

# Reinterpreting Kuki Chieftainship of Northeast India in relation to Colonial Historiography: Media Theory Perspectives

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Colonization of Asian and African countries by European countries in the bygone centuries has been regarded as the darkest phase of human history by the colonized. Imperialists' means of drawing authority and legitimacy lies in the interpretation of the traditional systems in relation to the western ways, thereby concluding the institutions of the colonized as devoid of rational character. Besides, generalizing the Indian cultures as homogenous all over wholly discredit some effective institutions of the colonized. The superficial understanding and interpretation of Kukis and their institution of chieftainship sans its evolutionary and cultural aspects have led to complete distortion of the same. In the absence of traditional records, the reliance on colonial historiography which was purely the perspectives of colonial historians has been prejudiced, even experiencing a reverberating effect. The influence of colonial records (information) upon the Kukis (audience) on the subject (chieftainship) has been great that it altered the chieftainship system as perceived in colonial writings. This paper intends to unfold colonial presentation of Kuki chieftainship, its interpretation and understanding on the basis of few media theories.

**Keywords:** Agenda setting, Chieftainship, colonial historiography, kinship, Kukis

The institution of Chieftainship<sup>1</sup>, a village republic governance of the Kukis<sup>2</sup>, is as old as the history of the people itself. It is a political institution, which governs the whole Kuki-Chin group as one ethnic entity through kinship bond. It largely exhibits a political character, yet intertwined with the social, religious and cultural practices of the tribal Kukis. The uniqueness of the institution lies in the fact that no tribes in the whole of northeast India professed a more powerful institution since its ancient period. A Kuki village is generally headed by a chief who is called 'Haosa'<sup>3</sup>, assisted by his council of ministers called 'Semang-Pachong'<sup>4</sup> or 'Haosa-Upa'. Though the position of council of ministers are either elected or nominated from time to time, the position of the chief remains inherited down the generation; passed on from the father-chief to the eldest son.

Until the chief dies or is incapable of administering the village, there is no question of replacement. The chief decides, administers and commands the army through the advice of the council of ministers. Every household pays tributes as a mark of due recognition to the chief as a legal inheritor and protector of the village. The chief treats all villagers, irrespective of clans, as his own kinsmen. Under such a system, there is no room for the institution to be autocratic. The chief is theoretically the head of the village, yet matters of

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importance are decided together with his councilors (Dev & Lahiri, 1983), thus assuming more of a democratic character. There is no capital punishment in Kukis' chieftainship administration; the maximum punishment for crimes committed is ostracizing the individual from the village. However, since the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, punishment begins to get harsher as contestation with colonial authority begins to turn to an overt conflict. The only crime punishable to death is high treason or an assault on the persons of the chief and treacherous commerce with the enemies of the clans (Ray, 1990).

Since the initial contacts around 1776 (Lewin, 1869), British officials and writers, as a distant observer, could not agree to the nature of the function of chieftainship, which, they feel, is autocratic in nature. Colonial antagonism against the institution of chieftainship increased, as it became a binding force to oppose the colonial influence in the region. The Kuki chiefs who assume the authority of the hills could not agree to any sort of influence, as it is perceived to be a threat to their independence, authority and survival. The first confrontation against the British begins in 1845 and continues till the 1860, which Col. EB Elly describes as the 'Great Kuki invasion of 1860s' (Mackenzie, 2014). Mackenzie also reported the Kukis raid in 1860, which led to the killing of '185 British subjects' in opposition to the colonial influence in the region. The term 'raid' as used by the British, is a measure to show the Kukis as villains and offenders, which is nothing but a distorted and falsely projected one. It was the Kukis who resented, resisted and were eventually forced to fight the British invasion into areas of their sovereignty (Hangshing, 1997). Opposition against colonial authority beginning in the 1840s culminated in the central Kuki Hills with the famous 'Anglo-Kuki War, 1917-1919' (Shakespeare, 1929) which ended in favour of the British.

Through the prism of colonial authority, this particular institution of the Kukis exhibits the character of being despotic, feudal and autocratic. In the absence of any records of their own governance, modern scholars largely rely on colonial writings to study the institution of Kuki chieftainship. The outcomes of the interpretation are contradicting and disappointing as it continually undermines the evolutionary and kinship aspect on which the institution is based. The present work is an attempt to study the nature of chieftainship, its presentation in colonial framework and its interpretation by using media theories.

## **The Kukis**

The Kukis constitute one of the indigenous communities in the northeast region of India, besides Myanmar and Bangladesh. They are found to have settled in all the states of North East India, viz- Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Assam, Meghalaya and Nagaland; with the exception of two states of northeast India- Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh. By physical attributes, they appeared Mongoloid and speak the Tibeto-Burman language (Grierson, 1904). In Myanmar, they are generally classified as Chin whereas in Bangladesh they are identified as Kuki, Bawm, Lushai, etc. Though they are recognized differently, they exhibit a common history, origin and traditions with slight variation in language and practices. 'Time-gap on migration' (Gangte, 2012) is opined as a major factor for the slight variation of these ethnic groups. Besides the time factor, geographical location, availability of resources and its interaction with other communities could be other factors contributing to the variation of lifestyles and practices of the people. On the basis of the 2001 Census of India, and available Census reports of Bangladesh and Myanmar, Kuki population in India, Myanmar and Bangladesh is estimated to be around 9-10 million (Lalremruata, nd.)

## Origin

According to Gangte (2012), the Kukis believe they were first settled in subterranean dwelling under chief Chongja. Chongthu, the younger brother of Chongja, while on hunting discovered the earth through a cavern called 'Khul' or 'Sinlung'. Upon his return to his village, he approached his brother-chief that he be allowed to annex the kingdom with some of his men. On receiving the approval from Chongja, Chongthu with some of his men proceeded to establish a new kingdom. When Chongthu and his team arrived at the earth surface they meet Lunkim, Lenthang, Changsan and other teams who claim themselves of celestial origin. Thus, the first village settlement came into existence on earth with Chongthu as the chief. As mentioned earlier, the practice of chieftainship predates the history of the Kukis itself.

Till today there is no evidence to substantiate the location of the cavern called Khul. Several scholars claim the origin of the Kukis or the location of Khul to be somewhere in the Yunnan province of China (Carey & Tuck, 1976). The proponents of the theory largely based their assumptions on the southward movements taking place during the construction of the Great Wall of China. The other factor includes the commonality and shared practices with several South East Asian countries. However, in the absence of any concrete evidence, the claim of Khul to be a place somewhere in China is 'subjective and conjectural' (Gangte, 2012).

Besides the Tibet-China origin theory, there are theories by others, which base the mythical Khul to be somewhere in the tri-junction of India, Myanmar and Bangladesh. Shaw (1929), an official of the British government describes Khul as the origin of 'Gun' river in the present state of Manipur:

The hole in the earth called 'Khul' is said to be [at] the source of the 'Gun' river, which I find to be definitely identified with the 'Imphal' river in the Manipur State. In all the old stories and the legends of the Thadous [Kukis] the river 'Gun' is frequently mentioned and is of great fame.

In concordance to Shaw's writing, Phukan (1992) contended:

The Kukis, [for the matter, the Mizos], at least some of their tribes, had been living in North East India since the prehistoric time, and therefore, their early home must be sought in the hills of Manipur and the nearby areas rather than in Central China or the Yang-tze valley.

This particular theory was further substantiated by the report of Kuki Research Forum<sup>5</sup> on a series of expedition it carried out along the Indo-Myanmar Border areas in 2012 of which 'Haosapi Cave'<sup>6</sup> of Chandel is one. The forum claims the possibility of the cave to be the mythological Khul as a reference to the origin of the Kukis (TSE, 2012). Though the argument requires further scientific evidence, there are possibilities of the claims considering the population distributions of Kukis around its geographical vicinity. If one is to incorporate the 'Wave Theory'<sup>7</sup> of migration, the adjoining areas of India and Myanmar could be well narrowed down as the location of the mythical Khul. Wave Theory holds that human migration in wave formation or disperse movement from a single point to all directions do take place in primitive societies. The population distribution of Kuki ethnic group in proximity from the hypothetical Khul location validates the theory which in turn validates the claim of Khul as somewhere to the south of Manipur.

## On 'Kuki' Identity

It is unknown who coined the term 'Kuki' and when, in reference to the ethnic group mentioned in the study. According to Reid (1942), the word 'Kuki' is a Bengali term referring to the hill people. Soppitt (1887), another colonial writer, describes the term Kukis as 'never been

used by the tribe themselves' (Soppitt, 1887). Moreover, there are claims of colonial writers that the Kukis as 'first heard in 1830s and 1840s' (Johnstone, 1896) and as 'migrants from the south' (Shakespeare, 1912) and introduced and settled in Manipur to serve as a buffer zone against enemy tribes of British subjects (MacCulloch, 1980). In this regard the claims sounded one-sided owing to the fact that the hill areas of the Kukis were little known till the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Chahsads, for that matter, who settled a long time ago in the region bordering Burma (Myanmar), came to notice only in 1870s (Mackenzie, 2014). It therefore turns out that the arrival of few groups of Kukis was too generalized which eventually undermined the independent existence of Kukis in the Hills since time immemorial.

If one is to refer to the traditional literature for an understanding of the Kukis, the description of colonial writings on the term Kuki as a Bengali word and the perceived notion that they were immigrants from the south in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century remains the 'most erroneous view' (Haokip, 2010) of a deeply subjective colonial historiography.

Phukan (1992) pointed:

If we were to accept Ptolemy's 'Tiladae' as the 'Kuki' people, as identified by Gerini, the settlement of the Kukis in North-East India would go back to a very long time in the past. As Prof Gangumei Kabui thinks, 'some Kuki tribes migrated to Manipur hills in the pre-historic times along with or after the Meitei advent in the Manipur Valley. (History of Manipur, p24)'. This hypothesis will take us to the theory that the Kukis, [for the matter, the Mizos] at least some of their tribes, had been living in North East India since the prehistoric times.

The claims of colonial writing on the terminology and origin of the Kukis as well prove wholly inconsistent to few available accounts of the region. According to Pooyas<sup>8</sup>, the traditional records of the Meitei Kings, it mentions 'two Kuki chiefs named Kuki Ahongba and Kuki Achouba who were allies to Nongba Lairen Pakhangba, the first historically recorded king of the Meithis [Meiteis], in the latter's mobilization for the throne in 33 AD.' The record herein dates to two millennia ago. The term Kuki, in reference to the people, was also used by Taranatha (1608) in the 'Account of the Spread of the Doctrine in the Ko-Ki [Kuki] country in the East':

From the time of Ashoka, samghas were established in these Ko-ki countries. Later on, these gradually grew large in number. Before the time of Vasubandhu, these were only of Sravakas. However, from the time of King Dharmapala on, there were in Madhyadesa many students from these places. Their number went on increasing so that during the time of four Senas, about half of the monks of Magadha were from Ko-ki.

The above accounts provide the rational argument that the term Kuki has been used to refer to the Kuki-Chin people since ancient times. Thus the theory of 'Bengali origin' or Kukis as recent immigrants was nothing but an outcome of a superficial understanding of Colonial writers on the subject matter. Moreover, the Ko-ki Country as described by Taranatha found resemblance with the work of GA Grierson, Superintendent of the Linguistic Survey of India, who demarcated 'Kuki Country' in 1904 (Grierson, 1904).

### **Tributes and Inheritance under Kuki Chieftainship**

Chieftainship among the Kukis is a kinship-based institution. As it receives a social sanction it is difficult to alienate from other social institutions. A superficial understanding will

conclude the institutions as overlapping each other. The closely-knit institutions, however, ensure better coordination among different branches of the administration. Inheritance is such that when a chief dies, the position, role and authority is passed on to 'Mi Upa', eldest of his sons. Under the law of primogeniture, the chief may be wanting of qualities or lack experience but the responsibility rests upon him. Carey & Tuck (1976) thus wrote,

'We find in them a natural reverence for him who by right of birth is the chief of the tribe or clan or family. The chief may be wanting in qualification and there may be many of other families superior in ability but, unless he is physically or mentally unfit for his position, there is no danger of him being supplemented'.

If only a son is minor, the position of the chief may be taken over by the next younger brother of the chief until the minor is matured enough to lead the village. In its truest sense, however, the position of a chief is not a privilege ascribed thereof. Rather, it is a responsibility given to the eldest of the clan settling in the village community. In a clan-centric society like the Kukis, clan chiefs are given recognition and respect within and outside the clan. As a matter of fact, the position he occupies as chief proves advantageous in times of peace, war, famine or any form of unforeseen disaster. To a distant observer, the system would seem to equally exhibit the character of monarchy. When, however, one relates the system to monarchical system, it projects a different image of closely-knit kinship relation within the system. The ascribed status, which has been the basis of the argument, always prove the other way for the position of a chief in the Kuki society, which is not a commanded or imposed notion but a responsibility ascribed to the eldest of the kinsmen through the law of primogeniture.

When any member of a family proposes to establish a village, it is customary to approach the village chief or the elder clan members of the intention. If a new village is to be carved out from the village he resides, it requires the approval of the chief to allow or disallow the request. However, if it happens that a proposed village is in a newly annexed land, the intending individual approaches his clansmen for the project. If the plan is agreed amongst its clan members, a new village is set up and the head of the clansmen till a certain generation is made the chief of the village. This is done to ensure that male cousins down the generation are better mobilized to settle and make the village big and self sufficient enough to protect itself and her interests from other clans or tribes. Though it is not a taboo for the individual to be the chief himself or appoint his eldest brother of the same parents, it is rarely practiced.

The general contention that the title of chief is being limited to heads of clans is a misunderstood one. There exists no limitation for a commoner to establish a village of his own. Any influential commoner with a strong kinship has the freedom to establish a village and head the village himself or appoint his elder kinsmen. Such chieftains deserve the same respect and privileges as those of the established ones. It must be understood that if such settlement assumes the administrative setup of Kuki chieftainship, the chief and the villagers have the obligation of fulfilling the needs of each other. In howsoever may the land be acquired, be it through cash and kind or annexation, it shall exhibit the evolutionary character to ensure the land is well protected against enemy forces. Any treachery involving the intention to destabilize the village or anyone taking undue advantage of the generosity of the chief attracts the most severe punishment. The chief, therefore, deserves utmost respect.

Every family in the village has the obligation of paying tributes to the chief. Tributes could be paid for two main reasons. One, tribute paid as a sign of respect and recognition of the position he holds for which the whole village remains safe. Two, tribute paid as a

mark of 'Mi Upa', a kinship relation recognizing him as the eldest down the lineage of the clan or village. When a different clan settled in the village headed by another clan, the particular household still has the obligation of paying tributes to his chief clan 'Mi Upa' who may be settled at the other village.

When a family wants to settle in a new village under a different chief, it undergoes a formality requiring consent of the chief. The new family could be of the same clan or of another clan; the intending settlers bring 'Ju', a wine made of fermented rice, to the chief of the village and his councilmen. If the chief grants his prayer the family resides in the village, enjoy the privilege as other villagers. In return the villager has the obligation to pay due respect and tributes to the chief. The tributary items and other services to the chiefs were never exploitative in nature but taken as a material ethics of obedience. It is a community recognition formally expressed through payment of tributes. These tributes, therefore, provide a legitimacy of the chiefs (Ray, 1990). Thus, neither the law of inheritance nor the nature of tributes paid to Kuki chiefs be equated with that of the Zamindari system<sup>10</sup>, which was widely practiced in India during colonial period. Thus Kuki chieftainship is related to the Social Contract Theory of Thomas Hobbes where the chief and the villagers are duty-bound to fulfill their rights as an obligation toward each other (Gangte, 2012).

### **Power and Authority of Kuki Chiefs**

In every society, be it of present or past, power and authority have direct association with 'resources' available to the group. By resource, it could mean the surviving population or the natural resource which supports the community. The Kukis practice of shifting cultivation and waves of movement from 'Khul' in ancient past may have demanded a strong central authority of the community. The need for a stronger force demanded a slight deviation of village administration from elected councilmen to nominated ones. This nomination thus ensures the chief is with his best team in any situation of crisis. With the fall of Manipur after the battle of Khongjom in 1891,<sup>11</sup> Kuki Hills became an indirect target of the British. The nature of divisive politics as understood from the division among Manipuri princes compelled the Kuki chief to remain largely insulated from the British. The idea of capital punishment, which was non-existent amongst the Kukis, begins to take shape in view to confront treachery upon the settlement. The only reason of 'treachery' which attracts capital punishment could be well related to counter the colonial influence on the people and its administration.

With regard to the power and authority of Kuki chiefs, there has been a deep divide between the evolutionary context and the general understanding in the present form. Though chieftainship is hereditary based on primogeniture, it does not reflect the character of a monarchical system. The chief and his council of ministers took the overall charge of the safety and security of the villagers. They administer, govern and decide all matters affecting the village and the people. In its real sense, the chief acts only on the advice of his council of ministers that are either nominated or elected by the villagers. These councilmen are largely drawn for its administrative and judicial ability; as such there exists no room for misuse of position. In the event of the chief misusing his position, which effects the whole settlement, the councilmen assume the rightful people to approach and advise the chief on the matter. However, such tyranny, as is believed, was non-existent because they were a body of people related by bonds of kinship relations.

In colonial writings, however, the power and authority of the chiefs has been described to the extreme. Hunter (1879) describes the chieftainship system as "a series of petty states each under a president or dictator". In Brown's Statistical Account (1874),

Macrae noted “each tribe is under the immediate control of its own particular chief, whose word is law, in peace and war, and who has the power of life and death”. The whole colonial writings and the arguments are based on the context which is a consequence of imperialism. Strict rules imposed by Chiefs and their councilmen to distance the community from the colonial influences has been wrongly perceived and presented in colonial historiography.

The contention of several colonial writings and its interpretation by modern day scholars that Chieftainship comes into existence as a ‘political necessity’ in the period preceding to European colonialism is a deeply flawed assumption. As discussed earlier, the institution does not exist in isolation and has been there in its earliest known period during the reign of Chongthu-Chongja Era. Contestations among clan members and even with other enemy communities over land and other resources, however, might have compelled the chiefs to evolve a more powerful structure to protect the people. The existence of a strong central authority has been the reason behind the survival of the people during the period. It is to be made clear that existence of chieftainship predates the history of colonialism by two millennia.<sup>12</sup> It only evolves stronger in the past few centuries ago.

### **Land Ownership: Collective or Individual**

In the evolutionary understanding of the Kukis, the notion to whom land belongs is out of question. The subterranean region is claimed to have governed by Chongja and his men whereas the surface of the earth is being governed by Chongthu and his team. Thus the concept of land ownership is not an issue in the primitive past. The inhabitants altogether assumes the rightful owner of the land. The chief undertake the guardianship of its people and all the resources lies under his supervision.

The concept of individual ownership of village resources emerges with the colonial understanding and presentation of land in relation to the Zamindary system of the plains. The colonial government failed to identify the difference from the Zamindary system as the village chief governs the resource of the village, and also receives tributes from villagers in return. However, tributes as mentioned in the chieftainship system are notional in nature. Tributes are paid to Kuki chiefs in recognition of the chief as the head of the village and for ensuring the safety and security of the villagers, besides a kinship obligation to pay tribute to the head of the clan. Not only is the tribute on harvests but also the hunt a villager had. At every hunt the chief is given the head of the animal in recognition as the head of the village. While it is clear that tributes are paid at the will of the individual, the chief took the responsibility of ensuring sufficient supply of food grains for a disadvantageous family who have poor harvest. Thus, tributes paid to the chief is more than fulfilling obligations but also act as a measure of insuring security of food grains during poor harvests.

With the increasing population in due course of time, land started becoming a bone of contention amongst various tribes or within clans in a tribe. As such a well-defined authority, jurisdiction and political institutions assumes importance to protect its people and resources from enemy tribes. However, the contention of chieftainship as having its origin to ward off opposing tribes is a deeply flawed assumption. It was the compelling situations, which demanded a stronger political authority, which ultimately paved way for the rapid rise of authority of Kukis chiefs. The evolution of a strong central authority, thus, guarantees not just the safety and security of the people but also ensure smooth movement of its people from one place to another. Slowly yet steadily chieftainship assumes the principal protector and an indispensable political institution of the people.

Though the actual period of contact with the British was not known, the earliest documented confrontation broke out in 1845 when a group of Kuki militiamen attacked

British subjects in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh (Elly, 1978). In the initial stages it was the policy of the British officials to avoid as much confrontation with the Kukis as meddling with them will bring undesired consequences in furthering their influence. Jenkins contended, 'Our hopes of reclaiming the country appear to rest on these Kukis' (Ray, 1990), signifying the position of the Kukis on the territory under their control. Colonial officers, therefore, befriended Kuki chiefs in ensuring the safety of their subjects. Moreover, it was the contention of British officers that diplomacy with Kuki chiefs means the common people or the villagers on the ground are under better control. Thus the British authority knew that the easier way to draw the support of the people and to legitimize the British policy to the masses was to control the chiefs of the tribe, since the voice of the chief was the voice of the people (Ray, 1990). Thus colonial government mistook the traditional institution of chieftainship and attempted to use it as a measure of controlling the Kuki populace on one hand and tribes under the subjection of Kuki chiefs on the other. Though the effectiveness of the diplomacy played by British officials in controlling warring population seems to bear fruit in colonial records, it paints a wholly different picture if viewed from the perspective of Kuki chiefs.

The use of Kuki chiefs as a 'measure of control' by the colonial officers sounded one-sided if one is to take the logic and accounts of Kuki chiefs. The Kuki chiefs, as the sole authority of the hills, consider maintaining law and order of different communities settling under their jurisdiction as their primary duty since longtime ago. As such in the event of any tribe misbehaving with the other, Kuki chief considers action taken against errant tribes as a necessity to ensure peace in the region. The 'means of control' only happens under certain instances and its generalization does not seem to go well with the independent authority of the chiefs.

It was without doubt that the influence of colonial authority begins to gain momentum by the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The adoption of friendly approach by both the contesting authorities has been evident in the colonial records. As the relationship between the chiefs and the colonial administrators becomes stronger, the nature of chieftainship begins to slowly erode. As it treated other subjects, colonial administration begin to assume the villagers as a subject of the chief. The recognition and further enforcement of privileges through 'annual payments made to the chiefs of the tribe (village)' logically reduced the chiefs to a paid group of special people and their interest became different from that of their own community (Ray, 1990). The public obedience to the authority of the chief which is based on kinship relation begins to be understood otherwise. This could, perhaps, be the beginning of the erosion of the political institution of chieftainship of the Kukis. The gradual increase of power in governing the village and the authority over the distribution of lands for cultivation available at its disposal is believed to have slowly drifted the chief to covertly perceive the possession of land differently against the evolutionary collective ownership. In the course of time the common masses is believed to have lost a sense of belongingness and responsibility it owes to the community. Two propositions are being formulated on the gradual change taking place in the course of time.

The compelling situation of colonial influence and the policy of Kuki chiefs to ward off the influences might have gradually cultivated the Kuki masses to accept whatever the chief feels, without any doubt. No objection was reportedly raised on the appointment of the councilmen through nomination and the introduction of capital punishment for treachery in the Kuki traditional governance. There are possibilities that no objection was raised by any villager on the complete control of land as it was thought to be a measure adopted to check British influence in the territory. The overall control of resources as seen

today could be an outcome of the continuity of complete authority the chief maintains under colonial hegemony.

Second, being head of the village and the clan, the people accepted the words of the chiefs as law. While the villagers consider the chief as representing the collective identity, it is unclear and hard to fathom how the resources of the village are being perceived by the chief. The difference on the understanding to whom village resources belongs between two entities over several decades of colonial rule might have drifted to the level of such magnitude that the ownership of the village resources, land for the matter, becomes a sole subject of the chief, as in the present context. According to Ray, it was the 'responsibility' which ultimately devolve the control and ownership of land as a necessary condition for maintaining the community.

Against the understanding in present form where the chief owns the land, however, there are protagonists of collective ownership who claims individual ownership of Kuki land as a measure to undermine the contribution of Kuki villagers and commoners. In the light of such claims, there arises a pertinent issue, which needs to be addressed meticulously. Kukis' social and political life is a combination of three elements, viz- Chief, Villager and Land. The importance of these elements is such that the absence of any one of them will eventually render the people stateless or without any definite identity. People identify and survive because of the chief and the resources he managed well. In the same pattern, a chief is said to have existed not just because he governs land resources, but the people who stand with him in all matters of life and death. The protagonists' contention that land are discovered, annexed and defended by the people itself under the able leadership of the chief is a reminder that chiefs, villagers and land do not lie in isolation but are indispensable to each other and for the continuity of the identity. Colonial understandings of Kuki village in the light of the Zamindari system have greatly contributed in shaping the way how land is perceived in the Kuki society even at present times. Though colonial writing proves helpful in a certain way, it proves suicidal when dealing with complex institutions such as the case of land holding in the Kuki chieftainship institution. As a matter of fact, land ownership as projected by colonial writers must be deal with sensitivity as its misinterpretation could render its stakeholders, commoners for the matter, at risk.

### **Chieftainship as Understood in the Media Theory Perspectives**

Before delving into the understanding from Media Theory perspectives, it is pertinent to understand the stages that the institution comes through. First, it is the period beginning from the Chongja-Chongthu era till the first time it comes into contact with the colonizers or other tribes. The period of chieftainship that was practiced during this period is considered to be in its pure form. Second, begins the contact with foreigners till the conclusion of the Anglo-Kuki War in 1919. During this period, the need of a strong central authority compelled Kuki chiefs to wield enormous power within their jurisdiction. This was a measure to ensure the people are safe and the Kuki institutions are protected from the onslaught of colonization. During this period a strong enmity develops against the Christianity faith and western education. The third phase begins with the end of the Anglo-Kuki War and continues till India got independent from the yoke of British Empire. This period is what could be classified as the darkest chapter on the Kuki political institution. It was during this period the institution becomes least significant though in existence. It assumes the transitional period as colonial administration takes its root in the hill areas. The fifth phase can be with that of the country's independence till present times.

Though chieftainship is still in existence, it largely lacks the original character. While colonialism remains the general reason for the decline of chieftainship institution, it is pertinent to look into the specifics of the matter. In this regard, media theories are being employed to explain colonial writings taking consideration of the in-depth understanding and emphasis given on information and its perception under different conditions and situations.

According to the Agenda Setting Theory of Mass Media (McCombs & Shaw, 1992), when a particular message is presented continuously as true and relevant, there is likelihood of the message being accepted as true and valid. As the audience does not experience the reality, the tendency of the message being accepted as true and valid is higher. Colonial historiography is such that the presentation of some form of traditional institution, Chieftainship for the matter, as relative to the practices of other institutions like the Zamindari system has set a deeply flawed agenda which still experiences a reverberating effect after hundreds of years. The Kuki chieftainship institution is one such case of a deeply misunderstood one. It has been framed negatively as dictatorial (Hunter, 1879), monarchical (Johnstone, 1896) and despotic (Soppitt, 1887) without any in-depth and rational considerations. The aspect of kinship relations which is the basis of the system has not been taken into account by any writers. Under such circumstances the institution is bound to look despotic and tyrannical.

Post-colonial literature which goes in tune with colonial writings has largely been the manifestation of colonial historiography on one hand and the understanding of chieftainship in the present corrupt form. More recent works terming Kuki chieftainship as authoritarian (Burman, 1977), feudal (Haokip, 2017) or simply incongruent to democratic system is a result of complete denial of kinship-based institution where the primitive society is not tyrannical as is perceived to be (Malinowski, 1947). The projection of the authority of Kuki chiefs as 'absolute' in the village administration without any trace of the evolutionary ideals in the academic discourse have further aggravate the colonial agenda that is being framed against the institution.

Besides the colonial presentation, the non-availability of documents or records of its own to counter the presentation in colonial writings further undermine the democratic nature of the chieftainship institutions. In this regard, the theory of Media Dependency (Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976) may be invoked to explain the underlying phenomena. The proponents of the theory believe the potential for the mass media messages to achieve a broad range of cognitive and behavioral effects will be increased when media systems serve many unique and central information systems. It thus mean to conclude the 'the fewer the source of information in the media world, the more likely the media will affect our minds and thoughts, our attitudes and how we behave in a particular way' (Aggarwal & Gupta, 2002). The understanding of the Kukis and their institutions in the present deviated form is believed to be the manifestation of fewer source of information, which is one-sided in nature. The consequence of fewer and at the same time one-sided information was gradual and immediate. It affects both the masses and the chiefs who constitute two of the three elements of Kuki Chieftainship. The educated Kukis, through the prism of colonial writings, contended chieftainship as autocratic, tyrannical, authoritarian and despotic. It began to be seen as totally inconsistent to the liberal philosophies of modern democracy.

On the other hand, colonial writing becomes the source of drawing legitimacy and authority of the chiefs. To certain chiefs, individual ownership of land, tax as paid to the chief, complete authority in the administration of the village, which colonizers wrongly portrays, becomes the premise of a sanctioned authority. Not to generalize, some village chief begins to take the role of an intermediary between colonial government and the

common masses. The role of certain chiefs as presented in colonial records managed to set a new identity to the institution of chieftainship as merely a middleman between the government and the governed. This makes some to jump to the conclusion that the right of Kuki chiefs and the authority over village resources was legitimized by colonial authorities. While it is a generally accepted belief that though the alliance with the British authorities immensely enhanced the prestige of Kuki chiefs, it would be wholly superficial to conclude that power, authority and legitimacy of Kuki chiefs was granted by colonial administration. The wrong impression could be a result of the availability of one-sided information intended to draw an understanding in a certain way.

While chieftainship receives legitimacy and acceptance amongst its population who professed it, it is surprising that there are no records of colonial historiography that acknowledge the pro-people nature of chieftainship; validating the subjectivity of colonial administration and historiography on Kuki chieftainship. Records at its best describe the institution as an effective mechanism of dealing with the masses on ground. The erroneous presentations of chieftainship by scores of colonial writers, however, fails to set the desired agenda as that is explained by the Hypodermic Needle Theory<sup>13</sup> which considers the masses as passive in accepting whatever is being fed and informed. The only tangible effect was the confusion it created amongst its stakeholders.

Consistency arising between Kuki chiefs and the public on the institution of chieftainship as 'democratic', however, is not free from disagreements on the role it played in the present context. These differences are believed to have arisen from the way information is being perceived differently in colonial literature and oral-traditional knowledge. Individual Difference Theory (Rokeach & DeFleur 1989) opines individual differences as playing an important role in the selection and retention of information. In other words, the way how information is perceived depends on the 'individual needs, attitudes, values, prior beliefs and other cognitive and emotional states of the individual' (Aggarwal & Gupta, 2002). In relation to the theory, conflict regarding the understanding of chieftainship among the public and the chiefs could be an outcome of the 'selective exposure, selective perception and selective retention of information' as propounded by DeFleur and Ball Rokeach. People tend to identify and accept information which is in consonance to their already-held beliefs. In certain case, people also tend to identify itself with certain information which suits their personal interests. The differences arising within the Kuki community on the nature of chieftainship can also be attributed to the public exposure to contrasting information of colonial literature and traditional knowledge on one hand and the varying interest an individual have on the other. In the absence of systematic traditional information, however, colonial literature assumes significance within and outside the community. Thus the image, position and authority of Kuki chieftainship have been largely understood from the colonial writings. In the process, colonial records has been used and exploited to target the traditional democracy of the Kukis. Exclusivity on the reliance either of colonial writing or oral source alone will always prove futile on the mission to reconnect the present form to the unique democratic institution in its originality.

The independence of India in 1947 does not relive the people of colonial influences. While the government at the centre is on the process of empowering grassroots level local governance, chieftainship as effective local self-governance does not receive due attention citing incongruence to democratic ideals; owing to the negative influence colonial writings set on the institution. In the meantime, chieftainship begins to be exploited and used as a means of drawing electoral favor in newly republic of India. The increasing number of chiefs and settlements after independence could well be attributed to the influence of colonial writings and their presentations of chiefs as having absolute authority of the

village setup. The notion of the chief having absolute authority in the village and on the resources he governs is a manifestation of an agenda framed and constructed by colonial authority.

## Conclusion

Discourse on chieftainship has been an interesting subject since independent India among academics and right-based groups. It has become a hotly debated one amongst the traditionalists and champions of western democracy. While the traditionalist, or the chiefs in particular, lacks the understanding of its deviation from the system's originality, the protagonists for the abolition of chieftainship neither take the 'cultural and kinship' consideration of which the institution is founded. The protagonists' stance has been based purely on the works of colonial writers, which is totally devoid of the cultural perspective of the people in question. As a measure to fairly present a particular institution of a tribe, in-depth understanding of the social life, which has more to do with the kinship relation, has to be given priority. As such, framing chieftainship institution as autocratic and despotic is a deeply flawed understanding which amount to the denial of the traditional democracy of the Kukis. The law of primogeniture in the inheritance of chieftainship from generation down the line should not be gauged from the monarchical systems, which are characterized by the seizure of power, suppression of opponents and imposition of martial laws. Chieftainship is more of a responsibility given to a chief as a head of a clan or lineage rather than a privilege ascribed or obtained. Thus, chieftainship should be recognized as a traditional democratic system as that of the Panchayati Raj<sup>14</sup> system of communities in India.

However, it is without doubt that chieftainship has lost its democratic character over time. Against its evolutionary stage, the basis on which the institution has been laid has received least attention in the present times. This can be well attributed to the 'agenda framed', which described the position with absolute authority. The desire for power and influence by the chief is another reason for the deviation of the practice. Colonial authority's notion of 'pleasing the chief is pleasing the subject' becomes so evident at certain times, elections for instance, where the intending candidates have least concern for the general voters but the chief. Misuse of power, which even happens in a well-defined system, happens to creep up under certain circumstances.

The abolition and replacement of the age-old practice has been initiated by successive government in the state of Manipur but failed to get desired response. The Manipur Village Authority in Hill Areas Act of 1956 was passed in the state assembly with the objective of replacing the chieftainship with an elected council headed by chairman. The Act could not materialize with stiff opposition from the public. Another bill was introduced in 2015, it met the same fate due to opposition. The regulations were nothing more than chieftainship in its originality; the only difference being the law of primogeniture in heading the council is to be replaced with an elected or a nominated chairman. The blind champion of state regulation over traditional chieftainship self-governance is nothing but the lack of understanding people have on its evolutionary democratic set-up. In many cases the dislike against the traditional institution seeded from personal enmity with the village chief. As mentioned earlier, the institution when devoid of its originality is bound to look despotic or tyrannical at certain times. However, the question on the institution should not precede or overtake the issue of individual differences an individual maintains under any circumstances. The unlikely nature of certain chiefs should not be generalized

in such a way that it altogether undermines chiefs who at its best profess the institution in its pure form.

The work here is not necessarily an argument for the reinstatement of chieftainship in its originality. It is rather a measure to rewrite history in the perspective of the traditional-kinship understanding, which is a wholly denied area in colonial writings. Arguments for the adoption of chieftainship in its evolutionary character will be of little help, if not futile, in the present context. This is more so evident in the light of the changing norms and values in the social system. Hunting and cultivation of food crops as the sole engagement in the past has now been largely replaced by the reliance on the secondary and tertiary means of earning and making fortunes. Maintenance of law and order, which was the subject of the chief and his council, has been substituted by a legal-state authority. Moreover, all matters related to the well-being and development of the village lies in the good hands of the state. Under such conditions, the position of the chief and the institution is bound to be less significant however hard it tries to maintain it in present times. Conformity, therefore, to the change taking place in the system will not only serve the continuity of the institutions but also act as a measure of drawing legitimacy amongst the public in a long run.

As mentioned earlier, colonial remnants still acted as a catalyst in dividing the colonized even after 70 years of India's independence. This happened more so to the Kukis who did not conform to the Imperial designs. The seed of animosity with other communities, division on clan lines, and undue classification of Kukis as Old Kukis and New Kukis which colonial historiography emphasized, has done more harm in the ethnic-conscious region of northeast India. While disapproving colonial writings on the term 'Kuki', its origin and settlement of the people itself, contestation arising on the nature of chieftainship is one of the agenda that has been set rolling in the colonial framework. A generally agreed notion that the institution is founded on the kinship relation and exhibit democratic character is yet to be located in colonial historiography. The absence of any colonial records presenting chieftainship institution as people-friendly reveals the colonial agenda to delegitimize the traditional institution of Kuki chieftainship. Conflict on the matter will persist as long as discourses are based on colonial historiography.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> A traditional local self-governance of the Kukis, where the chief is the head of the village assisted by his council of ministers, either elected or nominated for a certain period of time.
- <sup>2</sup> 'Kukis' are an indigenous people inhabiting the adjoining areas of India, Myanmar and Bangladesh. For the study, the term Kuki is meant to include Chins of Chin Hills, Myanmar and Mizos of Mizoram, India and Bawms and its cognate communities of Bangladesh.
- <sup>3</sup> 'Haosa' is a local term of the Chief. It is equivalent to 'Lal' which is a word widely used to refer Kuki Chief.
- <sup>4</sup> 'Semang-Pachong' is meant to refer to the council of the village, which is headed by the Village Chief. 'Haosa-Upa' is an informal term meant to refer to the Chief and his council of Ministers.
- <sup>5</sup> Independent and not-for-profit, the Kuki Research Forum promotes and generates objective research, discussion and ideas on issues affecting the Kukis around the world. Founded in 2009 and is registered under the Government of Manipur. Regd. No. 21 of 2017.
- <sup>6</sup> Haosapi literally means 'Lady chief', thus the cave has some association with feminine gender. Some people called it Haosabi Cave, a corrupted word to draw political mileage.
- <sup>7</sup> Wave Theory of Migration is such that human beings in its primitive form migrated and get dispersed in all directions from a single point. Push and Pull factors might have equally contributed to the process, but there are no specific 'Pull' factors, which drive people to move in a certain direction. The Wave or the Disperse Theory is derived from the nature of Kukis and its settlement in present times. The general contention that 'Khul' lies in the adjoining areas of Myanmar, Mizoram and Manipur; and the proximity of Kuki settlements in all directions from Khul/ Sinlung stands as the basis of the Theory. Unpublished work of the Author.
- <sup>8</sup> It is the earliest known record believed to have been maintained by the Meiteis, another community settling alongside the Kukis.

- <sup>9</sup> Mi-Upa is a term given to the eldest male of a family. It could also mean to signify the head of a clan through a male line.
- <sup>10</sup> A land ownership system widely practiced during British rule of India. Under this system, a Zamindar assumes the owner of the land and collect tax from peasants.
- <sup>11</sup> On April 23, 1891, a battle was fought at Khongjom between Manipuri Forces and British Forces, which the latter prevailed; ensuring Manipur under the dominion of the British Crown.
- <sup>12</sup> Pooyas, the historical records of Meitiei Kings, which mentions two Kuki Chiefs -Kuki Achouba and Kuki Ahongba, is dated back to 33 AD.
- <sup>13</sup> It was a theory having its origin during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is used synonymous to Magic Bullet Theory.
- <sup>14</sup> Panchayati Raj is a traditional local self-governance of Indian villages, which has been in practice since ancient times. The system left unattended during the British Raj. However, an Act of the Parliament in 1959 recognizes and empowers the functioning of the institution as grassroots governance of local people of India.

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