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## Language and Nomenclature Imbrolio among the Kukis

Thongkholal Haokip, Ph.D.

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### ***Kuki* – A Generic Term**

The word “Kuki” is a generic classification of ethnic groups that spread throughout the Northeastern region of India, Northwest Burma and Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh. B.C. Allen, et al., describe the home of the Kukis as “mountainous tracts lying between Burma, Manipur, Cachar, and Arakan” (Allen, et al., 1979: 618).

In Northeast India the Kukis are present in all the states except Arunachal Pradesh. This dispersal across international borders is mainly attributed to the British colonial policy (Haokip, Thongkholal, 2010). Like some other tribes, the term “Kuki” is given by outsiders. Adam Scott Reid said that “Kuki” is a Bengali word meaning “hill people” or “highlander” (Reid, 1893: 5).

### **Kuki Tribes**

According to Lt. Colonel J. Shakespear the term “Kuki” has a definite meaning and includes Aimol, Chothe, Chiru, Koireng, Kom, Purum, Anal, Lamkang, Moyon, Monsang, Gangte, Vaiphei, Simte, Paite, Thadou, Hmar, Zou etc (Shakespear, 1912: 8).

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The Kukis are blessed with custom, culture and lingual affinity. G.A. Grierson stated that the tribes connoted by Kuki are Anals, Aimols, Chirus, Gangte, Hmars, Koms, Lushais, Paites, Purums, Raltes, Suktes, Thadou, etc., each able to understand another's dialect (Grierson, 1967: 2-3). C.A. Soppitt also asserted that all the tribes grouped under "Kuki" "have so much in common, both in language, manners, customs, and system of internal government, as to render it absolutely necessary to take them together" (Soppitt, 1976: vi).

While most colonial historians divided the Kukis into Old and New, Soppitt conjured that the official terms "old" and "new" Kuki should not be used and the term "Kuki" itself is too well established to be given up. Recognising the common ethnicity and identity of the Kukis, the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950 of the Government of India placed all the Kukis under "Any Kuki Tribes" in the states of Assam, Tripura, Mizoram, and Meghalaya. While in the state of Manipur they are recognised in their respective tribes.

### **The Plight of the Kukis: Mutual Intelligibility and Political Disunity**

Lingual and cultural affinity among the various Kuki tribes and clans has not been taken into advantage to gain political mileage. Rather, the assertion of other nomenclatures such as Khulmi, Zomi, etc. has impeded their political aspirations. The recognition of Thadou and its contestations by groups who speak the same dialect in the aftermath has been detrimental to Kuki nation-building, since the group of people speaking the same dialect and recognised as "Thadou" are the majority, which their unity would lead to the consolidation of Kuki.

In this paper brief concepts of language, nomenclature and nation-building and nomenclature imbroglio are discussed. While there is a debate on contesting nomenclatures among the Chin, Kuki and Mizos, this paper is restricted to William Shaw's "Thadou" and "Kuki" (Shaw, 1929).

### **Introducing the Concepts**

Language plays a prominent role among the markers of ethnic identity. It is the first and ultimate expression of the bond that exists between a group of people. During nineteenth century the pursuit for political independence in Europe was primarily based on the existence of a common language. There have been exceptions, like Ireland, where efforts towards nation-building were based, not on language, but on territory, religion and history. However, not all communities defined by language could be given political autonomy or independence, either because they were geographically dispersed or because such a solution ran counter to the strategic interests of the major powers (Safran, 2005: 44). Nevertheless, language has remained one of the main instruments of nation-building.

The concept of nation is often debated among political scientist. Nationality is a cultural and ethical term applied to people having common racial stock, common culture, language, religion, custom and traditions, and common history. While many of the components of

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nationality, such as religion, language and symbols, may be older than history, the development and conceptualisation of nation is related to the development of modern industrial states and nationalist movements in the eighteenth century Europe. R.N. Gilchrist observes that “Nation is the state plus nationality” (Gilchrist, 1921: 26). However, protagonists of sub-national identities use nation for nationality.

### **Language as a Defining Feature**

Language has been the focus for unity during the time of German unification in the second half of the nineteenth century, and even European nationalism was taking a linguistic turn (Blommaert & Verschueren, 364). The survival of a nation and the success of its drive towards nation-state status are predicated upon the existence of a language that its people can speak, and more importantly, read and write.

Recognising the importance of language, Claude Ake argues that if the different cultural entities within the political system are so profoundly dissimilar that they cannot communicate with one another, mutual trust and a sense of collective identity cannot develop (Ake, 1967: 487). Karl Deutsch’s “communication theory” stress on communication among persons, cities, ethnic groups, language communities, and countries. To him the success or failure of integration depends in part upon the compatibility of autonomous responses as well as on the distribution and balance of range of social transaction, and of the streams of experiences to which they give rise (Deutsch, 1954: 4).

### **Colonial Nation-Building**

Nationalism and the drive for nation-building gave rise to most nation-states that exist today. The premise was that each nation, having a shared culture, history, language and blood, was entitled to have its own state. This type of nationalism led to the reunification of Italy in 1861 and Germany in 1871 and to the breakup of Austria-Hungary in 1918.

This process of nation building was successful where governments were relatively capable, where powerful states decided to make room for new entrants, and where the population of new states was not deeply divided (Ottaway, 2002: 17).

Colonial rulers formed new states as they conquered land, tinkered with boundaries, old political and leadership structures, and eventually replaced them with new countries and governments. Most of today's collapsed states, such as Somalia and Afghanistan, are a product of colonial nation building and to many ethnic nationalities, like the Kukis, are nation destroying.

### **The Kukis in the Colonial period**

Various colonial writers describe Kuki settlements in the present North Cachar Hills, Karbi Anglong in Assam and Manipur as “Kuki Country” and “Kuki Hills”. Since the advent of

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the British in India and Burma, the Kukis resisted the colonial rule until their subjugation in the Kuki Rising, 1917-1919. In 1860 the Kukis in Tripura plundered several villages and butchered about 185 British subjects and carried off a number of villagers as captives. Such raids, which were directed against the British, were commonly known as the “great Kuki invasion of 1860” (Roychowdhury, 1976: 60).

The Kukis also resisted the British which intended to raise Labour Corps from various Kuki clans inhabiting the hill regions of the native state of Manipur. Due to the repeated attempts of the British to raise Labour Corps among the Kuki clans, violence erupted in December 1917 which is recorded in colonial accounts as Kuki Rebellion (Shakespeare, 1980: 209-210). However, the Kukis regarded it as a “war of independence”.

E.W. Dun categorically observed that “The word ‘clan’ is undoubtedly the best to apply to the Kuki subdivisions” (Dun, 1992: 291). Clannishness was very much prevalent among the Kukis during the colonial period. Alexander Mackenzie also observed that “These Kukis are the most clannish of all the tribes with whom we have come in contact on this frontier...” (Mackenzie, 2008: 83).

Clannishness among them and their constant contact with the colonial administrators resulted in the naming of the dialect in question as Thadou and the publication of *Thado Grammar* by T.C. Hodson in 1905. Subsequently, Rev. William Pettigrew named the language in question as Thadou in 1926, followed by Longkhobel Kilong (1922) and Ngulhao Thomsong (*Lekhabul, Thadou Kuki First Primer*, 1927) as Thadou Kuki.

The publication of “Notes on Thadou Kuki” in Asiatic Society, 1928 by William Shaw and as a book form in the following year can be said to be the point of disintegration of the various Kuki tribes. The remark of William Shaw in his work that the Thadous were a very important people among the Kukis and the cognate tribes were “under the wings of Thados” was interpreted as implying that these communities were the subjects of Thadou. This instilled apprehension of the other tribes being dominated by the Thadous.

### **Aftermath of the Indian Independence**

The post-independence period witnessed the resurgence of various tribes in Northeast India. The coming of Christianity and the advancement of English education led to the rise of small middle class among the tribes and the rise of ethnic consciousness among them. With British patronage the Naga Club was formed in 1918, which was the first attempt at organised political opinion in the Naga Hills.

The Kukis were not far behind in such consciousness. They were fully aware of the various aspects of the vexing problems of the hills and the valley, and therefore pledge to be under Manipur if only conditions are satisfactory. After independence the Kuki National Assembly (KNA) demanded a separate state for the Kukis within India. In this regard the KNA submitted several memoranda to the Central Government but yielded no response.

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Among other things, the unsolicited remark of William Shaw on the various Kuki clans and distasteful utterances, *Kuki-Siki*, *Kuki-Makhai* by a leader of KNA encouraged the assertion of each tribe's independent existence and formation of various organisations. Not least important among these reasons is the listing of various communities as distinct entities in the Presidential Order of Scheduled Tribes. Early District Council elections also led to the assertion of distinct identity among various communities. Providing distinct spellings to words and "peculiar" sounds in the speech of various communities in the adopted Roman script writing system further intensified the independent identity consciousness. We should also recognise that there have always been inter-communal humorous jokes against each other among these tribal communities. In addition, the presentation of the arguments in favour of the term *Kuki* by the proponents of the common term *Kuki* created misunderstanding and mistrust among the members of the Thadou community. Many groups emerged in the 1950s and early 1960s like the Khulmi National Union, Hmar Congress and Hmar National Union, Paite National Council, Gangte Tribal Union, etc.

A Kuki historian T.S. Gangte rightly describe that,

In the past, till the end of British rule in India, different ethnic groups did not object to being identified as Kuki when inter-tribal feuds were the practice of the time. The term 'Kuki' gave security and protection, and was an expression of solidarity and identity. After independence the Indian constitution provides special provisions for growth and development of the weaker section of the people. These groups no longer feel the necessity of being called 'Kuki'. They feel that they should avail to the fullest extent possible of the privilege being accorded to them by the constitution of India. The sum total result was that while recognised tribes wanted to maintain their separate identities (Gangte, 1993: 231).

Taking advantage of the constitutional provisions by the various Kuki tribes brought about general divisions and weakness. It only resulted not only in restraining the political strength but also being looked down upon by the neighbouring communities.

Internal bickering started among a Kuki tribe since the early 1970s with the publication of the "Kuki Holy Bible" on June 20, 1971, by the Bible Society of India, Bangalore. The translation of the "Old Testament" by Rev. Dr. T. Lunkim was an excellent piece of work done in a very short span of time. However, it has serious ramifications which are counter-productive to Kuki nationalism and nation-building.

With regard to the Thadou and Kuki imbroglio, the Guwahati High Court constituted an Expert Committee. As per the recommendation of the Expert Committee the language in question was recognised as "Thadou-Kuki" by the Government of Manipur vide No. 7/15/93-S/SECRET (HC)/Pt. I, March 15, 1996. Notwithstanding such governmental and judicial settlement, the internal bickering continues till today.

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## Need for the Settlement of Nomenclature

The unsettled nomenclature imbroglio has led to cold enmity between groups which speak the same mutually intelligible dialects that constitute a language. The differences within these dialects are even much less than the differences that exist between several dialects that constitute Hindi as a language. However, the issue has been left out in the cold long enough that it even spread to other states. The Kukis of Assam, who mostly settle in Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills Districts, fought an internecine skirmish in the 1990s on the issue of whether the language in question should be named as Thadou or Kuki programme in All India Radio. The issue even percolated in the nationalist movement and resulted in several interferences in the students' organisations and vernacular daily by the insurgent outfits. In recent times the interference of the insurgent outfits can be seen in the banning of Kuki Students' Organisation, General Headquarters by a particular insurgent group for some years on the ground that the student body is not able to cover all the cognate tribes under its fold. The multi-lingual daily *The Gosem* is banned in Motbung and Keithelmanbi Villages in Sadar Hills, Manipur by a relatively lesser known insurgent group on the ground that the dialect used in the vernacular daily is not clearly spelt out as Thadou.

Despite the governmental and judicial settlement in 1996 of the language in question as "Thadou-Kuki", the internal bickering remains unabated till today. This necessitates a negotiated settlement among the people who speak the same dialect language. Delayed settlement of nomenclature has cost a lot, with the loss of precious lives and properties and continued estrangement among the people who should have loved so much amongst themselves.

## Suggestions

As we have seen, a lineage clan "Thadou" has been contested to represent all the groups who speak the same dialect, and the government-court settlement "Thadou-Kuki" has not been able to bring about a lasting solution. The projection of the language in question as Kuki by Rev. Dr. T. Lunkim can be validated and become the *lingua franca* when there is some form of political settlement, as seen in the case of Duhlian language being accorded as Mizo language in Mizoram. Political power could give strength to validate what is being intended. However, in the present state of affairs such projection is futile and will only corroborate the stand of the cognate tribes in their drive for separate identity. As such, there is a need to have an agreeable nomenclature to all who speak the same dialect.

With regard to nomenclature of the commonly spoken dialect, Seilen Haokip has proposed a neutral alternative *Khochungte* which colloquially means people of the north. The conception is that "When Pu Chawngthu and his followers surfaced from Khul (subterranean dwelling of the Kukis), they cleared a settlement *Chungkhopi/Khochung*" (Haokip, 2010: 34).

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I put an argument that, if “Thadou” is too established as a dialect and tribe to be given up, but has no standing due to its dispossession of the title of DOUNGEL, the eldest in the lineage (Hutton: 1929) and contested by various groups, can Thadou be taken as a formulation free from lineage and continued as a nomenclature for the people who speak the same dialect? In this formulation the protagonists and descendants of Thadou should not take this “Thadou” as their lineage name but as a commonly accepted nomenclature. This sounds absurd but everyone has the right to choose if they agree. If the language in question is settled unanimously by the speakers, it will be a step in Kuki unity and nation-building.

In a nutshell, there is a need for emotional unification among the various Kuki tribes and also within each tribe.

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