain, shame and death. Theologians like Moltmann and Jones provide ways for these women to imagine God. Reinterpreting Moltmann's cross event, Jones imagines a God who holds death within Godself, yet, lives. Naga women, in their grief and pain are in need of a God who would hold all their experiences. They are moved to imagine this God, and look for images in their experiences, a God who would love persistently, offer healing, and the gift of the future.

I insist for a mascu-surrogate sensitive reading of the vision of the cross. These women need a God who can help them destabilize the Naga social construct of mascu-surrogacy, which they hold as normative. They need a God who would be their midwife to help them value birth for its own sake – and God's sake and their sake – and not for the sake of a man. They need a God who will help them give birth to new life, and to treasure

life rather than idolize the suffering. The external intervening forces of death will be challenged to reinterpret the meaning of the womb of the cross.

Ren Ozukum, a Naga woman theologian posted this on December 25, 2012:

“Dear Naga Sisters. We all know how Mary the mother of Jesus must have been overwhelmed by the Announcement of Angel Gabriel about her conception. She sang in excitement the first Christian Song of Hope. May you carry the Hope, [gave] birth, carry, even unto the moment of crucifixion in your eyes, hold on and let it bloom no matter what comes your way. Be of good courage.”¹⁴⁶ This is a call to be in solidarity with all womenfolk, knowing their plight in the present and the challenges in the future. It is also a sign of assurance that things will be well. But there is also a reinforcement of their attachment to the suffering cross. On the brighter side, the longing and search for identity and agency for these women is portrayed.

A masculinist-sensitive reading of the cross calls for an alternative to the cross of suffering or a radical interpretation of the Christian cross. One way could be an exploration of the interpretation of the major Christian symbols that Naga Christians preserve. Critical examination of those symbols may lead to the reasons why the Christian cross needs reinterpretation. One of the most important symbols is the marriage certificate that the church provides to the wedding couple during the marriage ceremony. It has a picture of two hands clasped under one heart and one cross. The minister explains that the two hands signify the joining of two lives, and the heart signifies them becoming one. They take their vows to become one under the power of the cross. This powerful image has been misinterpreted due to its patriarchal rendering. The two lives become one but the one is usurped into the other – the female into the male. Besides the symbol, the

¹⁴⁶ Ren Ozukum, “She Naga” *Facebook*, December 25, 2012

wedding sermon is mostly given from the Pauline Epistle where Paul urges the wives to be subject to their husbands, and to respect them, and the husbands to love their wives.¹⁴⁷ They say “yes” to it. To carry the cross of suffering is implanted in them again that special day. The patriarchal reading of the cross is reinforced. Therefore, a masculine surrogate reading of the vision of the cross is pertinent - a vision where women will experience freedom to live and to love.

¹⁴⁷ Ephesians 5:22-33. *NRSV*.

CHAPTER FOUR

ASIAN WOMEN AND ASIAN FEMINIST POSTCOLONIAL CHRISTOLOGY

The Korean theologian Chung Hyun Kyung asserts that “Asian women cannot define humanity apart from their suffering.”¹ They have been taught that the Christian way of life was to “suffer peacefully, the way Jesus suffered on the cross, because it was God’s will, predestined in eternity.”² According to Aruna Gnanadason, an Indian feminist theologian, the normal message given to Christian women is ‘Christ died for you on the cross, you can bear the suffering too.’³ They have been kept in their place, unable to protest, by the presentation of a gentle Savior and passive subject to them through complex cultural, religious and social hegemonic systems, legitimizing the most inhuman forms of violence against them.⁴ For Gnanadason, this image of Christ is a colonial inheritance that “does not create the space or climate to challenge” the oppressive system.⁵ Chung Hyun Kyung argues that “only when we Asian women start to consider our everyday concrete life experiences as the most important source for building the religious meaning structures for ourselves shall we be free from all imposed religious

¹ Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women’s Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994), 5.

² *Ibid.*, 43.

³ Aruna Gnanadason, “Jesus and the Asian Woman: A Post-colonial Look at the Syro-Phoenician Woman/Canaanite Woman from an Indian Perspective,” *Studies in World Christianity* 7 no 2 (2001): 62-177, 172.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.* Kwok Pui-Lan insists that “the influences of colonization on Christology must be subject to close scrutiny” because Christ was interpreted from a Western lens and imposed upon the colonized *especially the women who were the colonized of the colonized* (emphasis added). See Kwok Pui-Lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology: Introductions in Feminist Theology* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 79.

authority.”⁶ Naga women, too, define themselves by their suffering and their relationship to Jesus in a patriarchal culture.⁷ The discussion of Moltmann’s Christology in relation to Naga women’s Christology followed by a reinterpretation of Moltmann’s Christology by the feminist theologian Serene Jones in the previous chapter exposed concepts harmful to the Naga women; yet, it also opened new possibilities to imagine, reimagine, and construct helpful and life affirming theologies. However, a deliberate Asian Christological discussion is necessary, given some of the aspects of Naga women’s cultural realities. There is a need to explore the theological and Christological articulation of the Asian theologians especially the Asian feminist theologians who have extensively contributed to the reading of the suffering of Asian women and their transformation.

In this chapter, I will focus on the scholarship of two Asian feminist postcolonial theologians, namely Rita Nakashima Brock and Wonhee Anne Joh. They have underscored the distinctive suffering of Asian women in relationship to Christian theologies. Their work that addresses the experience of Asian women, their critical Christological proposals and their effort to explore new Christological imaginations is compelling. I will explore their Christological work to see how these theologians look at life, suffering-death and the redemption of their own women. Then, I will examine their relevance for the Naga women in the Naga Christian context. Often Naga women are not

⁶ Ibid., 5.

⁷ Asian context as a whole is marked by poverty and is dominated by patriarchal institutions, according to Virginia Fabella and Sun Ai Lee Park, in their edited book *We Dare to Dream: Doing Theology as Asian Women* (Hongkong: Asian Women’s Resource Centre for Culture and Theology & Women’s Commission of EATWOT, 1989). Not only that, their context is characterized by the diversity of religions and cultures. For the Korean feminist theologian Chung Hyun Kyung, the Asian women’s theology is “very Third World,” “very Asian,” and “very women.” For her, “Third World-ness” refers to the everyday reality marked by poverty and oppression that colonialism, neocolonialism, militarism, and dictatorship have caused. Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women’s Theology*, 23-24.

considered in the literature of Asian women, particularly when Indian feminist theologians discuss Indian women, and this includes feminist theological works as well.⁸ I am drawing from the insights of these two theologians as a way of addressing this absence. I also agree strongly with the statement about how the focus on suffering is definitive for Asian feminist theologies.

Suffering continues to damage human lives and the rest of creation even as we struggle to comprehend the origins of suffering and put our best effort to alleviate pain in the world. Asian women's suffering is an unending struggle of life that goes on daily from the rising of the sun to its setting. Numerous bodies of literature discuss their situation.⁹ Yet, the Naga women have remained insignificant and forgotten until today. Suffering is an undeniable reality for all, but suffering for Naga women in India at the hands of patriarchal social structures is an especially acute form of suffering because it brings with it special forms of dehumanization. There is a strong presence of feelings of

⁸ One example is the 33 year old journal *In God's Image (IGI)*, an Asian feminist theological Journal, founded by pioneering Korean Christian feminist, Sun Ai Lee-Park in 1980, which is being published by the Asian Women's Resource Center for Culture and Theology. In almost all the volumes of this Journal, there is always an Indian woman contributing an article regarding Indian women's struggle; Dalit women, and others. (Actually, the whole volume of *IGI*, Vol. 26 No. 3 September 2007 was especially focused on Dalit women in India under the theme "The Haunts of Pain: Theologizing Dalits"). In *IGI* Vol. 26 No. 1 March 2007, out of fifteen articles, six were written by Indian women and none have touched on the situation of the Naga women.

⁹ Besides prominent Asian feminist theologians, some of the books about the Asian women's suffering that are published by Asian Women Resource Center for Culture and Theology are, Virginia Fabella and Sun Ai Lee Park ed. *We Dare to Dream: Doing Theology as Asian Women* (Hongkong: AWRC & Women's Commission of EATWOT, 1989); Dulcie Abraham, Yvonne Dahlin, Stells M. Faria, Sally Moses, Sun Ai Lee Park ed. *Asian Women Doing Theology: Report from Singapore Conference, November 20-29, 1987* (Hongkong: AWRC & Women's Commission of EATWOT, 1989); Lee Oo-Chung, Choi Man Ja, Sun Ai Lee Park, Kim Elli, Mirza Rodriguez, Debra Goodsir ed. *Women of Courage: Asian Women Reading the Bible* (Seoul: AWRC, 1992); Kwanh-Rye Chun, Yoshiko Isshiki, Hisako Kinukawa, Satoko Yamaguchi, *Women Moving Mountains: Feminist Theology in Japan* trans. ed. Margaret Warren (Kuala Lumpur: AWRC, 2000); AWRC, *Transforming Attitudes Towards Sexuality: A Module for Asian Women* (Kuala Lumpur: AWRC, 2002); AWRC, *Introduction to Asian Feminist Theologies: Modules on Asian Feminist Theologies Book 1* (Kuala Lumpur: AWRC, 2005); AWRC, *Telling Her Story: Introduction to an Asian Feminist Re-reading of History: Modules on Asian Feminist Theologies Book 2* (Kuala Lumpur: AWRC, 2006).

being “nobody” among the womenfolk, and this feeling is forced upon them both in their own cultural traditions and religion including Christianity and in their interpretations about women. L. Susan Bond, while discussing the suffering of Asian women by Asian theologians, indicated that “the systemic nature of oppression is so extreme that it leads not to anger, but to hopelessness and despair: the inability to struggle for freedom. Like any abuse victims, women in such situations internalize attitudes of self-hate, prolonged shame and guilt, . . .”¹⁰ It is necessary to continue to work toward liberating these women from their oppressive conditions. Postcolonial Asian feminist theologian Kwok Pui-lan, one of the founding members and a faculty advisor of the Pacific, Asian, and North American Asian Women in Theology and Ministry (PANAAWTM)¹¹ makes a clear statement:

For me, the critical test for any theological construction is how much it contributes to lessening human suffering; to building communities that resist oppression within the church, academy, and the society; to furthering the liberation of those among us who are most disadvantaged, primarily the women and the children.¹²

Liberation for these women requires in-depth examination of their daily experiences, living in their context, providing sound theological teaching and showing ways to deconstruct and construct new ways of understanding and living. Such moves

¹⁰ L. Susan Bond, *Trouble with Jesus: Women, Christology, and Preaching* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 1999), 99.

¹¹ PANAAWTM is a “grassroots movement of Asian and Pacific North American women in theological education and ministry.” They meet annually at different locations in North America. It is a gathering of about sixty theology professors, theological students, and those in ministry. Some of the highlights of the meeting include theological debates, workshops, dance, rituals, movies, sharing of personal and communal stories and mentoring of the doctoral students by the faculty advisors. A PANAAWTM faculty advisor said of Kwok Pui-lan, while talking about the reason for this gathering, “we strive together through supporting each other.” See Boyung Lee, “Re-creating Our Mothers’ Dishes: Asian and Asian North American Women’s Pedagogy” in *Off the Menu*, 300.

¹² Kwok Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-biblical World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 31.

can begin with the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. For instance, in critiquing atonement theories, Asian feminist theologians question the possibility of the transformation of the colonizing and dominating symbol of Christ into a symbol of a life-affirming, dignity-upholding and freedom-realizing symbol of Christ for the colonized, oppressed and subjugated subalterns. They are looking for new ways to appropriate Jesus Christ and for how to say new things about Jesus Christ for Asian women. Kwok Pui-lan has passionately asked, “What makes it possible to say something new about Jesus/Christ?”¹³ With the aim of liberation, Rita Nakashima Brock and Wonhee Anne Joh have called into question and expanded Christian understandings of the symbol of the cross and have addressed Christology in light of the experience of Asian Christian women, both in and outside of North America. They have looked at Christology from a postcolonial perspective, which is pertinent for an imaginative and constructive Christology. Therefore, I now turn to Brock and Joh.

Journeys by Heart: Rita Nakashima Brock

Rita Nakashima Brock is one of the pioneering Asian feminist theologians and an activist who knew suffering even at an early age. Nine years after the publication of her book *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power*, another book came out co-authored with Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering*,

¹³ Kwok Pui-lan, while talking about “Engendering Christ” argues for a central question: “How is it possible for the formerly colonized, oppressed, subjugated subaltern to transform the symbol of Christ – a symbol that has been used to justify colonization and domination – into a symbol that affirms life, dignity, and freedom? Can the subaltern speak about Christ, and if so, under what conditions? What language shall we borrow? Do we need to borrow from malestream theologies or feminist theories? What are the dangers of doing so?” Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005, 168-69.

*and the Search for What Saves Us.*¹⁴ This book is an exploration and critique of the doctrine of atonement, using their personal narratives of suffering – experiences of loss and painful interruptions in life. They offer theological reflections on how healing has come to them. Healing, for them, has been made possible and present by the power of life-giving community and a theology that is life-affirming. Brock and Parker lead the readers on a walk with them through their life as they narrate their stories, with lumps of pain in our throat and tears of heartbrokenness gleaming in our eyes, questioning deep inside “why?” There is a strong reappearance of Brock’s projection of her significant rejection of the redemptiveness of Jesus, which she has clearly expressed in her 1992 book, *Journeys by Heart*. In 1957, on the first day of second grade, Brock was stabbed in the back of her head with a sharpened pencil by a red-haired, blue eyed girl because she was different - Japanese. “Don’t you ever step in front of me again, you dirty Jap!” the furious girl hissed at her.¹⁵ She remembers:

I spent the entire day mulling over what happened. I wondered what I had done wrong to provoke such fury,.... My eagerness for school faded. I began to worry and be confused. What was wrong with being Japanese? How would I know what to do if following what other children did caused violence against me? Were there separate, hidden rules for being Japanese¹⁶

¹⁴ Rebecca Ann Parker is a feminist constructive theologian. She is also a religious activist, who has contributed immensely to the issues of women and gender concerns. Her current research interests include the interpretation of the death of Jesus in early church art and ritual, and theologies of non-violent resistance to oppression, injustice and war. She has co-authored books with Rita Nakashima Brock, two of which are of special significance for my project. They are: *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of this World for Crucifixion and Empire* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2008). This book offers a fascinating new lens on the history of Christianity, from its first centuries to the present day, asking how its early vision of beauty evolved into a vision of torture, and what changes in society and theology marked that evolution. The second book, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemption Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*. This book contains feminist critique of the Christian doctrine of the atonement, using memoir as a mode of theological reflection.

¹⁵ Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, 51.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

It is very painful to even imagine a seven year old girl, forced to experience first-hand violence and worry about it, when she should be playing and running around with friends with no cares. At her age, Brock knew, if she told the truth to her mother about the violence, it would worry her. She already knew of the pain her mother bore and did not want to burden her more. When her mother asked what happened to her head, she replied, “I hit my head on the playground.”¹⁷ Brock writes, “I didn’t want to worry her. I had no language to describe what happened, or to explain my confusion, anxiety, and sadness. They remained buried inside me.”¹⁸ She felt safe sitting behind the bus driver, thinking that he would not let bad things happen to her.¹⁹ She recounts children calling her names, like Chink or Jap, making fun of her by pulling the corners of their eyes up tight.²⁰ The cruelty is unspeakable. She asks, “How does a seven-year-old child defend herself against random and incomprehensible hostilities?”²¹ Her childhood experience of trauma led her to conclude that the Christian theological tradition has interpreted Jesus’ life in ways that reinforced trauma.²² Her own narrative of suffering as a small child unable to defend herself against the powerful caused her to reject the cross as a site of redemption. This leads to two important points to be discussed that are crucial for Brock in challenging the traditional understanding of redemption through Jesus Christ. First, moving beyond Jesus Christ, and second, exploring her concept of the power of life called the erotic power.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid. 53.

Beyond Jesus Christ

Rita Nakashima Brock offers two reasons for moving beyond classic Christologies. First, she finds it problematic that the father allows the suffering and death of one perfect child in order to save the rest of the wayward children, making this the basis for the goodness and forgiving power of the father who accepts all people free from the consequences of their sin. The problem of the nature of God stems from here, producing a kind of schizophrenic picture of God's nature, that God would require this kind of sacrifice. Second, she sees the danger of hero worship by assigning a single individual to fulfill the task of salvation. Jesus, the son, was allowed to suffer the consequences of other children's wrongs, which has made him the central figure in the Christian church. These two reasons will be discussed at length in this section.

Jesus always attracted people on the margins. Brock argues that Jesus was constantly active in the creation of the community of God. This community included the dispossessed, women and religious minorities, which makes sense because these people were always present with Jesus, and he met and connected with them everyday.²³ Those who came in touch with Jesus did not go away without being sincerely cared for or spoken to. Apart from the traditional names that Jesus had been called, the people of his day, who encountered him daily with their own problems and difficulties, must have had unconventional images of him according to their own experiences, which may not have been recorded. Brock, a strong critic of the atonement theories, has examined the images of Jesus that foster violence. Among all the images of Jesus portrayed throughout the first century to the present time, the image of the divine son allowed by the father to suffer for

²³ Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart, A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 66.

the redemption of all other children stands as the most difficult image, as narrated in dominant atonement Christologies. Brock narrates the logic of traditional atonement theologies in this way: She sees a sad and ugly picture of a father punishing a perfect child in order to forgive and love the rest of his children. The father appears to be compassionate and kind because he is doing a favor for the rest of the children and does not, himself, appear to be punishing the son. He allows the son to suffer the consequences of the evil created by his rebellious creation. The father watches in pain, without taking any active measures. His beloved child suffers and dies because the father refuses to interfere with human freedom. New life is found only through this son's sacrifice, and many Christians believe that their faulty and weak nature can be atoned by someone else's suffering and death, celebrating the death and resurrection of this child as salvific.²⁴

While discussing the cross of resurrection and communal redemption, Brock declared that "the torture and execution of Jesus has been inflicted on many, often in his name. The crucifixion is a reminder of the human legacy of violence, not of salvation."²⁵ The ramifications of this image of the crucified son play out in problematic ways, as the divine event is translated into situations of human abuse. Brock and Parker quote Lucia, who had been abused by her husband:

He beats me sometimes. Mostly he is a good man. But sometimes he becomes very angry and he hits me. He knocks me down. One time he broke my arm and I had to go to the hospital. But I didn't tell them how my arm got broken." . . . I went to my priest twenty years ago. I've been trying to follow his advice. The priest

²⁴ Ibid., 55. Also see Brock, "And a Little Child Will Lead Us: Christology and Child Abuse," in Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn ed. *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique* (New York: Pilgrim, 1989).

²⁵ Brock, "The Cross of Resurrection and Communal Redemption" in Marit Trelstad ed. *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, 249.

said I should rejoice in my sufferings because they bring me closer to Jesus. He said, 'Jesus suffered because he loves us.' He said, 'If you love Jesus, accept the beatings and bear them gladly, as Jesus bore the cross.'²⁶

This absolutely erroneous instruction is one example of how women suffer in the name of Jesus. These victims of domestic abuse or for that matter any victim of abuse "don't need advice to persevere in their suffering as a way of sharing in Christ's redemptive work."²⁷

To suffer and bear abuse silently at the hands of the abuser, in the name of Christian faith, is uncalled-for. Feminist theologians are persistent in their arguments against such beliefs and practices that involve the nature of God. They see signs of theological sadism, calling God sadistic.²⁸ Brock points out that "our oppressive, patriarchal doctrines are a result of the abusive treatment of children in a patriarchal culture."²⁹ The loving grace of God is said to be shown in this cosmic transaction and those who are faithful are forgiven and are prevented from suffering the consequences of sin. Brock laments that human beings are dependent recipients of the fruits of an event working within a transcendent god instead of being co-creators and co-revealers of grace. She doubts the cosmic transaction within the divine life and the reinforcement of the belief that an individual person's suffering takes away our own suffering, and we should remain willing dependent recipients if we want to live in the grace of the transcendent god. "We are

²⁶ Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, 21.

²⁷ Heim, *Saved From Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross*, 26.

²⁸ For Dorothee Söelle, in her criticism of Moltmann's theology of the cross, she has branded Moltmann's God as anything but God the executioner." See Dorothee Söelle, *Suffering*, trans. Everett R. Kalin (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); For Elizabeth Johnson it is "the Father in an act of sadism." See Johnson, "Christology's Impact on the Doctrine of God," *The Heythrop Journal* 26 (1985): 143-163, 153; *She Who Is*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 50. This is what she has to say: ... patriarchy is the encompassing social system that sanctions child abuse. Theologically, the patriarchal family has been and continues to be a cornerstone for Christological doctrines, especially in the father-son imagery and in the unquestioned acceptance of benign paternalism as the norm for divine power.

enjoined to look to a suffering and power outside us, both greater than ours. The shadow of omnipotence haunts atonement.³⁰ If we rebel against this dependence upon this power, we are categorized as those living in hubris and committing sin. Brock does not see interdependence and mutuality in this scheme of salvation. She sees that grace is experienced not as an awareness of interdependence and unconditional nature of love but as a relief from escaping punishment due to one's failings.³¹ "Paternalistic grace functions by allowing a select group to be in a favored relationship with the powerful father, but the overall destructiveness of the oppressive systems of the patriarchal family is not challenged by such benevolence."³²

Salvific teachings of such kind for Brock are analogous to images of child abuse, and neglect of children, demonstrating that such are acceptable divine behavior in the portrayal of the father inflicting death upon his one perfect child. Two opposites appear in this act such as the projection of the father's goodness and power versus the children's powerlessness showing that the father's punitive action is justified. The death of the child is the way through which the father accepts all people free from the consequences of their sins, portraying his goodness and forgiving power.³³ Brock finds this neither salvific nor just.

Second, she is following in line with Rosemary Radford Ruether and Carter Heyward, arguing that there is a danger of hero worship when lifting up a single

³⁰ Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 56; Brock, "The Greening of the Soul: A Feminist Theological Paradigm of the Web of Life," in Rita Nakashima Brock, Claudia Camp, Serene Jones ed. *Setting the Table: Women in Theological Conversation* (Saint Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 1995), 146.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

individual to fulfill the redemptive work. By being the suffering sacrifice on the cross on behalf of the other children for their wrongs, Jesus has been made the central figure in the church traditions. This has led to the passivity of the believers with no role to play for the remission of their wrongs because this remission has been taken care of in one person, Jesus Christ. Ruether has argued that “Christ, the liberated humanity, is not confined to a static perfection of one person two thousand years ago.”³⁴ Similarly, Heyward, instead of focusing on the historical Jesus, prefers to “speak of what can be and is ‘christic’,...Christ-forming or Christ-making, in our common experience and search for justice.”³⁵ Since God is a spiritual force, God cannot be contained in any single human life, including that of Jesus.³⁶ Therefore, the problem for Brock is the notion that one person is the means by which all are saved. Age old questions arise: Has there been healing, and end to suffering due to Jesus’ death? Has there been change of traditions, and patriarchy? Brock does “not find Christologies that base themselves in Jesus adequate for transforming patriarchy and healing suffering.”³⁷ She believes that the center of incarnation and redemption is misplaced by individualizing Christ, and she insists on finding Christianity’s revelatory and saving events in a larger reality than Jesus and his relationship to God/dess or any subsequent individual Christ.³⁸ She wants to move away from focusing on heroes because individuals do not make sense in and by themselves but

³⁴ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 138.

³⁵ Nicola Slee, “Visualizing, Conceptualizing, Imagining and Praying the Christa: In Search of Her Risen Forms,” *Feminist Theology* 21 no 1 (2012): 71-90, 79.

³⁶ Bond, *Trouble with Jesus*, 93; Carter Heyward, *Touching our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 189.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

³⁸ Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 68.

only through community as other feminist theologians have argued. Ivone Gebara too, does not favor the traditional Christologies and alleges that they are hierarchical and anthropocentric, isolating Jesus from the rest of humans and creation. These Christologies imagine Jesus as the Messiah, coming to the world as a superman, a hero to save humans from their sins. Such notions of atonement theory sustain the culture of dependence on the part of the humans.³⁹ Focusing our attention on a single individual will deter us from focusing on the important factors in understanding an event. This reinforces Mary Daly's description of this as "Christolatry,"⁴⁰ an "unhealthy idolization of Jesus" that disempowers women and thwarts them from claiming their own spiritual authority.⁴¹ Brock wants Jesus removed from the center in order to focus on the larger community events. Jesus, for her, is just a part of history, and she thinks that he should be moved into the larger community. She "wants to shift the focus from the "heroic" self-sacrificing Christ to the life-giving presence of Christ in the Christa/community."⁴² She holds the Christian tradition culpable for isolating Jesus as a singular savior, alone in his private relationship with God. He is portrayed as the one solitary, set-apart figure, who carries salvation for all, and who does not need us.⁴³ Brock, through her experience

³⁹ While discussing ecofeminist theology, she argued that for her, "Jesus does not come to us in the name of the "superior will" that sent him; rather, he comes from here: from this earth, this body, this flesh, from the evolutionary process that is present both yesterday and today in this Sacred Body within which love resides. It continues in him beyond that, and it is turned into passion for life, into mercy and justice." Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 190.

⁴⁰ Nicola Slee, "Visualizing, Conceptualizing, Imagining and Praying the Christa: In Search of Her Risen Forms," 79; Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (London: Women's Press, 2nd edition 1986), 74.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 79-80.

⁴² Bond, *Trouble with Jesus*, 93.

⁴³ Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, 53.

testifies that grace cannot be found in such isolation. “Isolating Jesus from mutual relationships carried forward the trauma of violence without healing it.”⁴⁴ The restoration of life is never an individual process, and salvation comes from communal practices that affirm incarnation, the Spirit in life, and its ongoing promise of resurrection and paradise.⁴⁵

While critiquing the development of the Christian theological doctrines and concepts on the basis of the patriarchal family structures that is unhealthy to the human race, especially the children and women, Brock looks for more liberating theologies that are healing and holistic. In the hope of creating a non-patriarchal world, she insists on a critical analysis of the social, political, and psychological roots of doctrinal claims. Doing this is important because her aim is to demystify non-liberating theological concepts and modern defenses of those concepts.⁴⁶ As Brock insists, the critical analysis has to begin with a clear focus in order to bring healing and not another ideology imposed upon those who are struggling to understand even the one that has been imposed on them.

Brock’s critique of atonement theories, particularly those that portray the image of an innocent child allowed by the father to be killed for the salvation of the rest of the children, is important. It may serve as a corrective to the concept that the Naga Christians have of Jesus Christ suffering on the cross. It helps form questions to be asked to the Naga women who are suffering due to their inability to bear male children: What does killing of the child of God on the cross mean for them in their suffering due to the

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Brock, “The Cross of Resurrection and Communal Redemption,” 250.

⁴⁶ Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 51.

inability to bear male children? Why do they cling to this son of God when they are suffering because they cannot give birth to sons? The Son of God suffering on the cross is a source of relief for the Naga women because they believe that the Son is in solidarity with their suffering, that he understands their pain. Unfortunately, they have not understood what really is going on between the Naga patriarchy and the Father-Son dynamic in Christianity. Brock has opened a platform for experiential and existential reasoning for the Naga women to look at their plight and their conception of Jesus Christ from a different perspective. However, her wish to displace the cross completely from Christian faith is problematic for the Naga women Christians.⁴⁷ The Naga women Christians need to look for ways of theologizing the cross, finding a theology of the cross and resurrection that affirms the life that is in the mother's womb.

Brock's rejection of Jesus as the single heroic figure for salvation is a radical move for the Naga Christian women for whom Jesus is central. Aruna Gnanadason has argued that the image of Christ in colonized India was that of a conquering hero, who comes denouncing other religious motifs and images.⁴⁸ However, there is a difference in understanding of the image of Christ in colonized India and among Naga Christians. The Naga Christians do not worship Jesus as a hero, but they associate him with a conqueror, who brings salvation to the world. Even though the image of colonization is the image of a conqueror, the Naga Christians see Jesus as conquering in another way. He is a counter-conqueror who comes as a friend who understands their suffering and walks in solidarity

⁴⁷ Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes; Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire*.

⁴⁸ Aruna Gnanadason, "Jesus and the Asian Woman: A Post-colonial Look at the Syro-Phoenician Woman/Canaanite Woman from an Indian Perspective," 172. Given the vast country India with numerous diverse cultures, religions and ethnicities, no one person can speak for the whole nation.

with them. They would press Brock to provide an alternative to convince them to shift their focus from Jesus, to give them a new perspective; a reinterpretation of the old Jesus narrative to a new narrative that will meet them where they are and expose their suffering, and furthermore, bring a corrective to their present conception of the cross of Jesus. Even though Jesus is the central salvific figure for the Naga women, he is also the one who is on the periphery with them and is one with them. Therefore, Brock's shift from focusing on an individual heroic figure to the community, that is, to move Jesus from the center to the community, will serve the communal aspect of the Naga community well because of the strong communitarian value they practice and hold.⁴⁹ To reduce Jesus to just a part of the community will be challenging for them. Jesus is held in high esteem in the Naga Christian community. Jesus is the paradigm of everything that is good, just and right. If Jesus becomes a part of the community, he would be regarded as the exemplary community leader whom every individual will regard with awe and admiration. His words and actions would carry much weight. Therefore, his policy on child-birthing would be in favor of the Naga women. If he is not the community leader, then, he would be the highly respected guest. The presence of this community leader, or the highly respected guest, is wholesome, healing and life-giving. This image of Christ brings the Naga women close to Brock's image of Christ as the life-giving presence of the community.

⁴⁹ One of the pioneering Naga tribal theologians who have written extensively on the Naga community and their communitarian life is Wati Longchar. See his works: *Returning to Mother Earth: Theology, Christian Witness and Theological Education: An Indigenous Perspective* (Kolkata: PTCA/SCEPTRE, 2012); *The Traditional tribal Worldview and Modernity: Focus on North East India* (Jorhat: N. Limala Lkr, 1995). Also see Razouselie Lasetso, Marlene Ch. Marak, Yangkahao Vashum ed. *Tribal Ecology: A Search for Ecological values from the Cultures and Practices of the Tribes of North East India*, Tribal Study Series No. 20 (Jorhat, Assam: ETC Programme Coordination, 2012); A. Wati Longchar and Yangkahao Vashum ed. *The Tribal Worldview and Ecology*, Tribal Study Series No. 2 (Jorhat, Assam: The Tribal Study Centre, 1998).

Power of life

Brock explores Christological images of erotic power. According to her, women are born with a power that has been repressed and hidden by a dominant power that has been accepted as the norm in the hierarchical social setup. This repressed power is the feminist Eros, which Brock calls erotic power.⁵⁰ She begins her argument on her understanding of the heart of erotic power with a powerful statement of the power of life.

This power of life is

born into us, heals, makes whole, empowers, and liberates. Its manifold forms create and emerge from heart, that graceful, passionate mystery at the center of ourselves and each other. This power heals brokenheartedness and gives courage to the fainthearted.⁵¹

We are born with this power in contrast to the commonly known power that is constructed in a male dominated social structure that is seen and experienced in terms of status, authority, and control over people, nature and things, which is oppressive to women. In opposition to this kind of relationship, Brock talks about the relationality⁵² pertaining to women's lives, which is fundamental in feminist Eros and her understanding of erotic power.

Women are the agents of interconnectedness. They generate a life of fluidity where love and power meet and embodiment is embraced. It is a matter of the whole

⁵⁰ Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 25. Brock discusses Haunani-Kay Trask's understanding of Eros and power. She quotes her: "The feminist Eros encompasses the "life force," the unique human energy which springs from the desire for existence with meaning, for a consciousness informed by feeling, for experience that integrates the sensual and the rational, the spiritual and the political. In the feminist vision, Eros is both love and power." Haunani-Kay Trask, *Eros and Power: The Promise of Feminist Theory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 92-93. Brock argues for the presence of a sacred dimension in Eros as power and finds a connection to the incarnate Spirit.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Brock develops Heyward's relational, justice-seeking approach. See Nicola Slee, "Visualizing, Conceptualizing, Imagining and Praying the Christa: In Search of Her Risen Forms," 79.

heart engaging in relationships, and when this happens, a “transformative whole-making wisdom” emerges.⁵³ It is the holistic subjective involvement of women creating and connecting hearts. It is the most inclusive principle of human existence that all forms of power emerge from the reality of erotic power.⁵⁴ Brock examines power from the perspective of the least powerful in the society, which is the starting point of feminist discussion of power.

Self-acceptance and self-creating is highly significant in the work of erotic power. This requires the healing of the broken or wounded heart. Unless the heart is healed or begins to heal, the prospect of the restoration and growth of erotic power is dim. The denial of erotic power leads to the production of dominance and control, losing its center and creating an incoherent world. Brock clearly states that power can be properly defined within a community of relationality. The community of relationality has to be clearly differentiated between the conventional gender bias, male dominated, controlling and one-sided decision making group to the relational community of the erotic power, the power of life. Erotic power can never be completely owned, subdued or controlled by any individual or group, even though history has shown and continues to show that domination and hierarchy has the upper hand. Suffering of women and the weak has always accompanied this dominant power. However, the fluidity of erotic power continues to create and sustain connectedness. The community of relationality pertaining to erotic power holds intimacy, generosity and interdependence as creating and sustaining power of life. Life cannot exist without relationships or connectedness but there are both

⁵³ Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 26.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

negative and positive outcomes of being connected with others. Also, for Brock, “erotic power involves inner and outer worlds in a knowing that is multilayered and a causality that is multilateral and intertwined.”⁵⁵ In her own words:

When the outer world of the self is not loving, supportive, and reliable enough, the inner self must become rigid to protect its need to create a coherent world... Without support, the self becomes extremely isolated, enraged, afraid to connect with reality, basing itself in protective, untrue pictures of life... the self’s ability to distinguish between inner and outer world, between subjectivity and objectivity, is attenuated. Marginalized from intimacy with the world, such selves seek to assert control over the world or to give in as victims of it.⁵⁶

The impact of Brock’s work on Christic erotic power lies in how she speaks to multiracial and multicultural contexts; this has particular valiance for the Naga culture. A majority of the illiterate Naga women live hidden and withdrawn from the outside world of self because this outside world does not support, love, or respect their existence and is not dependable. They cannot distinguish between inner and outer worlds, between subjectivity and objectivity. They are marginalized beings unable to interact and connect with the world, and so, they become victims of it. These women totally give in to the world outside. They are identified by the nomenclature “surrender” and “non-existence” in contrast to the masculine identity as “the shaper” of the world. “Gender identity and power fall into polarized sides of self-deceptive, fused relationships: in masculine identity by the attempt to shape the world according to the isolated self; in feminine identity by the surrender of self to the external world.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Ibid., 37.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 36.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

They are living a false life. There is an apparent rift in gender identity and power in such faulty binding relationships that is self-deceiving. Brock quotes Bernard Loomer: “to exclude others [*females*]⁵⁸ from our world of meaning and concern is to act out of powerlessness and fear. To exist within permanently hierarchical relationships is to limit the extent to which we can receive and give in relationships. And the final source of any power is through mutual internal relationships.”⁵⁹ Mutual internal relationships appear to be lacking among Naga Christians because they are subjected to the society’s long standing customs and their mutual internal relationships are controlled by the system. Power among them is understood as control, authority and influence exerted by the male upon women and children. Those in control are unable to have a comprehensive approach to reality because they have a rigid focus point and aim, which is to control and rule over the weak. They are not aware of the whole reality of the Naga women’s situation because they have to hold their position and make sure that power is not taken away from them. Brock argues that these people have the most distorted picture of reality.⁶⁰ She has rightly pointed out:

The quest for dominance involves an ascending thrust toward a transcendental aim, a need to rise and narrow upward toward a hierarchical peak of strength from which all else can be controlled. Stereotypical masculine power is manifested in the self through dominance and aggression. Inequality in relationships is perceived as a permanent state in which power cements status and subordination. The possession of such power is the primary measure of self-worth in the public arenas of our society.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Emphasis added.

⁵⁹ Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 37.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 26f.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

The entire system works for and supports male dominance in the society. It may appear to be an individual action, but it is never the individual alone who reinforces male dominance; the society as a whole reinforces such dominance. In a hierarchical power structure, the more power one has, the more worthy one becomes. The measuring line for claiming on life and resources; gaining respect and worth is “more power.” There is no greater distortion of system and mind than such. This clearly separates them from the powerless who cannot claim on life, even their own. Brock’s concept of power provides a helpful corrective to the ways in which power operates in the relational world of Naga women.

How would erotic power, as Brock presents it, speak to the child-birthing realities of Naga women? Such concepts and practices begin in the womb, at home. Girls are taught that they are born to be at home taking care of domestic responsibilities while the boys are born to be in the public sphere, to perform and execute policies for the whole community to follow. Girls begin life as little mothers and boys as little fathers.⁶² Naga women experience the downside of hierarchical power relationships. They have been stepped on, trampled upon; they remain buried under patriarchy. They are manipulated into the dominant power’s desired development. In this case, there is no possibility of a creative relationship that involves mutual sharing. The power of life that Brock talks

⁶² It is interesting to see that among the Ewe people of the Volta Region of Southeastern Ghana in West Africa, the firstborn daughter is considered as “a little mother” because she functions the same way as her mother. She is regarded as a double blessing to her mother, unlike the siblings who are born after her, because she carries the responsibilities of her mother and lessens her mother’s work. So, in this cultural context, daughters have no future to go beyond motherhood because they are expected to go through what their mothers go through. They remain there, although Dorothy B.E.A Akoto talks about this “little mother” from a liberating approach imaging the firstborn daughter as the “Good Shepherd” in relation to Jesus as the Good Shepherd in the tenth chapter of the Gospel of John. Dorothy B.E.A Akoto, “The Mother of the Ewe and Firstborn Daughter as the “Good Shepherd” in the Cultural Context of the Ewe People: A Liberating Approach,” in Gerald O. West & Musa Dube ed. *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends* (Leiden; Boston; Koln: Brill, 2000), 271.

about is repressed and hidden. Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro and Mercy Amba Oduyoye are right in saying that “until women’s views are listened to and their participation allowed and ensured, the truth will remain hidden, and the call to live the values of the Reign of God will be unheeded.”⁶³ Might erotic power be envisioned in light of this? This power of life is present, but denied, and ripped from women who bring life into the world through birth. It needs a new starting point. It cannot start from the already existing power of the powerful. The new starting point could start by making the invisible and suppressed visibly active.

I argue that this power of life can come alive in the child-birthing practices. The birthing mothers must claim this power of life. They have to undergo a change in their beliefs, concepts, and how they view people and the world in order to claim it. The erotic power challenges child-birthing practices in the Naga context. The creative connectedness and fluidity of the power of life can dismantle some of the ways in which child-birthing practices are constructed in the Naga context. Nancy Mairs wrote, “I had to change my intellectual and aesthetic beliefs about the world and about what I was doing in it, and I had to keep on changing as the world changed – and I changed in it – forever.”⁶⁴ The change within the weak and poor – the women, the subalterns happens because the world is changing too, which they have to know. R.S. Sugirtharajah, the Sri Lankan post-colonial theologian has simply and cogently discussed post-colonialism as

⁶³ Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro & Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Introduction,” in Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro ed. *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992), 1.

⁶⁴ Nancy Mairs, *Voice Lessons: On Becoming a (Woman) Writer* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 21.

signifying that “the future is open and the past unstable and constantly changing.”⁶⁵ The subalterns need to claim “the power to narrate, to contest and reconstruct meanings....”⁶⁶ This does not mean that there will be transference of power to another group. This power of life must not be understood as the power to be owned by any single person or community as is conventionally understood. This arises out of mutual understanding, mutual sharing, relationships and interdependence. There is no place for any element of dominance in this power because it is a creative interconnection. This is “the wonder and mystery of erotic power” for Brock.⁶⁷ The power of life is in all that needs to flourish in their own terms as women, children, and men as well.

Brock is optimistic about destroying the damaging power hierarchies that are destructive to the heart. She sees this happening only if people begin to experience differently the various forms of dominance existing in our society. “We can then begin to see power as the fluid product of a highly interactive process that begins with birth and buoys us throughout life.”⁶⁸ It is hard to imagine this in a context where the age old practices and traditions have become part of the self and community. The lens from which they look at the destructive power hierarchies is limited. However, there is a possibility of seeing from different lenses whereby the destructive power can be dismantled. In response to Brock’s proposal of the method of destroying the power hierarchies that are destructive to the heart, we can ask, “In what way could we experience the various forms of dominance differently?” One form of dominance I

⁶⁵ R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Configurations* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003), 8.

⁶⁶ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 126.

⁶⁷ Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 39.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

experience is by looking at the society through the lens of Brock's literature. For example, I see different forms of dominance in the practice of child-birthing in the Naga culture. I begin to see my own experience of suffering being born a girl at home at the hands of my mother, sisters, father, and brothers. I also begin to see myself as the perpetrator within my own family towards my children, reinforcing the male's power by mechanically introducing the male power mindset, in words, actions, and attitudes toward each child. This method can also take us back into past actions, thoughts and memories helping us to identify the problems. In the case of child-birthing in the Naga culture, I can identify the wrong thought and desires of mothers for a son and the sigh of huge relief when a son is born in contrast to a sigh of lament when a daughter is born. I begin to see that I have been mechanically engineered to follow that route. I also begin to see that this social engineering can be destroyed. I believe that if there are ways to experience dominance differently, fluid erotic power will become visible. I agree with Brock that the power of life must begin at birth and carry us throughout our life. I want to go even further by saying that even before a life is formed in the mother's womb, the mother finds ways to experience suffering differently in preparation for the growth of her child in her womb. This is necessary, for the birthing process must go on until the time of the pain of the delivery of the child. She has to go about the birthing process in a different way, allowing the process to flow toward a new way of being, driven by the new life that is coming. Yet, this is just a transition period. A new way of being and living has to be worked through, depending on the gender of the child. If the child is a girl, then, the mother is bound to begin a process toward a new way of life which will be harder in their hegemonic society of male power. In what way can these women experience and

understand empathy, passion, creativity, sensuality and beauty in light of their birthing? What symbolic terms, functions or images will help them to define them? Where will they look for it?

Living in a Christian state and being Christians, the Naga people and women in particular, without doubt, will look for the answers in the Christian tradition, the Christian scriptures and in the one central figure Jesus Christ. They have accepted and embraced Jesus Christ as their Savior and Friend who stands with them in their suffering. They will define empathy, passion, creativity, sensuality and beauty in the context of dominance in light of the person and work of Jesus Christ. Despite Brock's move away from Jesus Christ as the single savior and heroic figure, her concept of the power of life is helpful to construct a Christology significant for the Naga Christian women facing the suffering of birthing only daughters. It would help to see how they would understand this power of life without avoiding Jesus but finding it in him, and allowing him to create a community, so that they may well understand the community that Brock envisions. She envisions a life-giving presence of Christ in the Christa/community, which is the embodiment of Jesus' healing and redemptive ministry within a world of brokenheartedness. A significant development would be for the Naga women to explore the importance of Jesus as friend, in this case, to recover erotic power as friend. The notion of friend also dismantles the strict family focus (mother, father, child). This erotic power as friend will be present with the women at their birth, sharing their fears of birthing and comforting them. This erotic power can also be recovered as midwife. Jesus becomes the midwife waiting and helping the women to give birth. He becomes the facilitator of life irrespective of the gender of the baby born.

The Heart of the Cross: Wonhee Anne Joh

Reading the cross from the situation of oppression, it seems that every interpretation of the power of the cross is tainted by death because it appears to uphold the power of the perpetrators. Christians employ unique symbols and language for assessing dehumanization through the language of the cross, and although the force and quality of this suffering is critically articulated through the hermeneutics of the cross, the very language of critique presents Christians with a unique problem: how is the suffering force of the cross in oppressed experience linked with our Christian faith in the redemptive force of the cross? This section will focus on Wonhee Anne Joh's understanding of the cross by specifically looking at her book *The Heart of the Cross: A Postcolonial Christology*. Emphasis will be on her two-fold understanding of double-gestured cross and love-centered cross.

Double-Gestured Cross

Wonhee Anne Joh argues for a double-gestured cross, which means that “the symbol of the cross performs a double gesture and requires a double reading.”⁶⁹ The theological thesis of her work is that the cross works symbolically to embody both the horror of *han*⁷⁰ and the power of *jeong*.⁷¹ Joh sees the cross of Jesus as comforting,

⁶⁹ Wonhee Anne Joh, *Heart of the Cross: A Postcolonial Christology*, 104.

⁷⁰ *Han*, as described by Suh Nam-dong, a *minjung* theologian is a “feeling of unresolved resentment against injustices suffered, a sense of helplessness because of the overwhelming odds against one, a feeling of acute pain in one’s guts and bowels, making the whole body writhe and squirm, and an obstinate urge to take revenge and to right the wrong – all these combined.” Boo-wong Yoo, *Korean Pentecostalism: Its History and Theology* (New York: Verlag Peter Lang, 1988), 221. In the same book, the Korean poet Ko Eun says, “We Koreans were born from the womb of *Han* and brought up in the womb of *Han*.” 222.

empowering, and hope-filled, while at the same time horrifying, threatening, suffocating, contradictory, and offensive.⁷² For her, the positive symbol of the cross is contained in the concept of *jeong* and in the negative in the concept of *han* in her native Korean lived experiences. The profound depths of *han* and *jeong* are radically exposed on the cross and embodied - submission/victimization and liberation/revolution.⁷³ The cross, for her, is the interstitial space, the hybrid site, which embodies both homage and mockery; it is a meeting place between abjection and agency, where death and life coexist and where the opposites – suffering/abjection/*han*, liberation/love/*jeong* challenge one another. The cross performs a double gesture by embodying the horror of symbolic violence and reveals the presence of the semiotic as well. Abjection and love are both embodied in the cross and indicate the logic of love contesting the logic of violence. She sees and compares this logic with the way of confrontation of the maternal semiotic of patriarchal symbolic law.⁷⁴ Hence, she argues: “the cross is not the death of the semiotic/*jeong* by the imperial powers... but it is the cross-ing over into a new form of power. This would

⁷¹ *Jeong* is a cultural concept and practice in the Korean context that saturates daily living and all forms of relationships. Joh understands *jeong* as encompassing “the notions of compassion, affection, solidarity, vulnerability, and forgiveness.” It is even considered more powerful, lasting, and transformative than love, for many Koreans. It works to resist oppression and suffering without having any elements of retaliatory vengefulness. “When *jeong* is present among sufferers and oppressed who do not forget justice, these same oppressed people preserve an element of forgiveness for those who participate in structures of oppression.” *Jeong* is liberative for Joh. It is “an intense and vital mode of bonding but less susceptible to the romanticization of love as erotic or sexual attraction. We are interconnected. It has a strong sense of relationality and does not depend on equal regard and mutuality in order to flourish. *Jeong* involves sacrificing oneself for others even the oppressing other but it is not a self-emptying self-sacrifice. It is not self-abnegation. It is rather an intentional, wise, and knowing decision to relinquish that recognizes not only the dignity and worth of oneself but also that of others.” For her, “choosing to live by and through *jeong* is to claim one’s agency and power in a situation of powerlessness. At times sacrifice in *jeong* works to restore life in the face of forces that destroy life.” Wonhee Anne Joh, “Violence and Asian American Experience: From Abjection to *Jeong*,” in *Off the Menu*, 146-147.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Joh, *Heart of the Cross*, 109.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 111.

then be the power of “herethics”: the power of *jeong*.⁷⁵ The maternal symbolic⁷⁶ becomes a threat to the patriarchal symbolic. The latter will try to resist the former through subtle coercion and violence. The threat of the maternal needs to create, and recreate, imaginatively. Joh points out Christianity’s problem of replacing the loving and nourishing maternal body with a patriarchal God.

Nevertheless, she clearly states that the cross mirrors the suffering and the abjection of ourselves, understood from the perspective of the abject.⁷⁷ “Abjection is thus not something to be overcome but that which must be acknowledged and embodied as the stranger/other that is irreparably part of our very selves.”⁷⁸ For the abject, she presents the cross as powerful because of the power of transference love and solidarity.⁷⁹ She believes that “the abject as subaltern does and is able to speak through the ruptures of the maternal semiotic power within the symbolic.”⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid. Joh favors semiotic to symbolic following Julia Kristeva. Kristeva’s semiotic “precedes all unities, binary oppositional structures and hierarchical forms of organization” (xxii). “In Kristeva’s work the semiotic is explicitly maternal and feminine while the symbolic is paternal, the Law of the Father,” xxii. She argues that “the symbolic, without the subversive trace of the semiotic, is not alive. It is living but with no life. The semiotic is the life source even for the symbolic. Even as the symbolic demands the severing of the semiotic as abject, its source of life comes from the semiotic depths” (112). She reads the cross from a semiotic standpoint arguing that it relieves psychic wounds of “original *han*.” “The ultimate separation, between God and humanity in Christianity is overcome through the semiotic irruption within the symbolic/Law of the Father on the cross” (112).

⁷⁷ Ibid., 112.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 109.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 112.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 109. She is clearly aware that Spivak has earlier said that the subaltern cannot speak for it, and she argues that they do and can speak. She also acknowledges Spivak’s observation that “the time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelations bursts forth.” See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (NY: Columbia University Press, 1982), 9.

In my work towards a feminist Christological reimagination for the healing and restoration of the Naga women mascu-surrogates, I find my interpretation of the cross analogous to Joh's understanding of the cross.⁸¹ I understand the cross as having two sides in the same way as Joh understands *han* and *jeong* as two different sides of the same heart. The cross, for me, is gloomy and bright, unjust and just, paternal and maternal, and maternal and anti-maternal. It portrays death and life, violence and love. Both sides exist but desire the positive side of brightness, life, love, justice, and maternal and expose and denounce the opposite side of the cross. This is a continuous protest of the cross. Gloom, death, violence, injustice and paternal are threatened by their opposites. The cross brings to light two radical opposites – “death” and “life.” On the cross the two opposites become visible. It is a relevant search for Naga women who long for a life-affirming community where both male and female babies will be respected and women will be free from fear of birthing.

Joh's Christological work is useful for Naga women. Her understanding of the meaning of the cross mirrors Naga women's belief of the redemption on the cross. She allows the women to look at the cross intensely, at the deep wounds and scars of the heart and their bodies and acknowledge the ugliness and wrongness of suffering. She also wants the women to look at the other side of the heart which is filled with love, compassion and redemptive love. Both ugliness and beauty are portrayed on the cross simultaneously. This will enable Naga women to make a paradigm shift from their notion and belief of suffering in the name of the cross of Christ and transform their attitude and

⁸¹ Some years ago, I wrote a paper titled “The Two Shades of the Cross: The Transformative Power of the Cross Reconsidered” in which I tried to expose both life and death on the cross and how the cross encounters the violence and oppressions in the world and transforms them constantly.

see the need for a reinterpretation of their deep-rooted narratives towards new and liberating narratives. Joh may be pointing to something new for Naga women to take on, to seek ways beyond violence and abjection.⁸²

Love-Centered Cross

Joh argues for *jeong* centered cross.⁸³ She proposes that “the power of the cross also points simultaneously to the possibility of a radical form of love that can be linked with the Korean concept of *jeong*.”⁸⁴ She allows her readers to have a glimpse of her memories of her own experience of displacement and feeling of nostalgia in the interstices of her country of birth, Korea and her place of immigrant residence, North America. She looks at the traumatic immigrant experience of her family in North

⁸² Joh, “Violence and Asian American Experience: From Abjection to *Jeong*,” 157-8. Joh defines abjection “as an operation of the psyche that requires the expulsion and exclusion of that which threatens the formation of one’s identity” (150). Also see Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*. Naga women are excluded from the things that will hinder the identity of Naga men, and those women who stand against these exclusions and fight for inclusions may be threatened in subtle ways, such as abuse, mockery, shaming, expulsion from the village, and coercing the whole community to stand against them. “Abjection is that liminal state that hovers on the threshold of body and body politic – and thus the boundary between psychoanalysis and material history.” Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Joh, “Violence and Asian American Experience: From Abjection to *Jeong*,” 149. “Abject peoples are those whom industrial imperialism rejects but cannot do without: slaves, prostitutes, the colonized, domestic workers, the insane, the unemployed, *the mothers, daughters, women* (emphasis added).

⁸³ As Joh argues for *jeong*, I argue for life. We agree on the double gesture of the cross and have the same meaning in different ways to make it relevant to our own respective contexts.

⁸⁴ According to Joh, “as a concept, *jeong* encompasses but is not limited to the notions of compassion, affection, solidarity, relationality, vulnerability, and forgiveness. It is right-relation (xiii,xiv). It “embodies the invisible traces of compassion in relationships and is most often recognized when we perceive our very own self, conscious and unconscious, in the mirrored reflection of the other. *Jeong* is a Korean way of conceiving an often complex constellation of relationality of the self with the other that is deeply associated with compassion, love, vulnerability, and acceptance of the heterogeneity as essential to life. It not only smooths harsh feelings, such as dislike or even hate, but has a way of making relationships richly complex by moving away from a binary, oppositional perception of reality, such as oppressor and oppressed” (xxi). She argues that “*jeong* is the power embodied in redemptive relationships. It can even be argued that redemption emerges within relationality that recognizes the power and presence of *jeong* to move us toward life” (xxi). Brock’s notion of “erotic power” as discussed above is neatly reflected in Joh’s concept of *jeong*.

America as she unfolds the history of her family rooted somewhere else and being uprooted and planted in another place with strands of roots still in its original place, and the roots have journeyed miles of routes to another place, which may or may not have been rooted well enough, or not rooted at all, as perceived by others. She recollects that in spite of the traumatic experience of displacement, they journeyed in hope in the new land, which they were to call home, I believe. She remains rooted even though she had taken complex routes.

The complexity of our memory of the past, our present context, and our hope in the future have all been and continue to be sustained by the centrality of how we continue to live with *heart*. We continue to journey, to live, to resist, sometimes with wisdom and sometimes without, to navigate the complex layers of being in relationships and to have mighty and fierce hope in the future – all done with, by, and through the heart.⁸⁵

There is no life without heart. Living with heart, for Joh, is to reflect one's life in the other in daily living and being sensitive to the joys and suffering of the other, and living it.⁸⁶ Joh has proved it right that if theology is to be contextual, it has to come from where one stands and the reality of one's experiences, and she has shown herself a relevant theologian. Her experiences are connected to her parents lived experiences of suffering and pain, at the same time living that life with “a powerful presence of *jeong*” that helped them move toward wholeness in hope. Watching her parents' life has molded her to embrace *jeong* as a way of life. Her gratitude to her parents is moving and significant at the same time.

Through them I have inherited the wisest of all the wisdom: to live with heart in spite of brokenheartedness and never to give up on our human capacity to find, gift, participate, and share in redemption. More than anything else, my lived,

⁸⁵ Joh, *Heart of the Cross*, xvi.

⁸⁶ Joh, “Violence and Asian American Experience: From Abjection to *Jeong*,” 158.

Korean American, immigrant experience has taught me, despite the suffering and trauma, that our profound sense of collective interconnectedness and the relational empowerment of *jeong* ... promote communal healing and sustaining and make way for the presence of a deep, life-affirming power.⁸⁷

This is a powerful affirmation of the presence and acknowledgement of redemption in the midst of brokenheartedness, suffering and trauma. She does not abandon her parents' tradition but rather reinterprets and embraces it in light of the cross. She does not leave behind the old narratives, and yet, new narratives emerge but not without a critical understanding of the meaning of the cross. She asserts that Jesus lived the way of love/*jeong* and by doing so risked the wrath signified by the cross.⁸⁸ "In *jeong*, one knows that asserting one's subjectivity by rejecting the other is brutal. This does not mean that *jeong* is not confrontational or that it reifies relations of domination and powerlessness."⁸⁹ She finds Moltmann's understanding of the power of the cross where the painful suffering occurs at the depth of God's heart, coming close to what Jesus would have experienced as he embodied the power of *jeong*.⁹⁰ "The suffering of Jesus on the cross, then, signifies the *jeong* he embodied in his solidarity with the abject while, at the same time, the cross defies the powers that repress *jeong*."⁹¹ Joh has cogently defined *jeong* holistically; *jeong* extends beyond the traditional notion of love and being loved. She says,

Jeong lives in saying both a yes and a no in relation to the suffering it bears: no to violence and abjection and a simultaneous yes to the power of *jeong* to seek ways

⁸⁷ Joh, *Heart of the Cross*, xvi.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁸⁹ Joh, "Violence and Asian American Experience: From Abjection to *Jeong*," 155.

⁹⁰ Joh, *Heart of the Cross*, 100.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 101.

beyond this violence and abjection. One is able to recognize the vulnerability of the other by looking beyond the hardened heart of the other. *Jeong* exists even within, especially within, relationships not based on mutuality. At the heart of the transgressive power of *jeong* is its presence, its emergence even within the terrain of confrontational and oppositional relationships and often in the absence of mutuality and equality.⁹²

In her concept of *jeong* there is hope of the transformation of even the oppressor. We do not wait for the change to happen but continuously work towards justice and change.

Here, the dignity and worth of all beings is recognized.⁹³

Joh has laid out her belief that there is redemption on the cross. She falls in line with feminist theologians, like Elizabeth Shüssler Fiorenza, who share in the belief that there is redemption on the cross. Joh has strongly stated, “I am unwilling to insist that there is absolutely no redemptiveness on the cross.”⁹⁴ She is not deterred by the influential theologies of feminist and womanist theologians like Delores Williams, including her own Asian feminist counterparts like Rita Nakashima Brock, who do not see redemption on the cross.⁹⁵ Though Williams differs significantly from Joh, there is resonance between their understanding of the cross and their critique of the Anselmian atonement theory. Williams, like Joh, sees a human evil on the cross that should not be glorified, rejecting any identification in the image of cross-bearing and redemptive suffering. There is nothing of God’s love revealed on the cross; no salvation occurs as a result of Jesus’ death. “There is nothing divine in the blood of the cross.”⁹⁶ But she finds

⁹² Joh, “Violence and Asian American Experience: From Abjection to Jeong,” 157-8.

⁹³ Ibid., 155-6.

⁹⁴ Joh, *Heart of the Cross*, 94.

⁹⁵ Among the Womanist theologians Delores Williams stands out; and among the Asian feminist theologians Rita Nakashima Brock stands out.

⁹⁶ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 167.

images of salvation in “Jesus’ ministerial vision of life.”⁹⁷ She looks for a Christology of incarnation that celebrates life, especially the life-giving symbol of women.⁹⁸ Williams sees Joh’s *han* side of the cross but not the *jeong* side in the strict sense. However, Williams’ search for life and life-giving symbols for women in the ministerial vision of Christ alludes to Joh’s *jeong*, and more so, to Brock’s vision of Christa/community.

It is worth engaging Joh’s Christology for the fact that she is an Asian woman who has seen and experienced suffering, and yet, she believes in the redemptiveness of the cross. She speaks to the Naga women who insist on the absolute redemption on the cross. The cross is redemptive in the way it becomes for them a symbol of the care and love of Christ for them in spite of their gender as women, poor, disadvantaged and cursed. The cross stands as a powerful symbol of the suffering of people and of their yearning to know love.⁹⁹ Mercy Amba Oduyoye shares similar sentiments of the African women who “face the cross in the hope that the humanity of women will rise from the silence and peace of the graveyard.”¹⁰⁰

Conclusion: Transformative Power of the Cross Reconsidered

The Naga women need change, not a hoped-for change but a change that becomes a reality in their context of discrimination and vulnerability. This change has to address the unfair treatment of Naga women at the hands of patriarchy that has constantly made

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Bond, *Trouble with Jesus*, 82.

⁹⁹ Sharon Thornton, *Broken yet Beloved: A Pastoral Theology of the Cross* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2002), 115.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 108.

them vulnerable to their cultural stereotypes, and the societal abuse that have deconstructed them into powerless and helpless beings. These women are born with a cross hanging over their heads. They are crucified every day. Being a woman in these societies is the biggest penalty society ever placed on their shoulders. Sometimes, the cross they carry is so heavy that it consumes their very existence. To seek new ways beyond such violence and abjection is to first ask some questions: How can the cross be a symbol of love, hope, power and life for them? How can they listen to the Christian message of carrying your cross when they are born with this cross over their heads? When a female baby is ripped away from her mother's womb because she is a girl, how does one redeem the image of the cross? What hope does the cross provide for these girls and mothers? What love does this cross portray to them? What sense of relief does the cross offer to them? Is the cross life giving?

A re-reading of the Christian teaching that life comes in the death of Jesus is necessary. The understanding of the emergence of life in Jesus' death should be read in a new light. He gave up what human beings hold most dear – life – and he gave it up in love redefining the meaning of both “life” and “love” in history. Nicola Slee expresses the same sentiment that the Gospel of John offers the model of Jesus as the friend who voluntarily lays down his life for his friends out of love.¹⁰¹ Instead of venerating the cross as a means of redemption, she wants to venerate “friendship and its free act of love, including sacrificial love,” thus, even to the extent of giving his life for love of friends.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Nicola Slee, “Visualizing, Conceptualizing, Imagining and Praying the Christa: In Search of Her Risen Forms,” 87.

¹⁰² Ibid.

The Gospel of John 19:34 is significant: “life flows out of Jesus’ death [body]”.¹⁰³ There seems to be a nourishing power present in the fluid that flowed from Jesus’ side on the cross. It is love. This remains between death and life. This love exudes life. This love bears and delivers life in the world. Life becomes an expression of love, and the responsibility of that life. This love will guide the life given in death. It has the power to resist death. The cross becomes a symbol of life. It reverses all the strategies of the controlling power of death and works persuasively to open up “conceptual, behavioral, existential and social freedom.”¹⁰⁴ Life goes on in the expression and actualization of a power within, a power that is present. As a mother breathes hard to push the child out of her womb, the cross is a reminder of the presence of the force, telling the daughters to stand and fight, believing in their effort to stay alive. God is revealed on the cross as the giver of life. Jesus died because of love, and love appears to have died with him but love fought on. Susan Bond, affirming God’s power as power of life as represented by the cross and resurrection has said that “the cross operates as a critique of power-as-control and crucifies our notions of dominant power.”¹⁰⁵ She echoes Sally Purvis’ claim: “the “re-socializing” knowledge at the center of crucifixion is the image of a male, who acts contrary to notions of masculine power. Jesus, as male, rejects the privileges of kyriarchy and patriarchy that have traditionally been attached to the masculinity of God.”¹⁰⁶ Also,

¹⁰³ Gail R. O’day, “The gospel of John” in Keck, Leander E. ed. *The New Interpreter’s Bible* Vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 834; Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John (XIII-XXI)* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co. Inc., 1970), 949-50.

¹⁰⁴ Bond, *Trouble with Jesus*, 127.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. Also see Sally B. Purvis, *The Power of the Cross: Foundations for a Christian Feminist Ethic of Community* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 88.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

Virginia Fabella claims that Jesus, by being male, “could repudiate more effectively the male definition of humanity and show the way to a right and just male-female relationship.”¹⁰⁷ Love emerging in death directs us into a distinct relationship with one another. In Jesus’ love story, one can catch glimmers of what it means to be community of love, to see and know God fully in the midst of life and death.

The cross as life giving unveils to the sufferer the presence of God because this is God’s alternative to abusive power. It strives to encompass the whole reality of human life as they struggle to live freely in the face of death, making it clear to us that evil is real, but it is not the ultimate.¹⁰⁸ The power of the cross enables us to practice love in concrete ways to enhance life, being aware of the actual condition of the other and having an understanding of suffering solidarity as a community’s willingness to “give up our privileged state in order to stand with the disempowered group working for and with them to resist injustice, and to transform the situation.”¹⁰⁹ The cross calls for a critical reflection on Jesus’ identification with the victims of a violent and oppressive society. This is the reason why the power to break the bondage of suffering is the goal of the cross in the power of love. The cross calls people to believe in the possibility of transformation and for active participation in this task. The cross rejects the domination that kills; it recovers the abandoned; it positions the displaced; it takes suffering and death seriously; yet, it also embraces and releases life. This is the redemptive and transformative power of

¹⁰⁷ Bond, *Trouble with Jesus*, 127; Virginia Fabella & Chung Hyun Kyung in R.S. Sugirtharajah ed. *Asian Faces of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 212.

¹⁰⁸ Bond thinks that Wendy Farley’s understanding of the incarnation, the cross, and the resurrection as a narrative whole, suggests that evil is real but not ultimate, and that God’s compassion is the power to resist. Bond, *Trouble with Jesus*, 128; Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 132.

¹⁰⁹ Bond, *Trouble with Jesus*, 142.

the cross. From the darkness of the cross emerges the ray of light, the light of personhood, justice and love. Love for all humanity, love that transcends the groaning of life and leads them into a fulfilled and liberated life.

This love has the power to change the heart. Change of heart happens when one realizes that one is the other and sees oneself in the other, because in reality one is reflected in the other and vice versa. This changed heart through love transcends boundaries, divisions and binaries. For the Naga women, life means wholeness. It goes beyond the heart. An Indian feminist theologian, Pauline Chakkalakal, while espousing the power of creativity and connectedness in doing feminist theology, and creating space for mutual learning, has argued for doing theology “not only with the heart, but also with the body – the whole person, using dance, singing, poetry, painting, . . .”¹¹⁰ Life is to be lived in its fullness, to be enjoyed, loved, shared and lived in interdependence and interconnectedness, in community because life is offered as a gift to all. This calls for the envisioning of a passionate-compassionate holism of the affirmation of life. It is a radical movement towards life for all who are born and yet to be born, to re-narrate the story of salvation.

¹¹⁰ Pauline Chakkalakal, “Asian Women Reshaping Theology: Challenges and Hopes,” *Feminist Theology* 9 no 21 (2001): 21-35, 34.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE SYMBOLIC OF NATALITY

In this chapter, I will develop the symbolic of natality as an alternative to the suffering-and death-focused theology of the cross that is prominent in Naga theologies. This chapter draws especially on the natality-focused work of Grace Jantzen, which is highly compatible with the work of Rita Nakashima Brock and Wonhee Anne Joh reviewed in the previous chapter. Jantzen's concept of natality is particularly promising as a way to unravel the problem of child-birthing in the Naga context.

Jantzen adapted the concept of natality from Hannah Arendt, seeing in Arendt's use of the term a way of countering an obsession with death in western philosophy and theology.¹ Jantzen emphasizes the significance and purpose of life in the world, and she argues that all beings are born into the world as free. These ideas have potential to address the unjust practices of male-preferred birthing in the Naga culture.² Natality can be a starting point for the Naga Christians to understand the meaning of being born into the world, recognizing the beauty of giving birth to a child and the uniqueness of each life birthed. For Jantzen, natality is a political and philosophical category.³ Birth is to be affirmed and celebrated because it is the beginning of the story of a new life. Describing the new life narratively, she says: "This story is not the story of a soul, but of an embodied life, situated in material conditions which shape experience, and subjectivity

¹ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 147-149.

² Jantzen may not have heard of the Naga people and their culture during her lifetime, but I am optimistic that her passion for life would impact the Naga people's thinking.

³ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 148.

are also shaped by them.”⁴ This new embodied life brings a fresh beginning to the life in existence and continues in new and fresh ways towards freedom.

In developing the concept of natality, Jantzen is clearly concerned with the structure of thought that gives rise to the denigration of women. She offers an alternative that draws from what she refers to as a ‘feminine symbolic,’⁵ which helps in the analysis of the birthing problem in the Naga context. I will focus my analysis particularly on Jantzen’s book, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, to move toward understanding natality, as she explores the possibility of developing a new imaginary⁶ of religion, one that could replace the rigid structures of the masculinist, necrophilic symbolic.⁷ I will first describe necrophilia as Jantzen presents it, as I move to an analysis of the Naga child-birthing context. I will then discuss Jantzen’s concept of natality and explore what this concept might mean for Naga women.

Jantzen’s work will be significant in my attempt to critique the birthing philosophy and practice in the Naga tradition that has long been in conjunction with Christian theology’s emphasis on death. This teaching on death has portrayed that

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 4ff.

⁶ Jantzen discusses the imaginary of Lacan. Lacanian imaginary is referred to “the moment of prelinguistic unconscious fantasy of the unified ‘I’” based on the Freudian theory of the unconscious fantasy of a bodily self.” Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 95. Phyllis H. Kaminski gives a clear definition of imaginary as Jantzen discusses: “The imaginary refers to the dimension of images, conscious and unconscious, perceived or imagined, in which the ego strives to see itself reflected in its relations to others.” *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* by Grace M. Jantzen. Review by: Phyllis H. Kaminski *Feminist Teacher* Vol. 13, No. 1 (2000), 77-79:77. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40545934>. (Accessed 15/01/2014).

⁷ Ibid., Back cover blurb.

suffering and death leads to salvation.⁸ This particular love of death has for so long been the foundation of the understanding of the life and work of Jesus Christ, and the destiny of the believers among the Naga Christians. Yet, Naga traditions include other perspectives. Jantzen's work on natality and flourishing will help highlight themes of ancient Naga stories of wisdom, power and courage that have been suppressed. It will also provide a retelling of the Jesus story in the tradition of Naga women's retelling of traditional stories, as described in Chapter Three.

Necrophilia: Encountering the Fascination with Death

Necrophilia, the love of death, is a concept that identifies a theoretical bearing within the west, as Jantzen argues. Using the critical tools of Luce Irigaray, continental philosophy, and post-Lacanian psychoanalysis, Jantzen critiqued western modernity's obsession with death and violence.⁹ In her search for the origins of the concepts of violence and death in the western world, she concluded that "the choice of death, the love of death and of that which makes for death, has been characteristic of the west from Homeric and Platonic writings, through centuries of Christendom, and takes particularly deadly shapes in western postmodernity."¹⁰ She argues that we are living in a deadly habitus where the sedimentation of violence and love of death have formed layer upon

⁸ See Amy Chapman, "Suffering Our Way to Salvation: Ivone Gebara, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and the Adequacy of the Cross as a Symbol for Women," *Lumen et Vita* (June 2011): 1-18, 1.

⁹ Elaine Graham, "Redeeming the Present," in Elaine L. Graham ed. *Grace Jantzen: Redeeming the Present* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 2.

¹⁰ Grace M. Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence: Death and Displacement of Beauty* Volume One (London & New York: Routledge, 2004), 3.

layer in western history.¹¹ The connection of destruction and violence with the obsession with death seems embedded in western society. Jantzen also argues that a “preoccupation with death requires a refusal of beauty, or its displacement into some less threatening sphere.”¹² She pictures the pervasiveness of necrophilia in the world:

From militarization, death camps and genocide to exploitation, commodification and the accumulation of wealth, from the construction of pleasure and desire to the development of terminator genes, from the violence on the streets to the heaven-obsessed hymnody of evangelical churches, preoccupation with death and the means of death and the combat with death is ubiquitous.¹³

Such pervasiveness of necrophilia is not something new or different. It is a stark reality that continues to destroy the fabric of human society and the rest of creation. In repudiating the concept of necrophilia, Jantzen stated strongly, “violence is ugly.”¹⁴ She exposed the roots of violence in religion, particularly Christianity.

One of the roots of violence found in Christianity is the dualistic structure of thought. Jantzen has exposed the dualistic systems of thought that has had adverse effects on the world and its inhabitants, which she sought to undo. The dualistic and hierarchical western symbolic consists of male/female, body/spirit, rational/irrational, life/death, and a transcendent, spiritual and distant Other God. In this binary construct, the male is associated with spirit, reason, and life, whereas the female is associated with body, irrationality, and death. These binary constructs in Christianity have reinforced the culture of death and violence. The culture of death and violence is also extensively described by the Asian theologian Wonhee Anne Joh in her double reading of the cross

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., viii.

¹³ Ibid., 5.

¹⁴ Ibid., vii.

where the cross embodies both abjection and love. Thus, her reading indicates a contestation between the logic of love and the logic of violence.¹⁵

Violence is not just about killing or taking someone's life by force. It is the depersonalization and patronizing of others in the name of religion. Christianity is a fitting example. In "God and Violence in the Old Testament," Terrence E. Freitheim defines violence as

any action verbal and nonverbal, oral or written, physical or psychical, active or passive, public or private, individual or institutional/societal, human or divine, in whatever degree of intensity, that abuses, violates, injures, or kills. Some of the most pervasive and most dangerous forms of violence are those that are often hidden from view (against women and children, especially); just beneath in many of our homes, churches, and communities is abuse enough to freeze the blood.¹⁶

This psychologically destructive violence is often meted out on women because it has become a part of the social and religious structure of life, and the Bible's patriarchy has been uncritically iterated in churches.

In the thought of the early Christian theologians such as Augustine, such concepts were deeply ingrained in their theological discussions, especially in dualistic discussions of body and soul, which have adversely affected thinking about women. For example, Augustine's argument "that the image of God is to be found, not in the body, but in the mind"¹⁷ is one of the teachings that has impacted the history of the church and is dangerous to women. Through the centuries in Christian thought, body and soul have been dichotomized, teaching that the soul leaves the material body when a person dies. The body decomposes, and the soul lives in the spiritual realm. Hence, the soul is

¹⁵ See Chapter 4.

¹⁶ Terrence E. Freitheim, "God and Violence in the Old Testament," *Word and World* 24: 1 (Winter 2004) 18-28, 19.

¹⁷ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 31.

regarded as more important than the body. This hierarchy teaches that salvation is to be achieved in the next world after death, which neglects the need to value and care for the material world. This means that this world is temporal, and therefore, the physical body, sensory experience and sexuality are to be ignored in order to keep our minds on the other world. What matters is whether one's soul is saved. This dualistic concept is reflected in the "heaven-obsessed hymnody of the evangelical churches"¹⁸ that Jantzen has pointed out. Such a dualistic notion of body and soul, which leads to the longing for an other-worldly salvation to the neglect of earthly existence, is harmful and destructive to natality.

The culture of death and violence is also dualistically gendered. It has led to the strict division of purpose between male and female. Male is regarded as ruler and female as subordinate. Therefore, the male possessed with reason and soul rules over the female associated with fleshliness and reproduction. Again, Augustine's thought that "males are closer to God ... than are females, who are associated with materiality and reproduction"¹⁹ reinforces violence towards women. Following this dualistic Christian teaching, the Naga Christians emphasize their belief in the eternal soul, and because of such understanding, women are told to suffer in this world because their reward will be in heaven. Christendom has long since upheld suffering inflicted on the body as spiritual disciplining that is obviously portrayed in the image of the cross of Jesus. Such traditional teachings have reinforced men to impose this kind of understanding upon

¹⁸ Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence*, 5.

¹⁹ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 31. See Augustine, "On the Trinity," in Philip Schall ed. *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Vol. III (Grand Rapids: Mich., W.B. Eerdmans, 1956), 12.7: 10-12.

women, making suffering righteous in the women's mindset. So, when a male child is birthed, he is automatically adorned with spirit, and reason, and becomes the head of the social structure to rule over women, who are seen largely as reproductive bodies. By this view, the preference and desire for male children in the Naga culture is strengthened, while the suffering of Naga women and girls is increased. The cycle repeats itself. Jantzen wants to dismantle this fascination with the spiritual, the afterlife and the other world beyond, and focus on this world, this body and this reality.

Jantzen has also made a further observation about gender and the maternal body saying that women have been linked with death.²⁰ She has pointed out that, on a symbolic level, women are more particularly associated with death, whereas men are linked with aggression and violence, and with immortality and other worlds as well.²¹ She quotes Diane Jonte-Pace: "Death, the unrepresentable, the ultimate absence, is symbolized as woman; ... what 'woman' means is death."²² Julia Kristeva, too, has taken up this "conceptual linkage of women, absence, and death."²³ Woman embodies death, which is the epitome of nonexistence and fear. This is one example that depicts the connection between the western obsession with death and the obsession with female bodies.²⁴ Female bodies become the field of death-dealings. They are the pathways of death – to death from death. Woman and death are never separated. At the same time, the denial of

²⁰ Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence*, 16.

²¹ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 34.

²² Ibid., 132. See also, Diane Jonte-Pace, "Situating Kristeva Differently: Psychoanalytic Readings of Women and Religion," in David Crownfield ed. *BodyText in Julia Kristeva: Religion, Women and Psychoanalysis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992): 1-22, 21.

²³ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 132. See Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans, Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 27.

²⁴ Ibid.

death and the determination to control and master it shows its connectedness with deep-seated misogyny.²⁵ Death becomes a power that is inexorable and, yet, seductive; it lures the male to the female to meet male requirements and desires. This death that is linked to women can be called a seductive death that mirrors men's need for women and their refusal to acknowledge the need and the power that women-seductive death has. A "deep-seated misogyny"²⁶ becomes the tool to control this death.

Women's link to death is also found in the Christian tradition to a large extent. Women are portrayed as the reason for men's mortality. Death is understood to have come about by the sin of the first woman, Eve. Death and women's association with death is the consequence of sin for humanity in the Christian tradition. Therefore, all women are affected, and they are guilty of bringing death to humanity. The biblical teaching has been wrongly understood and imparted through the centuries, thus perpetuating unnecessary pain on women around the world. Women's world is limited and has become dangerous for them to flourish and enjoy. The necrophilic symbolic "connects death, sex and the female, while systematically silencing women and ignoring or suppressing the significance of natality."²⁷

The portrayal of women as the reason for men's mortality has made men afraid to be associated with any womanly characteristics or maternal longing. In her engagement with the psychoanalytic tradition, Jantzen interacts with the Lacanian thought to build on this theme. For the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, "a man constitutes himself as a

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 132.

²⁷ Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence*, 16.

self-identical subject by repressing and denying his connection to his mother, and the reminder of that repression by any other (m)others is consequently threatening to him.²⁸ They repress their maternal longing by strategizing to control and silence women. Silencing women has been an age-old tactic that continues to operate. Feminist thinkers, like Michelle Walker in *Philosophy and the Maternal Body: Reading Silence*²⁹ and Luce Irigaray in *Speculum of the Other Woman*,³⁰ have expressed a concern with the silencing of women.

Jantzen's description of the problem with the theoretical underpinnings of western thought compels me to think about the necrophilia that is factually playing out in the Naga context. As Jantzen has pointed out, the western tradition links women to death, claims that mascu-surrogates bring death, and considers women as good as dead. Here, Jantzen is not speaking of Naga women, but the situation of Naga women exemplifies Jantzen's connections between woman and death very well. Naga people communicate in silence sending messages such as, "It is better for you to be dead than not have a son," and "your womb is cursed." These statements are demeaning at their worst and painful at their best for these mascu-surrogate women. These women are doubly silenced because they are unable to bear male progeny, and yet, the male seeks them to bear his image. These mascu-surrogates become the source of death and victims of death as well. Their

²⁸ Jantzen points out here the "psychoanalytic base and expression of the onto-theological symbolic of mortality which sees the face of the Other as the one I want to – but must not – kill." Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 243.

²⁹ Michelle Walker, *Philosophy and the Maternal Body: Reading Silence* (London & New York: Routledge, 1998).

³⁰ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

nature, which is to bring new things and new life, is repressed because death-dealing control has shut them off.

As mortals, all humans, whether female or male, will die, which makes it clear that biologically all are equal in the face of death. Behind and within this reality of death, concepts and symbols have developed for centuries that have forced women to experience death before their actual death. Jantzen has observed that the womb in western culture has been seen as a metaphor for the tomb, which ironically for Sigmund Freud is a place where the child longs to return; for Freud, the womb is a place of peace and quiet until the child is born into the world. In this view, a girl child is born from the safe site within her mother, but she enters a violent world, which is particularly dangerous for her. She faces the symbolic of death at her birth. Her symbolic 'end of life' meets her at her birth. Death begins, for her, at her birth. It defies the concept of birth as the beginning of life.³¹ Preoccupation with death, for Jantzen, has displaced the life-giving possibilities that she names as beauty, natality and flourishing.³² She aims to bring these life-giving possibilities in opposition to violence and death. "It is precisely this masculinist imaginary, its necrophilic symbolic and social order constantly expressed in western modernity and with deep roots in its dominant religion that the deliberate development of a feminist symbolic seeks to disrupt."³³

³¹ Sigmund Freud accounts that "death is not a part of life; it is the end of life as birth is its beginning. See Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in The Pelican Freud Library Vol. 11, trans. James Strachey (London: Penquin, 1984), 311. This is discussed at length in Jantzen's *Foundations of Violence*, 23.

³² Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence*, 20.

³³ Ibid.

The lived experience of Naga women giving birth to children – both the literal moment of birthing a child and the choice men make for women to give birth – is critical. A Naga woman who gives birth does not have autonomy over her own self. Her body and her future are trapped within the definition of who she is as defined by masculinist society. She is bound by the complex passive birthing process. She has given birth against her will and does not have voice or choice in the matter of birthing.³⁴ She finds herself existing in a world where patriarchal realities force her to assume a posture of passivity and negation.³⁵

The most striking consequence for Naga women is that the gender of the child born determines the consequences of birthing. The birth of new life embodied in the female mirrors necrophilia being played out in the Naga context as opposed to the birth of new life embodied in the male. The female-death/male-life binary construct of natality in the Naga context is destructive to women. The failure of a woman to bear a male natal reinforces the western necrophilic symbolic, and women and girls remain the wounded prey. Thus, death and violence function at the cost of the most vulnerable, women and girls. Such interpretations cannot be made normative in society. In this kind of situation, the beauty of birth is displaced by the practices of control, and the beauty of life is displaced by the practices of valuing some lives more than others. The situation in Nagaland illustrates the dynamic that Jantzen describes as “the silencing of birth and displacement of beauty.”³⁶ Jantzen is passionate about uncovering the repression and

³⁴ With a slight difference in the understanding of birthing, Lisa Guenther resonates in many ways with the problem of birthing with the Naga society. See Lisa Guenther, *The Gift of the Other: Levinas and the Politics of Reproduction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 19

³⁶ Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence*, 18.

displacement of natality and beauty in the western imaginary and aims to bring change to such imaginary. She seeks to establish an imaginary of newness and redemption.³⁷

Necrophilia brings despair, violence, pain, and death. Jantzen wants to bring change to such realities by conceptualizing natality as the source of creativity rather than violence, of hope rather than despair.³⁸ Hope lies in natality because each new life brings new possibilities for human existence.³⁹ Jantzen suggests that the masculinist symbolic of the west could have been developed only by those who had forgotten their status as natals.⁴⁰ In her encounter with the West's and Christianity's fascination with death, Jantzen asks, "Who is mad and who is sane in a world in which beauty confronts death, and violence silences creativity? How can we learn to name what is happening, and find resources for transformation?"⁴¹ So, we turn to Jantzen for a detailed discussion of natality.

³⁷ Ibid., 19.

³⁸ Robin May Schott has rightly captured Grace Jantzen's conception of natality. Robin May Schott, "Introduction: Birth, Death, and Femininity," in Robin May Schott ed. *Birth, Death, and Femininity: Philosophies of Embodiment* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), 9.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 6.

⁴¹ Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence*, 3.

Nativity: Feminist Symbolic

*“If an obsession with death orients philosophers to a preoccupation with other worlds, by contrast taking birth as the centre of our imaginary will direct our attention to this world, to our connection, through the maternal continuum, with all others who have been born.”*⁴²

Nativity is the love of new life in contrast to necrophilia, which is the love of death. Jantzen maintains that newness enters into the world in birth, in natality and, in new life. She believes that every form of freedom and creativity is grounded and is contrary to violence and destruction.⁴³ Jantzen has clearly stated that “‘kill or be killed’ is not the way of women.”⁴⁴ Her usage of the idea of natality is, according to her, in some ways, related to biophilia, which is love of life.⁴⁵ However, “natality is meant not simply as a psychological characteristic but as a philosophical/symbolic category operating as a contrast to mortality.”⁴⁶ Natals grow and develop in a woman’s womb and are born. They are a sign of the future and hope of new life. For Jantzen, “birth is the basis of every person’s existence, which by that very fact is always already material, embodied, gendered, and connected with other human beings and with human history.”⁴⁷ Even speaking in terms of natals becoming divine, she affirms, “it will be as an embodied,

⁴² Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 150.

⁴³ Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence*, 6. The term “natality” was coined by Hannah Arendt, not in the statistical term but the term that means birth which points to the fact that all human life begins life in birth and the birth of each person signifies a new and radical beginning. We are each of us a newcomer and an individual which is absolutely new to the world. For Arendt, “the most general condition of human existence” is the constitution of both birth and death – natality and mortality. See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 10.

⁴⁴ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 243.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 141.

gendered, situated self,”⁴⁸ and she claims that “there can be no other selves than selves of woman born.”⁴⁹ Being born is being embodied that completes the natal.

The symbolic of natality that Jantzen develops insists on “embodied interdependence in a web of relationships and flourishing in diversity.”⁵⁰ She argues that we have all begun as part of somebody else, have been absolutely dependent on others, and have been nurtured into being who we are, both physically and spiritually. We continue to be deeply dependent on the web of relationships with other nats and with the earth that supports us.⁵¹ In Jantzen’s words,

Human beings are already in relation to the world and in a human community, shaped by the symbolic and shaping it in their turn. ‘Nats’ are not isolated ‘minds’ or ‘souls’ beloved of traditional philosophers of religion ever since Descartes meditated in front of his stove.⁵²

No natal can live in isolation, and even if one is able to do that, she/he is already part of the whole. A person is not self-born but born of a mother, herself a natal. Therefore, no matter where we nats stand, we are all interrelated in the web of life. This does not mean that all nats are identical. No natal is ever fully identical with another natal but is uniquely born. Thus, the beauty of natality is the intrinsic connectedness that all nats have with each other despite their uniqueness.

Natality is in opposition to dualistic thinking. In order to prevent the world from being destroyed and humans devastated through violence, natality seeks to reshape

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 149.

dichotomous concepts of male/female, body/soul, this worldly/otherworldly, rationality/emotion, birth/death, creation/destruction and other binaries. The destructive elements should be replaced with creative elements; violence and death be replaced with birth and hope of new life; and spiritual exclusivistic elitism be replaced with embodied holistic being. Jantzen insists on living a full and just life before one actually dies, which is the flourishing of natality.⁵³

Natality cannot be conceived without women. Jantzen takes women and their bodies seriously because “natality is inconceivable without recognizing its intimate involvement with the role of women – who are, both literally and metaphorically – the vessel of creation, by and through whom the original natality can occur.”⁵⁴ It is “a recognition of women as vital and necessary participants in the ultimate creative act of new life – birth.”⁵⁵ Obviously, a feminist symbolic of natality is the quest against the masculinist imaginary of ‘kill or be killed,’ to begin to think in a new and just way. It is also to be noted that Jantzen has clearly insisted that a symbolic of natality cannot be reduced to a symbolic of maternity. She connects the symbolic of maternity to her earlier argument to take women’s experience of motherhood seriously philosophically, following Caroline Whitbeck.⁵⁶ Motherhood is only one aspect of her identity even for

⁵³ Ibid., 141.

⁵⁴ Morny Joy, “Grace Jantzen and the Work of Love: Preamble,” in Elaine L. Graham ed., *Grace Jantzen: Redeeming the Present* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 33.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 243. See Caroline Whitbeck, “A Different Reality: Feminist Ontology,” in Carol C. Gould ed. *Beyond Domination: New Perspectives on Women and Philosophy* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1983): 64-88.

those women who have become mothers.⁵⁷ Jantzen recognizes the unique identity of all natalists whether they are mothers or not.⁵⁸

The feminist symbolic of natality opens the way to look into the face of the Other as a part of who we are, even when we look into the face of a woman, or look with the face of a woman into another, be it woman or man.⁵⁹ We will come face to face with natalists because we are natalists.⁶⁰ “Face-to-face” for the French philosopher and religious thinker, Emmanuel Levinas, is humans’ ‘irreducible relation’, “an ultimate ethical situation more fundamental than ontology.”⁶¹ The face, for Levinas, is unveiled, nude, making the face an epiphany of the Other. This face does not entail “any cultural ornament, an absolution, a detachment from its form in the midst of the production of its form.”⁶² The face is, for Levinas, “a *living* face, the disclosure of another person..., always moving beyond.”⁶³ The manifestation of the face calls for ethical response and responsibility.⁶⁴ “The Other becomes my neighbor precisely through the way the face summons me, calls for me, begs for me, and in so doing recalls my responsibility, and calls me into question.”⁶⁵ Jantzen’s analysis of Levinas’ ethical response to the face, the

⁵⁷ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 144.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 242.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 243.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁶¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 79; Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 237.

⁶² Emmanuel Levinas, *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings* ed. Adriaan T Peperzak, Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 53.

⁶³ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 237.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Séan Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 83.

Other, brings out the bareness in all humans confronting us with inalienable responsibility but, at the same time, opens us to new possibilities.⁶⁶

Jantzen's work is significant for my analysis of the Naga Christian community and my theological response to the problem of birthing. Her description and critique of necrophilia and her definition of natality offer clarity to the lived experience of Naga women. It will also open their eyes to the longstanding Christian theological discourse that has been imposed on them. Jantzen opens a possibility for them to realize that what has been etched out for Naga women has been oppressive to them. New ways of being and living that Jantzen proposes can lead to justice and flourishing for Naga women. She talks about an "openness to hope," in which redemption and transformation of the past begins without repeating its destructive patterns. She moves towards this hope, in which, for her, "creativity rather than violence could shape our habitus, and a poetics of natality could replace the necrophilia of the western symbolic."⁶⁷ She imagines the habitus of flourishing with being open to hope.

A Philosophy of Flourishing

Jantzen asks, "Where are the springs of hope that could bring newness and flourishing into a death-dealing world?"⁶⁸ Jantzen is passionate about alternative stories being told about women's religious experiences and voices and the celebration of the

⁶⁶ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 237.

⁶⁷ Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence*, 35.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

radical possibilities of life and beauty.⁶⁹ Her intention is to destabilize the present and to imagine radical alternatives, in order to redeem it.⁷⁰ Envisaging a redeeming of the present, for her, is not simply about providing a replacement for God's gender, shifting from a male to female persona; it is about the flourishing of the whole world and its inhabitants. Elaine Graham sees Jantzen's work as focused on "exposing the material, cultural and psychological effects of a particular way of thinking about God: to expose the real effects that our collective thought-forms have upon lived experience."⁷¹ Since the beginning of Christianity, theologians have assumed that suffering death was the way to salvation.⁷² As Jesus Christ suffered a cruel death for the sake of humanity, humans are called to suffer in Christ's name.⁷³ Such a calling is unhealthy because it does not lead people anywhere but keeps them stuck in the death symbolic. There is a pressing need to replace this death symbolic with a new religious symbolic. Jantzen has made it clear that there is urgency "for feminists to work towards a new religious symbolic focused on natality and flourishing rather than on death."⁷⁴ She strove for this symbolic: "a symbolic which will lovingly enable natalis - women and men, to become subjects, and the earth on

⁶⁹ Elaine Graham, "Redeeming the Present," 3. See also Grace Jantzen, "Flourishing: Towards an Ethic of Natality," *Feminist Theory* 2 no 2 (2001): 219-32.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 7.

⁷² J. Denny Weaver, *A Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2001), 2. Anselm's major work regarding this matter is found in his *Cur Deus Homo*. Anselm of Canterbury stands as a major theologian who described the work of salvation through the cross. See Flora A. Keshgegian, "The Scandal of the Cross: Revisiting Anselm and His Feminist Critics," *Anglican Theological Review* 82 (2000): 475-492, 475.

⁷³ Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation*, trans. Ann Patrick Ware (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 106f.

⁷⁴ Graham, "Redeeming the Present," 254.

which we live to bloom, to be ‘faithful to the process of the divine which passes through’ us and through the earth itself.”⁷⁵ Jantzen has searched for a theology modeled on flourishing, which is in contrast with certain dominant renderings of the doctrine of salvation in Christian theology.

A theology of flourishing would be that of a healing and fulfilment of life on earth especially in respect to the lives of women, girls, and nature who are oppressed and exploited, and whose lives disappear unnoticed. Moreover, such a theology would be liberating for the Christian doctrine of salvation. Although, they do not specifically use the word flourishing, feminist and womanist theologians have countered salvation in Christian theology and continue to search for a more humane and just theology, a theology that is healing and fulfilling.⁷⁶ Jantzen defines ‘flourishing’ in a comprehensive manner that is both compelling and restorative:

The word ‘flourish’ is etymologically linked with flowers, with blossoming. It is related to the Middle English *florir* and the Latin *florere*, which mean ‘to flower’; perhaps it is not insignificant that the word ‘flower’ in Latin is in the feminine. As a noun form, a ‘flourish’ is the mass of flowers on a fruit tree, or the bloom of luxuriant, verdant growth. In the more common verb form, to flourish is to blossom, to thrive, to throw out leaves and shoots, growing vigorously and luxuriantly. In the human sphere it denotes abundance, overflowing with vigour and energy and productiveness, prosperity, success and good health. The concept of flourishing is a strongly positive concept; one who flourishes is going from strength to strength.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ See Joanne Carlson Brown, Rebecca Parker, and Carol R. Bohn, *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, 2; Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 100-105; Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women’s Experience of Evil and Salvation*; Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*.

⁷⁷ Jantzen, *Violence to Eternity: Death and Displacement of Beauty Volume 2*, ed. by Jeremy Carrette and Morny Joy (New York: Routledge, 2009), 207f.

The flourishing that Jantzen describes can be contrasted with the understanding of salvation that Christians have inherited from many early philosophers and theologians. The dominant views are that humans are in need of deliverance from a problematic situation. If not delivered, they will face death. In order to be saved, a rescuer or hero is needed.⁷⁸ There is no role for humans to play in this salvation. In contrast, Jantzen offers her model of flourishing, where she envisions humans “having natural inner capacity and dynamic, able to draw on inner resources and interconnection with one another, and potential to develop into great fruitfulness.”⁷⁹ In a similar vein, Rita Nakashima Brock moves away from Jesus as the heroic self-sacrificing Christ towards a life-giving presence of Christ in the Christa/community.⁸⁰

Jantzen elaborates on her concept of flourishing and its value to the human community:

The metaphor of flourishing would lead instead to an idea of the divine source and ground, the one in whom we are ‘rooted and grounded in love’, in whom we ‘live and move and have our being’, the vine of whom we are the branches and can bring forth much fruit. . . , the concept of the divine would then also necessarily be much less deistic; God would not be thought of as a being external to the world, but rather as its source and wellspring; Jesus would not be envisaged as the heroic saviour entering human history from outside, but rather as one who manifests what it may mean to live fully and naturally in the creative justice of God.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Rita Nakashima Brock with other theologians like Rosemary Radford Ruether and Carter Heyward sees danger in making Jesus as the central figure in Christianity, thus making him the hero to save us. Brock wants to move away from this hero worship to a life-giving presence of Christ in the Christa/community. See Chapter 4.

⁷⁹ Jantzen, *Violence to Eternity: Death and Displacement of Beauty*, 209.

⁸⁰ See Brock in Chapter 4.

⁸¹ Jantzen, *Violence to Eternity: Death and Displacement of Beauty*, 209.

Jesus shows what human flourishing would look like and could be. He was filled with compassion for people and all of creation; he took his compassion to a new level that can inspire and guide others. His life full of wisdom and insight was dedicated to justice for all, especially justice for the defenseless and poor.⁸²

In Jantzen's model of flourishing, individualistic salvation, the idea of flourishing alone in isolation, cannot function. Interconnection, not isolation, is fundamental.⁸³ Both the Old Testament and the New Testament have references on flourishing of nation, community and the ecosystem, all in relation to one another and in relation to the interconnectedness of the people.⁸⁴ The ancient Naga tradition also teaches interdependence and interconnectedness between the Supreme Being, humanity and the rest of creation, but it does not prescribe a mutual relationship between men and women.

Theology built on the model of flourishing insists that physical and material realities – bodily, physical and psychological well-being - have to be taken into account, otherwise, such theology will fall into the dualistic conception of salvation that values one side of dualism and not the other. Flourishing will not function if the material situations of people's lives are not taken seriously. If theology built on a concept of flourishing is not embraced, then, humanity and all of creation will remain trapped in a world they despise while longing for a better world. Luce Irigaray, the French philosopher and psychoanalyst says,

⁸² Ibid., 211.

⁸³ Jantzen gives a more lengthy explanation on this in her "Connection or Competition: Identity and Personhood in Feminist Ethics," *Studies in Christian Ethics* (1992): 5: 1.

⁸⁴ Brock's theology of life is fundamentally based on interconnectedness and interdependence of all beings and the world. See Chapter 4.

The patriarchal order is based upon worlds of the beyond: worlds of before birth and especially of the afterlife, other planets to be discovered and exploited for survival, etc. It doesn't appreciate the real value of the world we have and draws up its often bankrupt blueprints on the basis of hypothetical worlds.⁸⁵

Such an age-old stance can possibly be dismissed or eliminated if we seriously think about it and see it as unhelpful and toxic to human and creation flourishing.

Talking about the fault lines of flourishing, Jantzen studies Aristotle's philosophy of flourishing in which Aristotle asserts that the good life is the life of flourishing here on earth. According to Jantzen's reading, Aristotle's *Ethics and Politics* were written to discuss what would count as flourishing and what would facilitate it.⁸⁶ For him, the world we live in is what we really have, and it is better to understand it and learn to live in it than to speculate about some other. Aristotle does not discuss much about death in his writings but more on how to live on this earth that we have now. He talks about biological death rather than metaphysical death. For him, death is just an event that ends life, whether for plants, animals, or people.⁸⁷ We should be critical about from where the longing and call for flourishing comes, and for whom. If simply accepted, Aristotle's concern for flourishing of life on earth will be very well accepted, as Jantzen points out. But deep inside his philosophy is a flourishing of a few at the expense of the most vulnerable – women and slaves.

Jantzen insists that "a theology of flourishing would not be able to avoid confrontation with issues of domination, whether in terms of poverty, class, race, sex, or

⁸⁵ Luce Irigaray, *Je, tu, nous: Towards a Culture of Difference*, trans. A. Martin (London: Routledge, 1993), 27.

⁸⁶ Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence*, 230.

⁸⁷ R.A.H King, *Aristotle on Life and Death* (London: Duckworth, 2001). Discussed in Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence*, 235.

any other form of injustice, since these are the things which prevent people and communities from flourishing.”⁸⁸ Therefore, she says that a theology of flourishing would necessarily be a political theology that confronts social and economic issues not as marginal theological interests but as central to theological thought.⁸⁹ Flourishing then, for Jantzen, is a responsible engagement of humanity and everything that exists. She is fully aware of the struggles inherent in life, including sorrow and pain by virtue of being mortal, but she argues against the dominant unjust system that prevents the habitus of natality from flourishing.

A Philosophy of Flourishing for Naga Women

Feminist philosophy of religion seeks transformation of all life and our habitus. This philosophy is critical of dualistic relationships that destroy life and its habitus, and seeks to rethink their sources that may deter the flourishing of life and right relationships. Three broad questions of feminist philosophy of religion that Jantzen discussed with her friend Pamela Sue Anderson, a feminist philosopher must be revisited: “How do we seek transformation?”⁹⁰ “How do we carry out our critiques?”⁹¹ “What do we do with our sources?”⁹² These questions are relevant to Naga women. To the first question, Anderson argues for “an alternative form of rationality which would generate a life-giving and

⁸⁸ Jantzen, *Violence to Eternity*, 218.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Pamela Sue Anderson, “The Urgent Wish...To be More Life-Giving” in Elaine L. Graham ed. *Grace Jantzen: Redeeming the Present*, 52.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 52-53.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 53

whole-making philosophy.”⁹³ To the second, pointing out that mainstream philosophers of religion are not seeking much that is new, she answers that feminist philosophers of religion affirm “the power to act rationally, falsifying those contrary relations, of reason and passion, mind and body, men and women as illusions which undermine an(y) individual’s power to act both responsibly-autonomously and with approbation.”⁹⁴ To the third question, she answers that feminist philosophers of religion “seek to rethink our sources and not be afraid to reject that which is death-dealing and to embrace that which enhances our endeavours to persevere in being – and so in the life of God...”⁹⁵ The feminist philosophy of religion aims at allowing different minority groups to ask themselves the same questions addressing their specific situations. This is when the authentic answers will emerge from among themselves, answers that may be counter to the dominant culture.

What would flourishing be like for Naga women? The Creed in the Beijing Preparatory documents called “A Woman’s Creed” composed by Robin Morgan with a group of Latin American women, describes a flourishing that fosters peace, justice, joy, and healing. Theologian Mary Grey has borrowed a part from this, as the title to her article in honor of Grace Jantzen. Though this creed does not address Naga women in particular, it portrays the situation of Naga women and the desire for their flourishing.

Bread [rice]. A clean sky. Active peace. A woman’s voice singing somewhere, melody drifting like smoke from the cook fires. The army disbanded, the harvest abundant. The wound healed, *the child wanted*, the prisoner freed, *the body’s integrity honoured*, the lover returned. The labour equal, fair and valued. Delight

⁹³ Ibid., 52.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 53.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

in the challenge for consensus to solve problems. No hand raised in any gesture but greeting. Secure interiors – of heart, home, land – so firm as to make secure borders irrelevant at last. And everywhere, laughter, care, dancing, contentment. A humble, earthly paradise in the *now*.⁹⁶

Rice and the cook fires depict the place of Naga women in their homes – the kitchen, a present reality of Naga women. This creed fits Naga women’s need and desire for flourishing. It has not come to fruition; it is only a longing – “a not yet.” The creed seems to be beyond reality for them. Thus, the task is to look for ways to realize this longing.

The three questions regarding the aims of feminist philosophy of religion that Jantzen posed, and to which Anderson responded, are relevant here. These can be condensed in one question, “How do we seek flourishing for Naga women?” One of the most important elements for flourishing of life here and now is dependent on just relationships. Every being is responsible for the fulfilment of life for all. Living in relationship does not mean simply an individual’s fulfilment and gratification. Relationships go beyond one’s desires and curiosities to include relations with other people, animals and plants, and the whole environment. Life becomes significant in our awareness of others and the nature that surrounds us and in our need to live and care for one another and live in mutual relation.

Rethinking human relatedness is of fundamental importance for the wellbeing and flourishing of the Naga community. Human relationality has to be actualized in equitable societal structures. “The centre of human subjectivity is a relational and a related subjectivity.... *Humanum* is constituted as subjectivity in inter-subjectivity i.e., in

⁹⁶ Mary Grey, “Nativity and Flourishing in Contexts of Disability and Impairment” in Elaine L. Graham ed., *Grace Jantzen: Redeeming the Present*, 197. The composition of the creed was sponsored by a women’s Environment and Development Organization. (*Italics emphasized*).

relatedness.... To be human is to be inter-human and to be related.”⁹⁷ This relatedness focuses on inter-human relatedness between human persons, cosmos and the Divine.

What we see today of the weakening human society manifested in unequal treatment of women is humanity’s failure to respect this interrelatedness.

What I propose is a Naga women’s philosophy of flourishing that values the depth of life and feeling that exists in each being. It awakens the people to act toward enhancing the quality of life for all sections of people. It creates a living community where all beings dwell in peaceful relation with one another, responsive to the spirit of God. In this community, every person feels free to exist, with all their differences, respected and accepted. In this community, there will no longer be unwanted children, but equal respect and love for daughters will exist, and women’s bodies will be honored. Humans are not yet complete unless gender disparity and discrimination against women are erased.

In this flourishing, dichotomous concepts are reshaped toward wholeness. For example, the integration of body and soul completes the human being. This leads to a clear understanding of salvation that brings healing and fulfilment to both physical and spiritual states, and to both women and men. In other words, the integration of the physical and the spiritual is salvation manifested. This living community is a corrective to the prevalent danger of fantasy and speculation, losing contact with the actual life of people in concrete history. This flourishing community brings all natals together perceiving the world and its inhabitants as holistic.

⁹⁷ S. Arokiasamy, “Human Relatedness and Moral Decision Making” in *Jeevadhara* Vol. XXV, No. 149, September 1995, 397.

Following Jantzen's suggestion that the hierarchical and oppressive gendered anthropology may not be the only possible Christian understanding of personhood,⁹⁸ Peter Manley Scott asks: "Is it then possible to identify the human in a different way?"⁹⁹ This leads him to come up with his preferred term "postnatural humanity." He has argued that "the separation of humanity and nature cannot be maintained."¹⁰⁰ Identifying humans in a new way is pertinent. This will remind us of Christianity's privileging of humanity over nature, but it will also help us realize the limits of human knowledge and action.¹⁰¹ He argues for a postnatural humanity as anti-human humanity. Then, he brings natality as the bridge between these two.¹⁰² He explains his notion of anti-human

as a theological concept, the anti-human is a contribution to re-thinking the situation and status of the human: that theology is not quite as humanocentric as might at first be thought. Indeed, the notion of natality is helpful in elaborating this notion of the anti-human, which requires the human to understand itself as a co-participant with the non-human and as the representative of the non-human.¹⁰³

So what is significant in the theological anti-human is its honoring of the emphasis on a 'web of life,' including the interconnections between human and non-human, the de-centering of the human, and the calling into question of the long assumed superiority of human over animals and male over female.

⁹⁸ Peter Manley Scott, "The Postnatural as Anti-Human? Resurrection, Natality and Creatureliness" in Elaine L. Graham ed. *Grace Jantzen: Redeeming the Present*, 216; see Grace Jantzen, "Healing our Brokenness: The Spirit and Creation," in Mary Heather MacKinnon and Moni McIntyre ed. *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology* (Kansas: Sheed and Ward, 1995): 284-298, 286.

⁹⁹ Scott, "The Postnatural as Anti-Human? Resurrection, Natality and Creatureliness," 217.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid., 218.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

Human beings do have a special role, however. They are political agents upon whom a political charge is laid, a charge to be natal representative for natal with less power and for natural entities that are not natal. They are to bear witness prophetically “to a different understanding of the relations between the human and the non-human predicated upon neither the separation of the human from its attachments nor immersion by the human in some nature.”¹⁰⁴ Scott calls this a Trinitarian anthropology in that it corresponds to God’s action in creating a world, in the liberating work that re-constitutes this world, and in the eschatological transformation of this world.¹⁰⁵

The notion of a distant God who appears only when needed is altered and is now conceived of as a relational Divine presence. This Divine presence is portrayed in clarity by the immanence of God in creation, as well as God’s transcendence of it. Christians believe in the cosmic Christ, God’s presence in the world, God’s embodiment, and God’s incarnation. Thus, the whole cosmos is bound together intrinsically and inextricably. In this flourishing world, people respect one another as God’s creatures, recognizing the value and dignity of being God’s creatures. This respect neither comes to humans according to any distinctions nor is it individualistic. Kathryn Tanner clearly states this point:

All human beings are owed the respect due God’s creatures in the same degree and manner. All human beings are due an equal respect in so far as the respect at issue is owed to them as God’s creatures.... Human beings may differ from one another in quality or activity or attainment, but such differences do not alter in any way the fact of creaturehood that is the basis for respect.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 219-21.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 221.

¹⁰⁶ Kathryn Tanner, *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 167f.

With respect and care given to the earth and its inhabitants - both humans and nonhumans, and male and female – all will live in peace, harmony and solidarity. Its goal is the restoration of all that is breached toward building a just world.

New Ways of Thinking and Living

“What is necessary is to find some way of thinking – and living – otherwise, some path to the healing of the western psyche so that instead of its death-dealing structures the present may be redeemed and the earth and its peoples may flourish.”¹⁰⁷

Jantzen’s concept of natality and flourishing provides ways for Naga women to address their issues of child-birthing. She offers alternative structures that are life-giving and life-affirming. Her insights are extended by the prominent North American theologian Mary Elizabeth Moore, who works in dialogue with Jantzen. Moore provides a compelling philosophy of life-bearing based on Jantzen’s natality. She brings out the core aspects of Jantzen’s natality that are critical to the Naga context. Her interpretation of Jantzen offers convincing hope and new possibilities to the Naga people through the four aspects of her theology of life-bearing, namely Compassion, Rationality, Creativity and Imagination, and Beauty.¹⁰⁸ I draw on her work because of the insights that she offers to the Naga people’s situation. In dialogue with Jantzen, her theological work becomes the bridge between the philosophy of natality in Jantzen and the Naga cultural context due to her commitment to connecting with different cultures and to repairing the world. I

¹⁰⁷ Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence*, 4.

¹⁰⁸ Mary Elizabeth Moore, “Passion for Life: Power for Building Justice and Peace” in Elaine L. Graham ed. *Grace Jantzen: Redeeming the Present*, 181-195.

will discuss each aspect of her theology of life-bearing in connection with Jantzen to show why her work is important to the Naga people.

Compassion

Moore terms compassion “the experience of feeling and appreciating the textures of life.”¹⁰⁹ She has theorized about compassion in other works, but her particular dialogue with Jantzen has highlighted the relation between bodies and sensual experience and compassion.¹¹⁰ Caring for the body and being responsive to sensual experience is vital to compassion, which is to love life and to share that life with others.¹¹¹ In her own experience of sensual beauty, Jantzen saw the world as succumbing to violence, and that made her alert to the destructive societal structures. She became more committed towards transforming contemporary society.¹¹² Her compassion revolved around the importance of the “bodily life here and now.”¹¹³ She was passionate about human flourishing, in which bodily needs have to be met.

Moore interprets Jantzen’s compassion further, saying that “compassion invokes concern for *all* aspects of embodied life. Further, it awakens people to the preciousness and potential of *every* living being.”¹¹⁴ Compassion then stirs hopes, as symbolized in an

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 186.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 187.

¹¹¹ Ibid. See Mary Elizabeth Moore, “The Ethics of Institutions: Compassion, Critique, Creativity, and Form-Giving,” in *Whiteheadian Ethics*, ed. by Theodore Walker, Jr. and Toth Mihaly (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2008), 83-100

¹¹² Ibid., 187.

¹¹³ Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence*, 37.

¹¹⁴ Moore, “Passion for Life,” 187.

infant, whose very life points to “new possibilities” and to “new freedom and creativity, the potential that this infant will help make the world better.”¹¹⁵ Compassion includes a deep love for life and the valuing of every being, which stirs concern for and solidarity with those in pain. Compassion is extended to all human life and other living beings, and it leads people to be present to others’ suffering and joy. By such compassion – or feeling with others – people become conscious of gender oppression. Compassion thus extends its hand to Naga women.

In Naga culture, mothers and daughters are forced to take a journey in this world against their will, to conditions that have been chosen for them. The daughter joins her mother in the journey the moment her embodied self comes into the outside world from the warmth of her mother’s womb. She comes into a world where her mother is already bound by many social norms and cultural customs. She comes into a society that may or may not welcome her, even though her mother has already made room in herself and her world, for her. I have intentionally referred to the coming child as “her” because my whole reason for this particular work is to offer compassion for “her” and “her mother.”

As discussed extensively earlier, among the Naga people, sons are regarded as the greatest wealth. Therefore, every parent prefers to have a son; the more sons one has the more honorable, proud and secure one is.¹¹⁶ If one does not have a son, then, one’s life is incomplete. In such a context, a girl child is seldom welcomed into the world. The mother

¹¹⁵ Ibid. See Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence*, 38.

¹¹⁶ Language and thought have to a large extent, contributed to the destruction as well as development in the human world. Whether it is destructive or building up we continue to embrace and implement them trying not to see the irrelevance and suffering caused to some sections of humanity. The Naga preference for male child brings suffering death to mothers and female children, which corresponds with Levinas’ thought as Lisa Guenther noted: “For Levinas, the child is imagined first and foremost as a son.” Guenther, *The Gift of the Other*, 165. This is very sad.

knows the consequences of birthing a girl child. Her coming is frowned upon by her father and the society; her mother laments deep down. She laments her daughter's birth because of the negative consequences that she and her daughter will face throughout their lives. She longs for a son so that she will not be called "cursed" and will have security and be treated decently.¹¹⁷

A majority of Naga women in the remote villages who are illiterate have no idea about family planning. They are totally isolated from the mainline state, invisible on the state radar, and are politically voiceless and marginalized. They live enclosed in their small world giving themselves away selflessly as if it is their duty, and they do so without complaints, expecting nothing in return because they have been taught that they are born to do precisely that, and that it is a biological fact. The contexts of sexist oppression have imposed a wrongful philosophy that women must give themselves because they cannot make choices.

Such a perspective is unacceptable, unthinkable and cannot be practiced. In Beauvoir's words, women have become "the victim of the species".¹¹⁸ Naga women are victims of both biology and patriarchy, which needs to be addressed. They cannot be reduced to a reproductive function. The understanding of birthing has to go beyond biology and patriarchal significance.¹¹⁹ This victimization of Naga women has caused deep scars upon them. Beauvoir rightly stated, "birth can leave a woman exhausted,

¹¹⁷ While working among the women as a minister, the Brazilian liberation theologian Ivone Gebara saw their suffering. Like the Naga women, Gebara saw that being born a woman is a curse for them. Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 113.

¹¹⁸ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 18.

¹¹⁹ Guenther, *The Gift of the Other*, 11.

misshapen, malnourished, emotionally unstable, and possibly even dead.”¹²⁰ Thus, the birth event is a denial of birth, and an event of death for both mothers and baby girls in the Naga context.

The compassion that Jantzen and Moore describe takes multiple forms. In the Naga context, compassion is needed toward mascu-surrogate women, whose lives and the lives of their daughters are at risk. To be compassionate is to feel the pain of these women in depth, and to be spiritually connected with their lives, just as the baby’s life is connected to her mother with the umbilical cord. Moore’s concept of compassion evokes the image of an outstretched arm touching Naga women’s pregnant bodies, blessing them and shielding them from forced suffering.

Rationality

A second aspect of a theology of life-bearing is rationality. Moore interprets rationality as “analyzing the beauty, pain and brokenness of the world for the sake of envisioning more life-giving ways of thinking and acting.”¹²¹ This is also important to Naga theological reflection. One cannot deny that human beings, in fact all living beings, have brought both joy and suffering into the world. We need to challenge the habitus of necrophilia, the destructive power,¹²² and construct a life-giving habitus. In the sensory experience of the world, we realize the need for transformation of an unjust society and the need for people to build new and life-giving habitus. Moore calls this life-giving

¹²⁰ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 24; Guenther, *The Gift of the Other*, 20.

¹²¹ Moore, “Passion for Life,” 188.

¹²² Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence*, 10.

habitus a “habitus of natality.”¹²³ The stronger the habitus of necrophilia is, the more we will need to think and act in order to create a place where life will be affirmed and will flourish. Such thinking and acting follows Jantzen’s aim in deconstructing a destructive habitus in order to construct a habitus that promotes flourishing of life.¹²⁴

Rationality is, in Moore’s words, “grounded in feeling the world and giving priority to the habitus of natality.”¹²⁵ Therefore, rationality contributes to a life-bearing telos.¹²⁶ It calls for responsibility on the part of humans in various ways: to be always learning with open-mindedness, to have a deep awareness of the context in which we live, to analyze and critique the systems and structures of the society, and to act accordingly. We should be able to understand or point out the destructive forces and violations of all kinds in the society. We should be challenged to construct a habitus where life can begin to heal and be nourished. Moore cites Marc Gopin: “people need space to mourn their painful histories with one another, thus uncovering, respecting, releasing, and transforming the feelings that threaten peace.”¹²⁷ Rationality, thus, brings our attention to the philosophy of natality, taking us to those people and places where the nourishing of life is denied, as is often the case for women, children, and the poor. Moore says, “We are invited into philosophical analysis that nourishes the quality of daily life and guides the formation of political and social policies. When rationality is awake to

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Moore, “Passion for Life,” 189.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 190.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 191. See also Marc Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to The Middle East* (Oxford, 2002), 204-219; *Healing the Heart of Conflict: 8 Crucial Steps To making Peace With Yourself and Others* (Emmaus, PA, 2004), 33-57.

necrophilia and centered on natality, it has potential to shape personal, communal, and political choices that protect and enhance flourishing.”¹²⁸ Moore’s concept of rationality is necessary for the analysis of the Naga patriarchal culture in order to make safe living space for Naga women.

A birthing mother in the Naga culture is the symbolic source of all goodness, wealth and good omen if she bears a son but the source of all possible deprivation, curse and bad omen if only daughters are born.¹²⁹ Yet, even in her most oppressed moments in a world of patriarchy, she gives birth to life. For the mothers who do not bear sons, birth and death are never separated, and they live endlessly within this vicious circle. The mother-daughter bond in the inseparability of birth and death differs from the mother-son relationship. As Simone de Beauvoir writes, “The close bond between mother and child will be for her a source of dignity or indignity according to the value placed upon the child.”¹³⁰ For Naga women, the kind of bond between a mother and her child is shaped in a similar sense by the value placed upon the child. The mother will receive dignity and worth or suffering and shame according to the value placed on the child. The value in this case is placed upon the male child, not the female child. A mother is perceived and received by the community as blessed, praiseworthy and dignified if she has a son but, without a son she is put to shame, suffering and curse. She is dependent on a son for her sense of self.

¹²⁸ Moore, “Passion for Life,” 191.

¹²⁹ Guenther has also said that the mother becomes a symbol of the source of all goodness as well as the source of all possible deprivation. See Guenther, *The Gift of the Other*, 22.

¹³⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* Harmondsworth: Penquin, 1972, 33; Guenther, *The Gift of the Other*, 23.

Analyzing the social structure of the Naga women, we see their experience of a different kind of death. In his book, *Excursions*, the prominent social anthropologist Michael Jackson has an interesting chapter entitled, “On Birth, Death, and Rebirth,” where he discusses symbolic death in natality. Jackson, using Arendt’s thought on natality, opens new windows to look at birth and life. He maintains that “not every birth or new beginning entails an *actual* death.”¹³¹ He asserts that “natality always involves a symbolic death – the sacrifice or loss of something or someone felt to be essential to the life one led and the person one was before.”¹³² This assertion is quite true, not just in the life of the mother, but in the lives of the father and siblings as well. They have to go through certain changes and adjustments, and their identity is shaped in some way by the addition of a new member into the family and society. Besides this change that Jackson talks about, Naga women go through a symbolic death that consumes their lives. Naga women who give birth only to girls do not literally die, but they suffer the brunt of the socially shaped demand for a male child. The Naga society openly acquiesces to such traditional customs. Such stark preference for a particular gender renders them doubtless that the female birthing mothers and their daughters will suffer the “not *actual*” death. For pregnant mothers who have never given birth to a son, fear lingers until her delivery time.

Naga women are at once a source of life and a threat to life. Jackson shares a traditional Maori concept that is similarly complicated: “Women bring children into the world of light...yet the vagina is also the source of misfortune and death... since it was the goddess Hine-nui-te-Po who crushed the culture hero Maui between her thighs as he

¹³¹ Michael Jackson, *Excursions* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2007), 203.

¹³² Ibid.

sought immortality by reentering her womb.”¹³³ I would suggest that, in Naga culture, the vagina is used as a mechanism for a Naga man to make a woman bear his image. Bearing his image makes her the source of life, but failing to bear his image makes her the source of death. Moore’s concept of rationality instills courage and responsibility in the hearts of the people to analyze and critique the Naga’s destructive culture. Through rationality, the brokenness that destroys life will be identified and destabilized, and construct a habitat that would respect life irrespective of gender and bless the birthing of a child as a gift to the world.

Beauty

Beauty is another life-bearing element that Moore finds in Jantzen’s work. Moore sees beauty as “the appreciation and creation of forms that bear beauty and point beyond the harshest realities to alternative futures.”¹³⁴ She alludes to Jantzen’s argument that beauty can change a society’s imaginary.¹³⁵ “Attention to beauty opens a way to redeeming the present, transforming the imaginary from its necrophilic obsessions to a celebration of natality, a celebration that includes the acceptance of death as the end of life but not its goal.”¹³⁶ Jantzen emphasizes the possibility for the redemption of the present by beauty and birth, and she thinks that beauty and birth threaten the western cultural symbolic that is “formed by a triangulation of death, gender, and religion.”¹³⁷

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Moore, “Passion for Life,” 194.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid. Also see *Foundations of Violence*, 42.

¹³⁷ Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence*, 4.

Beauty may take different forms and may be understood differently according to one's own cultural context and situation. Whatever form beauty takes, beauty needs to be cultivated among people, a beauty that actively and constantly challenges the culture of death and violence, and engages in finding new possibilities for the flourishing of life.

Given the centrality of poetry (as I indicated earlier), I want to engage in some cross-cultural reflection through poetry, touching on these issues of birth and gendered valuation. I begin with one of Jackson's poems. A poem entitled "To My Daughter" that Jackson wrote in 1970 after the birth of his daughter Heidi:¹³⁸

When you were born it was easy to ignore
that I was your father;
you did not resemble me
nor behave as I do now.

As I waited outside the hospital five years ago
I thought of those desert people for whom
children are spirit ancestors
come from a sacred site
where they subsist on flowers and dew, visible only in dreams.

Yet these men of the desert do not deny
the child is theirs
who is born to them
by magic or fortuity,
and I have followed their reasoning
and become your father.

Hearing this poem from a father to his daughter, I find myself writing a poem in the Naga culture where I could hear the father of a baby girl just born say:

"I did not look at you because I was very mad.
I was angry because you were a girl and not a boy;

¹³⁸ Jackson, *Excursions*, 207. The book of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible is quite shocking to read particularly verse 15 of the fourth chapter. Some women tell Naomi that Ruth is "more to you than seven sons." This is amazing. But this verse has been ignored completely. No commentators have given much attention to this verse. The people in their cultural context were hesitant to recognize Ruth's worth in her own right, which is problematic. Naomi's worth is restated when she begins to take care of the child born to Ruth. Naomi who is regarded as the barren one becomes life-giving once more.

you were not like me.
I wanted a son to carry on my name.”

Then, I find myself imagining the next part of the poem describing the change of the attitude of men in the Naga culture that says:

“It took me some time to ponder this baby girl born to my wife.
She too is my child, a gift of the sacred; sacred herself.
Forgive me, my daughter, I realize I am not always right.
I will change my attitude.
May you and your mother and all females flourish and live.”

Redemption existing in the Naga culture is understood within the coerced cooperation of the dominated group - the Naga women. They do not resist it but reinforce it by their uncritical cooperation, coupled with religious sanctions of both the traditional religion of the past and Christianity of the present. Jantzen rightly points out that a society can be trapped in a dominant symbolic system, and its habitus becomes the product of the internalization of that symbolic with little or no inspection. In such a scenario, people will act in accordance with it naturally, and social policies and structures will also “reflect and reinforce it.” Jantzen elaborates on how this shapes culture: “Culture will be filled with symptoms of this symbolic; its master discourses will be framed by it; . . . , patterns will repeat themselves, the symbolic structures of the habitus will be enacted ever and again.”¹³⁹ The internalization of such a dominant cultural symbolic is prevalent in the Naga culture, particularly in the attitude of gender difference and male preference. This is internalized so deep that Naga women find it immoral to speak against the preference for a male child in the Naga society. It seems natural to accept it and unnatural to speak against it. There are costs to questioning this cultural custom.

¹³⁹ Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence*, 10.

The western cultural symbolic of death, gender, and religion is prevalent in the Naga culture in the idea that death is necessary for redemption. Robin May Schott, writing from a different cultural context, argues that a duality of death and death is a human way of life.¹⁴⁰ For her, “death exemplifies the paradoxical character of human life. On the one hand, death is a form of existential evil that constantly haunts life”¹⁴¹ The term “existential” signifies a living death; these women are alive but experience the suffering of non-existence.¹⁴² “On the other hand, mortality is that which makes human life human.”¹⁴³ This is true in the sense that we mature day by day and finally die. In line with Moore, we accept death as the end of life but not its goal. We need to challenge death as a form of existential evil that constantly haunts life. This existential evil is understood in terms of the denial of the right to life for Naga girls just because they are born as female. Physical, emotional, and psychological pain is inflicted on them, and they are denied access to political, social, religious and economic privileges and rights. Against this evil, Jantzen seeks an alternative in the concept of natality.

Schott critiques Jantzen, saying that Jantzen, in reading western philosophy and culture as necrophilic, misses this dual character of death, pointing out that her alternative is to locate all the positive dimensions of life within the concept of natality, overlooking

¹⁴⁰ Robin May Schott, “Introduction: Birth, Death, and Femininity,” 8.

¹⁴¹ Ibid. She wrote this in her “Beauvoir on the Ambiguity of Evil,” in Claudia Card ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 229-232.

¹⁴² In a similar vein, Mary J. Streufert, while addressing the sacrifice of atonement and proposing an alternative of maternal sacrifice has argued that “Physical and existential sacrifice does not always involve physical death.” See her “Maternal Sacrifice as a Hermeneutics of the Cross,” in Marit Trelstad ed. *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, 64.

¹⁴³ Schott, “Introduction: Birth, Death, and Femininity,” 8.

the duality that is located in the concept of natality.¹⁴⁴ Schott argues that a “one-sided focus on the positive dimensions of natality looks away from the problematic or miserable conditions in which human birth can take place.”¹⁴⁵ However, Jantzen seeks to dismantle the western necrophilia and to offer a symbolic of natality that has potential to bring justice, freedom and hope for a world of flourishing. This world of flourishing, according to Jantzen - would not be perfect, nor would it be without suffering. On the other hand, suffering would not be glorified and would not be the last word.

I suggest that a holistic reflection on natality is necessary for the destabilization of the existential death that human beings have constituted that affects women. I believe that “if natality is ignored in an obsession with death and violence, it is small wonder that the world hovers on the brink of destruction.”¹⁴⁶ If the birth and life of females continues to be ignored and unaccepted, then violence against women and girls will continue to be meted out; the society will continue to thrive on the death and violence and will try all means to deny women’s agency to resist the present cultural symbolic of the Naga Christians.

There could be ways to resist the present cultural symbolic. One way could be to have genuine conversations about the birthing in the Naga context. Finding ways to talk about birthing is an element of beauty that is life-bearing, which points beyond the harshest realities to alternative futures as Moore and Jantzen suggest. The need to develop a more life-affirming “social imagination”¹⁴⁷ is necessary for Naga women to

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 10.

¹⁴⁶ Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence*, 6.

¹⁴⁷ Moore, “Passion for Life,” 194.

imagine beauty that is active, redemptive and transformative in the present. This imaginary has the potential to bring transformation to their society, so that women and the society will experience justice as they give birth to life and bring life into the world.

Creativity and Imagination

Creativity and imagination for Moore is also “the search for alternative possibilities.”¹⁴⁸ This element of life-bearing is connected with beauty that Moore discusses as another element of natality. Beauty points “beyond the harshest realities to alternative futures,”¹⁴⁹ which creativity and imagination is.¹⁵⁰ Transforming the world of necrophilic thinking and practice, which gravely affects the flourishing of life, particularly of women, is one of the most important activities for Jantzen. Resolute in her belief in change and with tenacious compassion, Jantzen devoted her lifetime to investigating and changing the world in which we live, imagining a transformed world of flourishing in which we could live. Redeeming the present is of utmost necessity for her because a life of healing and flourishing needs to happen here and now.

Jantzen makes a strong case for imagination in this process of transformation, but only if it is invoked for the sake of forging a new path:

If the imagination is called into play just to invent a new theory which is presented at a straightforward conceptual level in confrontation with the old one, we cannot hope to make much progress. But, if on the other hand, imagination is invoked at the stage where we have become conscious of what has been repressed and are actively looking for new symbols, new ways forward, a ‘new morning of

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 191.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 194.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 191.

the world' (Irigaray), then it is an indispensable well-being, a way that shifts can be brought about in the imaginary and in the symbolic which it subtends.¹⁵¹

Redeeming the present and searching for alternative possibilities as Moore has clearly interpreted, are also related to the questions that feminist thinkers like Phyllis Tribble have asked. In her article, "The Bible in Transit," Phyllis Tribble thinks about the feminist interpretation of the Bible in the story of Hagar by asking two questions: "Where have we come from? And where are we going?" She says that "we are fleeing the land of patriarchal (male-dominated) hermeneutics to find oases of nourishment in the wilderness."¹⁵² I find these questions powerful. They take us back to our own history of our beginning and all the suffering that women have gone through, burdens we have carried and continue to carry. This first question is loaded with the histories of women from generation to generation who have struggled, fought, many have died, and many more moving on. Then, we are confronted with the second question, "Where are we going?" "Where are we heading?" There is no easy answer for women and girls. Tribble says that we are fleeing male domination because, indeed, women have fled and continue to flee patriarchy. Moore and Jantzen open avenues for us to imagine new possibilities, including no longer fleeing from patriarchy and, instead creating new hermeneutics of reclamation and new ways of living.

Children are born into a world that has potential for imagination and transformation. In the Naga culture, it is important to recognize that the gender of the child will determine the reaction of the world toward her/him. The world already functions within a dualistic construction for the treatment of humans according to their

¹⁵¹ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 98.

¹⁵² Phyllis Tribble, "The Bible in Transit," *Reflections* Vol. 98, No. 1, Spring 2011 (31-33), 31.

gender, and this is the world that calls out for creativity and imagination. A child arrives into a world that is already gender-oppressive. A mother has made space to welcome this child. We call this child the Other.¹⁵³ If the child is male, she is subjected to him even as she welcomes him into her space. “The maternal body is not only a host but already a hostage for the Other, unable to extricate herself from a responsibility that she did not undertake but to which she was already assigned by the Other.”¹⁵⁴ Her identity, her very self, is disturbed. The change of the maternal body for the sake of the Other continues, but she remains alone as the maternal body with the responsibility she herself did not choose. The Other whom she carried will neither be far from her nor separated from her, but he will not identify with the maternal self that welcomed him. He will be linked to her and will love her but would not want to be her. Levinas would call it “the other-in-the-same,”¹⁵⁵ “neither alienated and rejected nor integrated into the identity of the maternal self.”¹⁵⁶ The concept of natality in Jantzen challenges these thought forms and practices.

Jantzen’s concept of natality calls people to imagine interdependent and interconnected spaces for all natals who have come and are coming. One cannot construct one’s life story by oneself but in interdependence and relationship with others in the

¹⁵³ This “Other” is used in the Levinasian way but this Other comes into a context (western civilizations) that Levinas disavows. He says, “Our relation with the other certainly consists in wanting to comprehend him [sic], but this relation overflows comprehension. Not only because knowledge of the other requires, outside of all curiosity, also sympathy or love, ways of being distinct from impossible contemplation, but because in our relation with the other, he does not affect us in terms of a concept.” See Levinas, *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, 6. Jantzen observes that for Levinas, this Other “is always unique, surprising, in excess of our expectations”, and transposing it to Arendt’s terms, “the Other is always doing what natals do, that is, making fresh, unexpected new beginnings.” See Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 234.

¹⁵⁴ Guenther, *The Gift of the Other*, 6.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 6; See Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1998), 78.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

society. From the moment of thinking about bearing a child, the mother prepares herself. She begins to change for the sake of the child she will carry in her womb. Her whole life revolves around the child who is anticipated. She already builds a relationship with this child, which will continue, though in a different way, as the child matures into an adult. She makes space for the child in a multitude of ways. Janice Allison Thompson argues that “the way that a mother works to make room for her child is not limited to the biological processes of her body during pregnancy; it is also a narrative work.”¹⁵⁷ Her experience of being a mother and working to make room for her daughter, imagining and anticipating her arrival, is very significant. She converses with her son about his sister’s coming and how to be prepared to receive her into their small family. She not only makes stories to tell her son but also makes space for her daughter in her own “life-story”, “family”, and “community.”¹⁵⁸ “Her plans and hopes becoming a life-giving narrative of hope that extends the work of her womb.”¹⁵⁹ Even this anticipatory narrative is a work of creativity and imagination.

Naga women can also imagine a fuller and more fulfilled life for their children, including their girl children. This is a value shared with people in other cultures. For example, the Papel people of Guinea-Bissau in West Africa say these words when they mourn their dead children: “A child is born to live, not to die.”¹⁶⁰ Mothers say these words when they mourn the physical death of their children. On the other hand, Naga

¹⁵⁷ Janice Allison Thompson, “Making Room for the Other: Maternal Mourning and Eschatological Hope,” *Modern Theology* 27 no 3 (July 2011):.395-413, 396.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Jónína Einarsdóttir, *Tired of Weeping: Mother Love, Child Death, and Poverty in Guinea-Bissau* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 136.

women mourn the existential death of their girl children at birth. Speaking from her own experience of the death of her child after birth and bringing experiences of mothers from other cultural contexts, Thompson suggests that “the experience of giving birth to a child and the experience of mourning a child newly born are both works of love that seek to “make room” or “create space” for an “Other.”¹⁶¹ Thompson found that birth-giving and mourning were more linked in her own experience of her daughter’s death, than her cultural context, theological studies, or feminists interests prepared her to expect.¹⁶² Thompson says, “Birth and death stand in stark opposition, and yet they can coincide in a woman’s experience, and also in the experience of various communities.”¹⁶³ The gift of birth is to live a life to the fullest, to enjoy it, to give our best to our habitat and the inhabitants, to flourish like a garden that provides space for plants to bear fruit and homes for the birds and other living beings.

Moore’s creativity and imagination plays a big role in the context of patriarchal domination. It is the pathway by which people find their voices and stir their imaginaries to create a habitus of justice. Women’s encounter with patriarchy should remain a warning sign. Being strong and persistent will help the women find “oases of nourishment in the wilderness.”¹⁶⁴ Women have been in the wilderness for too long, a wilderness that has been forced upon them, but today, they will tread the wilderness on one accord against all odds in order to bring justice, which is their right. Women will

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 395.

¹⁶² Thompson, “Making Room for the Other: Maternal Mourning and Eschatological Hope,” 409.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 396.

¹⁶⁴ Phyllis Trible, “The Bible in Transit,” 31.

imagine alternative possibilities. They will not flee, but they will return to reclaim what is theirs.

The Repressed Returns

Moore and Jantzen have shown alternative ways of thinking and living. One way of thinking and living is to find the lost women in the ancient Naga world through their stories. I have analyzed some ancient Naga women's stories in the previous chapter while discussing oral traditions and symbols. Here, I will describe some stories to exemplify how Moore's and Jantzen's work on natality and flourishing help highlight themes of ancient Naga stories of women's wisdom, power, and courage that have been suppressed.

Women in the ancient Naga world have played remarkable roles in their communities, which were deemed sacred and were held in high esteem by the people as endowed by God. Regrettably, their stories have been suppressed for centuries. Jantzen speaks to this travesty when she criticizes the necrophilic habitus of the west in order to reveal the repression of the voices of natality and flourishing. She has pointed out that such repressed voices threaten the gendered power. She writes,

But the repressed returns. In the margins, in the sidelines, in the voices of dissent it is possible to find creativity and beauty, offers of alterities. These voices were too often silenced, sometimes brutally, sometimes by ignoring or distorting them. But by careful listening, it is possible to hear them again; and by exploring their possibilities, find resources for transforming and redeeming the present and bringing newness into the world.¹⁶⁵

The return of the repressed is necessary for authentic freedom for Naga women. Asian feminist theologians Virginia Fabella and Sun Ai Lee Park stated over twenty years ago that, "Christian women have become aware that without their distinctive voices as Asians

¹⁶⁵ Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence*, 38.

and as women, the emerging theologies in Asia cannot be liberating or relevant, not for themselves or for the Church or society at large.”¹⁶⁶

Today, the stories of Naga women are being recovered by a young generation of scholars who believe in the right to life for women and girls and the strength that lies in them. There are abundant chronicles about women who were regarded as specially endowed by the sacred. Lucy Zehol, in her account of the Naga heroes and heroines, brings to light such women. One of them by the name *Dze-o* was believed to be close to the heart of the creator and possessed of some supernatural power in foretelling.¹⁶⁷ Another similar medium was *Tariinie-o*, who foretold the future of the village. Before her death, she advised her villagers to perform singing at her grave in the event of drought.

They were to sing:

*“Tariü dzedze
Ishe no no, Eshé no no
Solhuo le medzüsa pha bou”*¹⁶⁸

The people believed that, when the villagers came and sang the song, “the heavens would open wide and pour down rain.”¹⁶⁹ Some women such as *Kevechü-o*, *Zonie-o* and *Zode-o* received special powers at birth that went beyond the exterior physical form to the spiritual. These women possessed the spirit associated with wealth and riches called *Nyiepi-o*. Not many women were blessed enough to see this spirit. The women mentioned above have claimed they have seen this spirit. *Zode-o* owned *nyiepi-o*, and she was

¹⁶⁶ Virginia Fabella and Sun Ai Lee Park, “Introduction,” in Virginia Fabella and Sun Ai Lee Park ed. *We Dare to Dream: Doing Theology as Asian Women*, vii.

¹⁶⁷ Lucy Zehol, “Remembered Naga heroes/Heroines of Oho Legendary Khezhakeno Village of Nagaland,” *Indian Folklife*, 14-17: 16.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

believed to have the gift of drawing milk from her thumb.¹⁷⁰ Milk is the basic source of nourishment and survival of life. It is the basic food for the baby at birth. Just sucking on the mother's breast is the lifeline for the infant. It assists in giving life to the baby. The moment a baby is born, she/he is kept by her/his mother's side and immediately begins to feed on her breast. Drawing milk from her thumb, *Zode-o* demonstrated the power of women to feed and sustain and give life to the whole community.

Courage was another element of success and peace building found in Naga women. Naga women were capable of going where men were not able to go. These women risked their lives for their people and even for their enemies, while men could not. They performed dangerous, yet significant roles as mediators called *demi*, especially during head hunting days.¹⁷¹ One would not frequently see a man volunteer to act as *demi* between two warring villages, but, during such conflicts, women stood up to the task of negotiator and mediator, which was a thoroughly commendable undertaking. Zehol accounts that, "besides their diplomatic role, *demis* were also the only ones who could carry the head of a slain victim to the bereaved family of an enemy village. Their role was so important that it was tabooed for warring villages to kill a *demi* (*demi pi-o yie kü nyü*).¹⁷² It was their role that ushered in peace between the warring villages.¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ In the ancient past the Nagas practiced head hunting. This was the severing of enemies' heads during war. They did not simply take the heads of enemies but would first identify themselves to each other and then sever it in the proper ritualistic way. Possessing a head was a prestige for the Naga warriors.

¹⁷² Lucy Zehol, "Remembered Naga heroes/Heroines of Oho Legendary Khezhakeno Village of Nagaland," 16.

¹⁷³ Some of the Demis who are remembered to this day are: (also Akangla from Ao folktale) Kaponie-o, she mediated between Khezhakeno and Mao-Maram villages. Tarünie-o, she mediated between Khezhakeno and Poumai villages. She-o, she mediated between Khezhakeno and Lanumi or Nenumi (i.e., Poumai) villages."

Toshimenla Jamir gives a similar account of women who were married into another village. They became peacemakers during battles between their birth village and the village they married into. Jamir describes what Shimreichon Luithui has presented in his “Women for Peace in Nagalim.” The women would enter the battlefield for peace between the warring villages by holding up a long Y-shaped stick and try to stop the war. The Y-shaped stick symbolized the connection of the two villages by birth blood and through marriage. Moreover, since these women arbitrators were related to both parties by blood and through marriage, neither side could harm them.¹⁷⁴ In the midst of war, the symbol of the Y- shaped stick instantly sent a message of peace negotiation and life. Jamir asserts that women’s organizations in Nagaland are in some way continuing this tradition through new forms, which should be pursued with persistence. This, in present times, is a threat to patriarchy and male power. Such persistent work of Naga women continues to be resisted by the law-makers, stating that certain things regarding women cannot be changed based on the customary traditional law of the land. But women have the power to think differently in order to act differently.

The wisdom of women in the ancient Ao Naga life was needed during critical times in their history. A prominent Ao woman named Akangla, the wife of a village head, used her wisdom to aid two villages in the invasion of another village. Two villages, namely Longkum and Waromung, planned to attack and capture a village named Nokrang. They attempted several times in vain as they could not penetrate the ferocious dogs guarding the Nokrang village, who were trained to kill enemies. They feared the dogs more than the warriors, and could not devise anything to subdue them. It was at this

¹⁷⁴ Shimreichon, Luithui, *Women for Peace in Nagalim*. New Delhi: NPMHR Publication, Winter 2000-2001; Jamir, “Engendering Public Space in Naga Society: Tradition and Modernity,” *Indian Folklife* A Quarterly Newsletter from National Folklore Support Centre Serial No. 33 July 2009: 18-21: 19.

difficult juncture that the village sought advice from the wise woman Akangla. Akangla came up with a successful plan. She called all the women of her village to collect their fallen hairs while combing and to bring it to her. Then, she cooked sticky rice and made rice balls mixed with the hair. When it was ready, she gave the rice balls bound in leaves to the warriors and instructed them to throw them to the dogs. They did as they were instructed. When the dogs struggled to swallow the rice balls, the warriors could easily slay them.¹⁷⁵ Without much difficulty they captured the village.¹⁷⁶ The person behind the victory is a wise woman, but she has not been recognized in history. Her significant role has been repressed just because she was a woman. Arenla Longkumer points out that this woman is hardly remembered by the Ao Naga people. Instead, her husband Loyangpong, who did not do anything, is mentioned several times in songs of praise. Longkumer continues to say that these historical facts, which are part of the history of their culture and tradition, are conveniently forgotten by the people.

Until present times, rules that allow no women to be part of the village council remain in force. Society claims that this ban represents faithful adherence to the traditional practice that women should stay away from the high position and power.¹⁷⁷ I would argue that men feel threatened by women's power and, therefore, have continued to suppress the powerful stories pertaining to women.

¹⁷⁵ Killing the dogs or any domestic animals was not a matter of serious concern given the fact that their culture practiced human headhunting. Today, to slaughter animals in this way is unimaginable.

¹⁷⁶ Arenla Lkr, "The status and the role of women," in www.nagasonline.com, October 13, 2010. This story has been narrated and interpreted by scholars and feminist theologians like Limatula Longkumer and others.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

The male group has always been the dominant party and they have even gone to the extent of dominating the realms that did not and would never belong to them. A Naga legend, “The Man Who Went to Heaven,” is one such narrative. It tells of a young man who had a pond with clear water for his use. One morning, he saw it muddied. He wondered why. This went on for a week, so he decided to keep watch. Then, one early morning, he saw the most spectacular thing he had ever seen – three beautiful sky women frolicking in his pond. He could not get his eyes off them because of their beauty. They flew to their sky home before the sun rose in the morning. This went on for some time. One morning, he hid one of the sisters’ tails. When it was time for them to fly home, they secured their tails, but the youngest sister could not find hers. While she was searching for it, the young man came out and caught her and, eventually, married her. She became his wife and bore him children. They were living happily, but one day she found out the truth of her missing tail from her children. She realized that she had been deceived. When she found her tail, she flew to her heavenly home with her children. The man went in search of them through the help of a raven, and he reached heaven. His wife warned him to comport himself in the land of heaven because she knew that he was prone to invade others’ world and use his power over them, as patriarchy always does. Despite his wife’s insistence to respect the life of the sky world, he violated the rules of that heavenly place. He was killed by the creatures in that place.¹⁷⁸ No longer will the strength, wisdom and courage of Naga women be suppressed.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ Easterine Kire Iralu, *Naga Folktales Retold* (Norway: Barkweaver, 2009), 26-30.

¹⁷⁹ This reminds me of a fragment of the history of Ethiopia, 1681 as put forward by Elizabeth A. Johnson in her book *She Who is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, 61.

“Iron is strong, but fire tempers it.
Fire is awesome, but water extinguishes it.
Water is forceful, but the sun dries it.”

The purpose of telling the Naga women's stories is to show that our life is not just for us. It is for our children and our children's children. We make space and create narratives for the children even beyond death, that is, to mourn and to keep the memory alive. In fact, we will come to an end, but we have to keep alive for our children the stories that our great grandmothers, grandmothers and mothers have told us. We have stories. We have life. We will flourish. We will find new ways to tell our stories so that our daughters can hear them, and they can be heard.

To support the power of these stories, we turn in the final chapter to theological conclusions. Bringing Jantzen's and Moore's insights to the Naga context, I will turn to my constructive theological proposal of a Christology of natality.

The sun is mighty, but a storm cloud conceals it.
A storm cloud is explosive, but the earth subdues it.
The earth is majestic, but men master it.
Men are powerful, but grief overtakes them.
Grief is heavy, but wine assuages it.
Wine is powerful, but sleep renders it weak.
Yet woman is strongest of all.”

CHAPTER SIX

TOWARDS A CONSTRUCTIVE CHRISTOLOGY OF NATALITY

“How can newness enter the world? Where may we look to find the resources for redeeming the present?”¹

The final question, and the focus of this chapter, is how theology can be reshaped into a life-bearing, redemptive theology for the people of Nagaland. More specifically, how might we conceive and embody a Christology of natality? This is similar to the question that Jantzen posed; she recognized the world’s need for redemption, alongside the world’s need to focus on life.² Naga women face these questions every day. They yearn for redemption that genuinely brings new life, and they expect that redemption to come through Jesus Christ. That expectation, grounded in their deep Christian faith, requires a reconsideration of Christology to be more life-bearing for Naga women and still to be authentic to the biblical and historical tradition that they hold dear.

Christology in Naga Context

Christology begins in the incarnation of Jesus in human flesh. Therefore, Christology needs to be grounded in and related to living human contexts. For the people of Nagaland, this includes the context in which women find themselves today. As described in earlier chapters, the problem of mascu-surrogacy and the consequences that Naga women experience are severe. The preference for male life over the female life has been the norm, which requires a Naga woman to bear a son to carry on the family

¹ Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence*, 3.

² Ibid.

lineage. Failing to bear a son is the beginning of a kind of death for her; her body, sexuality, social status, and economy are adversely affected. Christian churches in Nagaland have neither responded nor given any effort to challenge these birthing customs and the consequent suffering of women. I ask the question that Musimbi Kanyoro has asked from her home country of Kenya and her global work for women: “What if religions cared about justice for women? What if the churches could care?”³ Since Nagaland is a highly Christocentric Christian state the role and teaching of its churches need critical analysis so women have a just and rightful place in the society.

Bandangjungshi, a tribal Naga theologian strongly critiques the confession of faith of the Naga churches. He sees the failure of the Naga Christians to translate their confession of faith “into actions which can germinate effectively in the actual life situation of the people.”⁴ He discusses the revival movements that swept over the state of Nagaland by the Spirit’s fire leading the Nagas to a thorough confession of sins, but he has observed that they had gravely failed to “replenish in daily life the spirit of this faith confession made during the revival.”⁵ The confession of faith has to be activated in the daily life of the people, and to further the mission of Jesus. Without being in contact or living in solidarity with the victims of the unjust structure of society, we cannot understand the work of Jesus. Bendangjungshi said: “Nagas should let Jesus’ mission flow in their own cultural setting so that an authentic Christian faith confession can be

³ Musimbi Kanyoro, “A Matter of Life and Death,” *Reflections* Vol. 98, No. 1, Spring 2011, 56-57: 57.

⁴ Bendangjungshi, *Confessing Christ in the Naga Context: Towards a Liberating Ecclesiology*, 268.

⁵ Ibid.

synthesized with and keep pace with the rhythm of the people's cultural life.”⁶

Bendangjungshi speaks of the contextualization and indigenization of the gospel in the Naga culture in general, but he also keeps in mind the need for culture to be “corrected and reshaped in the light of the gospel values.”⁷ He sees the authenticity of the confession of Christ occurring in the contemporary Naga socio-cultural realities, which means that the situation of the mascu-surrogates and their narrative of the cross has to be addressed for their liberation.

Like Bendangjungshi, I want to connect Christian faith to the contemporary Naga socio-cultural realities. In such a context, I ask several Christological questions in relation to natality: What would a Christology of natality look like in the Naga context? Why would a Christology of natality be helpful at all to them? What is the significance of Christology of natality in light of the sufferings of the mascu-surrogates? If Christology is to be meaningful and be positively effective in the life of the Naga Christians, I argue that there has to be a new approach to the meaning of human life.⁸ Since Christologies are varied according to the context and culture from which they emerge, I am convinced that a Naga Christology of natality must be forged in relationship to the concrete realities of the Naga women. In this chapter, I propose a constructive Christology of natality that will focus on three aspects of Jesus' 'life-bearing': nourishment, embrace, and respect. By rethinking the theology of the cross and salvation through this Christological lens, I

⁶ Ibid., 269.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ It is not the change of the gender of Jesus Christ or God theoretically that we need that would transform the Naga world in consonance with Asian feminist theologians like Kwok Pui-Lan who have asserted that “Progressive Christian Women in the Third World are astute enough to know that a mere change of the gender of God will not suffice, because gender is only *one* of the problems of Christian imperialism. Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 131.

will connect the life-bearing Christ to the experiences of the Naga women. I will then draw from this Christology a proposal for a theology and practice of Eucharist that will be life-bearing for a Naga Christian community, ushering in a birthing spirit that treasures life in all its forms, irrespective of gender.

Re-imagining and Re-thinking Christology

I propose that Naga people re-imagine Jesus Christ and re-think Christology, considering the image of Jesus with outstretched hands, and the welcome of those hands to all people and to all life. I imagine the powerful image of Jesus as the bearer of natality, stretching out his hands, as a midwife, in anticipation of holding the baby waiting to be born. This image becomes the image of the Christian community, who, as followers of Jesus, are midwives.

The beauty of the affirmation of life is powerfully portrayed in the midwife image and in the outstretched hands, which are already major images of Jesus in traditional narratives and art. A Christology that brings the outstretched hands and birthing imagery to the foreground is a Christology that affirms life and could potentially make the Naga context more open to all life, even the lives of baby girls. This midwifing work must be grounded in a life-affirming Christology. This will involve remembering the cross and the difficult passage into life. The Christian community will become the place of birth. The mother, in her labor pain, will need this place, these hands, and these encouragers as she goes through this unique experience. This community of midwives will eagerly wait in anticipation for the new life and will welcome the child. It is a process of waiting, preparing, accepting, blessing, and embracing. Through this process, newness arrives.

This community will walk with this new born life, feeding the child the milk of communitarian love, embracing with the desire to enrich her/him and be enriched in return, and showing the way of right and just relationships. The image of the Christian community as midwives portrays a deep connection between the event of the cross and the natal's passage to life. The affirmation of life birthed from the cross of suffering is newly expressed in the narratives of Naga women. The passion for life, expressed in these women, moves through the powers of death. All life will be affirmed, irrespective of gender. If the vision of the Christian cross is reinterpreted, as I am proposing, it will become clear to the Naga Christians the need for the alteration of birthing practices in their culture.

Mary Elizabeth Moore's interpretation of a philosophy of life-bearing shapes my constructive theology.⁹ In Moore's assessment of Jantzen's philosophy and approach to life, she identifies "elements vital for fresh philosophical thinking and transformed patterns of life."¹⁰ Her work offers Christological possibilities and opens up new ways to explore vital elements of a philosophy of life-bearing in different contexts. The element of her life-bearing philosophy, "creativity and imagination," invites theologians to "search for alternative possibilities."¹¹ This corresponds with my constructive aims. Creativity and imagination become powerful when directed toward a specific problem by attentively listening to the narrative of the problem, and analyzing it. In addressing the specific problem in a particular context, the energy of human experiences flow deep into

⁹ Moore, "Passion for Life," 186.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 186-195.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 191.

it and allow new theological ideas to emerge. The value and beauty of these theological ideas then becomes a resource for the people. This is when creativity and imagination become meaningful and authentic.

Moore, in her constructive work, brings out the philosophy of life-bearing as a viable structure by exploring the pain, hope, and rethinking of human lives within their social contexts, much as I am doing in this chapter. In one work, she explores the portraits of two women, namely Beatrix Potter who was born in 1866¹² and Ayanna Abi-Kyles who grew up in the 1960s.¹³ Moore, exploring these two women's stories, demonstrates the possibility of women from different contexts weaving their passions for life with their power to build justice and peace.¹⁴ She brings them to life making their passion for life meaningful, reasonable, transforming, and relevant in today's world, where life is being threatened, and commercialized, particularly, the life of the defenseless.

Beatrix Potter's intellectual prowess and deep religious awareness were woven around her love of life. She believed in the interconnectedness of all beings whether ordinary humans, animals or nature. Her "passion for life was embodied in a worldview of integrated wholeness and in actions of storytelling, artistic illustration, and ecological preservation that preserve and nourish the whole."¹⁵ She even crossed the boundary lines of her social context in order to protect and care for life. All these originated from her deep love of life.

¹² Beatrix Potter, *The Complete Tales* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2006), Back Cover Blurb.

¹³ Moore, "Passion for Life," 184.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 181.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 184.

Ayanna Abi-Kyles is a woman who kept searching beyond her family's religious norms to put into action her passion for life and justice. Growing up in Detroit, Michigan, in the 1960s, she saw the need for justice and peace for black people. She searched for places to get actively involved in this work of justice and peace. She did not see it in her grandmother's church but saw herself pulled into the Shrine of the Black Madonna because of the work it was doing for the good of the community.¹⁶ She just wanted to make a difference for black people in the world.¹⁷ All this originated from her love of life and justice.

Stories such as these help us think about the lives of women as transforming agents who are bringing about a new reality. Our transformed images and thoughts can transform our approach toward others and the structures of our society. For example, an image of Jesus with outstretched hands who welcomes and loves all people can transform the destructive Naga social patterns that discriminate against women and girls, particularly the mascu-surrogates. Such transformations are attempts to understand and create "in the present, to imagine what life-giving faith can be in today's world."¹⁸ This is a movement toward healing and redeeming the present habitus in order to promote flourishing for all. In the next section, I will develop a Christology of natality that is grounded in Christian tradition and has promise for such healing and redeeming of the present situation.

¹⁶ Ibid., 185. The Shrine of Black Madonna is an Afrocentric religious community committed to working in and for the community as a whole.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland, ed. *Constructive Theology: A Contemporary Approach to Classical Themes* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 2.

Christology of Natalty

From a Christian theological perspective, Jesus Christ bears these alternative possibilities. I am convinced, as a constructive theologian and a Naga tribal Christian woman, that Jesus Christ, understood as the life-bearing one, can bring hope and salvation to Naga women. Given the authority of biblical stories for Naga women, I will develop three aspects of his life and ministry: Jesus Christ as the nourisher, embracer, and respecter of life. Jesus as nourisher of life feeds the people for their physical and emotional healing. Jesus as embracer of life touches the core of the suffering heart and holds all their experiences. Jesus as respecter of life accepts all people, recognizing the worth and potential in each being and loves them equally. I will develop each of the three aspects in conversation with guides from the Christian tradition, the medieval theologian Julian of Norwich, the womanist theologian Delores Williams, and the depictions of women in the Christian Scriptures. I want to draw out the life-bearing aspects of Jesus, mindful that for Naga women; this life-bearing will also be interpreted in relationship to the cross.

Jesus Christ as Nourisher of Life

If the Naga Christian community conceives of Jesus Christ as one who nourishes life, then they need to imagine a theology of natalty. According to such a theology, Jesus is God's Life-Bearer whose life and ministry, death and resurrection, are gifts of life to the world. Jesus is the one who reaches out to love and care for all people. Thus, the Christian community is called to feed and nurse the new life that is born into the world, including the life of girls, with the milk of communitarian love. They are to become a

community committed to recreating a new world where all humans will live their best lives. In medieval theological writings, we find images of Christ as mother, feeding her children from the side of the cross. I want to highlight a few aspects of this image, juxtaposing nourishment and death.

Jesus Christ as nourisher of life is best portrayed by the great medieval theologian Julian of Norwich. Julian had a profound experience of the love and suffering of Christ on the cross. Her deep theological interpretation of the cross, together with her experience of Christ's suffering and love, brings out a clear image of a maternal, mothering God that is revealed in Jesus. Her understanding of Jesus is similar to the concept of Jesus' life-bearing that I am developing.

Like a mother who shares her whole self with her children because they come from her and are fed by her, medieval writers often spoke of Jesus as a lactating and birthing mother. For Julian, Jesus is identified strongly as the mother. She uses the motif of Jesus-as-mother, which is more than a symbol. She holds that it expresses a theological truth that is better said in female than in male images. Caroline Walker Bynum summarizes Julian's perspective that the holy Church is our mother because she cares for and nurtures us and that Mary the virgin is even more our mother because she bears Christ. But Christ is mother most of all.¹⁹ In Julian's words:

For in the same time that God joined himself to our body in the maiden's womb, he took our soul, which is sensual, and in taking it, having enclosed us all in himself, he united it to our substance... So our Lady is our mother, in whom we are all enclosed and born of her in Christ, for she who is mother of our savior is

¹⁹ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 96.

mother of all who are saved in our savior; and our savior is our true mother, in whom we are endlessly born and out of whom we shall never come.²⁰

The uniqueness of our birthing is seen here because we are endlessly birthed. Jesus as Wisdom and Jesus as Mother, in whom the birthing of humanity takes place, are united.

Julian's perception of mothering goes beyond loving and feeding; it is also creating and saving. Medieval piety saw flesh as fertile and vulnerable, and it saw enfleshing – the enfleshing of God and of us all – as the occasion for salvation.²¹ Christ was not only enfleshed with flesh from a woman; his own flesh did womanly things: it bled food and gave birth to new life.²² The wound in Christ's side and his breasts were used interchangeably to feed people.²³ The physiological role of the mother clearly underlies Julian's good judgment that, if gender is to be used of God at all, Christ is more like a mother than a father in the face of the incarnation.²⁴ More profoundly, Julian spoke of creation as a maternal act because God, in taking on our humanity in the incarnation, gives God's self to us as a mother gives herself to the fetus she bears.²⁵ Jesus' maternal mothering cannot be spoken of without the experience of love and the imagination of it. Life comes from him, and wherever and to whomever it is imbued, there Jesus is.

As a human who lived on earth, the nourishing that he learned from his own mother is significant for Naga women. His mother was an ordinary woman, in whose life

²⁰ Edmund Colledge, O.S.A. & James Walsh, S.J. trans., *Julian of Norwich: Showings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 292.

²¹ Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 116.

²² *Ibid.*, 215.

²³ Bynum, "[Jesus as Mother]," 194. Also see, The Monk of Farne, *Meditations*, chap. 40, "The Meditations of the Monk of Farne," ed. Hugh Farmer, *Studia Anselmiana* 41-42, *Analecta monastica* 4 (1957), 182-183.

²⁴ Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 97.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 205-6.

an extraordinary event took place: his birth. She nourished and nurtured him. His mother was the nourisher of his life and, in due time, he returned nourishment to his earthly mother in her need of healing and comfort. While the gender of Jesus changes, Jesus' nourishing comes to all children.

Jesus loved his mother and never forgot her but also regarded her as one among many women who needed care and healing. He saw her suffer and grieve especially on his account. The medieval lyric "Dialogue Between Our Lady and Jesus on the Cross," portrays Jesus' mother Mary as seeing the Crucifixion "only as an event causing great suffering to her child and immense grief to herself."²⁶ She is comforted by her son. He tells her to be "blithe," because "his death is the means of human salvation."²⁷ Filled with sorrow and confusion, she listens to her son. She is nourished by her son, and it is her turn to bring that nourishment to others. She asks him, "Son, what would you have me do?"²⁸ She needed to hear from her son, which would be healing for both of them. He responds to his mother's quest. He tells her "to reach out to other mothers ... associating her present emotional pain with the pain that other women experience in childbirth."²⁹ What this literature suggests is Jesus knew this pain, and he also knew the power of spreading love, even in his own moment of greatest pain. What is glorified here is not Jesus' suffering, but Jesus' love for others, including those others (women) who were

²⁶ Rebecca Hinton, "Dialogue Between Our Lady and Jesus on the Cross," *The Explicator* 50, no 1 (1991): 5-7, 6. In this lyric, Mary is portrayed as not comprehending the cosmic purpose of the Crucifixion.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Ibid. Rebecca Hinton tells of a popular belief in the medieval period. Christ's birth was believed to be "painless, as he passed through Mary's womb as easily as sun passes through glass. But it was also believed that Mary compensated for her lack of pain in childbirth when she witnessed her son hanging on the cross. Her emotional suffering at the Crucifixion was considered her link to other mothers."

subjugated and ignored by more powerful ones in the community. Jesus wanted to reach out to them from the cross and through his mother. Asking his mother to nourish other women in pain shows a way for the Naga women to become agents of nourishment for each other. Such literature becomes a resource for Naga Christology. What we also find in this medieval literature are images of Jesus as lactating mother; the death-wound on the side is actually a source of nourishment.

We also see Jesus' suffering on the cross expressed in terms of birthpangs. As found in many fourteenth-century texts, Marguerite of Oingt in her meditation identifies Christ's saving role with birthing and feeding:

My sweet Lord...are you not my mother and more than my mother?...For when the hour of your delivery came you were placed on the hard bed of the cross...and your nerves and all your veins burst when in one day you gave birth to the whole world.³⁰

Clearly depicted here is Marguerite's description of Jesus' pain on the cross as birthpangs. This maternal image depicts suffering that is related to motherhood, but at the same time, this suffering moves beyond motherhood to an all-encompassing maternal nourishing of all life. This is a strong depiction of Jesus' nourishing from the cross, similar to what is presented in Julian's writings. Julian links Christ's birthing of us to the pain of his death on the cross. Through his labor pangs we are born into bliss.³¹ Julian speaks of the word "mother" for Jesus as fair and lovely, and "so sweet and so kind" that she identifies Jesus as "the true Mother of life and of all things."³² These maternal images

³⁰ Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 97.

³¹ Kerie Hide, *Gifted Origins to Graced Fulfillment: The Soteriology of Julian of Norwich* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 135.

³² *Ibid.*

are complex but they affirm motherhood, and they also rethink the relationship of suffering in a non-patriarchal way.

Another dimension of the relationship between Jesus and his mother, reflected in his work of nourishing, is a wider maternal vision. Jesus knew the sorrow of his mother and the pain of other mothers, and Jesus regarded his mother as a woman who could be a mother to many. In light of Jesus' life and work, and his words to his mother from the cross (recorded differently in different Christian texts), one can conclude that, to Jesus, all mothers are his mothers. He cannot bear to see mothers, women, and girls go through pain and suffering. The Naga women find care and nourishment in him because he cares for them no matter what gender they bear. He will specifically be protective of the mothers who cannot bear sons because of the double discrimination they face. Such is the image of nourishing that the cross can portray to them.

Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are the epitome of holistic nourishing. We see it clearly in the Gospel accounts of his acts of ministry with the outcast, his welcoming of the little children, and his concern for his mother from the cross.³³ We also see this holistic nourishing in the medieval text in which Jesus asks his mother to care for other women. Jesus comforted his mother and directed her to move beyond her grief in the suffering of her biological child in order to commit herself to be the spiritual mother of humanity.³⁴ Jesus did not want his mother to linger too long on her sorrow, but to turn her sorrow into nourishment for others. We can see that Mary accepted this role in her request to her son Jesus: "Son, help all those in need, all those who cry to me – maiden,

³³ John 19:26-27.

³⁴ Hinton, "Dialogue Between Our Lady and Jesus on the Cross," 6.

wife, and prostitute.”³⁵ Jesus’ life-bearing finds fulfilment in the sustaining nurturance of all life. This opens a way for the Naga women to imagine the cross that feeds them with beauty and compassion towards a creative birthing and nourishing of life.

Jesus Christ as Embracer of Life

If the Naga Christian community conceives of Jesus Christ as one who embraces life, then their philosophy of natality has to be reimagined. They are to embrace one another’s life, particularly the lives of women and girls. For all lives that are birthed into the world through the mother, they are to make space in themselves. A revisitiation of Jesus’ embrace is necessary.

Jesus embraces all life. He receives all into his arms and into his own life. The purpose of God in Jesus was love, and it is this love that shows all things to us. Julian understands the embrace of Jesus based on love that gives birth to life. As she was dying, God demonstrated before her God’s love for humanity, and the life that is given to all out of love.³⁶ In her dying bed, she once again received that life to relive Jesus’ redemptive life. Not a single life is beyond the loving embrace of Jesus for Julian. Jesus’ embrace demonstrates that all beings are loveable and are loved. Julian through her experience of the divine love shows us her understanding of the deep meaning of incarnation in the embrace of Jesus. She wrote:

I saw that he is to us all things that are good and comfortable to our help. He is our clothing, that for love wraps round us, enfolding us and embracing us all

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Edmund Colledge O.S.A and James Walsh S.J. ed., *A Book of Showings to the anchoress Julian of Norwich* Part Two (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of medieval Studies, 1978), 291-295.

around for tender love, so that he may never leave us, being to us everything that is good, as I understand it.³⁷

The intimacy of Jesus' loving embrace is powerfully shown to us by Julian that no matter who we are, the goodness of God envelops us till the end. In Julian's perspective, the embrace of Jesus will remain closer than our very own flesh. She also shows the longing of God to hold us close and never let us go.

Jesus' approach to life has taken him to the very edge of the society. Just as Jesus met several women on the periphery when he walked on earth, Naga women have met Jesus on the edge. These women have never been in the center. They have been pushed further away from the significant places in the community. The further they are pushed away, the less accepted they are in the society. They find their worth and acceptance in Jesus' approach to life on earth, and thus, become ardent followers of him in their struggle to become acceptable and embraceable beings. It is no longer a passive commitment of their lives into the arms of Jesus but an active commitment.

Jesus embraces and holds all their experiences. They need to see the reality of the consequence of their belief in Christ. Their spirit in the face of years of abuse needs to be examined. An example of a South African woman's strength and hope is a replica of many Naga women's strength. This South African woman who had been abused and whose life was threatened by her husband for years uttered a few words, when she left him: "Nobody will take me out of this world except God."³⁸ No being is authorized by

³⁷ Elisabeth Dutton ed., *Julian of Norwich: A Revelation of Love* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2008), 28.

³⁸ Marie M. Fortune, "A Balm in Gilead?" *Reflections* Vol. 98, No. 1 (Spring 2011), 45-47: 46.

God to kill, abuse or destroy. It is not the motive of God to destroy or uproot but to form and shape and hold humanity and the rest of creation.

What is expressed here is the power of knowing God's embrace. This is a vital force that will enable women and men alike to resist the grave dangers of abusing and being abused. Abuse is like a contagious disease; it happens to women, but it also happens among women themselves as they become "active replicators of their own oppression."³⁹ It is a tragedy that women force other women to be bent instead of lifting them up and teaching them to walk again, to walk together. Naga women's mockery of their female counterparts who cannot give birth to sons is the antithesis of this. "The only time a woman should bend down is to help up another woman."⁴⁰ The mockery among women themselves is challenged by the embrace of Jesus. His embrace challenges the victimhood of women and calls attention to the victimizing umbrella of patriarchal discriminatory laws and practices. The female victimizers are still the victims, and they need to see this in light of the female victims whom they ridicule. They see themselves suffer in their victims' suffering, and they also need the one who embraces their victims to embrace them too. In the end, it is about women, girls and mothers being in solidarity with each other.

Jesus does not turn anyone away who comes to him. The Gospels inform us that children, including babies, both girls and boys, were brought to Jesus.⁴¹ It is plausible that most of them were mothers who brought them to Jesus. Why the mothers? Why did they

³⁹ Discussed in chapter one.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Mark 10:13; Matthew 19:13; Luke 18:15.

bring their children to Jesus? One might surmise that they had observed the embrace of Jesus, and they believed he would care enough to bless their children. Jesus' blessing of their children was important for them, and Jesus did embrace the children. He placed his hands on their heads and blessed them. In this text, the word "bring" has strong implications for the Naga women. They would bring their daughters themselves and other women to meet Jesus. They would also bring other women's needs to Jesus. Christian imagery through the ages pictures the children as happy to be with Jesus.⁴²

In addition to the mothers bringing their children to Jesus, the Gospels present yet another significant story of a mother coming alone to Jesus for her daughter's sake, and doing so in a society where women are discriminated against.⁴³ This story is important in the present context where daughters are aborted, abandoned, or killed at birth. Matthew describes the woman in this narrative as a woman of Canaan because her descendants were the Canaanites;⁴⁴ Mark calls her "Syrophenician" because of the country where she dwelt, the country of her citizenship.⁴⁵ With either identification, the woman was at a disadvantage. She was a woman, and a Gentile, a non-Jew. Yet she unabashedly came to Jesus and called out to him. With a mother's tenacious love and faith, she was willing to take the risk to cross any boundary – religion, ethnicity, race, gender, even respectability – to make Jesus notice her situation. This mother in the New Testament is a role model

⁴² See examples of contemporary images of Jesus and the children at: www.goodsalt.com

⁴³ The Gospel of Mark 7:25-30; The Gospel of Matthew 15:21-28.

⁴⁴ Numbers 13:29; Judges 1: 31-33.

⁴⁵ Mark 7: 26.

who advocated for her daughter's healing.⁴⁶ She was also defying the social constructs that have excluded some people from approaching Jesus. She was persistent in her request, and even convinced Jesus to fulfill her request. In the end, he embraced her and recognized her embrace of her daughter, saying: "For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter."⁴⁷

In thinking about the embrace of Jesus in the Naga context, I imagine the women completely surrendering themselves into the arms of Jesus. Yet, the notion of surrender has often been problematic. Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel refers to self-surrender as "an act of one's own free will; it is bound up with responsibility and love, and is interested in the preservation of life."⁴⁸ In imagining embrace, the image that keeps returning is Jesus placing his hands on their heads. Jesus does not desist from touching and healing those who are on the margins of the society. He neither condemns nor walks away from them, but instead he touches them and blesses them. Jesus' action challenges the people not to turn women away. In the healing of the Syrophenician woman's daughter, Jesus sends out a message about the place of all people with God. In fact, Jesus learns something from the Syrophenician woman and other women as well. It is this woman who makes Jesus understand that his mission is to all women and men.⁴⁹ Also, the woman with a

⁴⁶ Tracy Kemp Hartman, *Letting the Other Speak: Proclaiming the Stories of Biblical Women* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2012), 78; Ranjini Wickramaratne Rebera, "The Syrophenician Woman: An Asian Perspective," in Amy-Jill Levine ed., *A Feminist Companion to Mark* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 108.

⁴⁷ NRSV, Mark 7:29.

⁴⁸ Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *Rediscovering Friendship: Awakening to the Power and Promise of Women's Friendships* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 43.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

flow of blood makes Jesus feel the powers that are in his body.⁵⁰ We are invited to place ourselves in the role of the other, to struggle not only with God but also with our own perceptions of the other in our effort to live a just life.

By embracing and accepting women, Jesus overturned the so-called justifiable promotion of male humanity as normative, which stretches far back in history. He disrupted society's notion that women are less human. Jesus, during his lifetime on earth, denounced this by gathering womenfolk around him, giving them places close to him and becoming mutual friends. Moltmann-Wendel asserts that "the mutuality of the relationship becomes particularly clear only in the stories about Jesus and women."⁵¹ For instance, the sisters Mary and Martha were regarded as having a close relationship with Jesus in the Gospels of Luke and John.⁵² For Naga women, Jesus comes as the "good news to the spaces of life most in need of healing."⁵³ Jesus's embrace of us helps us to understand and learn to reciprocate. Miroslav Volf's metaphor of embrace is helpful in this context:

In an embrace I open my arms to create space in myself for the other. Open arms are a sign that I do not want to be by myself only, an invitation for the other to come in and feel at home with me. In an embrace I also close my arms around the other. Closed arms are a sign that I want the other to become a part of me while I at the same time maintain my own identity. By becoming part of me, the other enriches me. In a mutual embrace, none remains the same because each enriches the other, yet both remain true to their genuine selves.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 36-37.

⁵² Luke 10:38-42; John 11:1-44, 12:1-11.

⁵³ Karen Baker-Fletcher, Michelle A. Gonzalez, David H. Jensen, Joerg Teiger, Cynthia L. Rigby, Deanna A. Thompson chapter ed. "Jesus Christ," in Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland ed. *Constructive Theology: A Contemporary Approach to Classical Themes*, 184.

⁵⁴ Miroslav Volf, "A Vision of Embrace: Theological Perspectives on Cultural Identity and Conflict," *Ecumenical Review* (April 1, 1995) 195-205: 203.

Volf believes that embrace happens among the three persons of the Trinity.⁵⁵ It is no wonder that embrace begins with God. We are touched to “embrace God by a full, active, conscious, and passionate participation in the purposes of God for life in this world.”⁵⁶ It is an avenue for Naga women to think about the cross anew and to ponder Jesus’ life more fully, recognizing that Jesus’ life and death were marks of Jesus’ embrace of humanity. His life and death were also a call for people to embrace one another.

Jesus Christ as Respector of Life

If the Naga Christian community conceives of Jesus Christ as one who respects life, then their philosophy of natality has to be reimaged. Making natality as the central focus, they need to be persistent in diligently moving toward a transformation of attitude, where respect for all life ensues, and the quality of life begins to unfold in the community. Attention to Jesus Christ as one who respects life would uncover the injustice and indignity meted out on women in the community and lead to a realization to protect them and enhance their flourishing. This includes making the right choices and relationships in all aspects of a community life.

Respect for life is seen in the teaching and practice of Jesus Christ. It stems from the depth of his heart that holds all life equal, precious and worthy. His philosophy of life includes a desire for wellbeing for all living beings, even the least of the birds and the grains. He has always been the advocate of womenfolk, especially the most marginalized in society. Jesus respects their potential and, further, helps them to recognize the potential

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Robert E. Webber, *The Divine Embrace: Recovering the Passionate Spiritual Life* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2006), 170.

they themselves have not yet identified. He places their worth and their ability in the open before men and the community. His spirit of care becomes apparent in the face of discrimination, oppression, exploitation, and disrespect, while his actions come alive in the midst of it all. Jesus saw and dealt with the fully blown death-dealing business. His life was dedicated to justice for all, especially for the defenseless and poor.⁵⁷ Jesus' central focus was life and quality of life.

Christians believe and affirm that Jesus came into the world to give us life, and to enhance our lives so we might live abundantly. This picture of Jesus as a respecter of life is strongly advocated by womanist theologians, particularly by Delores Williams. Her Christology emphasizes the significance of Jesus' *life* as redemptive. The redemptive nature of Jesus' life is, for Williams, counter to traditional understandings of Jesus being crucified on the cross for the salvation of humanity. Williams stands against an interpretation of Jesus as one who voluntarily or coercively became a "surrogate" for human sin and suffering on the cross. This image reinforces and justifies the painful experience of black women who were coerced during slavery, and voluntarily after slavery, to fill surrogate roles, as "mammy" to mother other women's children, and as performers for sexual favors and as slaves of manual labor. Hence, she rejects the cross as a saving event. For her, "there is nothing of God in the blood of the cross."⁵⁸ Believing strongly that black women's experience of surrogacy cannot be addressed through a theology of the cross, Williams argues that salvation is expressed through Jesus'

⁵⁷ Jantzen, *Violence to Eternity*, 211.

⁵⁸ Delores Williams, "Black Women's Surrogacy Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption," in Marit Trelstad ed. *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meanings of the Cross Today*, 32.

ministerial vision of righting relationships.⁵⁹ Jesus shows us how to live a life of right relationships among people and their communities. This includes right relationship with God and the rest of creation. Williams brings us face to face with the reality of violence against women, and with the problem of glorifying Jesus' suffering and death as a path toward redemption. Jesus saved, according to Williams, through his vision and life of right relations. Christ saved by demonstrating a fresh approach to being human, to live "peacefully, productively, and abundantly in relationship."⁶⁰

Jesus' passion for abundant life for all was seen in his compassion and respect for people and all of creation. He moved in all places – from the center to the periphery and vice versa, communicating with all sorts of people. Jesus, while showing respect to people, teaches self-respect. Respect is central in Williams' concept of 'righting relationships.' She argues for justice and recognition for women, which is helpful for Naga women. The Naga women believe in the respect that Jesus has for them as women in a patriarchal society, and they emulate his approach in their struggle to gain the respect they deserve. Women, including – their bodies and their sexuality, need to be accepted as worthy as God intended. Marie Fortune hopes that "Someday sexuality will be celebrated and shared as God's gift by all people. Someday equality will be an erotic experience and violence will be abhorred. Someday people will chose one another freely and rejoice in their choosing.... We need not wait for another life, another incarnation, another generation. In the dailiness of our lives..., we can do this differently."⁶¹ The possibility of

⁵⁹ Ibid., 30

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Marie M. Fortune, "A Balm in Gilead?" 47.

the newness of this world depends on our choice of “life over death, respect over control, and justice over injustice in both our intimate and public lives.”⁶² Respect for women is always directed to the liberation of women. Their approach is communitarian in the sense that if one life is affected, the whole community is affected. Therefore, respect is not simply about individual worth, but it is also about collective worth.

Williams work of righting relationships as a way of respecting all life and demanding justice and recognition of women’s life is helpful for the Naga women; however, like other womanist thinkers, such as JoAnn Terrell and M. Shawn Copeland, I do not want to turn away completely from the cross. For Naga women, this concept of respect needs to be extended to their understandings of themselves as sexual beings. Such understanding is also an important part of womanist thought.

Referring back to the Syrophoenician mother, her story is one that reveals an emerging respect in the encounter. She approached Jesus as his equal, and she drew respect from him, in spite of his initial reticence. Ranjini Wickramaratne Rebera asserts that “the woman dealt with Jesus as an equal, acknowledging his power but retaining her own power to challenge him and confront him with the legitimacy of her request... the ministry was mutual, the woman gave Jesus the power to recognize his ministry to the Gentiles while Jesus gave her the power of life by healing her daughter.”⁶³ This is a narrative critical of the passivity of women in Jesus’ society. It is also a narrative that shows Jesus as a respecter of a powerful woman; he gave *her* the credit for the healing of her daughter.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Tracy Kemp Hartman, *Letting the Other Speak: Proclaiming the Stories of Biblical Women*, 78; Ranjini Wickramaratne Rebera, “The Syrophoenician Woman: An Asian Perspective,” 108.

Recognizing and claiming respect is necessary for Naga women, as the Syrophenician mother did. This is an essential element of righting relationships. A flicker of hope is seen in the resolution made by the Naga Christians at the Nagaland Baptist Church Council (NBCC) Platinum Jubilee celebration on April 18, 2012. Under the theme “One New Humanity in Christ,” the Naga Christians resolved to uphold gender equality based on Genesis 1:27, urging the churches, associations, and councils to avail the Christian services of both men and women as equal in the ministry of the Church.⁶⁴ The Nagaland State Commission for Women (NSCW) did not keep silent on this important resolution, and did not fail to commend the NBCC, saying that this resolution “will go a long way in bringing about holistic change in our society as women and men walk together, as equal partners in Christ, leaving aside all barriers that have over the years incapacitated the society’s full potential.”⁶⁵ Jesus’ life-bearing can be articulated and practiced by Naga Christians when we develop a theology of Jesus Christ as Respector of Life; Jesus’ respect for all persons becomes a model for the people’s respect for one another, even across gender boundaries.

What then, actually happened on the cross that can transform Naga women’s understanding of Jesus and his respect for them? Williams’ embrace of Jesus’ ministerial vision of right relationship is deeply connected with my development of Jesus as respector of life and my understanding of the cross. Williams’ work challenges the unjust relation between men and women and the unjust treatment of the mascu-surrogates in the Naga culture. Her theology of righting relationships teaches respect for all life. Naga

⁶⁴ “NSCW applauds NBCC Resolution,” *Morung Express*, April 2012.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

women find solidarity with her because of the respect for life and right relationships in Jesus' ministerial vision that she espouses. However, where she differs with the Naga women relates to her theology of the cross. Her denial of God in the cross separates her from the Naga women, for they see nourishment, embrace, and respect for all on the cross as central to its meaning.

The three aspects of Jesus' life-bearing - nourishing, embracing, and respecting – are a starting point for transforming Naga women's understanding of the cross. The cross is too significant for them for it to be taken away from them. They have walked with and toward the cross throughout their lives. They, like Julian, read it as an expression of God's love and solidarity. Julian shows that all people stand equal at the cross. This love of God is expressed through Jesus' expressing nourishment, embrace, and respect for all on the cross. This brings me to look at the meaning of Christ's invitation to the Table and how it intersects with the cross.

Eucharist: To Flourish and To Bear Life

Jesus as the bearer of life clearly points to him as the one who nourishes, embraces, and respects all life, especially mindful of lives that are not wanted and are most threatened. How would these life empowering aspects – nourishment, embrace, and respect—be expressed in the practice of the Eucharist? The Eucharist is a particularly important practice of the church to communicate the nature of Jesus as Nourisher, Embracer, and Respector, and Eucharistic practice calls for these same qualities from the Christian community. I will, therefore, develop a theology of Eucharist in relation to a Christology of Natality.

I will look particularly at the Eucharist as it is observed in Naga churches and the Baptist Tradition, seeking to re-envision Eucharistic theology for Naga women. This re-envisioning of the Eucharist will not only aim to transform the message of child-birthing for Naga women, but it also allow Naga Christians to understand the meaning of life that comes from birthing, so that they can imagine and reconstruct alternative theologies and life practices to bear life.

As I revisit my childhood memories of the celebration of the Lord's Supper,⁶⁶ I think about the questions I asked then: What is the meaning of the Lord's Supper? Is it in remembrance of Christ's sacrifice for the salvation of sinful humanity?⁶⁷ Why does the pastor say that some are unworthy to receive the supper? If this meal is for sinners, then why would some be unworthy to receive the broken body and blood of Christ?⁶⁸ Today, I

⁶⁶ The practice of the Lord's Supper in the Naga churches has its roots in the Baptist tradition. In this work, the Lord's Supper, Eucharist and Communion will be used interchangeably. The celebration of the Lord's Supper has always contained a sense of awe and mystery for me since childhood. I used to wonder what went on behind those closed doors in the church at a certain time during a Sunday worship service, once a year, when the children were asked to go out of the church for a brief moment. It was obscure to me. I was told that they were having *Kibuba Benjong* (The Lord's Celebration referring to the Lord's Supper in my local Ao dialect) and there our parents were going to share in the body and blood of Jesus. What was communicated to us was, *parnok Yisu zu ajemer* (they are drinking the blood of Jesus). So every time I hear "The Lord's Supper" my mind goes back to my early days and picture a large group of parents and adults gathered behind closed doors and drinking the blood of Jesus in a solemn manner. I also remember being taught that those who were unworthy would get sick if they drank it. So, even when I came of age to drink the cup, initially, I feared getting sick. But I knew that the celebration of this ordinance was to remember what Jesus Christ has done for human beings.

⁶⁷ René Girard has said of sacrifice, which is deeply ingrained in Christian thought, that it pollutes the innermost recesses of our brains. See René Girard, *Das Ende der Gewalt* (Freiberg, 1983), 212.

⁶⁸ The confessions of faith of the early Baptist Christians are reflected in the practice of Eucharist in the Naga churches as majority of the Naga Christians are of Baptist tradition. The practice of the Lord's Supper among the Baptists throughout their long and important history is varied, but they all have the one basis of their practice and belief – Jesus Christ. The Schleithem Confession, 1527 appears to emphasize the oneness of the believing community. The Waterland Confession, 1580 also confessed that the bread is eaten and the wine is drunk in order to proclaim the bitter suffering and death of Christ, and these things are done in commemoration of him. In the similar vein, the Second London Confession of Faith and the Orthodox Creed speak about remembrance and adds the spiritual nourishment and growth of the believers in Christ and to be in communion with him and with one another. In the Orthodox Creed, as much as the worthy are fully accepted into the Supper, the shunning of the unworthy to participate in the Supper is

reflect on the Lord's Supper through the questions by attending to the value of Naga women and girls. I am mindful of the power of necrophilia and natality. As the Lord's Supper is celebrated in the churches, do we linger too long on the death of Christ? Is the broken body of Christ on the cross the basis for the Holy Communion? Is it a memorial for his death? What happens to a person each time she/he participates in the communion? What can we draw for our healing from the communion? A practice of communion justly interpreted and compassionately intentioned from the heart should be life-giving and healing for Naga women and should provide a life-changing space for the Naga patriarchy. I will look at what happens when Naga Christians remember the cross, while participating in the Lord's Supper.

Remembering the Cross

The life and work of Jesus, including his death and the effect of his death, can be understood in diverse ways given the critiques and reinterpretations of the atonement theories through the years. According to Susan L. Nelson, "the cross can serve multiple interpretive purposes, that context matters in interpreting its meaning and function, and that we cannot speak universally about the appropriation of the cross as a symbol in the

strongly communicated. There is judgment for those who participate in an unworthy manner as is apparent in the creed that "this holy ordinance ought to be often celebrated among the faithful, with examination of themselves, viz. of their faith, and love, and knowledge of these holy and divine mysteries, lest they eat and drink their own damnation, . . ." The New Hampshire Confession agrees with this by confessing that the commemoration of the dying love of Christ is to be "preceded always by solemn self-examination." In a more positive tone, the commemoration of Christ's death, according to the Free will Baptists, is a privilege and duty of all who have spiritual union with Christ, and no person "has a right to forbid these tokens to the least of His disciples." See William L. Lumpkin. *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1959), 26, 61, 291, 321.

lives of all people.”⁶⁹ Nelson supports her argument for the multiplicity of the interpretation of the cross by looking at the visual testimony of Marian Kolodziej, a Polish, Catholic survivor of Auschwitz.⁷⁰ Also, Mary Streufert’s proposal of a hermeneutic of maternal sacrifice shows the possibility of multiple interpretations of the cross according to one’s own cultural and religious context, specifically in the context of suffering women, women who find themselves imitating the suffering of Jesus on the cross.⁷¹ My suggestion for thinking and practicing the cross in the context of the Naga Christians comes from similar arguments of Nelson’s and Streufert’s. The Naga Christians can interpret the cross in their own context of Naga women’s suffering. I am visualizing the background and meaning of the cross and its remembrance, particularly with the mascu-surrogates’ relationship to the Eucharist, in mind.

The Naga Christians need to ponder what exactly happens when they remember the cross, in their participation in the Lord’s Supper. The cross is scandalous and mysterious. There are no adequate words to articulate what is transpiring on the cross.⁷² All sorts of things happen when the cross is remembered. In remembering the cross, some people experience the power of the cross, some the powerlessness of the cross, and still others experience both the power and powerlessness of the cross. The cross, therefore, could possibly be experienced in new and different ways.

⁶⁹ Susan L. Nelson, “Imagining the Cross: Through the Eyes of Marian Kolodziej,” in Marit Trelstad, ed. *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, 167.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Mary J. Streufert, “Maternal Sacrifice as a Hermeneutics of the Cross,” 71.

⁷² In Mary M. Solberg’s characterization of the Luther’s theology of the cross, she expresses the seeming experiences of a theologian of the cross, according to Luther: he or she is struck, “as if by lightning, by what God reveals on the cross: namely, God’s own self.” Mary M. Solberg, “All That Matters: What an Epistemology of the Cross Is Good For,” in Marit Trelstad, ed. *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, 140.

It is important to explore what Naga women think is taking place when they remember the cross in and with their community. In their suffering, they examine what of the cross truly makes sense to them. They also see suffering inflicted upon them by the community, as well as a misapplication of the suffering on the cross upon themselves. They see the story of their lives displayed on the imaginative screen of the cross that involves both sacrifice and the desire for liberation.⁷³ Their lives must be restored. The interpretation of restored life may find its base in the resurrection of Jesus Christ because both death and life is seen on the cross for Naga women. The resurrection narrative portrays a life that is to flourish among the people within their community even without the presence of Jesus' material body. This project makes the case that Naga women need to remember the cross within a life affirming community. They need to see each other as witnesses of the life portrayed by Jesus and be transformed by being present to one another in this life affirming community. Sandra M. Schneiders shares the same sentiment when she says that "no longer should followers look to the physical Jesus, they must rather look to each other – *touch* each other, to find the glorified Jesus Christ."⁷⁴

⁷³ Streufert also talks about a soteriology of restoration in her "Maternal Sacrifice" that would make much sense to those women suffering due to the misapplication of the suffering on the cross upon themselves. Streufert presents Rebecca Ann Parker's "experiences of being saved from the devastation of childhood sexual abuse not by further sacrifice or violence, but by restoration." See Streufert, "Maternal Sacrifice as a Hermeneutics of the Cross," 73. See also Rebecca Ann Parker, *Albertson Lecture*, Wenatchee, Washington, 8-10 Feb. 2002. Parker finds this restoration salvific. The New Testament scholar Sandra M. Schneiders' understanding of restoration denotes transformation and nonviolent atonement. See Streufert, "Maternal Sacrifice as a Hermeneutics of the Cross," 74.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 74; Sandra M. Schneiders, "John 20:11-18: The Encounter of the Easter Jesus with Mary Magdalene – A Transformative Feminist Reading," in *"What is John?" Readers and Readings of the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia, Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series 3 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1996), 164-165.

Transformation for Schneider is the restoration that occurs through each other because of the conversion of the followers toward each other through God.⁷⁵

This research has shown that the cross is vital to Naga women and the practice of the Eucharist makes it possible for them to see life in the midst of death. They fiercely believe that life comes from Jesus' death on the cross as reflected in their poetry, as well as Christian tradition. They begin to examine the suffering cross that they hold as central to their Christian living that might lead them to a new Christological paradigm. In the life-affirming Christological paradigm, we will find Jesus who was crucified on the cross, who, in his resurrection, more fully revealed life. If the Naga Christians are to live *imitatio Christi*, a rereading of the cross of suffering is necessary. Life that is birthed as females and males will learn to find new ways to understand the cross, which brings together the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. In the remembering and actuality of Naga women's experience of birth emerges an image of maternal life giver.⁷⁶ The embrace and celebration of life and the anticipation of life becomes the central focus and experience of the remembering community.

My concern, as expressed here, is that the Naga women's theology of the cross still exists in the Anselmian understanding of the cross, which I think does not work for them, and is rather oppressive but they strongly believe in it, which is damaging to their lives. The misuse of authority in their patriarchal understanding of the cross and the

⁷⁵ Streufert, "Maternal Sacrifice as a Hermeneutics of the Cross," 74.

⁷⁶ Ibid. In a similar vein, Streufert's interpretation of the mother giving life and caring for her child shifts the soteriological focus from death to life. The life-for-life model of the mother-child relationship that she advocates diminishes the death-for-life interpretation of the cross. Feminist and womanist theologians such as Delores Williams, Rita Nakashima Brock, and Rebecca Ann Parker, to name a few, have strongly argued the primacy of Jesus' life as a potential locus of redemption rather than his death, as Streufert, herself believes. To have knowledge of God is through Jesus' life, and this knowledge of God is life.

misinterpretation of obedience of Jesus on the cross is embedded in their theology.

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has warned very early on that obedience has opened the way to suffering in the present society. In her own words,

If one extols the silent and freely chosen suffering of Christ, who was “obedient to death,” (Phil. 2:8), as an example to be imitated by all those victimized by patriarchal oppression...one not only legitimizes but also enables acts of violence against women and children.⁷⁷

Recognizing the importance of Jesus in the faith of Naga women, as well as the importance of a theology of the cross, is only right and just to help them see their own oppression through the cross in order to experience a new life. Ivone Gebara the Brazilian liberation theologian, while pointing out the inadequacy of the symbol of the cross for some women, argues,

the symbol of the life of Jesus is the most telling for women. His cross does not stand alone; Women stand around his cross as his friends, caring for his lifeless body, so that life will not be further violated. This gesture is rich because it leads to life.⁷⁸

The message of the cross has to be one that promotes life for women and men. In the midst of death, Naga women find life. They have never left the cross alone because they have experienced the depth of the cross that speaks about Jesus, their friend, who cares for them. What I am proposing is that it is important to see the cross and the birthing experience of women together; it provides a witness to their experience but also speaks to life that is liberating and open to new births and new realities.

⁷⁷ Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet*, 106.

⁷⁸ Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 115.

Towards a Life-giving Communion

In the Baptist tradition, the ordinance of the Lord's Supper is the proclamation of the life-sustaining power of Jesus' life and death; it is important to the Christian community as a remembering community. The ordinance carries on the directions of Jesus to his disciples to "do this in remembrance of me."⁷⁹ In this dissertation, I emphasize a theology of Eucharist, as a complement to the understanding of ordinance, because the meal is a thanksgiving moment to God. Ordinance and Eucharist together beautifully portray the reenactment of the Gospel message of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ; the shared meal conveys grace and helps us to recognize what Jesus accomplished for us in his redemptive work. The ordinance of the Lord's Supper in the Baptist tradition is an expression of faith and obedience to the command that Christ gave us. Jesus himself commanded the disciples to do this in remembrance of him.⁸⁰ It is a highly symbolic and significant part of Baptist practice and worship. Eucharist as thanksgiving adds an important dimension of meaning to the shared meal; it brings all believers together for a thanksgiving celebration in which they remember in gratitude the gifts of God. Together, they partake of the bread and wine as the grateful body of Christ.

This theology of Eucharist holds the experiences of all people, regardless of their conditions and status. This theology of Eucharist takes women's voice seriously by valuing the entire community and each member of it. By valuing the equality and dignity of each person, it lifts up women, as well as men, to forge theology and transform society. It also involves practical implications, seeking to promote the full human flourishing of women and the oppressed in the church and in society. When women face

⁷⁹ Luke 22:19.

⁸⁰ Luke 22:19; I Corinthians 11:24-25.

the hard consequences of birthing, death, shame, disgrace, confusion, and rejection, there is a place they can go to – Christ’s table. Christ’s table is the place of hope, which opens new possibilities for their lives. The image of Christ’s table manifested in the sacrament of the Eucharist recreates and restructures the context, thus heralding the possibility that the deprived can be subjects and flourish.

I look for images of both women and men receiving the bread and the wine and offering the words of institution which promote human flourishing. What is birthed in this image? All people whether male/female, rich/poor, young/old, educated/illiterate, clean/dirty, barren/fertile, mothers of sons/masculin-surrogates are served the communion. This is the sign of birthing. Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker alluded to early Christianity’s understandings of life saying that “Christians drank the elixir at the Eucharist, where they communed daily with the risen Christ in paradise.”⁸¹ In rethinking this important aspect of Christian community, I want to envision how it might speak to the life-bearing Jesus *and* to the experience of Naga women. If the Eucharist is a communal practice, then the realities of masculin-surrogacy are named, held, and potentially transformed by the Naga community at the Table. My central point is this: In the Eucharist, the Naga community becomes a community of life-bearers. The promise of ending masculin-surrogacy emerges from a communal understanding of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I will reimagine three aspects of the Eucharist that move the community in this direction.

⁸¹ “Saving Paradise with Rita Nakashima Brock,” presented at *The Madawaska Institute of Culture and Religion* 17-19 April, 2008, 1-9: 3. See Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise*.

Eucharistic Community Grieving

The community upholds the importance of all of life in this ritual of remembrance. They gather to remember the death of Jesus Christ who came into the world to live with us and to reveal to us the love of God. Jesus' ministry was directed toward abundant life for all.⁸² This abundant life is given impartially to all. During the celebration of the Lord's Supper, the community comes together in grief for the suffering and death Jesus endured for our sake. This is a significant part of the Lord's Supper, which Jesus asked his disciples to remember. The words spoken by Jesus to his disciples are repeated, and each time, their meaning is communicated to the community of believers. This ordinance is a primary way by which Christians remember the life Jesus lived, a life that was courageously present and wholly relational, a life that was broken in order to bear life for all.

Christ's life-bearing in the midst of suffering treasured every life. He affirmed life, engaged the world, connected with all sorts of people, and was redemptively present to all. He envisioned a life that embraced, respected and nourished all life to its fullest. In all our brokenness and weakness, the God of love and life calls us to remember the brokenness, and to experience and envision God's promise of love, hope and freedom. Naga Christians are called to embrace this kind of radical living. This kind of living is the life affirming Christology that I am proposing for Naga Christians.

William Cavanaugh's development of Eucharist as theology and practice resonates with my proposal for a life affirming Christology for the Naga Christians. Cavanaugh has found out that the symbolic connections between the Eucharist and what

⁸² John 10:10.

is happening in the real world needs rethinking. He envisions the Eucharist as actually nurturing and transforming lives. He goes beyond the symbol attempting to see “the actual and potential impact of the Eucharist” on people.⁸³ It is critical to know what exactly is happening when we remember the cross in the practice of Eucharist for those who need refuge, freedom, and comfort, and who need to live without fearing for their lives. Remembering the cross does not bring any good if these people who are members of the body of Christ are denied. The remembering has to be brought into the daily ordinary lives of the people, to their doorstep.

The understanding of the cross in Christianity has been gravely misinterpreted; therefore, what it means to be a Christian is misunderstood. Although, Naga women are insiders along with the rest of the people by virtue of being born, they are actually outsiders, forced out of the center because they do not fit the conventional hierarchical mold; they are different, weak, and poor. Thinking and interpreting the cross is incomplete without embracing this group of people, and Eucharist is inadequate without them. Hence, the cross and Eucharist cannot be understood as just without embracing the mascu-surrogates in the Naga Christian community.

In the Eucharist lies death and life. As they receive communion, Naga women have the opportunity to see both death and life, both grief and celebration. They remember and grieve the death of their innocent daughters and the devaluing of girls. In that moment, they also remember their labor pain and birthing of new life. Communion portrays brokenness, pain and struggle, and yet, it is a place where love and life that

⁸³ William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc. 1998), 205.

brings renewal and healing is seen.⁸⁴ Naga women see Jesus present with them and compassionately looking at them with his hands stretching out to them. Naga women, with their fierce love for Jesus, embrace him and anticipate his message for them. Along the same lines, Craig G. Bartholomew imagines the Christ we encounter is standing with his face turned toward his world, sending us from his table to work alongside the Spirit to bring hope and healing to his world, the habitation of all his creation.⁸⁵ Bartholomew emphasizes Christ as Life-Bearer. Through Jesus' life and work, humanity is renewed and healed. Seeing both death and life in the communion, and themselves laden with death and life, Naga women remember Jesus, their loss of death, and injustice, and the gift of life and healing. In their remembering and grieving, the whole community begins to remember and grieve differently.

Eucharistic Community Celebrating

Eucharist is the life-sustaining sacrament, the bread of life that feeds and fills all.⁸⁶ The community gathers to celebrate the gift of life in Jesus Christ. They come together to celebrate because this ordinance cannot be performed in secret or within a selected group of people. It is open to all. The participatory celebration of the Eucharist

⁸⁴ Rita Nakashima Brock resonates with what Naga women see and experience in the communion. Brock's interpretation of Christ's words as he broke the bread and poured the wine demonstrates love and life, justice, and healing, stemming from her theology of life and her Christa community. In her interpretation she expresses Christ's work: "This is my body broken for justice, a sign of our work together to make whole a broken world, our body of struggle," and as Jesus shared the cup of wine: "This is my life with you and our hope for a renewed creation of healing and love." Brock, "The Greening of the Soul: A Feminist Theological Paradigm of the Web of Life," 145.

⁸⁵ Craig G. Bartholomew, *Where Mortals Dwell: A Christian View of Place for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 320.

⁸⁶ For Mary Elizabeth Moore, Eucharist is a source of human liberation and a gift of bread for the hunger of the world. Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, *Teaching as a Sacramental Act* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2004), 197f.

in the breaking of the bread and sharing of the wine symbolizes the believers' participation in Christ, their confession of faith, and their commitment to Jesus as the Christ, the giver of life. The act of eating and drinking at the table is a celebration that signifies the importance of spiritual nourishment through Christ.

The symbol of sharing from one bread and one cup by the whole community is a sign of one fellowship and one people of God represented by diverse individuals, whether women or men. It also signifies the hope of the eschatological feast in the realm of God where all people will be together. The walls of everything that degrade a human life within the community, which has prevented people from meeting, knowing and loving each other, are exposed, while the bridges, which make connections possible, are affirmed. Here, we imagine a celebratory table of oneness where all kinds of people gather, where we lack the ability to comprehend the diversity, and yet, we are able to identify with each other and even willing to go beyond identification by accepting and embracing one another as we are.

The Table is a place of celebration for Naga women because they see life amidst death. Their celebration principally involves the remembering of the cross, which is also a thanksgiving moment. They see the concept of life deeply embedded in the communion. They look for signs of life and imagine the forms of life, and the manner in which it is given to them. The frequently asked question remains, "What is the reason for our living and is it worth living?" Their Christological dimension of life is remarkable, especially as I have argued for a life-giving Christology in which Jesus is the life-bearer who nourishes, embraces, and respects all life.

The nourishment of the whole of life includes life in all circumstances. Mary Elizabeth Moore believes that “nourishing life involves searching for life in the most difficult situations and encouraging even the tiniest seeds of life to grow.”⁸⁷ It is important for Christians to discern God’s life in every circumstance and to try to find the best possible way to nourish that life. God’s table is the table of life. At this table, blessings are given, and people receive them, feed on them and renew their lives. People find nourishment at the table for their daily sustenance and are also blessed enough to see God’s faithful nurture of all creation. The communal presence of the church celebrating the one who nurtured, embraced, and respected all is nourishing in the deepest sense.

This celebratory practice of communion also builds respect within a community. Jesus’ respect for every individual person he met on the road leads the way for the believers to celebrate life. This respect witnesses a special relationship between God and the world, which expands into compassion for all those who are absent, an invitation to all who are outcast, and a radical hospitality to those who are unworthy.⁸⁸ And all of these people gather at the table without any worry about their station in life and share together in the celebration of life of all. The Naga women’s celebratory communion moves us to engage in the community with the purpose to embrace, respect, and nourish all of life.

As Naga women see both death and life in the Eucharist, they also see the past, present, and future of life. At Christ’s table, they see their long dead daughters

⁸⁷ Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore. *Teaching as a Sacramental Act* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2004), 154.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 167.

celebrating and dining with Christ along with those girls who are devalued, and the community. There is a resonance between Naga women's imagination of the Eucharist and Susan L. Bond's argument for an inclusive Eucharist, when she says that the celebration of the Eucharist "gathers into the communal consciousness all those who are not present: past believers, present believers, future believers, and all those whom God so loves ..., we imagine the table crowded with all the people we favor and those we don't favor."⁸⁹ All life, especially the life of girls that are unwanted, are included and celebrated at Christ's table that Naga women imagine.

Eucharistic Community Transforming

Eucharist becomes a place of performance for the community. The symbolic performance of the breaking of bread and pouring of wine is also a feast with real bread and wine or juice – a feast that nourishes the body while nourishing the whole being. It affects each individual believer's faith and response to the work of Christ in one's life. This symbolic performative act of the community provides for the believers who come to the table space to reimagine Christian responsibility towards living their life for Jesus and for others. Christ's table is a clear depiction of the passion Jesus had for the life of others. Living this life involves risks and responsibility that is built on courage and love.

The community's act in communion with one another leads them to live a nourished life. "At the table, the creative love of God joins the elements of nourishment and joy, produced by the earth, with our human lives."⁹⁰ This nurturance at Christ's table

⁸⁹ Bond. *Trouble with Jesus*, 166.

⁹⁰ Brock, "The Greening of the Soul: A Feminist Theological Paradigm of the Web of Life," 144.

includes feeding a desire for responsibility and relationships based on acceptance and a genuine sense of interconnectedness, which has the power to transform the present situation and gives courage to face the world. As they are invited to the table, they are reminded of Christ calling them into his arms and his invitation to trust him. Knowing they are in Christ's embrace, Christians can risk their lives to prevent violence in all its forms.

William Cavanaugh's and Mark Lewis Taylor's work of performing a counter-politics resonates with Naga women's imagination of the Eucharist.⁹¹ Alluding to Cavanaugh, Miroslav Volf also believes, that "a proper celebration of the Eucharist is a liturgically enacted counter-politics to the politics of this world. By drawing the church back to the cross of Christ, the Eucharist furnishes the church with resources to resist the injustice, deceitfulness, and violence that mark the world for which Christ died."⁹²

Though Brock and Parker do not want to see and accept the dead Christ, they also assert the affirmation of life countering the politics of death in this world:

to affirm this life and to have confidence in the love of Christ, we must be wise about the world around us, to resist violence, to do all we can to save life, and to stand against the principalities and powers of this world. We must honor the fullness of life and seek to affirm the whole world as blessed. We must constantly renew each others' spirits, enliven each others' passions, and empower each other to work together for the common good that sustains us all.⁹³

⁹¹ Mark Lewis Taylor talks about the body of Christ as Eucharistic action arguing for the Eucharist as a social space of performance. He maintains that "the words of institution are not intoned solely as a remembering back, but as that kind of re-membering that is heavily laden with expectation, expectation of deliverance of a groaning people..." Mark Lewis Taylor. "American Torture and the Body of Christ: Making and Remaking Worlds," in Marit Trelstad ed. *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, 275.

⁹² Miroslav Volf, "Proclaiming the Lord's Death," *The Christian Century* (March 3, 1999), 253.

⁹³ "Saving Paradise with Rita Nakashima Brock," 8. See Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise*.

This is a crucial affirmation that Naga women need to understand and assert their place in the body of Christ where each person plays a part that strengthens one another to enjoy equally and pleasantly the fullness of life.

Naga women participate in the Eucharist by watching the bread being broken and wine being poured, and they themselves act in the receiving of the elements as it is being served to them by menfolk.⁹⁴ This is the one place where they are being served rather than them serving others. Their grief and brokenness are touched. Their performative act affects the faith community in profound ways. Naga women might see the Eucharist as a remembrance of the nourishing mother in labor, as a way of both naming the pain of Naga women and of calling the Christian community to this work of nourishing and laboring with Naga women. In this laboring with Naga women, the men become the midwives as they serve the communion to the women. It is the affirmation of life given and they become the midwives to do service to other lives as Jesus demonstrated.

The counter-politics of the Eucharistic table is a critical platform to compare and contrast the Naga traditional customary laws and the Christian tradition. It is pertinent to find possibilities to bring them together because those who hold the traditional customary laws are the same people who hold the teachings of Christianity. Their present style of living two opposite lives, an oppressive traditional cultural life and a religious tradition, must be challenged and transformed to give birth to new life.

The World Council of Churches' affirmation of the Eucharist is relevant:

It brings into the present age a new reality which transforms Christians into the image of Christ and therefore makes them his effective witnesses...As it becomes one people, sharing the meal of the one Lord, the eucharistic assembly must be

⁹⁴ In the Naga Christian churches, women are not allowed to serve communion.

concerned for gathering also those who are at present beyond its visible limits, because Christ invited to his feast all...⁹⁵

The transformation of Christians into the image of Christ in the practice of the Eucharist, perhaps opens our imagination to envision women being transformed into the nourishing Christ. The nourishing Christ inspires us to do the work of nourishment for all life.

It is time for the Naga churches to reexamine their purpose and vision. The Naga churches need to respond to their primary calling to be churches that affirm Jesus' way of life. Eucharist is a necessary resource for the restoration of the holistic life that includes justice and peace, and an opportunity for churches to relearn the way of Jesus.⁹⁶ What actually happens at the communion table and surrounding it is in the continuous present tense of restoring.

We are called to envision a healthier world within the world we know, a world that meets us with disappointments, pain, sorrow and hopelessness. Life in this world is defined too often by the one who is stronger and more powerful. The incarnation of Jesus makes it clear that the incarnation of divine love is for all, giving us a hope that our existence has meaning and possibility beyond the social and cultural constructs of our lives. This hope is seen among the suffering and confused Naga women. They see their God embodied, enfleshed and incarnated in a new born baby, the very sign of newness, potential and possibility. The significance of natality becomes more powerful at Christ's table where we all share in the invitation to abundant life. The Table is where we see and

⁹⁵ *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), 15.

⁹⁶ Rowan Williams also claims that the church "should be a place of challenge as well as a place where voices are heard." Julie Gittoes, *Anamnesis and the Eucharist: Contemporary Anglican Approaches*, *New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology and Biblical Studies* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate), 2008, 101

imagine this God who dies and who births. This is the place for Naga women as Changkija's poem once again calls:

“Come, climb up the stairs
the world looks so much
better from here.
Hurry, hold my hand
there is so much to see
and take of the land.
And I would rather
we soar and sing together.”⁹⁷

On the cross, Jesus as the Life-Bearer gives us the ministry of life-bearing. He will not do it alone but calls everyone to do this work of life-bearing.

Constructive Work for the Future of Naga Christians

The Naga Christians need to reconstruct a more life giving theology that can transform the social practices that impede the flourishing of life for all, but especially for women and girl children. Reconstruction, for the Naga Christians can happen only in their experience of daily living. I will underline five elements pertinent for a Naga Christology of Natality.

First, I urge Naga Christians to remember their conversion to Christ by converting to the valuing of one another. This conversion beckons them to look at one another with an intense look to see the life of Jesus embedded in them. Converting to and seeing Jesus in the other invites them to touch one another with deep love, feeling Jesus' life in them. This conversion is made possible through an imaginative envisioning of the Eucharist. As they are drawn to the communion table with this conversion experience, they might begin to see the power of life in their midst that compels them to stand face to face with the

⁹⁷ Changkija, *Weapons of Words on Pages of Pain*, 29.

reality of the ongoing oppressive birthing practices that Naga women experience. This conversion experience is the performative act of counter-politics leading them to participate in the birthing and restoration of life.

Second, Naga Christians need to rethink their soteriological formulations by examining the concept of death-to-life and the practice of life-to-life. This rethinking will reinterpret the cross steeped in death from where life emerges. This cross interpreted in the cultural language of the Naga Christians might produce a divergent cross – a cross of child-birthing. A reinterpretation of the birthing practices in the Naga context will help develop a theology of life through which a Christology based on the actual experience of birthing will be established. It is a call to return to each other not with the death-for-life attitude but with the life-for-life attitude which embodies the life that Jesus showed through the love of God.

Third, Naga Christology needs to be reshaped with a recognition of the motherly qualities of Jesus. This will be a significant starting point to take the experience of women seriously and would even develop a hermeneutics of a life-giving mother. It is not necrophilia, but natality that they will seek to embrace and nourish. They will see women's life in Jesus and Jesus' life in women. The death-to-life approach is seen in a new light, where flourishing of life becomes the norm. The cross becomes a place of nurturing and education, more so a refiner's fire that births precious life out of the ordinary.

Fourth, Naga Christians need a life-affirming Christology that gives birth to a remembering community. In their practice of the cross, they need particularly to remember the life of Jesus that nourished, embraced, and respected all persons.

Fifth, Naga women need to appropriate the cross as a symbol of Jesus' radical living and the price he paid for serving the values of life. Because Jesus cannot be remembered without the cross, Naga women can appropriate their understanding of the cross in light of the life that Jesus brings as the life-bearer. Instead of seeing and experiencing submissive suffering on the cross, they must find a way to experience a sense of solidarity in the cross and a willingness to see beyond the cross – listening to voices that share a commonality of vision of the cross that seeks always to further life, not death, and calls forth life. For these voices of the cross, life has no gender. It is God's life. To be able to celebrate in joy every female natal in the Naga society would be a witness to the life giving power of a transformed understanding of the cross.

I have attempted to pave a way to help others move toward a more life giving theology of the cross. This is a work in progress that will bear more life and flourish in the life of the Naga community as more Naga women give birth to their own truth and vision. Since this dissertation is a pioneering work in the context of the Naga Christians in North East India, I relied on the available western and other resources relevant to this project. I hope that future work will be in deeper conversation with other Naga sources as it becomes available.

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