

TRIBAL LIFE WORLD

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The tribal life-world can broadly be described as having “extraordinary values of solidarity with nature, egalitarianism, a non-competitive collaboration with one another, and a filial (not mercantile) relationship with the land, which offers a valuable alternative to the rampant individualism, unchecked greed, aggressive competitiveness, and a growing alienation from nature which is leading the post-modern world to nuclear and ecological disaster” (Soares-Prabhu 84). The paper will consist of three main parts. The first part will be a brief elaboration the features tribal life-world. The second part will deal with the tribal life-world seen through the socio-religious rituals, and the third part will deal with the myths of the tribal life-world which could be considered as the foundation for understanding and appreciating the tribal life-world. The tribal life-world presented in this paper mainly refers to those of my own tribe Kuki, which is one of the tribes of a larger family of tribes usually referred to as Kuki-Chin-Mizo group of tribes but I am sure there are many similarities with those of other tribes, other than the Kuki-Chin-Mizo group.

Extraordinary Values of Solidarity with Nature

The first characteristic feature of tribal-life world is the close solidarity with nature. This is evident from the fact that they live in villages and hamlets surrounded by forests, mountains, valleys, rivers and streams which are also the habitats of all kinds of animals, birds of the air or of the ground, and other creatures like reptiles, fish and insects of every kind. A well-balanced relationship was maintained which did not threaten the existence and the well-being of the humans as well as those of the natural world. Traditional ways of living enabled human beings to make use of the products and creatures of nature for their food, nourishment and livelihoods but never seriously endangered the

existence of the products of nature and its creatures. Today, with the increase of human population and the adoption of ways of living more hostile to the environment, an increasing imbalance is taking place in which human beings are dominating to the detriment of other creatures of nature. Elsewhere I have tried to argue that it is possible to promote and maintain a more Sustainable Development and Green Economy (Haokip 2014: 94-109, 2016: 276-290) as proposed by the Rio Earth Summit (2012) for the survival of both human beings and the ecology. The mutual dependence is clearly seen in their practice of what is called 'jhum cultivation' or 'shifting-cultivation' or 'slash and burn' method of cultivation. I have also tried to show that this method of cultivation is one which shows the solidarity of the Kuki tribe with nature.

Perhaps the Kuki tribe's life-world's closest solidarity with nature may be *Indoi* (house-god) (Chongloi 2008) which Chongloi calls the primal Kuki religious symbolism in which the best things of Kuki life-world which come from nature are offered to God and his blessings are invoked saying: Bless me as you have blessed these items of nature. Here the tribe becomes identified with the natural objects from the world of the tribe. I will elaborate a little more on it when I deal with rituals.

Egalitarianism

The French word *égalité* basically means equality. In the tribal world, there is neither caste system nor class system. Nobody is superior or inferior by birth. People are honoured or respected by virtue of what they have become because of their gifts and talents and for what they have achieved by their hard work and perseverance. This is one of the core values of tribal ethos which is very much in tune with the value of Jesus and his Gospels. This was shown to the tribals both by their British officers as well as the missionaries. The British officers might employ them as porters or cooks, etc., but they treated the tribals as equal human beings. Similarly, the missionaries embraced the tribals as

brothers and sisters. That is one of the important reasons why tribals in Northeast India readily embraced Christianity.

On the other hand, the Hindu people in the neighbouring plains had always looked down on the hillsmen as barbarians and given the nature of Hindu society, they would have been assimilated at the very lowest social levels. This was too obvious to the tribals from the way in which they were treated when they visited the plains markets (Downs 179). In Manipur, the hills tribals were called by a derogatory name “*hao*” (unclean, uncivilized) and would not be allowed to even enter the compound of the Hindus lest they cause defilement. Hill tribesmen of the time might have been illiterate and backward in many ways but they were not backward in their self pride and sense of dignity as human beings. They treat each other as equals and expect all others to treat them as equals as well.

The tribals also had a mechanism to “promote and perpetuate the value of egalitarianism. The celebrations festivals like the Feast of Merit (Lotsüro 16-17) among the Nagas Tribes and *Chon* (highest form of feast of merit) (Haokip 1979: 37-40) among the Kuki-Chin-Mizo tribes were inbuilt mechanisms in their cultures to preserve and practise egalitarianism. A conversation between an uncle, Omed and his nephew, Ramke, the first Garos to embrace Christianity among the Garos shows that tribals will not compromise with one of their core values, namely egalitarianism.

Ramke asked his uncle:

“We Garos have no religion, but it is certainly necessary for us to seek some way of obtaining good after death. Which of the three religions - that of the Hindus, Mohammedans, or *sahibs*, is it best for us to receive?” (Downs 158)

To this Omed, the uncle replied:

“We do not know the Mohammedan religion; the Hindus observe caste, and if we take their religion we must forsake our people; the *sahibs* do not observe caste, therefore to receive their religion is good in every respect (Downs 158).

Non-Competitive Collaboration

Non-competitive collaboration could be called a healthy competition whereby people vie with one another to do well, not to destroy each other. It is a competition to make one another better. Collaboration and sharing are the predominant hallmarks of tribal ways of life. Traditional tribal life-world is dominated by work in their *jhum* paddy fields. It is here that we see real cooperation and collaboration in what is called *lomkai*ⁱ in Kuki tradition. Some families or youngster of certain families form a grouping that is called *lomkai*. They work in the fields of the members of the group in turn. The process is repeated until the working season is complete. The work becomes not only more effective but also joyous because of the company of friends and peers. This grouping or *lomkai* could also be enlarged to include all the youth of the village. It is then called *lompi* (literally mother gathering as opposed to *lomcha* (baby grouping, grouping of a few members of the youth). The *lompi* will be carried out till the end of the working season which will climax in a big celebration called *lomsel neh* (literally eating of the *mithun*ⁱⁱ (gaur) of the grouping. These groupings of collaboration and cooperation also show that traditional tribal communities are by culture community oriented and communitarian in spirit and practice. Tribal communities hardly do things in isolation but always in groups together.

A Filial (not mercantile Relationship with the Land

“A filial relationship with the land guarantees that land is not considered as a mere commodity, but more as a mother which

nourishes and feeds the community” (Haokip 2016: 278). A frequent Kuki expression is human beings are called “*leiset chate* or *leiset mihemte* (children of the earth or beings of the soil). To look upon the land more as a mother or father figure that nourishes and feeds the community is to look at it as having a life of its own; it may not an animate being, but it is a being with its own life. If it is deprived of its life by emptying it of its trees, plants, countless creatures that nourish and make it produce living things by poisoning it with toxic chemicals. It will become barren deserts with no living beings in it. In the Hebrew Bible itself God tells the Israelites: “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants” (Lev 25: 23). The tribal attitude to their lands is something in tune with that of the Bible. As tenants or stewards, they should care for the land. Solidarity and respect for the land and nature as whole has also been due the misinterpretation of Gen 1: 28 to “subdue” and have “dominion over land or nature. The human beings’ likeness to the Creator is associated with their dominion over the lower creatures (Gen 1: 28-30). If human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, their dominion over nature also should be like of God’s own in which case “dominion over the earth would be that of a steward or caretaker, not a reckless exploiter” (Zoramthangi 24). Thus Tribal Life-World can indeed offer a redeeming alternative to the “rampant individualism, unchecked greed, aggressive competitiveness, and a growing alienation from nature which is leading the post modern world to nuclear and ecological disaster” as quoted above.

Tribal Life-World: A World of Socio-Religious Rituals

Tribal life-world is full of rituals of various kinds. It may be often difficult to distinguish purely religious rituals from those merely social. They all intermingle and mix. The idea of ritual that would be in tune with tribal experience is what Rudolph Otto and Mircea Eliade, along with most scholars in the history and phenomenology of religions, say about ritual, namely: “Ritual arises from and celebrates the encounter

with the “numinous,” or “sacred,” the mysterious reality that is always manifested as a wholly different order from ordinary or “natural realities” (Zuesse 405).

Tribal ritual is thus a celebration or actualization in signs and symbols, the values, the realities and aspirations contained in their culture. Tribal rituals can broadly be divided into: home rituals, village, and field rituals. I shall mainly discuss the rituals of my tribe, Kuki, as they are what I am most familiar with. I am not making a distinction between religious ritual and mere social rituals. I do not think traditional tribal societies made such clear cut distinctions. Rituals and celebrations always had religious and social dimensions.

Home Rituals

1. Ritual of *Indoi*

Indoi is at the heart of Kuki traditional religion (Chongloi 183-192). It is translated as “house-god,” (Shaw 73) or “house-magic”, “a bundle of charms” (Shaw 153). In *Indoi*, *in* means house and *doi* could be translated as deity. So “house-god” is an exact literal translation. The symbol of this ritual is called *Doibom* (basket of the deity). *Doibom* embodies the cluster of the components of this religious ritual. The Kukis are not in any way worshipping the various items of the *Indoi*. This is only a symbol of their worship of *Pathen*, the Supreme Being. The exact origin of *Indoi* is uncertain. Hemkhochon Chongloi lists four versions of its origin (Chongloi 185-190). The ritual of *Indoi* is the most religious in Kuki tradition. However it takes place in the context of a kind of spring festival called *Hun* which has many social aspects. The *Indoi* ritual is the most important one in this festival.

The components of *Indoi* are taken from the flora and fauna of the Kuki world. They are the following: (1) the curved skull of a female pig, (2), the twisted horn of a he-goat, (3) a miniature gourd ladle, (4), a miniature gourd, (5) *belval* (a circular stand for a jar), (6) a miniature

bamboo *dao* (representing a *dao* of *kol thih* (iron from Burma, iron of high quality), (7) a miniature bamboo spear head (representing iron: *tengcha* (spear), (8) fibre from the plant called *khaopi*, (9) the bamboo spike, and (10), the white cock's feathers, (11), a post from a young *se* tree with its branch facing the east, (12) a few branches of a tree called *thinghe* (an evergreen tree), (13) *vomgui* (a wild creeper of the grape family, and (14) a bangle or wristlet (*chao*) (Haokip 1979: 44).

The items also represent household animals or other household things. Each of them also has great significance (Chongloi 192-203; Shaw 153). The curved skull of the female pig represents longevity and fertility. The twisted horn of a he-goat too represents “beauty and vigour, longevity” (Shaw 153 App G). The miniature gourd ladle represents “plenty in all that can be lifted in a ladle – water, wine (i.e. rice-wine), grain, etc. The *belval* (circular stand for a jar is to symbolize that all wealth acquired is encircled and bound in as with a *belval*, and cannot escape or be lost. A miniature bamboo *dao* symbolizes that even as a *dao* cuts through everything so all evil spirits that bring disease shall be cut and driven away from the body of the owner of the house and those who dwell there. Similarly, the spear-head of bamboo, symbolizes the piercing and driving away of all misfortune and diseases.ⁱⁱⁱ

Some of these items are decorated with the feathers of a spotlessly white cock and each item is bound together with a cord of the *khaopi* (the best rope tree) on a bamboo spike.^{iv} Then a post from *se thing* (very strong tree used for the pillars of the house) with a branch is erected on the outer courtyard of the house. At the joint of the branch and the *se* tree, a few branches of another tree called *thinghe* (ever green tree) are tied together with a creeper called *vomgui*. Before the ceremony, the *Indoi* is placed or hung on the post at the joint point of the branch and tree where branches of *thinghe* have been tied. The father of the family stands under the *Indoi* and performs the ceremony with incantations. He is assisted by the village priest (*thempu*) if he is

doing it for the first time. The ritual consists in the father of the family invoking Pathen for blessing on him and his family. In this he makes use of the items of the *Indoi* and prays to Pathen to bless him and his family as He has blessed these items which represent of the best of their kind: “Bless me as you bless this...” (Haokip 2012: 83-86).

2. Rituals of Birth and Childhood

Besides this ritual of *Indoi*, Kuki tribes have other rituals in relation to the various stages of life. When a child is born, a name is given as soon as the child’s gender is ascertained. This is to lay claim to the child. If this is not done, the child would be claimed by the spirits of the wild – animals, trees, waters, etc. In that case, the child will meet with accidental death in the hands of these malevolent spirits. But if the child is claimed by human beings first, the child will live a long life and will have a natural death^v.

Naopui is the next ritual connected with the new born child. It literally it means leading the child. The child is taken to the family of its mother, to its grandfather (mother’s father or to the mother’s brother, if the mother’s father has already expired). Usually it is done when the child is young, but it is able to grasp the meaning of the ritual. The main purpose of this ritual is for the grandfather or uncle to bless the child and pray for his/her well-being.^{vi}

3. Marriage Ritual

The Kuki marriage is carried out in a three stage ritual called *ju um tun* (literally it means placing bottle of rice-beer). It means the parents of the boy to be married initiate the process of marriage in three stages. First, they take a pot of rice-beer to the parents of the bride-to-be declaring their desire for the girl to be their future daughter in-law. No further discussion is made. If the mood is found to be favourable, the second *ju um tun* is done. Here serious discussion takes place; the consent of the parents as well as of the girl is sought. The third *ju um*

tun marks the final agreement between the parties. The time and date for the marriage are fixed. There is no fixed time gap required between the different stages. It is usually done within months.

The actual ritual of marriage is simple yet meaningful. It is performed by the traditional village priest. A red cock is sacrificed and strings of thread with the feathers of the cock tied to them are put around the necks of the bride and groom. As the priest ties the strings around the necks, he says: *Alung athin kagopna* (With this I join their hearts and minds). Then they are given a cup of rice-beer which they drink in turn. Then the priest prays for their well-being and the gift of many children. If the marriage is the first for both, children are allowed to take part, so that they too may share the same fortune. But if the marriage is between a widower and a widow (or even if it is the second marriage for a partner), children will not be allowed to take part in it. Children should not have such misfortunes (Haokip 1979: 33-34; 2015: 127-131).

4. Death Rituals (Gangte 107-122)

If a Kuki dies of an accident or of a deadly disease, he or she is buried in a hurry with hardly any ceremony or ritual. However, death ritual for someone who dies a natural death at a ripe old age is accompanied by a detailed ritual. The person is washed and dressed up in his/her best dress and made to sit up leaning on the main pillar of the house in the centre of the house. People sit around the person as if conversing with the deceased. If the weather is warm, some will fan the dead person with hand fans. The person is kept this way for a day or two or even more so that friends and relatives from far away villages can come and pay their respects and mourn for the person.

When men and women of fame dies, the burial is preceded by a special ritual called *langa lap* (a kind of palanquin is made and the body of person placed on it, and carried back and forth in the court yard of the house nine times). In the olden days persons were buried in the

courtyard of the house. Wooden posts are erected on the tomb and heads of animals the man had hunted and killed are hung on the branches of the posts. If the dead person is a woman, her favourite items, and some of her belongings are hung on the posts. Besides these, unleavened bread (*changlhah*) made of rice and bottles or bamboo pipes of rice-beer are hung on posts. These are the food and drink of the dead on their journey to the village of the dead (*Mithi kho, Kuki heaven*). Thus the life of a Kuki is accompanied by various rituals from birth to death.

The life cycle rituals of the Naga tribes, like the rituals of birth, naming, marriage and death have many common elements with those the Kuki tribe (Lutsüro 23-26). There may be differences in details of the rituals, but what is significant is the importance given to these moments of life in all tribal communities. Rituals and ceremonies of life and death are ways of connecting with the Benevolent God they believe in and want Him to guide and bless them in these important cycles of life.

Rituals of Feasts of Merit

There are mainly two rituals of merit among the Kukis: *Sa-ai*, and *Chang-ai*. The first is the ritual of the feast of merit of a good hunter. *Sa* means animal; *ai* is translated as “subjugation” by Tarun Goswami (Goswami 115-172). It is a kind of declaration of ownership of the animals killed by the hunter. It may be best translated as celebration. The second *Chang-Ai* is a festival of merit of the person who has abundant harvest of paddy. In Kuki tradition, the cultivation of paddy field is attributed to the woman of the family. Hence it is a feast of merit of women. William Shaw mentions a third festival ritual called *Chon* which is “the mostly highly prized feast of the lot and can only be performed by those who have done the *Sa-Ai* three times. In this everything has to be done seven times (Shaw 76). Shaw adds that it has not been done for a long time and therefore the exact details of the ritual are not known. It was done originally by the Thadou himself

(ancestor of the Thadou clan) and only three or four persons are supposed to have done it since (Shaw 76)). I have personally witnessed rituals of *Sa-ai* and *Chang-ai* but not *Chon*. Perhaps, it is an ideal ritual of merit which has not been reached by most men.

1. **Sa-Ai (Ritual of the Feast of Merit of a Hunter)**

The ritual of *Sa-Ai* (Goswami 115-156) is performed by a great hunter. If the spirits of the animals killed are left without this ritual, they might be alive again. In fact, it is believed that during Thimzin (a total darkness which engulfed the earth, everything became alive again except the skulls of animals of over which *Sa-Ai* was celebrated. In this sense Goswami may be right when he says that the ritual of *Sa-Ai* makes the hunter gain complete control over the spirits of the dead animals (Goswami 115). According to William Shaw, “in hunting the Thadou (Kuki) is particularly expert. Nothing pleases him so much as to be out after game with his muzzle-loading gun or arranging and setting up traps to snare wild animals. He is a good tracker and has an uncanny knack of knowing where the game is likely to be” (Shaw 88). However, the Kukis believe that to be a good hunter is a gift from God, the owner of the animals. Hence, to perform *Sa-Ai* ritual is basically a thanksgiving ritual to God.

The skulls of animals killed are carefully kept for this ritual. The animals eligible for this ritual are the wild animals, especially the dangerous ones like tigers, bears, wild boars, etc. Especially valued is a wild animal called *jangsel* (wild *mithun* (*bos gaurus*) (Shaw 135). Its swiftness is compared to lightning by the Kukis. Among the birds those eligible for *Sa-ai* ritual are the eagle and the hornbill, and among the reptiles, python and a poisonous snake called *gulse* are eligible.

The ritual of *Sa-ai* is also performed in stages. The man must performed *solkho* ritual thrice and the climax is *Sa-ai* ritual. *Solkho* ritual consists in this: One Y shape post from *se thing* (a very tardy tree is used for pillars) is erected at the end of the courtyard (*leitol*). A

bundle of bamboos, big and small, as many as skulls of animals killed by the man, will be tied together to this Y shape post. The small bamboos represent the small animals killed by the man celebrating *Sa-ai* and the big bamboos represent the bigger animals. The bamboos will be placed between the branches of the Y shape post. This is preceded by a ceremony in which a bamboo will be given to some men or boys and chanting together of incantations of bravery (*hanla*, songs of bravery). A man who has performed this ritual of *solkho* three times is qualified for the proper *Sa-ai* ritual. The climax of this ritual is *sel ding lhuh* (killing of a mithun). After the main ritual is performed, the rest of the days are spent in merry making, singing, dancing and consumption of abundance of rice-beer. It is also a time when the youngsters of the community learn to sing the cultural songs and dance their cultural dances.

The significance this ritual is honour to the man for his skills in hunting as well as thanksgiving and prayer for his continued success in hunting. Honour in this life also ensures him a better position in the afterlife. For example, it is believed that if a man kills a *jangsel*, a *gulse* and an eagle, after his death, he will be going to the *Mithikho*, the village of the death (Kuki heaven) riding on the *jangsel* with the eagle sitting on one horn and the *gulse* entwined on the other horn of the *jangsel*, and the person will be untroubled at the gate of the *Mithikho*. The man is also given a solemn funeral at his death and is *langa kilam* (his body is placed in a palanquin and carried back and forth nine times in his court yard).

2. Chang-Ai (Feast of Merit of Women)

The ritual *Chang-Ai* (Goswami 157-176) belongs to women. In traditional Kuki society, cultivation of the field was largely left to the responsibility of the women folk.^{vii} William Shaw is right in saying that “this is a feast to the entire village and is the only known ceremony in which a Thadou/Kuki woman plays the leading part” (Shaw 74).

Goswami's assertion "amidst the Kukis the housewife is considered to be the owner of the paddy" (Goswami 157) too is correct.

The ritual is done in three stages: the first stage is called *chang lha kou* (literally it means calling the spirit of paddy). It really means praying for the continued abundance of paddy (food) in the family. A red cock is killed and the priest prays for God's continued gift of abundance of paddy for the family. The second stage is called *changphit* (literally it means sprinkling of paddy or blessing with rice-beer). It has the same significance as the first one, but it is done in a bigger way by sacrificing a pig for the ritual. The climate of the celebration is known as *sel dinglhuh* (means killing of the mithun). There is some gap between these stages. The last one is the real *Chang-ai* ritual and festival. The festival can last two to three days.

On the first day, the youth go the *jhum* field hut where paddy is stored and each of them brings some paddy packed in cloth (*ponvai*)^{viii}. Along the way, some grains of paddy are purposely allowed to fall off from the *ponvai* with the justification saying: *Chang-ai ni leh chang thang deh ta!* (On the day of *Chang-ai* festival, it is understandable that some paddy will be wasted). As they come home with these small bundles of paddy, they blow a kind of bamboo flute. After the main ritual on the first day, the rest of the days are spent on revelry and merry making. For the youth it is an occasion to learn things cultural.

The significance of the ritual is first of all to thank God for the gift of abundance of paddy to the family and to pray for its continued abundance. It is also to honour the mother of the family whose main role it is to cultivate the paddy field and keep the family with sufficient food. This honour of the woman of the family is not only for this life but also in the life after. Such a woman who has celebrated this ritual is not troubled by *Khulsamnu*^{ix} at the gate of the *Mithikho*. When such a woman dies she is also accorded the privilege of *langa kilap* (her body placed on a palanquin is carried back and forth in the court yard of the

house nine times before the burial). I have taken part in this ritual many times including the *Chang-Ai* ritual of my own mother.

These rituals are not mere social celebration but religious rituals too. The role of the priest is essential in these. Life on earth is connected to what will happen in the afterlife. The sacred and the profane are fused together. What happens in this life foreshadows what is going to happen in the next life. The social function of this ritual of merit is the value of sharing. The practice of this ritual is expensive. The family has to feed the whole village for two to three days. The ritual is against hoarding of wealth and fostering egalitarianism in the tribe.

Among the Naga tribes too, the rituals of the feast of merit is widely celebrated. The Mao Nagas, in fact, celebrate several feasts of merit and those who have celebrated these festivals wear special shawls of social distinction (Lutsüro 16-17). The social function of this ritual is the same in all the tribes. After the lavished celebrations, the well-to-do will become like others. The rituals of these festivals inculcate the value of equality imbedded in the cultures of tribals. Its philosophy holds that wealth is not for hoarding but for sharing. Tribal life-world is characterized by the absence of creeds and dogmas as well as greed.

Rituals of Daily Life

We have already discussed the ritual of *Indoi* worship the primary religious ritual of the Kukis which is renewed every year by every family. Besides this, there are other religious rituals performed according the needs of the situation. We shall deal with these briefly.

1. Ritual of Kithoina (Healing Ritual)

The first is *Kithoina or kithoi damna* (healing ritual or sacrifice) (Haokip 1979: 49-51). When a person is sick, the priest, through a process of divination (*phun san*) diagnoses his/her sickness and a ritual of healing is prescribed. Depending on the seriousness of the sickness, the ritual prescribed will entail sacrifice of a small or big animal.

Traditional Kukis believe that sicknesses were caused by malevolent spirits of the forests.

The ritual of *kithoina* is usually performed by the sacrifice of a domestic animal, usually pigs. Depending on the seriousness of the sickness, the animal could be a small pig or a big one. The highest form of *kithoina* is performed by the sacrifice of a *mithun* (the highest valued domestic animal). It is called *sel a kithoi* (healing sought through the sacrifice of a *mithun*). If a person is not cured of his/her sickness by this, people are resigned to their fate and accept it as God's will.

2. Lauthu a Kithoina

Lauthu is another way of praying or chanting incantations for the healing of sick people. It can be done by a single person or groups of men together in unison, in harmony. The second is the usually preferred way. Each one has a bamboo jar holding it as one would hold a microphone. The incantation starts with an invocation of God, Pathen thus: *Phaya*, Pathen Oh! The word *Phaya* is a Burmese word which means God, Pathen. This ritual originated among the Kukis in Burma (now Myanmar), hence they adopted the Myanmar word for God. This ritual was a part of a revival movement in traditional religion initiated by Kukis from Myanmar. Starting with the invocation of God, the Divine called upon with all his attributes. It is as follows:

Phaya, Pathen, Oh!

Nipikot a mang; lhapikot a mang (Lord at the gate of the sun; Lord at the gate of the moon)

Nilhum sahthei; khovah sahthei (One who can make the sun set; one who can make the day dawn)

Pen kitpatna; pohkipatna (Origin of birth, origin of life)

Alhum pen na; ael pen na (Source of all that is sweet, source of all that is tasty)

Nihchen penna; ponsil penna (Source to all clothing, both for personal attire and for warmth)

Sumtin pen na; paitin penna (Source of all money and source all wealth)

Nipi chung a mang; lhapi chung a mang (Lord over the sun; lord over the moon)

Leipi thosom le tholi chung a mang; vanpi thosom le tholi chung a mang (Lord over the fourteen layers of the earth; Lord over the fourteen layers of the heavens) (Haokip 1979: 96).

After invoking God, the Almighty, in this way, intercession for the sick persons is made to God. God is asked to release the sick person from the clutches of the evil spirits dwelling in the rivers and mountains of the area. These spirits are believed to be dwelling in the whirlpools of rivers. The sick person is made to sit in the centre, a group of ten to fifteen, each holding a bamboo jar, chant together the incantation. The sound of voices 5 or 10 men chanting in unison and harmony is both soothing and healing.

3. Ritual of *Sanenghet*

This ritual *Sanenghet* (Haokip 1979: 48-48) is performed for the whole family. The meaning of the ritual literally means to ‘put’ or ‘offer abundance of meat.’” It may signify that the family is generously, for no particular reason, offering a sacrifice of an animal (usually mother pig of the family or even mithun) to their family deity and praying for a generous response from the deity as well. It can be called a ritual for general well-being for the whole family. It is performed when there is a feeling that something is not right in the family. There may be a feeling the spirits of *pusa pasa* (those who have blessed the ancestors) are not happy with the family.^x

The spirit of the ritual is indicated by the prayer (incantation) of the ritual: *Pathennu, Pathenpa, nalunglhai in, lhotinnu, lhotinpa naneng in*

(May Mother-God and Father-God be pleased and may the spirits of the fields bring abundance. The exact ritual details may differ from clan to clan but the purpose and significance of the rite is the same (Haokip 1979: 49).

4. Kilha Lhona

This ritual **Kilha Lhona** (Haokip 1979: 52-53) is similar to the previous one. The word *lha* means soul or spirit. *Lhona* comes from the verb *lho* means to stop or prevent. For example, when a guest comes to your house and he/she wants to go away soon, you persuade the person to stay on. That is the meaning of *lho* or **Lhona**. Kukis believe that when a person is sick the soul/spirit of the person is going away from the body in a temporary manner. If the ritual of *Kilha Lhona* is not performed, the spirit of the person will go away permanently and the person will die.

The ritual is of two kinds: the simple form and the more solemn one. The main element of the ritual is invocation of the spirits of one's ancestors for their blessing and intercession. In the simple form, only the ancestors of one's particular clan are invoked. In the solemn ritual all the ancestors of all clans of the tribe are invoked. This is called **Phungpi sa-o a kilhahona** (*Kilha Lhona* by invocation the ancestors of all related clans). The invocation runs like this: *Haokipte, Kipgente phung in hinlhon* (*Let the ancestors of Haokip clan and Kipgen clan prevent*) (Haokip L. 60-69).

The animals sacrificed for this ritual could range from a domestic fowl to a *mithun*. The distinctive feature of this ritual is **sa-o** (string of thread to which the feathers of the fowl, a few hairs of a pig or a *mithun* is tied at the centre of the string) and put around the neck of the person on whom the ritual is performed.

Village Rituals

1. Ritual of Selecting Site

The Kukis were semi-nomadic in earlier days and change the site of their village often. Before selecting the site for a village, a cock is tied in the proposed site and left alone at night while those who come to select the site camp close by. If the crow the cock is clear and resonant, it is considered to be a good omen and the site is selected. It means there are no evil spirits. But if the cock crows in a muffled way, the site is abandoned. It means the place is infested with evil spirits. An egg may also be boiled on three sticks. If it bursts, it is considered to be a bad omen. This is called *Ahtui san*, divination by an egg (Goswami 75).

2. Rituals of Doino and Aikam

Traditional Kukis believed that diseases and sicknesses were caused by evil spirits. So when there is a rumour about the outbreak of epidemics like cholera, smallpox or other such fatal epidemics, the ritual of *Doino* (chasing away evil deity). This ritual is not practised by all Kukis. Only those who have adopted the method of healing incantations called *Lauthu*^{xi} practised it. Some men under the leadership of the village priest go to every house and after they chant together the *Lauthu* for chasing away the evils spirits, they beat everything in the house with shouts and acclamations as a sign of chasing away the evil spirits that may be lingering in the house.^{xii} They will end up outside the village on a road that leads to another village. A kind of gate (or arch) of wood strewn with branches of trees is erected. This is called *Aikam or Dong* (Shaw 76; Haokip 1979: 53-54).

According to William Shaw, the blood of gibbon (Hoolook ape, *guldu* in Kuki) is mixed with the root of *ai* (of a wild turmeric family), a piece of *thingsaphulip* (earthworm like creature) and of *thingthu* (a kind of tree) tree are mixed. The people of the village apply this mixture on

their foreheads. Then the village priest (*thempu*) takes the remainder of the mixture and the two halves of the gibbon and places them in the framework of the arch. After preparing the mixture and killing the gibbon the *thempu* invokes Pathen to protect the village the epidemic and the entire village is “taboo” for 15 days. No one is allowed to enter or to go out of the village (Shaw 76-77).

Field Rituals

Kuki livelihood, as is also the case for most tribals of Northeast India, depends on agricultural products. The agricultural cultivation most of them engaged in is *jhum* cultivation or popularly known as ‘slash and burn’ or shifting method of cultivation. “Slash and burn’ may apparently suggest a careless method but in reality it is far from being haphazard way of cultivation. It, in fact, involves careful selection of the site, meticulous labour of cutting down trees and bamboos, careful burning to avoid unnecessary spread of wildfire, laborious process planting and nurturing the growth of the paddy in order to reap a bountiful harvest. Hence each of these stages is accompanied by religious rituals seeking the help of the deity for a fruitful labour of their hands.^{xiii}

1. Ritual of *Louchan* (Divination a Suitable for Plot)

Jhum cultivation or shifting cultivation means change of plot every year. They have to look for not only a fertile plot of land, but also a plot that augurs well for the family that will cultivate the plot. First of all the village council decides on the area for cultivation for the year. Every family must fit in within that area. A day for selection of plots is fixed and all families, usually both the father and mother go together for the selection. If the area had been cultivated by the village before, each family usually select their old plots. In that case, no special ritual is performed. But if a new plot is to be selected, a simple ritual of divination is done. A patch of the ground is cleared and a few grains of rice are placed on it. After some time, it is inspected. If the grains are

not disturbed or carried away, the plot is selected. Dreams of the night too are examined. If no bad dreams are occurred, the plot is chosen for the family.

2. *Lou Lut* Ritual (Ritual of Appeasement)

This ritual literally means pacifying the field which really means appeasing the spirits of dwelling in the field in case they were hurt or damaged during the cutting down of the trees, bamboos and at the time of burning. After a few days of burning the field, every family sacrifices a dog in the field in order to appease the spirits of the fields. Earthen images of elephant's tooth, partridge, mithun, etc., are also made and kept under the shade of rocks or a tree and prayers are made to the spirits asking them to excuse the cultivator of the field for the damage or harm he might have caused while cutting down the trees, bamboos, plants, etc., for the field. The next day is a day of taboo for the whole village. Nobody is allowed to go to the field.

3. Ritual of Chang Lha Kou

The ritual of *Changlha Kou* (Shaw 77-78) literally means calling for the spirit or soul of paddy. It really means praying to the Deity for a plentiful harvest from the field. The ritual of *chang lha kou* is done first in the beginning of June, during the festival of *Hun*. A bundle of paddy which has already grown about a foot high is brought and tied to the main pillar of the house, and invocations are made for a good harvest.

The most important occasion for this ritual is during the festival of *Kut*^{xix} which is the time when the paddy is beginning to ripen. It is a festival of thanksgiving for the coming good harvest which is already seen in the almost fully ripen paddy. It is marked by preparation and eating of *changlhah* (a kind of unleavened bread from rice) and also the preparation and eating of *changdoi* (flattened rice) from the new crop. A basket or two of the half ripened paddy (especially of the sticky type) is harvested, fried a little over the fire and pounded. The grains of paddy will not break up but will be flattened and the husk is easily

removed and eaten. Traditionally a few families would join together to celebrate this festival. These are families more close and friendly to each other and have undertaken common enterprises together during the year like *thangkhang* and *pelkhang* (setting traps for animals together).

The day will be inaugurated at the dawn of a new day. The time for worry and anxiety, whether they will reap the new harvest, is over. Their labour has yielded fruits. Therefore, it is really a day of rejoicing. It could be named the Kuki New Year. The village youth, in particular will spend the day in merry making, sports and games and other festive activities. Today the emphasis often is on festive activities like sports, games, singing and dancing, etc. In the olden days, a vigil was kept by the youth in the house of the chief of the village and the festival was inaugurated at dawn with the beating of drums and gong (*dahpi*). The main religious dimensions of this ritual would be *Khovangboh* (Invocation for the blessing of the village) and *Changlha kou* (calling for the spirit of paddy). Both of these will be performed by the village priest (*thempu*) on the *Khomol* (village hillock near the village). Here most religious ceremonies common for the village are performed.

The ritual would end on a serious note. On the last of the festival, all families will gather together in the chief's house taking a jar of rice-beer each to drink together and discuss serious matters concerning the village affairs. If stricter laws are to be enforced for the welfare of the village, it would be discussed and passed in this assembly. The site for cultivation in the coming year also will be discussed and fixed at this meeting.

Chang Nungah (Virgin Paddy)

At the time of harvesting the paddy, sometimes one comes across a completely green and fresh looking young paddy plant in the midst of the rest of the paddy plants which are yellow, and bending with grains of paddy. This is called *chang nungah*, the virgin paddy and its

presence is interpreted as a good message. This virgin paddy plant will not be cut but kept well-protected till the end of the harvest.

On the day of threshing of the paddy, a special ceremony of *changlha kou* will be enacted. A pathway will be made between the virgin paddy plant and the threshing floor. A man will go the spot of the virgin paddy plant with a big basket and pick up a sheaf or two of paddy and bring them to the threshing floor. He will act as if he is very tired because of the load of paddy he brought. He will unload his basket of paddy on the threshing floor saying he has brought the spirit of paddy. Then a cock or hen will be sacrificed on the threshing floor by cutting of its head. The headless cock will jump on the threshing floor. People believe that the height the cock jumped be will the height of the heap of paddy harvested that day. It usually happens. The presence of the virgin paddy does not always take place but it does take place. I have witnessed it many times. It is truly considered as a good omen and an appropriate opportunity to perform the ritual of *changlha kou* (calling for the spirit of paddy. In these rituals of the field, as also some other rituals, the closeness of tribals with nature and their dependence on it are clearly seen. These are concrete expressions of their ‘extraordinary solidarity with nature.’

Tribal Life-World is a World of Myths

Tribal Life-world is a world of myths, legends and stories which are vital for the understanding of the tribal life-world. What are myths in general and tribal myths in particular? What role and function do they play in the lives of tribals are questions that need to be addressed.

Myths in General

Leonard J. Biallas, in his book, *Myths, Gods, Heroes and Saviour*, says: “Perhaps, the biggest obstacle to a proper understanding and appreciation of myth is its misuse in the everyday speech and writing of many people” (Biallas 15-17). However, he also says, “by and large the

battle against this downgrading of myth in the name of science has been won” (Biallas 16). My interest, understanding and appreciation of tribal myths arose from my study of the Bible, especially of the Old Testament. It is full of myths of the Hebrews as well as those of their neighbours. Unfortunately, much of our tribal myths have been lost for good (W. Longchar 23-29). Quoting and agreeing with Mircea Eliade, Wati Longchar, a Naga scholar, defines myth as “a ‘true story’ and beyond that, a story that is a most precious possession because it is sacred, exemplary, significant” (W. Longchar 22; Eliade 1).

One of the leading exponents of myths in the twentieth century was Joseph Campbell (1904-1987). He travelled all over the world studying the myths of other peoples and cultures and wrote books on myths. He was described by reviewers of his book as “the rarest of intellectuals in American life: a serious thinker who has been embraced by the popular culture (Campbell and Moyers cover back p.). Myths according to Campbell are “stories of our search through the ages for truth, for meaning, for significance. We all need to tell our story and to understand our story. We all need to understand death and to cope with death, and we all need help in our passages from birth to life and then to death. We need for life to signify, to touch the eternal, to understand the mysterious, to find out who we are” (Campbell 4). For him, myths teach you that you can turn inward, and you can begin to get the message of the symbols. Read other people’s myths, not those of your own religion, because you tend to interpret your own religion in terms of facts – but if you read the other ones, you begin to get the message. Myth helps you to put your mind in touch with this experience of being alive. It tells you what experience is. Marriage, for example, what is marriage? The myth tells you what it is. It’s the reunion of the separated duad. Originally we were one. You are now two in the world, but the recognition of the spiritual identity is what marriage is” (Campbell 5-6).

As regards tribal myths in India, Verrier Elwin (1902-1964) must be one of the leading exponents. He meticulously researched and documented the myths, folktales and folk songs of the various tribes like the *Folk-Songs of Maikal Hills*, in collaboration with Shamrao Hivale (1944a), *Folk-Tales of Makakoshal* (1944b), *Myths of Middle India* (1949a), *Tribal Myths of Orissa* (1954b), *Myths of the North-East Frontier of India* (1968), *A New Book of Tribal Fiction* (1976), etc. If not for Verrier, some of these myths and folk literature would have been lost forever.

Carlos Maesters, a Brazilian scholar, too spoke in similar terms about the myths of the native South Americans (originally known as Red Indians). He says that the myth is the “collective memory” of the tribe, “the memory of their origins, by which the members know their identity and their place in the world” (Maesters 68). Similarly, Biallas had said: “The sacred beliefs and practices evoked in the myths united the believers into a single community. The myths narrated the fundamental unity of the group and actually created it. Telling myths created group self-consciousness, a common story in which all who participated knew who they were” (Biallas 17). This is very true of tribal people’s experience about their myths.

Carlos Maesters also said:

The myth is like a catalyst in the tribe’s life. It is the key the Indian hold to read and interpret all that exists and all that happens. Everything is in it! The myth is the tribe’s tradition, its rule of life, its law, its medicine, its past, its present and its future. Whatever is important for the life of the tribe is found in it. You might call the myth the Indians’ Bible. It is the expression of their way of seeing life, nature and the world, the consciousness the tribe has of itself as a tribe. Better still, you could call their myth the tribe’s Old Testament (Maesters 69).

The myth of the origin of the *Kuki-Chin-Mizo* tribes that they came out of a cave in the earth, *Khula pen*, is something that unites them and

gives them identity. The hardships they had to overcome before they reached their present homeland are something comparable to what the Israelites went through the desert before they reach their Promised Land (Haokip 1979: 3-7; Shaw 24-32). The myth of origin of the Naga tribes which says originally they migrated from somewhere in the Far East and came to a place called *Makhel* in present day Manipur (Senapati District), and from here they were dispersed in different directions to their present homes (Lotsüro 6-9) is also something that unites all the Naga tribes. For the *Khasi* tribe of Meghalaya, the myth of their origin is believed to be from *U Hynniew Trep U Hynniew Skum* (Seven Huts and Seven Nests) which God created and put in these beautiful hills which is called by the name of “*Ka Ri Lum Khasi*” (Mawrie 48). A golden bridge grew on the top *U Lum Sohpetbneng* (The Navel of the Peak of Heaven) and became a ladder of communication between man and God. Thus, *Tip-Briew Tip-Blei* (knowing man and knowing God became the heart of Khasi religion and spirituality (Khylllep 30-33). These examples of tribal myths are examples of identity giving and enhancing myths which control the lives and goals of tribal communities even today.

Conclusion

Components of tribal culture like solidarity with nature, egalitarianism, collaboration and cooperation and filial relationship with the land are the core values of tribal life-world. Similarly, the values taught and promoted in the rituals are values of perennial importance. Some of these rituals could be modified or even modernized but the values taught are valid for Stone Age human beings as well as post-modern human beings. In the same way our myths, in the words of Campbell, are ‘stories of our search through the ages for truth, for meaning, for significance.’ Many tribal leaders were and are disappointed with Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India and Verrier Elwin, the man Nehru appointed as adviser on tribal affairs. They have been accused of keeping tribals as ‘museum pieces’ but what Nehru has

given in his famous “five principles” for the policy to be pursued vis-a-vis the tribals, especially its first principle, “tribal people should develop along the lines of their own genius, and the imposition of alien values should be avoided” (Nehru 5 Principles) is the most valuable. Verrier Elwin whom Nehru appointed as adviser to the Government in tribal affairs in 1953 till his death in 1964 tried to fulfill it in these words:

We must look, if we can, at things through tribal eyes and from tribal point of view. We must find out what means most to them. We must see that they do in fact get a square meal: we must save them from the exploiters who still invade their villages, and ensure that in the future they will be in a position to administer and develop their own areas.

‘A tribal bias’ means that we recognize and honour their way of doing things, not because it is old or picturesque but because it is theirs, and they have as much right to their own culture and religion as anyone else in India. It means that we must talk their language, and not only the language that is expressed in words but the deeper language of their heart. It means that we will not make the tribes ashamed of their past or force a sudden break with it, but that we will help them to build upon it and grow by a natural process of evolution. It does not mean a policy of mere preservation; it implies a constant development and change that in time will bring unbelievable enrichment, as there is ever closer integration in the main stream of Indian life and culture (Elwin 245).

Verrier Elwin was also appointed to train officers for *Indian Frontier Administrative Service (IFAS)*. Ramachandra Guha, in his book on Verrier Elwin: *Savaging the Civilized: Verrier Elwin, His Tribals, and India*, writes:

Under his guidance the Indian Frontier Administrative Service developed a cadre of capable and massively committed young men, almost unique in Indian political history for their readiness to live with and think like the people they had been sent to govern. The officers of

the IFAS dwelt in thatched huts, bathed in streams, toured on foot and subsisted on *daal* and rice for months on end – these were dropped by helicopter, for Elwin insisted that officers not take food from villagers unless it was surplus produce voluntarily sold (Guha 257).

He also told them: I don't want you to ever give tribals a feeling of inferiority." Integration can only take place on the basis of equality, moral and political equality." Furthermore, "when on tour they must drink with the tribals ... drink he added significantly, from the same collective bowl" (Guha 258).

Ramachandra Guha has rightly pointed out: "The more I read, however, the more I understood how central Verrier Elwin was to debates about tribal policy before and after Independence" (Guha x). Verrier was central for tribal policy because he advocated that tribals should do everything with "a tribal touch" or "tribal bias" echoing his boss's view that tribals should develop according to their genius. If tribals do not know who they are, they cannot develop or grow according to their genius. The core values of tribal life-world shining through our cultures, rituals and myths are marks of our true tribal identity. Only when tribals truly know these core values, appreciate and practise in their lives can they truly to maturity to the full stature of being fully realizing their genius and grow in everything they do and achieve according to their true genius.

i I have personally taken part at least in two *lompis* and innumerable *lomchasas* a youngster and what I have described is recollections of personal experiences.

ii *Mithun* is the most valued domestic animal of the Kuki tribe and many other tribes too. Celebration with this animal means the highest level of celebration. *Mithun* is seen in Arunachal and some parts of Nagaland and Manipur.

iii The spear is one of the instruments used most by Kuki men. They usually use it as a walking stick when they have to go away from the house. So with the *dao*, the spear forms the two basic implements of defence as well as offence.

iv On the day of the erection the spike is tied to the post which is erected at the outer courtyard of the house. Later the spike is thrust into the thatch (on the underside of the roof) in the porch of the house and left there till the next year it is renewed. If someone converts to Christianity, the *Indoi* is burned down.

v This ritual is based on the myth which narratives: Once upon a time a man went for hunting and as it became night he took shelter under a tree. Around midnight night he was awoken by the spirits calling the spirit of the tree to go to the village nearby where a child was born. The tree under which the hunter took shelter excused himself saying he could not come to the village because he had a guest. Others went and came back reporting that the spirit of the tiger had claimed the newly born child (For full version, cf. W. Shaw, *Notes*, 52-53).

vi In the older days, the grandfather or uncle of the child would perform a *puja* by killing a cock/hen and would make a kind of necktie (*sa-o*) decorated with the feathers of the chicken invoking God's blessing on the child. This ritual is very much in practice today too and in fact, done in a grand scale with exchange of gifts. It sometimes appears to be overdone at the risk of forgetting its real significance.

vii Men do help in the initial clearing of the forest, planting and harvesting, but they have to see to other needs of the family like earning some cash, making the house and household tools, etc.

viii The normal way of transporting the paddy from the field for the Kukis is to carry it by *tumbu* (that cloth made like a sack) which can contain two to three tins of paddy, but in *ponvai* one puts some paddy in the central part of the cloth roll up both ends of the cloth and carry the paddy pulling one end over one's shoulder and the other end under one's armpit as they carry the babies.

ix *Khulsammu* is the name given to the woman who guards the gate of the *Mithikho* (village of the dead, Kuki heavenly abode) to check who can go in there or who cannot go in there.

x It may also be performed when a soothsayer/diviner of the family has suggested to the family that they have to do this ritual otherwise something tragic may happen to the family. It could have been also hinted by a dream of the father or mother of the family.

xi 14 *Lauthu* refers to the ritual of healing in which a group of men chanting over the sick person by holding a jar bamboo each using it as if using as a kind of microphone.

xii Boys are also allowed to take part in this. As a boy I have taken part in it many times. I had also learned these incantations by heart. With a number of my peers we used to go to an elder man to learn this every evening.

xiii I have a good personal experience of *jhum* cultivation in my younger days. I can say I know from the A to Z of *jhum* cultivation.

xiv Its full name is *Changkut or Chavang (Autumn) Kut* because it occurs in Autumn season. Nowadays it is often known by its shortened name **Kut**. Kut means bend and probably the name is derived from this. When the paddy begins to ripen, because of the weight of the grains, the paddy plants are bent.

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