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BASIC BELIEFS OF THE TRADITIONAL KUKI RELIGION

The 'Kukis' are one of the major hill-tribes living in the North-eastern part of the Indian sub-continent. They also live in the neighbouring countries, such as, Bangladesh and Myanmar (Burma) in greater number. They are Mongoloid by race, speaking Tibeto-Burman group of language. They are great warriors who carry out successive raids in Bangladesh¹, and in Assam². This is most evident in the so-called 'Kuki Rebellion' (1917-1919)³ against the mighty British empire.

The traditional religion of the Kukis is what the anthropologists would call 'animism'. But, with the coming of Christian missionaries into their land during the latter part of the 19th century, the Kukis have embraced Christianity as their new religion. They are made to forsake their traditional religion and way of life. Hence it has become difficult to penetrate into the traditional religious life of the Kukis. However, this is an attempt to give the readers the most reliable informations regarding the "basic beliefs of the traditional Kuki religion." The contributor of this article consults the best written sources available to him which are again supplemented by oral interviews conducted by him with reliable persons plus his personal experiences as a member of the community concerned.

Kuki World-view

Information about the traditional Kuki World-view is basic for the understanding of the traditional Kuki religious beliefs. For, the traditional

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1. S.p. Talukdar, *The Chakmas : Life and Struggle*, Delhi : Gian Publishing House, 1988, pp. 35-41.
 2. Stephen Fuch, *Rebellious Prophets : A Study of Messianic Movements in Indian Religions*, Bombay : Asia Publishing House, 1965, pp. 125-126.
 3. Col. L.W. Shakespear, *History of the Assam Rifles*, Calcutta : Firma KLM Pvt. Ltd., 1929, (Rep. 1977), pp. 197-238.

Kuki World-view is necessarily a religious one⁴ which links man, nature and history directly to the only Almighty God - *Chung-Pathen* - who is the Creator, Sustainer and Sovereign God over all things, things in heaven and things on earth, visible and invisible, including powers and gods, and over all human beings. The traditional Kuki World-view thus transcends the dichotomic world-view which is typical to the West. For, unlike the Western world-view which distinguishes elements of religious and secular, sacred and profane, the traditional Kuki World-view brings man and God, and sacred and profane, religious and secular elements into a single realm.

Since the Kukis believe that *Chung - Pathen* is the Creator and Sustainer of all trees of the forest and plants of the fields, the waters of the rivers and of the seas, the birds of the air and the animals on the ground, and the illuminaries of the sky, they hold that they themselves and the nature and environment that surround them are ultimately the properties of God. And, since the nature and environment that surround them are the properties of God, the Kukis hold the view that they should not disturb their environment nor violate the natural laws. This belief leads the Kukis to have a high regard to nature and environment and thus, to them, this attitude has become giving honour and respect to God.

This world-view also makes the Kukis to regard the whole activities of life as religious ones. Thus, in establishing a new village, in building a new house, in clearing jungle for paddy fields, in sowing the seed, and in social occasions like birth, marriage and death, the Kukis perform the acts with solemn religious rituals.

Belief in Supreme God

Although the traditional religion of the Kukis has much animistic elements there are also clear indications and evidences that they do have belief in the existence of Supreme God whom they call *Chung-Pathen*. Interesting to note here is that while the common Kuki term for God is *Pathen*, the Supreme God is often categorically called *Chung-Pathen*, meaning, 'God of Above', 'High God', 'Supreme God', 'Sovereign God', 'Almighty God', and the like.

4. D. Singson, *The Kuki Christian Church of India*, Unpublished D. Min. Thesis, submitted to Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois (USA), 1985, pp. 16-17.

The Kukis' belief in the Supreme God is evident in the following incantation which is pronounced by the priest at the time of cereal offering ritual:

Nang ka mimpiju kachangpiju chung Pathen na lhajjin... (in Kuki)⁵.

Meaning: O you wine which is made from the *Mimpi* (a kind of cereal) and *Changpi* (rice), please pacify the God of heaven (chung Pathen) . . .

Chung Pathen is believed to be the Creator, Sustainer and Sovereign God of the universe as the following chanting of the priest shows:

Pathenin van asemin lei asemin thingtin asemin tuitin asemin...
(in Kuki)

Meaning: *Pathen* (God) created heaven and earth. He created all types of trees and water . . .⁶

And *Chung-Pathen* as the Creator of human beings can be seen in the following question of the priest to God at the ritual of the sending off of the dead soul:

... Chunga Pathen na mi siem na mi sah chunghin thimpi ajingtai I kalo ding hitam? (in Kuki)

Meaning: O God of heaven! Dark clouds are floating around the dead person you created. What should I do now?⁷

The Kukis attribute all kinds of goodness to *Chung-Pathen*. To them *Chung-Pathen* is the God of goodness, kindness, mercy, love, meekness, endurance, and the like. Since He is the good God He does not interfere in the daily affairs of human beings nor does He demand sacrifices from the people. This may be one of the reasons why the Kukis do not pay much attention to *Chung-Pathen*. The daily life of a Kuki is rather occupied with the appeasing of the evil spirits that trouble him. So, Dr. Singson conjectures the reason why the Kukis neglect *Chung-Pathen* in this way:

5. T. Goswami, *Kuki Life and Lore*, Vol. I, Haflong: North-Cachar Hills District Council, 1985, p. 50.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 211f. Here the term *Pathen* is used equivalent to *Chung-Pathen*.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 180.

The spirits caused much suffering, sickness, and death among the people which further diverted their minds from the true knowledge of Pathen.⁸

The Kukis, however, seek for the help of *Chung-Pathen* in the occasions when everything else has failed to help them. In other words, when they are troubled by the evil spirits but they cannot afford to pacify them, the Kukis turn to *Chung-Pathen* for help. This is the very nature of *Chung-Pathen* that He has the supreme power and authority over all things and powers. And, since *Chung-Pathen* does not demand sacrifices from the people, the poor who do not have animals to offer to the evil spirits naturally turn to *Chung-Pathen*.

Chung-Pathen is transcendental God who lives in the highest heaven. So, He is incomprehensible for human beings. This may be another reason why *Chung-Pathen* is paid less attention by the Kukis, which, in turn, led their religion appear to be animistic.

Chung-Pathen is the Supreme Judge. So, He is called upon to judge in the solemn oath-taking ceremony of the society. Thus, *Chung-Pathen* upholds the moral law.

Chung-Pathen is not only the Creator, Sustainer and Sovereign God, but Saviour also. So, the Kukis turn to Him in times of natural calamities, such as, earthquake, cyclone, drought, famine, etc.

The Kukis thus firmly believe in the existence of One Supreme God, though they generally neglect or pay less attention to Him due to the continued troubles caused by the evil spirits. In other words, their fear for the evil spirits overshadows the Kuki's loyalty to *Chung-Pathen*.

Belief in Spirits

The Kukis believe in the existence of innumerable spirits whom they call *Thilha*. Though the literal meaning of *Thilha* is 'Spirit/Soul of the Dead', the Kukis use this term to refer primarily to the evil spirits or demons.

The Kukis believe that there are various types or kinds of *Thilha*; both good and evil, named and unnamed, personal and impersonal,

8. D. Singson, *op cit.*, p. 25.

visible and invisible that inhabit the land, the sea and the sky. So, Carey and Tuck report the Kukis' belief in varied kinds of spirits in this way:

If one asks six different Siyins (one of the Kuki clans in Myanmar) the names of the various spirits, they will give six lists which vary greatly, not only in names, but in the characters of the spirits. Different villages propitiate different spirits, and each village has its own special set of local spirits.⁹

The knowledge of the names, natures, forms, characters and functions of the spirits vary from place to place, region to region, village to village, clan to clan and person to person among the Kukis. This is due to the fact that the Kukis live in a very vast land without having proper contact among themselves for lack of communication facilities for many years. Although one may find such diversities in the Kukis' understanding of the spirits, one will also find that all the Kukis of different parts of their lands unanimously believe in the existence of innumerable spirits.

The Kukis hold that these multitude of spirits infested their whole environment, such as, the house, the village, the village outskirts, the wood, the fields, the forest, the jungle, the village boundaries, the hills, the mountains, the hill-slopes, the rivers, the streams, the pools, the lakes, the seas, the swamps, the springs, the caves, the holes, the rocks, the trees, the breeze, the air, the wind, the cloud, the birds, the reptiles, the animals, and even human beings.¹⁰

The Kukis believe that *Thilha* is capable of changing its shape and size, form and appearance as well. Sometimes it appears like a big man, while other times like a small child, or like an old man/woman or a beautiful girl. It is also seen in the forms of beasts, reptiles and birds. But most of the manifestations of *Thilha* are in the forms of invisible supernatural powers, such as, strong wind, big sound, and the like. These varied manifestations of *Thilha* may be one of the reasons why the Kukis' understanding of spirits varies from place to place and from person to person.

9. B.S. Carey & H.N. Tuck, *The Chin Hills*, Vol. 1, Calcutta: Firma KLM Pvt. Ltd., 1932 (Rep. 1976), p. 197.

10. See also A.H. Keane, "Asia", in *Encyclopedia of Religions and Ethics*, Vol. II, Ed. J. Hastings, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark., 1909 (Rep. 1930), p. 122.

And, although the Kukis hold the view that the *Thilha* are generally harmful or devilistic in nature, they also speak of some friendly or less harmful spirits. So, the Kukis' belief in the spirits can broadly be divided into two, viz. Benevolent Spirits and Malevolent Spirits.

a) *Benevolent Spirits*

The term 'benevolent' here does not necessarily mean that these spirits are always good and kind, but, rather they are less harmful than the naturally evil ones. For, even these benevolent spirits, unless they are pacified with appropriate offerings and sacrifices, can be harmful or, they will remain useless. Their goodness depends mainly on how they are well-treated. So, their goodness has to be encouraged by means of offering sacrifices like animals, food and drinks.

Few of the well-known benevolent spirits are: *Pugao - Pagao* (ancestor-spirit) – the deceased spirits of the ancestors are believed to be capable of conferring blessings if they are pleased, or causing harm if they are displeased, to the living members of the family. Prim Vaiphei describes the rite of ancestor-spirit worship in this way:

They offered sacrifices to the souls of their deceased ancestors to appease . . . to give them health and prosperity . . . They killed a pig . . . addressed the souls of the ancestors of the family and asked them to come and accept the offering . . .¹¹

And James A. McCulloch account that – "At the funeral feast of the father among the Kukis food is placed beside him . . ." ¹² – refers to the food offering to the ancestor-spirit. Each family or clan has its own ancestor-spirit. This ancestral-spirit is invoked for help and for the welfare of the living members of the family. The ancestor-spirit is also consulted to find out the cause of sickness and other misfortunes that trouble the living members of the family by means of divination.

11. Prim Vaiphei. *Church Growth Among the Hill Tribes in Manipur : North-East India*, Imphal: 1986, p. 38.

12. James A. McCulloch, Mouth'', in *Encyclopedia of Religions and Ethics*, Vol. VIII, Ed. J. Hastings, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1915 (Rep. 1930), p. 870.

Kho-Pathen: (village deity) – which literally means ‘village god.’ It is believed that *Kho-Pathen* is able to guard and protect the village from disease, pestilence, and natural devastations like failure of crops, storms, flood, etc. *Kho-Pathen* can also bless the village with many children and thus increase the member of the villager. So, they offer sacrifices like white-cock, pig, and *Zu* (rice-beer) and call upon *Kho-Pathen* in this manner:

Oh *Kho-Pathian* be kind to us and keep all the people of the village in happiness. By your grace we are all alive and living in peace.¹³

Kho-Pathen is invoked upon for help when the villagers have to wage war against another villages or enemies. The success and failure of the village, therefore, depends much on the satisfaction of *Kho-Pathen*.

There are also few more benevolent spirits like *Sanzil*, *Hapitenu*, *Chomnu*, *Lunglente*, *Khobonte*, etc.

b) *Malevolent Spirits* :

The Kukis’ belief in the malevolent spirits or evil spirits overrides their belief in the benevolent or good ones. This is obvious when a Kuki is asked of how many *Thilha-Pha* (good-spirit) does he know, he would mention only few, but when asked of *Thilha-Phalou* (bad-spirit), he would keep on counting until he would conclude, saying, “the evil spirits are many; they are countless.”¹⁴

The malevolent spirits for whom the term *Thilha* is mainly applied are believed to be evil and harmful in all respects.

They do not need an excuse to harm a man. They are extremely selfish, greedy, vicious, and devoid of all the higher qualities like mercy, justice, etc.¹⁵ However, the Kukis are of the opinion that *Thilha* are not evil from the beginning or by birth. The enmity between human beings and *Thilha* originated in this way, that – human beings and *Thilha* were once living together in the same village, and their

13. H.H. Presler, *Primitive Religions in India*, Madras: C.L.S., 1971, p. 54.

14. This statement is made as a result of the contributor’s interviews with many Kuki people. He himself knows many evil spirits.

15. H. Bhattacharyya, ed., *The Cultural Heritage of India*, Vol. 4, (The Religions), Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1956, p. 431.

children used to play games and sports together. But one day, while they were playing a game called *Kungkal* (High Jump), one of the children of *Thilha* intentionally dislodged the bamboo bar and posts used in the game. As a result a quarrel ensued between the two groups of children. The children of human beings used *Tengdop* (a lethal and poisonous spear) and killed all except one of the children of *Thilha*. The escaped *Thilha* reported to his parents. The *Thilha* wanted to retaliate but they were afraid of the *Tengdop*. So they (*Thilha*) reported the case to *Pathen* (God) and asked for His help. *Pathen* then told *Thilha* to sprinkle *Chollaivom* (the black magical leaven particle) in the eyes of human beings, and, as a result the eyeball of human beings became black and they were incapable of seeing the *Thilha*. And since human beings could no longer see the *Thilha*, they were defeated and so they began to offer sacrifices to appease *Thilha*. Thus originated the practice of sacrifice of various forms.¹⁶

The Kukis believe that these evil spirits live in all places. They spoil the crops and bring famine in the land. They bring bad luck to the hunter and fisherman. They disturb conception and childbirth. They cause all kinds of diseases, ailments and sickness that sometime leads to death. They cause epidemics, and natural calamities like earthquake, drought, famine, hail-storm, flood, etc.¹⁷ The evil spirits are, thus, the main threat to the life of the Kukis. They are even believed to have control over the minds and bodies of human beings, making a man dull-witted and rendering a person physically useless.¹⁸ Of the countless evil spirits, few of them are mentioned here for a rough information :

Nelhao : It is also called '*Nelhaoloi*' because it is a group of evil spirits, consisting of seven members. The well-known Kuki musical instrument called '*Gosem*' originated from the *Nelhaoloi*. This *Nelhao* is feared because it usually moves along as a strong wind, destroying crops and houses of the villagers. It is said that it usually comes in cyclonic storm on the last night of the month of May every year bringing out *Palhung* (a kind of mushroom) from the depth of the earth.

16. T. Goswami, *op cit.*, pp. 311-313.

17. W. Croke, "Demons and Spirits (Indian)." in *Encyclopedia of Religions and Ethics*, Vol. 4, Ed. J. Hastings, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1911, p. 605.

18. T. Goswami, *op cit.*, p. 218.

Gam-hoi-se : This is believed to be the king of *Thilha* and the name of his wife is said to be *Inmunse*. It causes all kinds of ailments and natural calamities. It lives in the densest forest on the mountain tops. So, while passing through these areas the dreadful name *Gam-hoi-se* is never mentioned.

Kau-mei-de : It is also called *Gamkau*. It is said to carry a torch of fire in the jungle during the night. The Kukis are afraid of it because if it falls upon a house or a village, it causes destruction and brings misfortunes.

Zoumi : The word literally means 'hill-man' because this *Thilha* usually lives in the hills and mountains. To see *Zoumi* is said to be the forerunner of some dire misfortunes which can only be averted by the immediate sacrifice of a dog. It has the power to inculcate madness.

Twi-khum-ngah : This is the evil spirit that guards the waters of the ponds, the lakes, the streams, the springs, the rivers, the waterfalls, and the seas. When a person is drowned in the water, it is interpreted as taken by this spirit.

There are also many more evil spirits known to the writer, like, *Gamnupi*, *Gamthilha*, *Kause*, *Pheisam*, *Khemkhum*, *Jenjun*, *Nomnoh*, *Gam-pachoi*, *Thizin*, *Khochom*, *Thin-langdoh*, *Monu*, *Khalvomtepu*, *Vansam*, *Vanleng*, *Nelmut*, *Vetvut*, *Sonte - pel*, *Thui*, and so on so forth. Besides these there are countless evil spirits which do not have names.

It is because of these evil spirits the Kukis cannot pay proper attention to any other thing, specially the Supreme God. Their whole activities in life are to appease or cheat the evil spirits by whatever means available to them.

Belief in Life After Death

Like almost all the tribals living in India, the Kukis believe in the existence of 'Life After Death'. In other words, they believe in the continuation of life after this earthly life. The belief is well-expressed in the Kukis' concept of *Mithikho*, meaning "the village of the dead." They believe that every soul of human beings, both man and woman, young and old, rich and poor, goes to *Mithikho* after death.

Further, one of the most popular Kuki folk-tales known as "*Khupting le Ngambom Thusim*" (the Tale of Khupting and Ngambom) also gives

evidence to the existence of life after death. In the story, Khupting, the young girl and, Ngambom, the young boy, fell in love with each other. But the marriage was disapproved by the parents of Khupting, the young girl.

As a result Khupting died and lived in the *Mithikho* (the village of the dead). Ngambom visited *Mithikho* with the help of a wild cat and met Khupting there. But, being human, Ngambom could not join the activities of the *Mithikho* like hunting, fishing, to his satisfaction. Moreover he could not enjoy the dishes which his beloved Khupting prepared for him. It was only after death that Ngambom could live happily with his Khupting and joined her in all aspects of life.

Mithikho is believed to be a place of happiness, joy and perfection:

Where rice grows spontaneously and game abounds - the happy hunting fields. All the enemies he has killed will be in attendance on him as slaves, and the animals of all kinds that he has eaten with his friends will live again as his farm stock.¹⁹

And, since the Kukis believe that the one who commits most murder here on this earth will obtain the greatest advantage in *Mithikho*, they practise head-hunting and killing of wild and ferocious animals like lion, tiger, elephant, bear, deer, etc. Because this act will serve as a *pass* to cross through the way to *Mithikho*, and as a *medal* to live happily and honoured by all in *Mithikho*. However, they do not kill any animal or human being without sufficient reasons.

To the Kukis good deeds and bad deeds do not determine the entry to *Mithikho*. One must go to *Mithikho* if one dies a natural or accidental death, and one must go to *Sathikho* if one dies at the hands of an enemy and there remain disconsolate and restless until one's death is avenged by blood, when one will at once enter *Mithikho* and be as happy as those who died a natural death on earth.²⁰

And, though every soul ultimately reaches *Mithikho* after death, the way that leads to it is not easy to go through. Because, it is believed that the path leading to *Mithikho* called *Thijon-lamtou* is steep like a hilly path which requires enough strength to go up. Moreover,

19. E. Dalton, *Tribal History of Eastern India*, New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1978, p. 46.

20. B.S. Carey & H.N. Tuck, *The Chin Hills*, Vol. I, *op cit.*, p. 196.

it is said that somewhere on the mid-way, by the side of the path, there grow *Sohlhu-bungbu* (a plum tree that grows upside down). The tired soul would try to pluck the fruit of the plum by striking the branches with its walking stick, but, surprisingly, the fruit, instead of falling down would go upward and the soul won't be able to eat of it.²¹

There would be yet another problem on the way to *Mithikho*. Somewhere on the way there sits a woman called *Kulsamnu* who snatches all those on their way to *Mithikho* who have not performed *Gal-ai*,²² *Sa-ai*,²³ *Chang-ai*²⁴ here on earth, and makes them her slaves. She makes women and children search her hair for lice. Therefore, women and children are made to carry a tobacco-seed called *Dum-mu* under their finger nails to cheat her. But it is said that *Kulsamnu* does not separate nor harm those who are really in love with each other; rather she wishes them to live peacefully in *Mithikho* together.²⁵

After the said conditions are passed through there will be a stream flowing through a bamboo pipe, and:

The soul of the dead person drinks some water from the bamboo pipe. It so happens that after drinking the water the soul forgets all about its earthly life. From there onward the soul of the dead person goes into a sphere of peace and prepares itself for its life in *Mithikho*.²⁶

The Kukis believe that in *Mithikho* one will meet one's friends and relatives and live together happily. Lovers who could not get married on this earth will be married there. The souls of the dead will continue hunting, fishing, eating and drinking. But there will be no more fighting and raiding. The evil spirits will no longer trouble their life.

21. T. Goswami, *op cit.*, p. 179.

22. *Gal-ai* is a feast of merit performed by men those who killed many enemies and took their heads.

23. *Sa-ai* is a feast of merit performed by men those who killed many wild and ferocious animals.

24. *Chang-ai* is a feast of merit performed by women those who have plenty of paddy and other crops.

25. William Shaw, *Notes on the Thadou Kukis*, Ed. J.H. Hutton, Aizawl: Tribal Research Institute, 1929, p. 44.

26. T. Goswami, *op cit.*, p. 179.

Conclusion

The brief note on the basic beliefs of the Kuki traditional religion shows that the Kukis have distinctive religious traditions which were mistakenly forsaken for the sake of the Gospel. The mistake could be mended by means of more efforts spent in this field of studies. The work done here is by no means exhaustive. It rather helps the reader to see the need of more research done on it in order to accumulate the rich tribal religious traditions of India.