The book “Confessing Christ in the Naga Context: Toward a Liberating Ecclesiology” by Bendangjungshi is a search for a new meaning in the Christian faith, especially of its relationship with the socio-political and cultural identity of the Naga community, which lives in the northeastern region of India. First of all, the author narrates the historical experience of the Naga people, and then how the Gospel was brought to them together with the colonial British power. As a consequence, the Christian message has created cultural ambiguities and even has caused the loss of socio-political identity to the people. This has made the author search for a new significance in the Christian creed for his people through this research in Ecclesiology.

The first two chapters narrate how for centuries the Naga people had enjoyed the self-rule and a communitarian culture particular to their way of life. But their life style changed when the British colonized India and made them subservient to their rule. Thus the egalitarian community with its own education system, Morung, found the western culture not at all compatible. In response to this, the Naga people always vehemently opposed British rule, defending their own identity as “a group of homogenous Pan-Mongoloid indigenous people” … “sharing a common belief and ethos of the same ancestral origin, language, culture, blood relationships, taboos and tattoos, with a close feeling of kinship” (p. 22). The author considers the ancestral domain, the homeland of the Nagas, as “the source of their origin, nourishment, support and identity”, besides the cultural heritage of “an egalitarian way of life” and “self-sufficient” economy as important values. He stresses again, “Everyone was respected equally and treated with dignity and freedom in Naga community life” (p. 25). According to the author Bendangjungshi, the colonial spirit of the British has passed on to the Indian government, which has occupied the Naga Land and has sent many non-Nagas as government officers to it. Consequently, the Naga community has felt humiliated, beginning with their nickname and other pejorative attributes given to them. Thus the main question is addressed now to the Church, whether she would respect the values of the Naga community, while it would like to confesses the Christian faith with its cultural context.

The third chapter explains how the Christian faith was preached to the Nagas. According to the author, it took the form of oppressor alienating the people from their own culture and socio-political identity as well. “The Christian missionaries destroyed the Naga identity” … “the concept of individualism (personal salvation) marred the Naga communitarian corporate living” (p. 125). “The missionaries’ role during the colonial era nonetheless encompassed the control of a people, their souls, their psyche, their minds. Such colonization of the natives’ minds weakened the natives’ ability to resist the unjust pre-emptive colonial political suppression” (p. 126). Besides these internal attitudes, the political structure was substituted by village churches, and even the Naga celebrations and practices were abolished (p. 128). In short, the Christian message arrived in a form which the Naga community has not been able to accept to this day. Thus the search for a new Christian way of life by the community continues.

In search of an answer for his people, the author has turned to western philosophy and theology. First of all, he finds out that though the Christian Creed professes the Church to be One, Holy and Catholic, there are many confessions (communities) in the same Church. Thus the Christian faith has been contextualized through the centuries and has created different Churches and communities having one creed. This calls for a new challenge that the Naga community will have to look for its own faith response with its cultural values, just as other communities have done in their faith
response according to their cultural context. Secondly, in the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the author finds a partial answer to his search for meaning that the Church should be for others. Yet his thought does not support sufficiently what the Naga community is looking for: the socio-political and cultural identity of the community within the same Christian faith. In this search the author finds that even the other Indian theologians are limited to their contextual response.

In the fourth chapter, Bendangjungshi appreciates the emerging theologians of his own community: Renthy Keitzar, K. Thanzanva, and A. Wati Longchar. These authors articulate better the common concern and aspirations of the Naga community. Thus he affirms there should be a legitimate right of the community to have its own response to Christian faith with its own language, celebrations, community socio-political structure. He writes “I agree with Keitzar, Thanzauva and Longchar in asserting the importance of tribal communitarian culture as an important element in nourishing the present tribal Christian community to give focus and direction to the present amid the experiences of social change and cultural instability” (p. 196). He laments, though, that these authors “fail to provide concrete suggestions for crossing tribal cultural borders” (p. 197). Thus the author is of the opinion that the processes of social change of a particular culture should not be closed to other cultures.

Unfortunately to my mind, the author does not come from the Church which has a strong hierarchy, nor does it support the concept of the Church with a legitimate right to be a society. Thus the relationship between the Church and State is too weak to support each other even in the theological concept, unlike the Latin Church. The socio-political and cultural identity is better expressed in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. The author should have read Lumen Gentium: “Christ, the one Mediator, established and continually sustains here on earth His holy Church, the community of faith, hope and charity, as an entity with visible delineation through which He communicated truth and grace to all. But, the society structured with hierarchical organs and the Mystical Body of Christ, are not to be considered as two realities, nor are the visible assembly and the spiritual community, nor the earthly Church and the Church enriched with heavenly things; rather they form one complex reality which coalesces from a divine and a human element” (LG 8). The Latin Church does accept today that the Church is a human society and that her supra-natural character helps her transcend particular cultural and national boundaries. The Local Church under a Bishop is a full-fledged Church with all powers due to him. Thus there are many ritual churches with their total way of life without being contradictory to the universal church.

It is true that the integration of particular culture with the universal Christian culture has never been easy, yet there remains a possibility of having the confession of a particular community in harmony with the Christian Faith. Bendangjungshi’s concern is valid as well, for the western churches have by now separated themselves from the States, due to which the relationship between them has taken different shades. Henceforth, it often depends on the political ideology to have a healthy relationship between them. According to ‘Absolute liberalism’, the Church loses all its right to act in the State; according to ‘Regalism’, the Church becomes subordinate to the State; and ‘Qualified Liberalism’ allows the Church to exist within the State as a liberal organization. (cf. Catholic Encyclopedia, s. v. ‘State and Church’). Thus a balanced relationship based on proper agreements often remains wanting. It may be said that the State is responsible for the body and the Church for the spirit of a person; thus by so doing the Church has excluded herself from the total responsibility of the whole person.

The Naga community naturally has found no support in western philosophy and theology either for the western Churches do not guarantee the unity and sanctity of the Catholic Church and the
faithful are free to choose the religion they want to. Thus the role of the Church as being only the spiritual head of persons is equal to not being present to the persons living in civil society. If man is social by nature, the divided society makes no sense in the long run. There is no sense of belonging to the institution which has no full responsibility for the persons. Thus unless the State and the Church together share the common responsibility for the society, the individuals’ commitment to the society would remain divided. If the Churches are empty, it is perhaps because the Church has dissociated herself from taking care of the whole man.

We wish Bendangjungshi follow the Latin tradition of the Church but distribute the responsibilities to both societies: the State and the Church, allowing the Church to be supra-natural in character and keeping her specific confessions in harmony with the common Christian faith. The Church can legitimately have particular ritual churches with cultural identity under their Local Ordinaries within the same One, Holy, Catholic Church. - Linus Kujur, S.I.