

UNDERMINING TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP: THE CAUSE OF THE ANGLO KUKI WAR, 1917-1919

Thangkhohal Haokip Research Scholar, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong (Meghalaya)

Abstract

The Anglo-Kuki War (1917–1919) was a significant armed uprising led by the Kuki tribes against the British colonial rule in northeastern India. This article explores the root causes of the conflict, with a focus on the systematic undermining of traditional Kuki leadership by the British administrator. The imposition of foreign governance structures, forced recruitment into labor corps during World War I, and disregard for the authority of hereditary tribal chiefs collectively eroded the indigenous socio-political fabric. This disruption provoked widespread resistance, culminating in a coordinated tribal war aimed at preserving cultural identity and political autonomy. By examining colonial administrative policies and their impact on Kuki society, the study highlights the war as a form of anti-colonial resistance rooted in the defense of traditional leadership and indigenous sovereignty.

Key-words: Anglo-Kuki War, Labor Corps, Traditional leadership, Tribal chiefs, World War I

Introduction

The first world war broke out in Europe and many parts of the world from 1914-1919 and the British ruler in India tried to recruit manpower in the form of porters from sturdy hill tribes like the Kuki, Naga and Kacharies, etc. in the Northeast region. For this, the task was assigned to Higgins, the then political agent of Manipur who tried to convince the chiefs to help the war as laborers in place like France and Palestine. The proposal was rejected by the Kuki chiefs as they felt it humiliating to work as an ordinary coolie in unknown land where rumor spread that none would return home. Higgins even brought eight barrels of English wine for ceremonial presentation to the chiefs and also tempted by saying that if they would agree to give the required manpower for used in battle front, a nicely built house and a good gun would be presented to each of the main chiefs. But the Kuki chiefs turned down this proposal with contempt and did not touch the wine offered by the English.¹ All meetings between the British and the Kuki chiefs failed and it led to ill feelings and finally burst out in what is called the Anglo-Kuki war of 1917-1919 in Manipur and in surrounding regions against British colonial authority.

However, before the arrival of the British, the Kukis were politically independent and self-sufficient in economy. But the arrival of the colonial administrator in Manipur by the later part of nineteenth and early twentieth century caused considerable resentment among the Kukis and the chiefs in particular as they enjoyed considerable authority within their own jurisdiction. This new administrative system has contradicted their customs and cultures which also undermined their identity and freedom. Thus, the British policy to control over the hill tribes has been opposed by the Kukis which led to the revolt against the mighty British empire in the early nineteenth century in the corner of the north eastern part of India. Therefore, with the advent of colonial rule in Manipur, the traditional law has undergone changes. The new administrative system like labor recruitment, corrupted *lambus*, *pothang* system and house tax as mentioned by Ashok Kumar Ray led to the causes for the Kuki rising.² This has affected the hill tribal people socially, economically and politically. Therefore the present paper attempts to answer the following question: How did the Kuki chief under traditional customary laws govern the early societies? How far the colonial governance affected and undermined the role of Kuki chiefs and to what extent the chiefs were taking part in the war.

Traditional leadership structure

The word 'Kuki' first appears in Rawlin's writing of the "Crucis or Mountaineers of Tipra" in Asiatic Researcher in 1792.³ G.A. Grierson states that the word 'Kuki' is an Assamese or Bengali term, applied to various hill tribes such as the Lusheis, Rangkhols, Thadous etc. He further says the word 'Kuki' and 'Chin' are synonymous and are both used by many hill tribes.⁴ Elly states that the Paite,

Thadou, Lhlangum, Changsen, Sihreem, Hralte, Vaiphei etc. were people of the same race, speaking dialects of the same language, wearing the same dress, and having the same customs, form of politics, and religious belief.⁵ Carey and Tuck observed that “The Kukis of Manipur, the Lushais of Bengal and Assam, and the Chins originally lived in what we known as Tibet are one and the same stock, their form of government, method of cultivation, manners and customs, beliefs and traditions, all point to one origin.⁶ There is a popular traditional account that had been handed down through generations that the Kukis came out from the bowels of the earth or cave called *Chinlung* or *Sinlung* or *Khul*, which is generally believed to be located at somewhere around China.

The village is the highest political unit among the Kukis and its administrative system is based on the chieftainship governance model wherein *Haosa*/village chief along with his *Semang-Pachong* (council of ministers) are the administrative and political leaders. The Kuki political system or institution as also among other primitive societies is based on kinship relation.⁷ This system of political institution based on kinship relation is term as a mere social organization, which is distinguished from the political organization of the civilized community.⁸ Each tribe claims exclusive rights to the land that it occupies. All people living there are subject to the chief, as head of the local government, and only by moving away can they escape his control. Outsiders may not settle in the territory without his permission, and he places them where he wishes; henceforth they too are his subjects, and if they disobeyed him, they may be expelled. He also regulates the distribution and use of the land, and must ensure that every married man receives private holdings for residence and cultivation.⁹

Administration of justice, enforcement of executive function, maintenance of social practices and customary laws, including religious performance are the area of village administration under the chieftainship and his council of minister or *Semang-Pachong*.¹⁰ The Kuki chief is the sources of perennial law and he wields the modern three organs of government namely, legislative, executive and judicial powers.¹¹ He rules independently within his jurisdiction without any superior authority in the pre-colonial period. Thus, chieftainship has come to stay as an institution which is the perennial source of custom and tradition, and the mechanism by which such laws are interpreted in the social system that makes them a living force enabling to maintain their identity inheriting a rich cultural heritage. This system in every matter relating to economy, political, religious, judiciary, etc. has its base on the proper interpretation of the customary law and tradition.¹²

The power and authority of the chief is reflected on his ownership of land and natural resources within his geographical jurisdiction. The chief hold vast land for shifting cultivation and foliage. The villagers cultivated and utilize the land as per requirement and in return, they pay a tribute called ‘*Changseo*’ (basketful of paddy) to the chief. The theory behind this is that the land in which any Kuki cultivates belongs to a chief. This *changseo* is not taken by the Haokip chiefs, instead they take *belpeng*, a jar of rice-beer.¹³ It is also an obligatory to offer the right hind leg (*samal*) of wild animals killed by the hunter. The penalty for failure to pay *samal* to the chief is one *mithun*.¹⁴ The chief is also entitled to receive tax like *vohkai* (pig tax), *ahkai* (hen tax), *selkotkai* (tax on buying mithun), *selgam-potman* (tax on selling mithun). Carey and Tuck observed that the Chiefs are lords of the soil within their boundaries, and, if any aliens wish to enter a chief’s territory and work his land, they must pay him the customary tithes. A Chief, besides the tithes which he receives as lord of the soil, receives tribute from tribes, villages, or families which he has conquered.¹⁵

However, unlike other tribal chieftainship, Kuki chief naturally is a clan head (*Mi U-pa*) and his chieftainship is hereditary. The genealogical record maintain by the tribe also signifies the legitimacy of the rule and authority of the chiefs.¹⁶ The chief himself is, on the contrary, invariably succeeded by his eldest son, for whom, should he be a minor, the kingdom is managed by a council of ministers. In default of sons or no son, the chief’s brother succeeds, and failing him the nearest male relative takes the *guddee*, the Salique law being in full force.¹⁷ These gives prestige to the royal line and validates the right and legitimacy of the chief. Therefore, other than the hereditary succession, genealogy happened to be one of the most important based of authority in Kuki society.¹⁸ His house was the shelter, house of the community, the orphans and the indigent persons lived there and get food in return for labor. He led his people in war and, he was expected to be the first to attack and last to

retreat.¹⁹ The people lived under the autocratic ruled of their own chief and therefore invariably combined together for any purpose, defensive or offensive.²⁰

Colonial disruption of traditional leadership

The treaty of Yandaboo paved way for the Britishers to interfered in Manipur's internal affairs. They conquered Manipur in 1891 and ruled till 1947. It was not annexed to British India and was imposed the feudal rule of the raja with the help of a Manipur state durbar confined on the small valley of Manipur. The administration on the hill tribes were under the British political agents. However, the consolidation of the British control over this tiny state begun with the establishment of the office of the British political agent. The administration of hill areas was therefore entrusted with single officer and was excluded from the general administrations scheme of the state. He has the powers equivalent to those of the magistrate of the first class under Indian Criminal Procedure Court of 1898, and so far, as the criminal justice was concerned, he tried all criminal cases in which a member of Manipur hill tribes or a native of the Lushai, Chin or the Naga.²¹

It is well known that the office of the political agent was to preserve friendly relations between Manipur and British and as a medium of communication between the two. Another duty was to prevent border feuds and disturbance which might lead to hostilities between Manipur and Burmese. It was also mentioned that in every important matter the political agent would receive instruction from the secretary to the government of Bengal in political department and with regard to the relationship with the Maharaja of Manipur, it was mentioned that the political agent is dependent on the wish and pleasure of Maharaja for everything. But the power of political agent became more and more powerful because of the internecine quarrel among the princes of Manipur which gave an opportunity to interfere directly or indirectly in every domestic affair of the state. The power of political agent increased tremendously because of the strong personalities of the incumbents like Gordon, McCulloch and James Johnstone.

The British political agent, Major Maxwell announced the abolition of *lallup* and slavery system on 29th April 1892 and was substitute with a house tax of Rs.2 per homestead in the valley and Rs.3 per house per annum in the hill territory in 1907. The hill areas were separated from the general administration on the valley that 'the hill people were not Manipuris and have entirely different customs and languages. To quote Hutton words as reproduce in Gangte,²² that the Kukis were the monarch in hills surrounding the valley of Imphal and their relationship with the Raja of Manipur till the outbreak of the Anglo-Kuki war in 1917 was one of mutual respect and understanding on equal terms and the administration in the hill areas of Manipur state is not very close, and as they (Kuki) were ruled by their own organized chiefs and treated as they had been in the past, at any rate, by the Manipur state as allies. The chief or head man of the tribal village were entrusted with the administration of their own village. They used to collect the hill house tax and submit to the state. This imposition was a great burden to them. Singh²³ writes that, persuading a chief to pay one's own house tax by offering him a jar or *zu* record, the tribesmen had contributed about Rs. 70,000 a year in the form of house tax but in return received nothing, either financially or in development works. The colonial also still practiced the *pothang* systems in the hill areas while it was abolished in the valley in 1913. It was of two kinds- *pothang bekari* and *pothang senkai*. According to the first, the hill people were under obligation to carry food and baggage or to make bridge or roads and built bungalows without payment for the officers touring the hill areas. Under the second system, each household was to subscribe money, chicken, eggs or other domestic animals to feed the touring officers free of cost.²⁴

In practical, the *lallup* system was the de facto reimposed on the hill tribes in a more stringent form. This system undermines the chief powers and effected the traditional economy of the Kukis. Besides, they also introduced a tax called *Thil Kotkai* which is an export fee of Rs .1 paid for a single barrel gun, Rs 2 for a double barrel gun and Rs.1 for a *Dahpi* (large gong). The idea is again that the chief's prestige is reduced, and in the case of guns, it is obvious that in the old days considerable persuasion would have to be brought to bear on the chief before he would dream of allowing one to leave his village.²⁵ Even though, the political agent was a colonial officer who were assigned to deal with hill people, the direct contact with the hill people was made by petty officials called *lambu*,

recruited from the people of valley. This *lambu* in the pre-colonial was an important petty official for the rural areas. Under the colonial Britisher, they were interpreter, a process server and a peon combined in one. They were employed in all aspects of the colonial administration, keeping the law and order, administration of justice, supervision of public works. In overall, he was the ear and eye of the government. The Kukis who felt that the *Lambus*, who are not more than a peon in the pre-colonial period, treated them as their subordinate. Therefore, chiefs who always tried to maintain an equal status resented the concept of *Lambus* superiority.

However, in the midst of the WW1, the British raise labor corps for the second time in the hill tribes of Manipur. The then political agent Mr. Higgins in 1917 passed an order that each village of the Kuki had to supply one collier for each two houses. The Kuki resisted to joined the collies on the grounds that it was their customary practices to bring the dead man's head where ever he died. There was a rumor that the collies were without proper accommodation and were exposed to diseases like cholera, pneumonia, dysentery etc. Thus, the service for labour corps to the unknown land beyond the sea was generally known by the hill people as 'detrimental to the health and spirits.'²⁶ The Kukis had a very strong concept of death that was central to their cultural worldview, which they beliefs in life after death. For those who died in *thise* or unnatural death like accident, cholera, yaws, leprosy, smallpox or in battle or childbirth, death ritual was not performed.²⁷ Their souls wander around the world and could not reach *mithikho* or dead men's village to joined back their family and become slave to the one who killed them. Besides, the Kukis were one of the predominant tribes who commanded respects as they were well dispersed on the hills surrounding Manipur and spread across the region extending into hills adjoining Burma.²⁸ They followed patriarchal and was male dominated society. In the traditional sawm institution, boys practiced *bontol-kho* (wrestling), *kung-kal* (high jump), *suh-kho/tiengcha-kho* (spear-throwing), and therefore men are primarily concerned with hunting wild games or to go to war etc. while household chores including agricultural works are mainly done by the women which men regarded as menial and below dignity. They regarded themselves as superior warriors which they therefore considered labour job below their status and inferior to that of warrior. Gangte states that the Kukis were a nation of hunters and warriors, rules as a nation by their principal hereditary chiefs or rajahs, but divided into clans, each under its own chiefs.²⁹ Perhaps, the Kukis would accept the offer if the Britishers offer them as an armed combatant. Therefore, the rejection of labour force by the Kuki chiefs which led to armed conflict was British misunderstanding of the Kukis pride in physical and cultural worldview. Anyway, this system effect and undermine the pride and power of the Kuki chiefs which led to armed resistance against the Britishers.

Outbreak of the war

To end the matter regarding labour corps, Ngulkhup Haokip (chief of Lonpi/mombi) met Higgins at Kakching, Chengjapao (chief of Aisam and Pache (chief of Chassad) visited Imphal for negotiation but were imprisoned. Further, Tintong and Lhukholal request them not to recruit labor corps from the Kukis and performed *salam* (highest Kuki customary fines) with Rs. 1500, three gongs and *mithun*. All this is in vain, Higgins misunderstanding of the Kuki cultural worldview was the central opposition to labour recruitment and he however ordered them to pay Rs. 10 as per house tax instead of Rs. 3 and to deposit all the guns with him.³⁰ The Kukis who regarded themselves as superior warrior resented Higgins action and took it as a challenge to his stern warning. For instance, the Kuki chiefs begun resisting the British by deterring their people and other hill tribes and stopped paying the hill house tax. Khotinthang Sitlhou, Chief of Jampi even refused to permit the state *lambus* to enter his village, the baggage of one *lambu* was seized by him and his personal effects scattered.³¹ Ngulkhup Haokip sent message to his neighbouring village that if they sent collies, their village would be burned and their women and children be killed. Arrogant as he was, Higgins proceeded to *Lonpi* to punished the recalcitrant chief on 17th October 1917, but on failure to arrest the chief, he burned the village to the ground. This news angered all the major Kuki chiefs who performed war rites such as *Sajam-Lhah* (sending piece meat to absentees and allies), *sathin-salung-neh* (feasting on liver and heart) and *hansa-neh* (feasting for courage) and declared war against the British.

The North Eastern hills or the Aisan area which the British termed as ‘unadministered areas’ were under Chengjapao DOUNGEL (Piba/Head of the Kuki). His authority spread over the region which comprised of Kanjang, Akhan and Meluri areas of present Nagaland. It also further extended upto the adjoining areas of Chassad presently under the Chaingai sub-division of Ukhurl district of Manipur. He disliked the imposition of labour and house tax which undermined the authority of the chiefs and he further even restricted their freedom. In opposed to colonial governance structure, Chengjapao revolt against the British known as the Aisan Rebellion of 1910. The opportunity to rise up against the British occur during WWI when the news of labor recruitment was made mandate by the British. He commanded the North Eastern hills covering the north eastern areas of Manipur, parts of Naga hills and Somra tracts. He was assisted by Nguljaleng Singson (Kanjang chief and Sutmang Singson. The Eastern sector or Chassad areas were under Lhukhomang Haokip (Piba/Head of Haokip clan).

The South Easter hills were under Ngulbul Haokip (Longja chief and Piba/Head of Mangvung, sub-clan of Haokip) and Ngulkhup Haokip (chief of Lonpi/Mombi). Ngulbul was the only chief to have died fighting in the Anglo-Kuki War. He in collaboration with Ngulkhup rallied other clans neighbouring Longja, such as Ana and Lamkang to resist the government’s order for collies. The North Wester hills were under Tintong Haokip (Laijang chief) and Khotinthang Sitlhou (Jampi chief and Piba/Head of Sitlhou clan). A fiery speech of Tintong in Octan meeting on 10-11th October of 1917 was ‘war is not meant for women and children, therefore anyone who think like a women or children come forth and show yourself now. As for me I do not care for anyone consent, for to die in war against British is death so too, to die in France is also death. We are not born to be slaves, therefore brothers in arms, lets rise and take oath to fight the white men.’³²

Therefore, the Anglo-Kuki War occur not merely from the immediate spark of forced labor recruitment during World War I, but from deeper-seated frustrations rooted in the systematic erosion of traditional Kuki authority under British colonial administration. By imposing foreign land revenue systems, house taxes, and demanding labor contributions without consent, the British not only disrupted the Kukis’ economic autonomy but also jeopardized their longstanding institution of chieftainship. The most serious incident in the history of Manipur and its relation with the hill subject was the Kuki rebellion. Commencing in the close days of 1947, the war cost 28 lakhs of rupees to quell, and in the course of it, many lives were lost.³³ It grew therefore into the largest series of military operations conducted on this side of India.³⁴

Conclusion

The Anglo-Kuki war of 1917-1919 though short, was a pivotal event in the history of Manipur marked by resistance, conflict and ultimately led to the subjugation of the Kuki people under colonial British ruled. The war had a profound impact leading to political, social, economic and cultural changes. It has a far reaching consequences in the history of Manipur. There was overall reorganization in the state administration. In his letter to the viceroy on 19th April 1919, the chief commissioner wrote “we must send British sub-divisional officers at suitable places in the hills. These men, working under the president, would reside in the areas all the year round, open up roads, administer simple justice, set up schools and hospitals, and generally act as fathers to the hill men and restore their confidence in the British raj.”³⁵ After the victory of British in the Anglo-Kuki war, they set up a new scheme in which three new sub-divisions were formed who was directly accountable to the president of the durbar. The south-west area with headquarters at Churachandpur under B.C. Gasper, the north-west with temporary headquarters at Tamenglong under William Shaw and the north-east with Ukhurl as its headquarters under L.L. Peter. Thus, after the end of the Anglo-Kuki war in 1919, the hill people were for the first time brought under the intensified political and administrative control of the imperial British power.

The British arrested all the prominent Kuki chiefs where they suffered for many years. The absence of this chief made the Kuki people leaderless and brought downfall to Kuki supremacy and sovereignty. Many villages were burnt down and livestock were destroyed. In addition to this, the stoppage of agriculture during the war led to several famine. The war took many lives including women and children leaving many to orphan, widows and widowers. Those who were in concentration camps were kept under unhygienic conditions. Thus, diseases like cholera, malaria and smallpox

spread out that took many lives.³⁶ Even after the war, the British continued raiding many Kuki villages which resulted in the disintegration of all big settlements into smaller, weaker and scattered which resulted in poverty and backwardness of the people.

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