

## **Christianity and the Traditional youth organisation of the Kukis**

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### **Abstract:**

Most of the tribes of North-East India were independent of outside influence until the arrival of the British in their land. The major break-through of outside influence started with the arrival of Christian missionaries and the introduction of western education that follows. The impact was so great that the Kuki society started experiencing tremendous change in their social, cultural and political life. Along with it, the very institution of the youths which serve as a great centre for education and training and transmission of age old customs and practice went out of practice. The paper is an attempt to put into picture, the importance of the traditional youth organisation in the simple village life of the kukis. The paper shall also highlight in the brief, the coming of Christianity and its effect on the traditional youth organisation.

**Keywords:** youth, organisation, traditional, institution, Christianity, change

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The Lexico-Oxford dictionary defines youth as the period between childhood and adult stage. The qualities of vigour, freshness, or immaturity are associated with being young. It further explained youth as an early stage in the development of something.

According to Friedman (1972: 9), 'youth traditionally has been defined as the group of human beings who have reached the end of puberty but have not yet acquired the full rights and duties of adult'. Hollingshead (1949: 6) who said, 'Sociologically, youth is the life of a person when the society in which he functions, cease to regard him (male/female) as a child and does not accord to him full adult status, role and function.'

Likewise, the term organisation has no single accepted definition. According to Weber (1947, cited in Khongsai, 2013: 116) 'an organization is a system of continuously purposive activity of a specific kind such as corporate organization which is based on associative social relationship characterized by an administrative staff devoted to such continuous purposive activity. In Weber's articulation, organisation involves social relationships among individuals who cooperate with each other for the pursuit of specific goals and have features such as continuous efforts, boundary, hierarchy of authority, division of labour etc. (ibid)

Youth organisation therefore, is simple the association or coming together of youth with common aims and objectives. The studies of youth in their own traditional setting later widely came to be known as 'dormitory system'. Varrier Elwin (1947) described in length the existence of dormitory institution known as *Gothul*. Here, the children are taught lessons of cleanliness, discipline and hard work that remained with them throughout their lives. They are taught to take a pride in their appearance, to respect their elders and above all they are taught the spirit of service. Several studies had reported the occurrence of youth dormitories in North-East India. Haimendorf (1938), Mills (1926), Hutton (1969), Bareh (1970) etc. have written extensively about the dormitory system known as *Morung* among the different Naga communities of Nagaland. Anand (1967) observes, the morung plays vital role in preparing younger generation for the posts in the village council. The morung is the club, the public school, the military training centre, the hostel for boys and meeting place for the elders. It is as well the centre for the social, religious and political activities. In short, it is the fulcrum for the village democracies.

The Kukis of North-East India had their own traditional system of youth organisations. Like the Morung of the Naga, the dormitory of the Kukis is known as (*Sawm*). Another important youth organisation of the youth which serve the purpose of the ago-based economy of the Kukis is the institution of *Lawm*. The two institutions played a very significant role in the social, economic and political life of the Kukis. The two serves as means to secure economic prosperity, political security and a centre for the young members into responsible adult members. It also serves as an institution of learning (Gangte, 2013).

## II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study is an outcome of various interview carried out among different groups of people during my fieldwork between 2015 and 2016. The present study was conducted in Churachandpur district of Manipur. It is to known that Churachandpur district is divided in five sub-divisions and ten TD Block. Eleven villages from two blocks, of which seven villages were from Tuila area, Henglep block, Churachandpur North sub-division, and the rest from lamka block, Churachandpur sub-division. Tuila area comprises a number of villages clubbed together. It is about 26 km from the district head-quarter. The other areas are located in and around the district head quarter itself. On the other, secondary data related to this article were collected from various sources like published and un-published books etc.

## III. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE KUKIS

The Kukis are a group of tribes belonging to the Kuki-chin linguistic sub family of the Tibeto-Burman group (Grierson, 1940). They are found in the north eastern states of India, Chittagong hills tracts of Bangladesh and also the Northern provinces in the Chin Hills of Burma. In Manipur, they are predominantly settled in district such as churachandpur, Kangpokpi, Tengnoupal, Tamenglong and Ukhrlul. The society comprises of many clans and sub clans, and each clan has *Phung-upa* (Clan elder). The village is a political unit and the political administration of the village is based on *Haosa* (Chief-ship). Another feature of the Kuki society is the separation of the population into groups such as *chapang* (children), *Khangdong* (youth), *Pilhing* (elders) and *Tehse* (aged generation) and each generation having different roles.

The Kukis maintain a distinctive culture and social life of their own. The richness of the culture is to be found more in poetry and says that they have been transmitted down through the ages than things of conspicuous nature. The village itself is the source of all social cultural life. The family structure of the Thadou Kukis is patriarchal, tracing descent through male line. Being patriarchal the managerial and custodial authority of the family has been vested with the head, i.e. the father. The children, both male and female take the clan name of their father and eldest son becomes the head of the family at his father's death. Every decision making in the family is the sole responsibility of the Eldest son.

## IV. THE TRADITIONAL YOUTH ORGANISATION

Among the Kukis, the two important traditional organizations of the youths are the institutions of *Lawm* and *Sawm*. The concept of *Lawm* and *Sawm* are the key facets of traditional social engineering among the Thadou-Kukis. Primordially institutionalized, both these practices constitute a social synergy-co-efficient resulting in economic and social dividends for the traditional Thadou-Kuki village communities till about the early twentieth century (Hangsing).

*Lawm* literally mean 'corporate labour' or 'Labour in rotation'. It was an informal labour organisation in the simple and corporate life of the Kukis, where in all the able-bodied young boys and girls are members (Gangte 1993:132). Here, young people are engaged in social activities which benefit the individual and the community as a whole. The comparison with the modern day youth club by most of the respondent during fieldwork suggest the fact that there is much similarity between *Lawm* and youth clubs today. Therefore, the word *Lawm* also means traditional form of youth club.

Under the system of *Lawm* every adult boys and girls from each household comes together and form a group. All the members of the group work collectively as a team, helping one another on a rotational basis in each other field irrespective of one's strength and weakness. This was done in order to minimise differences among the families of the village, the rich and the poor, and to keep the village economically self-sufficient. Here, members are repaid the amount of work he/she attended other than his own, by other members of the group. The institution of *Lawm* however, was not only limited to agriculture. The *Lawm* also offers help to the sick, the poor and the needy. They also provide help to such people who are unable to carry out their work, like the sick, widows and whosoever in need of their help.

It had been said that the institution of *Lawm* came into being as a means to tackle food insecurity and social and political well-being of the village. Gangte (1993) calls it a reciprocal labour institution, mainly concerned with the economic activities of the village. Besides, he regarded it as the basic life-giving system and a revelation of the basic concept of the community-based economic system of the Kukis. Hence, it was believed that the Kukis, in order to achieve economic prosperity and welfare of the greatest number might have organized the energetic young boys and girls into a group. Thus, *Lawm* consisted generally of representatives, both male and female, one each from every household. The members used to work by turn on a rotational basis in each other fields regardless of the capacity of each individual.

There may be several types of *Lawm* depending on the size and population of the village. Gangte (1993: 132-133) classified *Lawm* into four types on the basis of age, namely *Lawmpi*, the largest group meant for adult, *Lom-lai* middle-level group meant for adolescents, *Lom-neo*, a group where the third brothers and sisters of a family and other teenagers are the members and *Lom-changpah*, a group whose service at home are

not very much required. Every *Lawm* has a *Lawm-Upa* (senior member), *Tuollai-pao* (overseer or superintendent), and *Lawm-Tangvo* (assistant superintendent) (Haokip 2016). These people are entrusted to oversee and maintaining discipline among the member. There is no-room for misbehaviour and any member found guilty of misbehaviour is punished.

*Lawm* was also an institution of traditional learning. As an institution of learning, it was useful for imparting technical and practical knowledge to its members, with regard to farming methods, hunting, fishing and sporting activities. It was also a centre where young people learn discipline and social etiquettes (Haokip 1998: 7). Thus, it is through it, they acquire the habits of charity to extend help to the needy, the destitute and widows in the village. Gangte (1993) calls it an organisation devoted for imparting leadership training, a sense of duty and dignity of labour. Working together all day long, throughout the year a sense of unity develops among the members. Thus, Lom as a part of the life of the young people served as one of the most important factors of unity in the village. It also keeps the village economic growth in good condition (Kipgen, 1992: 17). Lom also serves as the training center for the youth, as young members are taught the art of cultivation and other handicrafts.

After the harvest season, the *Lawm* member celebrates the *LawmpiGolnop* or *LawmSiel-neh* festival. During the occasion this celebration a *Siel* (mithun) is slaughtered. The celebration continues for days and night from 8 to 10 days. The event is accompanied by sports such as *Kungkal* (high jump, over a mithun), *suhtumkhaw* (javelin throw), *kangkak* (top), *songse* (shot put), followed by dance and drinking rice beer. Therefore, it also acts as a place of recreation for the young members in their free times.

On the other hand, internecine warfare and consequent destabilising effect on the security and safety of the inhabitants of villages were common occurrence during those times. In the context of such inherent fragility of social economic and security ecology, the Kuki evolved a unique system, *Sawm* or Bachelors dormitory (Hangsing). Gangte (1993:133) puts, 'the nature of hostility and practice of tribal raids necessitate the existence of this organisation; so that in times of emergency, the service of all the abled-bodied men might be available in short notice'. This is an organisation responsible for mobilisation of the service of the young men to meet the exigencies of the society.

*Sawm* as an institution among the Kukis was very unique. All the boys of the village form into several groups. A village may have four to five groups, depending on the size of the village. Each group finds a suitable place, having unmarried girls to stay at night as tradition does not allow the boys to sleep in their parents' house. This system of sleeping together of the boys is known as *Sawmgie* and the inmate girl *Sawmnu*. The *Sawmnu* take care of the chores such as combing their hair, washing their clothes, stitching their torn clothes, making their beds and fetching water for their cleaning. She prepares tea and wine and rolls local tobacco known as *Zou Dum* for smoking and *Som* members in turn consider her as their own sister and help her and her family in all possible ways. They help them in all possible household work like erecting or constructing house and jhum work like construction of their house. *Som* members conventionally become part of the family (Chongloi 2012: 16). Despite their intimate relations and close association, sexual relation as well as cases of unmarried pregnancy was unheard of between *Som* members and *Somnu* (Haokip 1991).

The activities of *Som* is in full enthusiasm when all the members assembled in their respective *Som* after completion of their daily *Jouleikon* (jhum work) and *Nilhah An* (evening meal) thereby exchanging ideas and thoughts along with merry making, creating jokes, composing of a song about the achievement of their ancestor for the society, their bravery which they sang whole heartedly. Thus, all the fundamental practices of healthy social living were inculcated among the boys in the *Som* (Chongloi 2012). The older men also assembled in the evening and narrate stories concerning great events and deeds of bravery, chivalry, heroic efforts in the past as well as customary rules which were important for the young men. From these accounts, younger generations learn old traditions, customs, and social codes, and young boys learned discipline and respect for elders (Nunthara 1996).

According to Haokip (1998: 7), *Sawm* was a community center/house for boys, a center of traditional learning where in an elder (*SomUpa*) teach the young boys. In this connection, Kumar and Touthang (2003:166) wrote, *Sawm* was an institution of traditional learning where the boys learn techniques of war, fighting, games, sports, handicrafts, martial art, and method of labour. The younger boys also learn social customs and manners. It served as an institution of learning discipline, obedience to elders and other essential characters necessary for a person in future life (Gangte, 1993: 133-134). It was a center wherein young people were shaped into a responsible adult member of society (Varghese and Thanzauva, 1997: 18). In fact, the main objective of the Kuki dormitory was to channelize the young mind into desirable habits, to mould their charity (Haokip, 1991: 124).

In the by-gone days, an incendiary war among the tribal's was frequent and usual, thus it was necessary to teach every able bodied man to fight their enemies for the safety of the people and village. The young boys kept their war weapons, such as daos, spears, swords, arrows and shields in their own respective *Som* house, so

that they could readily use them without any delay in times of emergency. When the chief waged war against the neighboring village or tribe, the *Som* members came in the front line, led by their *Som Upa* (Chongloi 2012).

## V. CHRISTIANITY AND THE KUKIS

### **Brief history of Christianity**

The capture of political power in Manipur by the British in 1891 paved the way for Christian missionaries in Manipur (Tiba 1993: 26). Christianity came to the hill people of Manipur during the British rule. Christianity was brought to the Kuki people by two separate missions, the Arthington Aborigenes Mission later succeeded by the American Baptist Mission through William Pettigrew in 1896 (Downs, 1971). And later, the independent Welsh Mission called the Indo-Burma Pioneer Mission through Watkins R. Roberts in the southern part of Manipur in 1910 (Dena, 1991), which was later changed to North-East India General Mission and recently to Evangelical Congregation Church of India.

The Arthington Mission transferred the Manipur field to the American Baptist in February 1896, and Pettigrew took up work at Ukhrul under the auspices of the American Baptist Missionary Union (ibid). Once at Ukhrul, he established the mission headquarter and set about learning and reducing to writing the dialects used at Ukhrul by opening schools for boys, which became the seat of learning as well as the centre for good news to the people. The school was attended by 30 boys, which included eight (8) Kukis- Tiba Kilong, Longkhobel Kilong, Suhlut Singson, Jamkithang Sithhou and Hkunga Hmar. These mentions were responsible for education and converting their fellow people (Haokip, 2016: 67).

The second major group in Manipur to embrace Christianity were the Kukis. The first converts among the Kuki Baptists was Nehseh Chongloi, a Thadou from Makui who had accepted Christ in the hand of Angami Christian while in Nagaland followed by Ngulhao Thomsong who was also from Nagaland. Both came to Manipur in 1910 to assist mission work at Ukhrul centre. The mission began to expand to the Kuki areas and Tujangwaichong became the first Christian village among the Kuki Baptist in 1914 largely through the work of Ngulhao Thomsong (Haokip 2008).

The whole of Manipur was claimed to be the exclusive mission field of the American Baptist mission. Although, technically belongs to the American Baptist mission, yet it could not cover the south districts practically. The vacuum so created was filled in by another mission called the Indo-Burma Thadou-Kuki Pioneer mission, an independent non-denominational mission started by Watkin R. Roberts (ibid). Roberts apparently came to Mizoram at Frazer's expense and with the intension of helping him in his work. In the south while assisting Dr. Frazer in this way and engaging in evangelistic works, some young men having slightly different outlook came to the clinic. They were Hmars from Senvon village of Manipur. Roberts heart was greatly touched and wanted to give them something so that they could learn about the gospel. He gave them a copy of St. John's gospel, which has been translated by Rev. Savidge and J.H Lorrain, the Arthington missionaries in Mizoram. One copy was sent through some students to the chief of Senvon, Mr Kamkholun (Khaizalian, 1986: 70-71).

Mr Kamkholun was believed to be the same chief who had earlier refused entry to the Baptist missionary Rev. William Pettigrew (Downs, 1971: 166). It was on Saturday, 5<sup>th</sup> February, 1910 Watkins R. Roberts who had his base at Aizawl, Mizo hills, came to Senvawn, the biggest Hmar village in Tipaimukh, in response to the invitation by the village chief, Kamkholun saying "Sir, come yourself and tell us about this book and your God" (Dena 1991: 109). The same year a church was established at Senvawn, which was the first Kuki Christian church in Manipur.

### **Impact of Christianity**

The coming of Christian missionaries into the land of the Kuki marked a turning point in the socio-cultural, political and religious life of the Kukis. It touched every aspect of their lives. Christianity made a departure of the Kukis from their traditional religion. Their belief and practices were abandoned as they were considered pagan and evil in the light of Christian principles and practices (Chongloi 2013). The sacrifices and offerings made by the Kukis were thought of to be strictly against the Christianity. Singh (1989) wrote, the Thadou (a clan of Kuki tribe) regard Christianity as their own religion and turn aside from anything that is connected with their religion (ibid). Consumption of *Ju* (rice beer) which were very much part and parcel of *Lawm* and *Sawm* was also strongly opposed by the Christian missionaries. As such these two institutions were seen as being unethical and the Christian youth were discouraged from attending such institutions. Slowly and steadily, with the growth of Christianity, the traditional youth organisations began to lose its significance.

Christian mission took the initiative of setting up schools and dispensaries. With the introduction of the western education, the number of students enrolled in the mission schools began to increase. As the education is now being provided by schools, the children do not go to the dormitory to receive education anymore. The spread of Christianity among the tribal and the presence of missionaries among them have adversely affected their youth cultural set up. It had been said that, the practice of *Sawm* was totally discontinued as it was seen as

a 'heathen institution'. But *Lawm* was carried on for quite some by the Christians youth endeavours and *Ju* was replaced by tea. However, this too could not be continued for long owing to impact of modern education.

Thus, with the dawn of British imperialism in India, the entire body of traditions; social, economic, religious, aesthetic and linguistic heritage either got dismantled or underwent changes. Christianity, followed by western culture and lifestyle led to the disintegration of traditional ways of life. Inevitably, this external acculturation led the tribal into thinking, rationalizing and reacting in typical western notion.

## VI. DISCUSSION

The traditional youth organisation of the Kukis namely *Lawm* and *Sawm* disappear from the society and there is no such report in the present times regarding their existence in its most traditional form. However, it is found that *Lawm* exist, but in different other forms among small group, families and friends. Today, if one walks across any Kuki village, one may come across mention of youth clubs at the village level and Christian youth fellowship at the church level. They performed all the activities related to youths in particular and the village in general. But the question remains, do they still act as the reservoir of culture and tradition? Are they able to mould and shaped the lives of the youth?

In the olden days, the traditional youth organisation was not meant only for achieving economic prosperity (*Lawm*) or protection of the village from external and internal dangers (*Sawm*). Both were also an important institution of learning various forms of arts, folklores, folktales, custom and moral lessons. They act as a channel through which knowledge of the past are handed down orally from generation to generation. However, when Christian missionaries came into contact with the people, they fail to see the deep meaning and role played by these institutions. Rather, they too quick in judging them and simply terming them as unethical or heathen institutions. The transformation of these institutions from its pristine form to a modernised structure with definite system and process has affected the social matrix of the village life. The void so created could not be adequately addressed by a highly formalised structure of modern youth clubs; the recruitment and training of the youths away from their families to enable them to take up responsible adult role later in life (Hangsing).

However, it might also be wrong to conclude that, Christianity had only negative impact. As a result of modern education introduced by Christian missionaries, the youths have now become part of the larger global world. And, with the introduction modern means of transport and communication, mass media, etc. the youths are exposed to the global arena more than ever. With this the core traditional values and customs are losing importance, and the youths are losing the bond with their roots. Many of the school going students are not even familiar with their own culture and tradition. In the present society, many young people want to live a comfortable life but do not want to work which resulted in theft, burglary and so on. The disappearance of dormitory brings lost the dignity of labor, and so all sorts of social evils have arisen in the society (Daimai and Ranjan, 2015: 90).

## VII. CONCLUSION

The study indicates that, since time immemorial, the Kukis have a well-organized youth organization. However, the coming of British colonial rule accompanied by Christianity and western education had a transforming impact on the traditional youth organizational set up leading to its decay. Despite, it's educative values; it is seen today, as an event of the past. Along, with it, many of the tradition, customs, core values etc. related with it, are losing its importance. However, it may be wrong to conclude that they have totally died out. Today, the Christian church and youth clubs still imbibes facets of the traditional organization. According to Haokip (2013: 191), Though the primal institutions of *Lawm* and *Sawm* are now said to have been incorporated in the Kuki Christian church today, the degree of contribution they rendered in past for the primal Kuki society was far more greater than the Christian church today. The Christian church and youth organization like youth clubs and student organizations can still address these short-comings by maintaining the core values of the traditional youth organization. Besides, they can organize seminars and work-shops at their respective ends. In this way, many of the tradition and customary practices of the past can be incorporated in their lifestyle and thereby minimizing the gap between then and now.

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