

The Enchanted Community: *Kaose* and *Doi* (Witchcraft) Among the Kukis of Northeast India

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This paper examines the social history of *kaose* and *doi* among the Kukis of Northeast India. It begins with a discussion on two recent incidences of *kaotom* to show how the old belief continued to haunt Kuki society of the present. Then it went on defining *kaose* and *doi*, of their mythological origin, their characteristics, and the societal responses. In the final analysis, it discusses whether they exist in reality. From few historical evidences that we could gather here, this paper argues that the *kaose* and *doi* are largely the products of social and neighborhood tensions and community conflicts that engulfed the Kuki-Chin world during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In other words, the gaining popularity of *kaose* and *doi* during this time was largely centre on the conflicting political and social relationship between different social classes in the village community on the one hand and between different villages/clans/tribes on the other where the powerful utilised them as a tool to dominate, defame, and criminalise the weak. They are merely a civilisational tool in the hands of the powerful who felt they are cultured and civilised against the weak whom they condemned as ‘uncultured’ and ‘uncultivated’. The broad argument is that *kose* and *doi* is a mere social construct and does not exist in reality.

Keywords: Kaose, Doi, Witchcraft

In 2014, when I was on a holiday at home, I came across one very disturbing or rather tormenting video clip of *kaotom* circulating across social networking. It was difficult to say how many people had actually viewed the clip. But the fact that I got this clip from an aged man who was not conversant to, and has the least interest with, social network convinced me that the clip in fact had a wide circulation. Very soon, I came to know that this clip had gone viral across the land, at least among the Kukis, in Northeast and other cybercities of India. I came to learn soon that similar clips of *kaotom* had, now and then, circulated in the social media in recent times. Rumor

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mongering society was also often flooded with stories of what they called *kaotom*. It was in the midst of such criss-crossing rumor wire that I also learned certain underground outfit killing some people accused of *kaotom*. When I heard all these, I was deeply appalled by the new development that reminds me of history. Sometimes I asked myself: is history repeating? I thought it was not good. This episode strikes me hard not only because of the sympathy I had on the accused persons but more importantly by the growing trend of instances such as this which has the potential to break the very social fabric of Kuki society. This particular episode had already disturbed the peace and tranquility of the local society. Strong views had been already expressed by different sections of the population. Public mind had been poisoned with fears and hatred to group of people who had been traditionally condemned as *kaose*. My personal agony is that this electrifying episode had done a damage so great that people like me who have been attending the subject closely for a long time had find the success of our mission to demolish the *belief* postponed for many more years. We have been trying hard to weave together some scattered historical evidences to understand the subject and are on the verge of reaching a conclusion that the existence of *kaose* and *doi* in Kuki society was merely in the social mind. They are social constructs specific to a particular time and space and have nothing to do with the reality.

Considering the damning impact the said episode would have wrought to the shivering minds of the thousands, of the possible mental dissociation it would have brought in their thought, I eventually decided that I should take some inventory myself and see to it what really conspired in the darkness of the 'great conspiracy'. While it had devastated the minds of thousands so that the chance of winning them was diminishing fast, I thought that the electrifying episode had at the same time opened up a new vista for academic discourse especially because it open up the minds of thousands who had till then consider this as an 'unsayable' (*seingeilou*) thing in the society. To the Kukis, the subject of *kaose* was always a 'secret subject'. It was a subject every Kuki knew which everyone pretends to forget. It was a subject everyone learned secretly from childhood days which everyone preferred to keep 'in silent' and 'in secret'. This is the subject which I would call the greatest conspiracy of silence in Kuki history, which the episode had, for a moment, challenged, if not punctured.

Before I come to some of my findings in my study on the episode and another one which occurred a little time before this one, I would like to share my little childhood days experience. This ancient idyllic had a 'staying-on' in the mind of every Kuki is inarguably not overstated. Let me share from my small experience. When I was in junior school I got one very close friend. I realised that those few years of our friendship was one of the best times I ever had in my life. There, no one cared or talked about clan, family, community, or nation what our children are flattened with today. No one talked about rank, hierarchy, wealth and so on. It was just a true life. If you cavil, should we say that was a 'natural' lifeworld? Everything depends on individual taste. On many occasions, we had had food together in his house, then in my house. Now and then, we spent the evening or the night together – shared stories,

folklores and so on. Truly, it was a real oral lifeworld? Now and then, we went to the jungle for fishing, bird-hunting, collecting bamboo shoots and so on. Now and then we played games, we carry kerosene (*'thao-po'*) for a pocket money. That was just a beautiful world. Yet, one very very bad afternoon, another friend of mine broke the silence that devastated me. I felt I was attacked by some sort of shock. It was a shock of different kind which I would prefer to call a mental-quake that sadden my whole years in that school until I passed out. He told me 'secretly' that my close friend was '*akiseite*' (lit. 'what we said'). He said the 'unsayable' and I knew what he said. I knew such 'unsayable' stories much before that but I had not known or seen anyone until I was told that my own friend was one of them.

Mind you, it is a rule among the Kukis that you can never ask a person accused of *kaose* whether s/he is one of them. Therefore, I started enquiring from other people. Surprisingly, the answer was positive; everyone seems to know it. Some had even told me that my friend's family was one of the most 'active' one (*'alaangte'*/*'akhohte'*) and hence most feared one. When I heard this, I was literally devastated. Every Kuki had had the psychological fear of *kaose* from childhood days. We were indeed terrified with such stories. I was running through with fear, panic, and terror as if my friend would immediately finish me up. That day was one of the saddest days in my life. It was from that day onwards I was not even able to face my friend. Kukis believed that *kaose* can read people's mind; it is said that they knew what we are thinking about them, not to speak of what we speak ill of them. Hence, I always thought that my friend knew what I was thinking about him. That gave me uneasiness every time I met him. The life together with him after that was so uncomfortable that I never had a single day of happiness. I felt like I was in hell, in the frying pan. I was literally besieged and tormented every single day. Sometime I felt I should cut off my friendship but I was afraid because I believed that he would immediately strike me down if I do that. But that was not the serious point I had in mind. The truth was that I could not just forget my childhood friend who until that time was so close to me as if we were brothers.

When I think of this today, I feel very sorry to my friend, and of my savagery. But at the same time, I was not at odd; my behavior was what it really was, and is, in Kuki society. That was the pain, the suffering that every Kuki felt tormented in their mind; the non-*kaose* (who felt 'atheng' or clean) in the presence of *kaose* (who were condemned to be 'aboh' or polluted) and the latter among the former. Definitely, my friend did not know what I had in mind. He was completely unaware of my body language, not to speak of what we have talked about him. To him things were usual, normal until we departed to different schools. My own silent conspiracy tormented me for some many good years which otherwise would have been the happiest years. This is the irony that every Kuki who would eventually realised one day that what they had in mind was what was in their mind, nothing more. It was just a mindcraft, a hostage to ancient belief, the state of mind that keep them conspiring against their brothers for none of their folly, none of their real being. Some of you might have shared this experience in your past life, many of you might just heard about it. But the fact is when everyone knew about *kaose* each of us preferred to remain silent, a silence which of course was studded with fear and hatred.

Of savage modern men: Two electrifying episodes

Coming back to that electrifying episode, I took two of my students and few other associates to take a ground inventory. That field trip makes me realised that the belief in *kaose* is still overwhelming and deep-rooted in our society. We spent the first two days in finding out who were the people accused, attacked and involved in the horrifying clip. We were initially told that the scene took place somewhere in Tuibuong in Churachandpur district, Manipur. We literally took the clip from door to door in and around Tuibuong. Tuibuong youth leaders were helpful. Everyone told us that they have also seen the clip but was not aware of who, where and so on. Eventually, on the second day, we were lucky enough to find out where the tragic scene took place that led us further and so on. But what astonished me during these two days hunting was that, if a random survey is to be taken the following conclusion can be easily arrived at. Most of them were aware of the video clip(s). They all felt terrible after seeing the clip. Some women told us that what they took it to be a theory, a story, until this time, the episode prove it to be true and real. A very nervous woman told us: 'Although I used to hear about it, I did not believe it before, now I see that *kaose* really exist'.

She went on saying '*kaose* are really horrible, I am really afraid now. The society should do something to stop this silent killing'. This woman was concern about the safety of her children. The clip shows the alleged *kaose* woman 'revealing' that all the children who died recently in her village were 'devoured' by her. That was the message that shivered thousands of women who literally felt insecure, and agitated. The childrens were also, in all their innocence, similarly traumatised and tormented after seeing the clip. An old man protested: 'What the *gollhangho* [lit. youth, meaning militants] are doing, how could they let this thing happen'. There are also people who protested against the circulation of the clip in social media. They felt that this is a usual thing going on in our society but putting up in social media is something they considered 'unethical' because it tormented people's mind, because it break the silence of what is suppose to be 'unsayable'. They wanted that whatever happened should happen behind the closed door recalling the ancient principle of 'unsayableness' (*seingailou*) to the root.

After getting sufficient information, we 'went up' to the village where the accused and victim live. After travelling for a little more than an hour we reached the village. When we asked the villagers about the woman who was accused of the black art, they looked stunned and nervous. Initially, they told us that they were not there, probably they were suspicious of our intention. When we told that we are researcher and there is no mischievous design behind, they hesitatingly told us that she went to *jhum* field and will be back in the evening. They told that her house was at the corner of the village. We saw her house and it was locked. Since we cannot wait till the evening, we decided to go to the *jhum* field. There in the thatched *jhum* house we finally found her with her daughter, grand children and two son-in-laws. She was an aged lady, thin, poor, and numbing. We told our purpose and started inquiring about the clip. She broke down with tears and told us the whole story behind the accusation made against her. She claimed that her own son, the son of her husband's first wife, mainly plotted the conspiracy.

Her story is like this. She was the second wife of her husband who had a son with his first wife. This boy had stayed away in other village in his mother-in-laws house (apute) since his childhood days indicating the childhood trauma under a step mother. Later, he got married with one of the girl from his father's village but continue to live in his mother-in-law's village. His father and step-mother were living in the former village already for the past more than twenty years. Her husband died a year back. Until this time, no single accusation had occurred in the village. The conspiracy began immediately after her husband died. After the conspiracy broke up in public and viral, her elder brother, who is also a chief of another village, came to her village and declared that their family had never been accused of being *kaose* in the past. They were instead the clan or the family who was considered by everyone as '*thenchilahnate*' (provider of clean spouse). His brother took the matter to the village chief who promised that he would do anything to remove the 'false' accusation made to them. But this had never come, and perhaps it will never take place because we learnt from them later that they are fully in favour of the accusation.

We also talked to one of her daughter and her husband and another man close to them. They all told us the hard time they were going through in the village where people did not even look at them, not to speak of talking to them, as if a glance at them would likely cause sickness or otherwise. Every one avoided passing through their house (her married daughter's family also stayed with her). She told us that she used to be an active member of the Church women society. But after this, none of the women would come to her house, not to mention of an association with her, nor was she invited for the regular women fellowship and family prayer groups. In fact, such hostile social environment forced them to spend a secluded life. They said they are ashamed of going even to the church or any other public gatherings in the village. Of course, no one asked them to leave the village as in olden days, but the way the whole village community treated her family amounts to putting a pressure to shift away from the village. The kind of social ostracism and hatred shown toward *kaose* was, therefore, clearly visible.

Perhaps the chief family was also part of the conspiracy because the man who played a central role in the brutal scene of exorcism or 'seized' (*nodoh* or *kaomat*) was the brother of that village chief. That gory scene in the clip was performed in his house under his direction. In the clip, he was seen to have told the same woman that he had 'seized' (*mat*) her on other three sickly persons or 'victims' earlier when he had committed the same brutality on them as in this clip. What a savage modern man he was. It should be noted that this man was a deeply religious (Christian) person. He was the Secretary of that village church. The morning we met him we had to wait him for a while. He came from the 'prayer-mountain' where he had gone out the previous night for a whole-night prayer. He proudly claimed that had done a 'good job'. But he did not realise that he had committed a great crime against humanity: first to the sick persons and then to the woman he had implicated again and again as *kaose*. Certainly, such brutal acts against sickly people cannot be spared under human rights law: torture was one that attracts punishment under any legal framework.

This chief family and the majority of the villagers belong to the same clan. The

husband of the accused lady also belongs to the chief's clan but she is not. The conspiracy, as she told, was that her step-son wanted to come back to his father's village after her husband died and wanted to own the house as per his customary entitlement as the eldest son. But this to happen, his step-mother must leave that house and most importantly that village. Hence, she asserted that it was a well planned out conspiracy against her. Interestingly, the alleged victim of *kaose* shown in the electrifying clip was the elder sister of her step-son's wife. This connection makes the claim of the accused lady very strong. Therefore, we went to the alleged victim. She told us that she was suffering from occasional stomachache 'for a long time' which she had been consulting few doctors. She was on continuous medication then. She was also suffering from asthma.

That day while going to the Lamka for doctor consultation, she stayed at the house of the chief's brother we had just mentioned. This man seems to have invited the (in)famous, and popularly known in Lamka area as, 'kao doctor'. This 'kao doctor' first offer her certain liquid (about half a tea cup) before prayer. He also used two sticks which he called '*lhagao chemjam*' (angel's sword) as if they are his stereoscope. With these stick he used to punch over the abdomen where his patient felt most painful. This lady told us that the moment she consumed the liquid she felt unconscious and felt in a state of trance (*manga banga lhajenjen*). She said that she could hear what other people asked her like in a dream (*mangjejen*) but could not remember whatever she had said. She said that her stomachache was immediately healed or relieved after she was conscious but she felt the pain on her skin over which the 'kao doctor' punched his '*lhagao chamjam*'. But she also told us that after sometime her original pain continue and her ailment was not cured. When we met her she was on her usual medication as before.

We then went to the 'kao doctor' who told us that he was 'used by' (*manchah*) Christian angels (*lhagaotheng*) who told him to use two stump of certain common garden plant as '*lhagao chemjam*' (angel's sword) and certain liquid made of the same plant to cure any ailments. The liquid was made by a simple method. The upper skin of a stump of the said plant was removed and then dipped (for about half-an-hour) into a cup of water so that the bitter white fluid of the plant is mixed with the water. We tasted the water; it was stingingly bitter. This liquid was given to the sick and it was so powerful that it immediately sent him/her into a trance. The fact that hundreds of people, from across Manipur and outside, had flown into his house for treating different ailments show the effectiveness of the liquid. Truly, many received, according to him, a 'miraculous' cure. It appears that the plant contents a very strong medicinal value which still needs to be studied in a laboratory. We have had a case of person being cured from diabetes after taking the liquid.

But the problem with this 'kao doctor' was that he was also a strong believer in *kaose* and what he called '*lhagao boh*' (malevolent spirit) or *doi* (black magic or wizardry). So anyone who came to him were declared as 'possessed' by either of the above black art. Whenever an ailment was related to stomach or abdomen, he would invariably pronounced *kaobol* or *kaotom* (devoured by *kaose*). What a savage. He proudly claimed that the angels have given him the 'power to see' ('*hettheina*') who

is actually 'devoured' by *kaose*. He even claimed that he could identify who is *kaose* by looking at the eyes. He also proudly claimed that he was able to 'cure' more than a hundred cases of *kaotom* in recent times. But when he declared this with pride, he did not realise that he was the most savage and inhuman as those who had invited him. This innocent 'kao doctor' did not realise that when he claimed with pride of the 'success' he had actually indicated the fact that he was responsible for the gaining popularity of *kaose* belief since recent times. This was particularly because he mindlessly indulged in savage method of exorcising *kaotom* such as declaring many of medically sick persons as *kaobol*, needlessly questioning several things to his patient who was falling in trance such as the identity of *kaose* (which is actually an act of putting certain names in the mouth of the person who is falling in trance and who normally responded with 'yes' or 'no'). When we told him that *kaose* do not exist in reality and he had actually committed serious crime by defaming and devastating many innocent people, he devilishly defended by saying that he did not ask any questions to the sick but those who had invited him does that. Interestingly, he agreed to abide not to ask anymore question to the sick in future.

The second case was of similar but of a more savage kind. Two sick persons were taken to one house, and with the same savage manner, they were forced to pronounce certain names, one to a father and another to his daughter, through application of torture, terror and intimidation. The village authority was equally intolerant and enchanted. It invited the family who was accused as *kaose* and without giving any opportunity to defend themselves, ordered them to immediately leave the village the same night. They were threatened of public outrage if they fail to abide the order. We met the family who were forced to leave that village and lived in the outskirts of another village not very far from the previous one. The story we uncovered was that the daughter of this family, a beautiful, spiritual, and active member of the village church, had another female friend from the same village. There was a handsome gentleman who fell in love with this lady which her friend had also apparently liked him for herself. One day, the former (her friend) told the gentleman that his girlfriend is 'akiseite' (pronounced *kaose*) so that she could win him for herself. The gentleman did not take it seriously, probably he thought that is a safe idea. Therefore, when he met his girlfriend he had casually, jokingly, told his girlfriend of the accusation. Accusing someone as *kaose* is a serious defamation charge among the Kukis. Therefore, the friendship eventually broke down into conflict, not only between the two friends, but between the two families. This went on for a while which eventually ended up in the electrifying incident where she and her father were implicated to be *kaose* and their eventual expulsion from the village. Certainly, there was nothing more than a sinister design by the accuser who wanted to prove to the people that what she had said was true. Otherwise, such accusation being a serious defamation charge, public wrath could backfire on them. It was but a spiteful savagery on the part of the accusers who had not yet realised that they were still under ancient spell and the world they live in is the world that is filled with science and reason.

The relationship was such that this unfortunate family belongs to a clan other than the prevailing clan (chiefly clan) of the village. They are what is known locally

as '*phungchaga*' (lit. orphan clan, meaning different clan of the village). The accuser's family also belongs to another clan but maternally related to the prevailing clan of the village. In fact, her brother was an influential person in that village affair. The accused family had no history or precedence of any accusation earlier. This is the first time they were accused in their family history, both from the mother and father side. Therefore, they took the matter to their '*phungpi*' (lit. clan head, meaning clan organisation) so that the wrong accusation may be corrected through the clan ('*phung*') to clan level. Here also, we can see the kind of hostile social pressure put upon this hapless family. The girl told us that she stop going out from the house, not to speak of going to the church. The kind of social boycott that befell upon the family was so tormenting that it completely devastated them to the point they would never recover again. In fact, the whole episode of exorcism was farcical taking the people to the age of savagery. Guns were pointed against the sick, they were tortured to say what they actually did not wanted, and so on. Our cross examination of the clip with the reality was unmatched. The tormenting scene in the clip also clearly shows that the two accused names were literally put into the mouth of the sick persons.

Certain significant conclusions can be drawn from the above two cases. First, it was the product of a local or neighbourhood tension, say, between a son and unkindly step-mother or between two friends eyeing on a handsome gentleman. Second, it proved that the accused were implicated for the first time in their family history. In other words, both the accused families had no precedence of such accusation in their family genealogy in the past. Third, both the families belongs to '*khochaga*' (the other minority clan) in their village. Fourth, both the accused were innocent women. The first case added one significant case: she is an aged, widow, poor, and numbing. Fifth, the accusers belong to the dominant and chiefly clan who had certain sinister design by defaming the accused family. Sixth, in both the cases, the chiefly court was unsympathetic to the plight of the accused; no justice was provided to them as in olden days despite the case being a serious defamation. This was probably because the chiefly family had nothing to lose, politically and socially, the fate that would certainly be reversed had it been to any of their clan members or someone related to them. Seventh, the kind of social ostracism shown to the accused families clearly indicated that the idea of *kaose* is still very lively and strong in the Kuki society.

Eighth, Kuki church is equally apathetic to the idea of *kaose*. It can even be said that the Church, instead of destroying such concept, promoted the idea of *kaose* as one of its newly acquired concept of '*lhagao boh*' (unwanted spirit, an evil and hence sin). Declaring *kaose* as '*chonse*' (sinner) would bring a serious social implication in the future. The fact that an active church member or persons who are deeply religious or who even took the name of God and Christ, say, the '*kao doctor*' for instance, were involved in the dark conspiracy is a case that prove the position of the Kuki churches on the subject. Ninth, and more seriously, the existence of a concept like *kaose* in a society lacking any protection against defamation of the kind is a serious social problem which had the potential of breaking the social fabric. This is especially so in a society which is undergoing rapid change, a spiraling social evils and so on. Thus, if anti-social attitude towards the so-called '*lou-ne*' (drug addicts) produced Satanists

(followers of Satan), the proliferating cases of defamation as *kaose* and its accompanying concept of them as sinners, unfit to 'enter heaven', then very soon large numbers of Kuki population will be dragged to the Satanist followers. From the trend of defamation charges since recent times, we can say that in not very near future the Kuki society is going to have more *kaose* than the non-*kaose* (the 'atheng'). Tenth, and most importantly, the two cases strongly prove that *kaose* is a social construct, an ancient concept, which can be used by anyone to anyone whom s/he wanted to defame. In other words, *kaose*, as the two cases show, did not exist in reality; it was through accusation, and the lack of power to defend oneself against such defamation, that certain family was eventually condemned and known as *kaose*, nothing more. Let us see what *kaose* and *doi* was, and how society responded them, in the past.

Defining *Kaose* and *Doi*

Very often there was an ambiguity in our understanding of *kaose* and *doi* which are of different categories under the generic 'athenglou' (unclean or polluted, meaning 'evil') in Kuki society. *Kaose* is understood in different terms among their relatives in Chin Hills and Lushai Hills. For instance, the Lusheis called it *khawhring* and the Lakhers called it *ahmaw*. Truly, there is no equivalent English term to define *kaose* or *khawhring* or *ahmaw*. Hutton (1980: 155), for instance, translated *kaose* as 'vampire'. Carey called it an 'evil eye'. Shakespear avoid giving an English term. Parry (1988: 462-63) pointed out the inaccuracy of existing English terms to define the belief. He said: 'It is impossible to translate the term accurately; it approximates to the evil eye, but is not exactly the same'. He felt that it is 'a sort of vampire soul'. J.H. Hutton (1980: 155) defined *Kaose* as a person 'who can so project their astral bodies as to enter into those they wish to and devour their internal organs, particularly the liver and heart'. This definition seems accurate as it recognised the presence of an 'astral bodies' or spirit in a person which s/he has the 'power' to project to those people they wish to attack. Yet, his understanding of the term 'devour' on 'their internal organs', that is feeding greedily on the vital organs, seems wrongly applied that led him to translate *kaose* as 'vampire'. Certainly, *kaose* is not a vampire, and as far as the local understanding of them is concerned, they did not eat or feed on the vital organs of the people they attacked. Instead, it is said that *kaose* either 'le' (lick), 'pe' (bite) or 'tom' (lit. cover, meaning overwhelm/engulf) which did not eat but tormented the internal organs of the victims. For clarity, we see similar belief in other tribes that came under similar cultural area of what is commonly known as Kuki-Chin cultural world.

Thus, similar belief was recorded in Lushai Hills and Chin Hills. In Lushai Hills, John Shakespear recorded among the Lusheis of what they called *khawhring* which is an equivalent of *kaose*. Like *kaose*, he defined *khawhring* as external body residing in a women (remember, it's only in women unlike *kaose* which can dwell in both men and women). He recorded that 'Khawhring lives in certain women, whence it issues forth from time to time and takes possession of another woman, who, falling into a trance, speaks with the voice of the original hostess of the Khawhring' (Shakespear, 1983: 111). *Kaotom* (engulf by *kaose*) is also similarly understood like

this among the Kukis. Among the Lakhers, N.E. Parry (1931: 462) also recorded of similar belief which they called *Ahmaw*: 'A person is said to be *Ahmaw* when his spirit has the power of entering into another person's body and causing severe stomach-ache'. Thus, *kaose*, *khawhring*, *ahmaw* and so on are of different terms used by different Kuki-Chin tribes to mean the same sort of belief that defined an external body or spirit which reside inside a human body who had the power to use this spirit to enter into another person's body generally for certain negative reasons.

The reasons for the attack were said to be many and varied, but they can be reduced to one word: *envy*. It was said that *kaose* attacked a person mostly, if not exclusively, out of envy. Parry (1931: 462) lucidly put this down:

The belief is that a person who is *ahmaw* is always of an envious nature, and when he sees anyone else possessed of cloths or other property that he would like himself, he becomes very envious, and sends his spirit into the body of the person whose property he envies, and at once cause most violent stomach-ache, which on occasions is believed to have resulted in death. An *ahmaw*, in fact, is a sort of vampire soul, which, on seeing any one prosperous and happy, tries to get hold of the property of the person he envies by entering his body and making him ill, in the hope that the sick man will then make offerings to him.

To these, food should be added as a central theme of envy among the the Kukis and Lusheis. Besides, it was also said that an attack could take place due to insult or humiliation. Since people used the invisible spirit to enter into the body of others in order to satisfy their 'envy', *kaose* also comes under the category of black, negative or evil arts.

The Kuki-Chin cultural world also had another set of the black art locally known as *Doi* (Kuki) or *Dawi* (Lushei) or *Deu* (Lakher). *Doi* is further divided into two: positive (white) and negative (black) magic. While the positive *doi* (commonly known as *indoi* among Kukis) was exclusive to the practice of an institutionalised priesthood called *Thempu* or *Puithiem*, the negative *doi* was a practice akin to English witchcraft and wizardry or often given a generic term black magic. While the former used the method of *kithoi* (healing), the later used *kibol* (*doi-a-bol*, witchery, or wizardry). Parry (2009: 18)) said that '*Dawi* is magic and a *Dawithiam* is a wizard'. He differentiated between *khawhring* (*kaose*) and *dawi* (*doi*) as: 'A *Khawhringnei* is a person who is possessed of an evil eye, while a *Dawithiam* is an active wizard'. Shakespear defined *dawi* as 'witchcraft'. The difference can also be seen from the method of attacking a person. *Kaose* sent its spirit inside the body and torment, *doithem* used certain 'poison' to attack its victim through food or certain spirit for the same purpose. Ambiguity arises mostly from the fact that both used certain spirit to attack their victim. This ambiguity is also even more complicated by the way society responded to the so-called black or evil arts. We can see that both the beliefs were clubbed together under the rubric of *athenglou* (unclean or unwanted) practice that the society struggled to stamp out over the ages. Besides most tribes/clans, sometimes villages felt its rival group both as *kaose* and *doithem*. Thus, Chins felt that all

Lusheis were both wizards and evil eyed people whose single glance was supposed to cause sickness when the Lushei similarly sees the Thadous. This association of the two, *kaose* and *doi*, together as a anti-social combo or having to do with the whole tribe should not, however, confuse us from the fact that the same culture informed us a clean divide between the two sets of negative elements in the society.

The difference can also be seen from its later development as well. Thus, when *doi* (both positive and negative) was successfully stamped out by the society over a period of time, *kaose* remain intact and at time vibrant. This not only indicates why *kaose* is a different set of belief system but also that it requires separate and different treatment from *doi*. Broadly, *doi* is a *practice* or an ‘art’ that requires a determined training under an able teacher. Whereas, *kaose* is a *concept* that does not require training and teacher; it lives inside the body of certain person and passed on through generations along the blood-line. The person may refuse to use that power but it does not lack that power which s/he can use anytime. The death of *thempu* or *doikungpu* however marked the end of his art unless he passed the knowledge on, through training, to someone else. *Kaose* is understood to be a sort of spirit and it can proliferate like virus through the bloodline and the heirs, if not controlled. Thus, great care was taken in the past, and of course still in the present, that *kaose* do not spread. Besides other discriminatory practices, an in-built mechanism in marriage institution such as the *neite* or *pute-chanu kijuon* was enforced and a strict prohibition on sharing of *samthi* (comb) and *nam* (cane-plaited band for carrying load in basket) with certain persons was pronounced. One can also see from the origin myths of the two which also clearly shows a different origin.

Mythical origin of *Kaose* and *Doi*

Different Kuki-Chin groups had different narratives on the origin of *kaose*. At least two important narratives are available among the Kukis. The first one was related to a very old tradition which took place not very long after they came out from Noimang (Khul). Legend has it that Santhuh was the first known *kaose* among the Kukis. Pu Chonghtu cut the neck of Santhuh for swallowing up, at one gulp, the bridal-meat called *sachan* or *sahap* of his eldest son Thanpi’s bride Seichin of Vanlaite. Somehow the decapitated neck was rejoined again by a mysterious creature called *chilchite-nupa*. With a shorter neck, Santhuh was transformed into a gibbon (*guldu*). Since then *guldu* was prohibited for human consumption due to the fear that *kaose* spirit might enter their body. Those who had eaten *guldu* against the social injunction therefore became *kaose*. The second narrative said that when the Kukis were in present Chin Hills they came across a speaking mithun called *Sielpao* (being possessed by *kaose*). One day Kipgen and Chongloi killed this mithun and ate the meat. After they had eaten the meat *kaose* enter their body (Haokip, 2011: 23-35).

Among the Lusheis, the origin of *khawhring* (or *kaose*) is slightly different from Kuki version. Shakespear (1983: 111-112) recorded one translated account of the Lusheis in this respect. He wrote:

Wild boars have Khawhring. Once a man shot a wild boar while out hunting. On his return home they cooked the flesh. Some of the fat got on the hand of his sister, who

rubbed her head, and the wild boar's Khawhring just passed into her. On the next day, without any provocation, she entered another girl. She took entire possession of her. People said to her, "Where are you going to?" She replied, "It is the wild boar my brother shot". "Well, what do you want?" they said. "If you will give me eggs I will go away," she replied. They gave her eggs and she went.

From the above account it is clear that *kaose* first entered and resided the human body through a consumption of certain meat possessed by *kao* (say, gibbon or mithun among the Kukis) and through the hairs after the application of boar's fat on the head. They enter other person's body out of envy, in this case, for eggs, that is, other's food they envy for themselves.

As far as the origin myth of *doi* (black magic) or wizardry among the Kukis is concerned, it is generally believed that they all learned the art from the Koms, one of the Kuki tribes. Another legend narrates that Pu Hangsai, the lionman, was the source of such black magic which Pu Galngam had from him. Hangsai also appears in the Lusheis legend. The story of the origin of 'black magic' or what Shakespear has called 'witchcraft *dawi*' among the Lushei is, however, well established. Shakespear noted that 'the Lushais are firm believers in witchcraft'. He recorded:

Dawi witchcraft was known to Pathian. Vahrika also was something like Pathian. Vahrika had a separate water supply, and Pathian's daughter was always disturbing it. Vahrika said, 'What can it be? and lay an ambush. Pathian's daughter came, and he caught her and was going to kill her. But she said 'Don't kill me; I will teach you magic'. So she taught him, and Vahrika taught it all to Keichalla, Lalruanga and Hrangasai-puia. Then Lalruanga went to court Zangkaki, and Zangkaki, who was a friend of Pathian's daughter, bewitched Lalruanga, who has forgotten his "dawi bur" (magic gourd), and he said to Chaichim (the mouse), 'Go and fetch my dawi bur which I put in my basket'. So the mouse went to fetch the dawi bur and got it, but the Tuiruang (Barak) river rose very high. The mouse took the dawi bur in his mouth and started to swim over the river. The dawi bur was washed away by the river till it stuck in the fish trap of the Thlangom tribe, who said, 'What is this?' The dawi bur was singing like anything. The Thlangoms broke it open. No sooner had they opened it than they each acquired knowledge of magic. Then the Thlangoms were chanting the magic song. Some Mizo (natives of these Hills) who were passing through the village also heard the song of those who knew magic. The Mizo saw a man eating rice. 'May you be bewitched!' they said. They bewitched him in his rice eating, and for a year after whenever he ate cooked rice it changed into dry uncooked rice, and it swelled inside him till his stomach could not hold it and he died. Thus, the Mizo learnt about magic. Nowadays also there is magic, but those who knew it won't teach it without payment'.

The crucial point here is 'dawi witchcraft' came from Pathen's daughter. The art was passed on to human which eventually fall, of course accidentally, in the hands of Lhangum clans. When the Lhangums (Kukis) were chanting the 'magic song', then the Lusheis learned from them. The name of 'Hrangasai-puia' is significant; he is also

closely associated to Kuki legends as the powerful lionman and the friend (*jol*) of Galngam, the legendary warrior of the Kukis who learned the art of magic from Hangsai (Hrangsai-puia). The legendary personalities in Kuki-Chin cultural world such as Vahrika, Keichalla, Lalruanga, and Hrangsai-puia are all belonged to super-natural world 'something like Pathian' who were associating with human beings.

'As they Said': Characters of *Kaose* and *Doi*

We have noted that *kaose*, *khawhring* or *ahmaw* are different terms used by different Kuki-Chin tribes which mean a person who can so project or has the power to issue forth from time to time his/her astral bodies or spirit as to enter into or take possession of another person's body or those they wish to and devour [*pat* or bite] their internal organs, who, getting a severe stomach-ache and falling into a trance, speaks with the voice of the original hostess (Hutton, 1980: 155; Shakespear, 1983: 111; Parry 1988: 462). We have also noted that the primary reason for their attack is 'envy'. They are always 'an envious nature' who envies the delicious food and wealth of the others that they themselves did not have. It is significant to note that 'envy' is something which the stateless societies in the Kuki-Chin world wanted to stamped out in their society indicating the importance given to equality of all and freedom from any kind of envy which they considered was the source of social tension.

Hutton (1980: 155) also noted: 'Some Thado say that if a man is suffering from the attacks of a vampire, and his hair be cut off, it will be found, when he is recovered of the diseases, that his hair is intact and that of the vampire has been cut'. In Lushai Hills, Shakespear (1983: 112) also noted another significant character of *khawhring*. His informant had told him that 'presently all those who borrowed the "hnam" (a plaited cane band for carrying loads) of the girl with the Khawhring also got possessed'. This means, one can get *khawhring* (*kaose*) through the hairs, that is, by sharing *nam* (cane-plaited band) and comb (*samthi*) with them. This is the main reason why tradition has strongly forbidden the sharing of *nam* and *samthi* with other people, especially with unknown persons. Shakespear (Ibid.) was also told by his informant of another channel through which *khawhring* can pass on from one to another. 'If one with a Khawhring has a daughter', his informant told him, 'the child is always possessed, so no one wants to marry a person with a Khawhring'. This means that *khawhring* is hereditary; it passes on from mother to daughter through the bloodline. This means that the male, husband and sons, were immune to *khawhring*. The idea of hereditary is also shared by the belief among the Kukis and Lakhers except that this hereditary character was not only from mother to daughters but also to the sons and the spirit possessed even her husband. Among the Kukis it continues to be the standing belief that a man who married a woman who is known as *kaose* also got possessed after they got the first son. But a woman who married a man reputed to be *kaose* got possessed the moment she enter his house after marriage.

In Lushai Hills, Shakespear also noted another interesting case. He said that the Lusheis believed that the *khawhring* girls sometimes 'walk in their sleep and go and lick up urine, as the metna do, under the zawlbuk, and that when starting forth on those expeditions their feet and hands shine as if they were coated with

phosphorous...This state is called “Thlahzung” Shakespear (1983: 112). This belief is also shared by the Kukis who said that the *kaose* used to walk during the night in the form of fire-ball (*kao-mei*, ‘ghost-fire’). According to the Kukis, such fire-ball are of two kinds. One is what they called ‘*kao-mei*’ or ‘ghost-fire’. Hutton identified *kao-mei* as ‘the Will o’ the wisp, as it consists in small pale moving fires and is regarded as harmless to human beings’.¹ Kukis also identify another fire-ball known to be ‘*gam-kao*’ or ‘jungle-ghost’ which is dangerous to human beings. Hutton again noted: ‘It appears in the night in the form of a much more powerful light, single and concentrated, but with some movement, as it swells and subsides’. Hutton (1980: 155) noted that his Kuki informant:

...watched one in the jungle near Kohima; one was seen by a woman of Thenjol in 1916 or thereabouts, when she left her house at night. It was in the top of the tree and she ran back to her house in terror, fastened the door, and fainted. She recovered enough to tell her husband what she had seen, but was smitten with violent diarrhoea and vomiting and was dead by morning.

In the Chin Hills, there seem no clear distinction between an attack by ‘evil eye’ (*kaose*) and ‘wizard’ (*doithem*). People simply felt that a ‘single glance’ of those persons whom they considered as possessing evil eye or wizards ‘is sufficient to bewitched them and who are capable of causing lizards to enter the body, balls of string to form in the stomach’. Carey & Tuck (2008: 200) noted of the Chins belief as:

All ailments which are not understood are considered to be either the work of a spirit or a wizard, and all internal complications are thought to be due to the presence of a foreign body which has been introduced in some mystic manner, and which most often takes the form of balls of hair or string, lizards, and rats.

From the above historical narratives, we may add some important characteristics assigned to the *kaose* in the present day. Apart those characters of *kaose* noted above such as it is hereditary (parents to children), permanent (cannot be removed from those persons), contagious (sharing of comb and *nam*) and envious (always envying others goods and delicious food), one may add others here. We have seen that the victims of *kaose* usually felt severe stomach-ache and went into state of ‘trance’ which come close to psychological or medical state of dissociative disorder particularly that of dissociative amnesia.² It is also said that the physical body of the *kaose* and the victim lays in coma, saliva oozing from the mouth and remains virtually in unconscious state. Another belief said that distance is not a matter for the ferocious spirit to unleash an attack as it can traverse against time and space in the atmospheric zones. *Kaose* is also said to possess an astral ear. There is a saying ‘*Gun in akhen louleh kaose ten mithusei aja thei jiuve*’ (unless separated by Gun river the *kaose* could hear people who had spoken ill of them), meaning only a river can prevent the *kaose* from hearing what we said.

It is also said that a young suitor can know a *kaose* maiden whose beauty enhanced as the night gets older. It is also said that the third son or daughter of a family is immune to possession by *kaose*. It is not only hair but any body parts of the victim that is cut off or injured will appear in the *kaose* body but not in the victim after s/he recovers. *Kao* that resides in a person dies when the host *kaose* died or vice-versa. *Kaose*, it is again said, usually attack the weak (like children, women, or elderly) or sickly person whom they can win. This means that *kaose* had to literally fought hard to enter a person's body and possessed and hence they avoided a healthy and strong person as they are, it is again said, not able to win them. The characteristics of *kaose* can go on indefinitely so much that the mental world of the Kukis are studded with fear and hate against *kaose*. The same is true to *doi*. This expressed itself in the form of societal responses to *kaose* or *doi*, the point we shall now come.

Fear, Hate and Vengeance: Criminalisation of *Kaose* and *Doi*

The belief in *kaose* and *doi* was universal in the Kuki-Chin world. Shakespear (1983: 111), for instance, noted that the 'Lushais are firm believers in witchcraft' and 'the belief in Khawhring is universal'. Carey and Tuck (2008: 200) also noted that the 'Chins fully believe in witchcraft and the power of the evil eye'. As they came under the 'evil' category of the society, the struggle to stamp out *kaose* and *doi* was also one that is historical. No one can say for sure when it began and how it exactly took a shape. Nevertheless, *kaose* and *doi* had certainly assumed a position as one of the most dreaded 'evil' practices in the past just as it was the 'most disgusting people'. Hutton (1980: 155), for instance, noted among the Thadou Kukis:

Thado live in great dread of vampires, *kaushi*... So great is their fear of persons reputed to have this power that *they will not as a rule on any account mention the name of a person as being a kaushi* for fear that if the vampire came to hear of it he would start to devour the person who had spoken ill of him. (emphasis mine)

Parry (1988: 463) also noted among the Lakhers: '*Ahmaw* is greatly feared, and to accuse any one of being *ahmaw* is very serious defamation. The fine for falsely accusing any one of being *ahmaw* is a cow mithun or 60 rupees'. Among the Lusheis if a man accused another of being a wizard or *khawhringnei* and is unable to prove it he was liable to a fine of Rs. 40 (Parry, 2009: 18). In the Chin Hills, Carey and Tuck (2008: 200). also noted an extreme case in which the Chins believe that a 'single glance' by the so-called wizards or evil eye was 'sufficient to bewitched them'. They felt that the wizards or evil eye 'are capable of causing lizards to enter the body, balls of string to form in the stomach, and to inflict any and all those afflictions which are *the evil gifts of the spirits*'. In this context of fear and terror, *kaose* and *doi* represents the 'evil gifts of the spirits' to human being and hence became a constant neighbourhood nightmare. They had constantly haunted and tormented the minds of people over the ages as if they are criminals lurking all around for a prey.

It was under such circumstances of 'dread', 'fear', and 'terror' that societal re-

sponse to *kaose* and *doi* needs to be situated. We have noted that ‘envy’ was central to the cause of their attack and it was this ‘envy’ that a non-state society was most unkindly with. Thus, the very association of *kaose* and *doi* with ‘envy’ turned the social temperature against them into what I would call ‘hate’. A combination of fear and hate determined social action against the *kaose* and *doithem*. It was within this fear and hate paradigm that vengeance against the ‘evil gifts of the spirits’ and methods employed to get rid of them may be seen from different social context. Among the Lakhers people were so terrified by *ahmaw* that appeasement was apparently the norms. Among the Kukis, both appeasement and violence methods were combined to deal with them. Violence dominated the response against the black art among the Lusheis and the Chins. Let us discuss some of the historical evidences on these aspects of social response.

Among the Kukis, we have seen that people were so scared that ‘they will not as a rule on any account mention the name of a person as being a *kaose*’ (Hutton 1980: 155). Not even muttering the name of a person accused of *kaose* was indeed an extreme case of fear. Keeping the secret ‘within the wall’ does not, however, fore-closes their hatred for the *kaose*. Within the opaqueness and the calm of societal conspiracy of silence was an open domain of maneuvering their mobility, of their attack and of their everyday life. A strong regime of vigilante, well known to everyone, was therefore in place. One obvious area of regimented maneuvering system was the institutionalisation of the fear in marriage custom. The fear of them, or the aversion to be one of them, was so strong that all possible measures were taken to avoid any marriage relationship with them. An inbuilt mechanism, the institutionalised of fear in the marriage custom, was the system popularly known as *pute-chanu kijon*. The idea was to have a ‘clean’ (*atheng*) or ‘known’ partner and to avoid any nuptial relationship with person related to *kaose*. We also noted how sharing of *samthi* (comb) and *nam* (cane-plaited band for carrying load in basket) was strictly prohibited in the society as one measure to avoid the proliferation of *kaose* through the hairs.

In Lushai Hills, similar hatred was shown toward the *khawhringnei*. Shakespear noted that ‘no one wants to marry a person with a Khawhring’ and no one would ‘let a person possessed by a Khawhring enter [their] houses’. If a Khawhring ‘sits on the bed of a true Lushei she will certainly be fined a metna’. To avoid marrying with them, to prevent them from entering their house, and to fine them if they sit on their bed, were indeed a more extreme form of social ostracism taking us to the level of the notion of ‘untouchability’ in Brahmanical social system. No wonder, Shakespear (1983: 111-112) was told by his Lushei informants that those ‘possessed of Khawhring are *most disgusting people*, and before the foreigners came *they were always killed*’. Seeing them as ‘most disgusting people’ and ‘killing’ them always if found were an extreme case of hatred that take the subject close of ‘witch-hunting’ pogrom in early modern Europe. Among the Lakhers, Parry (1988: 463) also similarly noted the tenor of societal hatred towards the *ahmaw*: ‘Any one who is *ahmaw* is unclean; and if a woman is believed to be *ahmaw*, nobody will marry her’. In Chin Hills, those who possess the power of ‘evil eye’ (*khawhring* or *kaose*) were not even looked at because a mere sight of them was considered ‘sufficient to cause sickness and distress’

(Carey & Tuck, 2008: 200). Therefore, they avoided seeing those people accused of evil eye or wizards. And worst, they won't let those accused to enter their village, or as among the Lusheis, killed them whenever they found them in their midst. We will come back to this point shortly.

The contour of social responses to *kaose* can also be seen from the way they dealt with *kaotom* (those possessed/attacked). Among the Kukis, *kaose* was usually first appeased by offering what s/he wanted or envy from the victim. Rituals like *Saguojuon-kithoina* and *Sa-phephou* were performed. Offering ranging from food, clothes to certain property may be given so that *kaose* would spare the victim. But when such appeasement was refused, then violence would invariably followed. The first step toward this violence injunction was known as *kao-mat* ('to catch'), which means to hold-fast the *kaose* so that s/he should not run away. Certain methods were deployed such as *thoulen-khukhum* (holding under nets), holding by the toes, and so on. The identity of *kaose* was invariably asked so that s/he could be attacked at his/her house, if possible. An application of pain was a means to force *kaose* to 'reveal' (*kiphong*) or to 'leave' (*alha*) the victim. This process could go along with offering/appeasement. In the extreme situation, certain item such as horn (say, *sasan-ki*) would be use 'to kill' the *kaose*. This violent steps may involve killing of *kaose* in his/her house or through certain application of pains. As the later could cause the life of the victim such extreme application of pain/torture was normally avoided.

In the absence of *thempu* to perform the necessary ritual, this violent measure was usually the first step after most Kukis had become Christian. But this was not the normal practice in olden days when every village had their *thempu* to do the necessary exorcism (*nodoh*). An extreme step prescribed in olden days was known as *khengsumlhah*. It was a ritual performed by the *thempu* in which the spirit of *kaose* was 'called upon' (*kou*) to an appointed place, that is, a hole impression (of a sharpened stump of certain tree call *khengthing*) on the ground like the *sum* (mortar). When the spirit came in the form of some insects to the appointed place to eat certain food items placed there, a fatal blow was given by *thempu's* assistant with the sharpened stump. The stump was then fastened into the ground and then covered with earth so that it is not visible to anyone. *Khengsumlhah* was considered to be an infallible cure for *kaotom*. It led to the death of *kaose* and hence the cure.

The Lakher method was predominantly appeasement. When one is attacked by *ahmaw*, Parry mentioned four stages of ritual; each stage will be followed by the next if the *ahmaw* refuse to leave. In the first stage, little meat, rice, salt, chilies, beer, tobacco, nicotine-water, bananas and other edibles are placed in a gourd spoon on which the victim spits on it. The spoon is then put in threshold of the house for a while and then placed at the foot of the house ladder. If the *ahmaw* refuse to leave then second step follows, in which a fowl is sacrificed and cut into half. The half with the head was cooked and with some gravy, salt and rice were placed on the plate on which the victim again spits as before. After putting on the threshold for a while, it was taken outside the village fence.

If the *ahmaw* still refuse to leave then the third step is performed in which small pig is killed and singed, again cut into half. The half with the head is set aside and

placed in the verandah. The other half was cooked and put on the plate. In the meantime, clothes, ornaments, and property are collected. Two plates, one with cooked meat and the other with raw meat, were taken to the victim who spit again on them. They were then again put in the threshold for a while, after that they were taken outside the village fence. The clothes and others were taken back while the plates were abandoned there. If the *ahmaw* still refused then the fourth and last step follows in which a little blood is drawn from the big toe of one of those present, smeared on a bit of stick and offered to the *ahmaw*. The patient licked some of the blood of the stick and the following incantation was made: 'O, *ahmaw*! We have offered you everything you want, and still you are not satisfied, so now we offer you human blood, which is what you most desire'. This is said to be an infallible cure for stomach-ache caused by an *ahmaw*, and is the only Lakher sacrifice in which human blood was used.³

In the Lushai Hills, we have seen from its origin story that appeasement was also one method of exorcism against *khawhring* attack. We have seen that people asked her certain questions. When they knew that she wanted eggs, they gave her eggs and 'she went away'. This is a familiar method common to all Kuki-Chin tribes. Shakespear also noted one account of violent method employed against *khawhring* among the Lusheis. He remarked:

A missionary described to me a weird scene of excitement which he once saw, the object being to exorcise a *Khawhring* which had possessed a girl. Amid a turmoil of shouting, drum-beating, and firing of guns the spirits was ordered to quit its temporary abode and return whence it came (Shakespear, 1983: 111-112).

Shouting, drum-beating, and firing of guns were a means to scare the *khawhring* so that she 'quit' her temporary abode. Thus, we can see a combination of force and blandishment method being used by most tribes against *kaose* attack.

How was *doi* or witchcraft or wizardry (*doi-a-kibol*) dealt with then? We can see similar societal fear and hatred toward this 'evil' art as well. We have no account to show how the society had reacted to the black art among the Kukis. But, again, the tenour of their opposition to it can be gleaned from the cases of Lushai Hills. Shakespear, for instance, noted that in 1897 three whole families were 'massacred' because it was thought that they were 'bewitching' a very old chieftainess. 'The livers of the wizards were cut out and portions carried to the sufferer', remarked Shakespear, 'but unfortunately, she died before being able to taste them and thus prove the efficacy of the remedy'. The Lusheis believed that the consumption of the liver of the wizard was the best remedy for any wizardry (Shakespear, 1983: 109). McCall also cited one case in the village of chief Liankhama Sailo in about 1850. This village, Zawlnghak, got about 1000 houses of which there were 150 houses of the Rangte (Gangte) clan. One day, Liankhma's 'most brave young man', Thangvuka, had a dream in which he saw Keitawna and on this very night his house was filled with smoke and mist of an unprecedented kind. Keitawna belonged to Gangte clan and had the reputation of being a *dawithem* or sorcerer. Hence, Thangvuka became 'so disturbed with the obvious implications of this dream' that he eventually killed

Keitawna. He cut out Keitawna's liver and ate a little of it. His objective was, McCall remarked, 'to neutralize the effect of any evil words which Keitawna may have uttered against Thangvuka's welfare'.

Shortly after that, McCall went on narrating, 'all the Rangtes appeared before the Chief in fury and in a spirit of revenge against Thangvuka'. They demanded from the Chief 'to decide whether he wished the friendship of all the Rangtes or whether he preferred to lose them all that he should keep Thangvuka'. To their surprise, the Chief decided in favour of Thangvuka and 'ordered that they should not kill Thangvuka'. With this replied, he noted:

All the Rangtes packed up their families and chattels and made off to Manipur State swearing eternal enmity with one and all of Liankhama's villagers in perpetuity – a situation which persisted, resulting in the mutual taking of heads until peace was enforced by the arrival of the British Government (McCall, 2003: 71-72).

McCall also cited another case in which Liankara and Kanglova, two brothers of Dokhuma Sailo, Chief of Chawntleng, were suffering from phthisis [tuberculosis]. They suspected certain men of their village as being the cause, through sorcery. These men had been previously known, while they were under the influence of Zu, to have threatened others by claiming to possess, supernatural power. The chief decided that the 'accused should be killed'. Therefore, Leta, Leta's mother, Buka and Vungbakira were all killed while the fifth Laikuala fled to Hnachang village where, however, he was at once killed, as the Hnachang chief was related to Dokhuma and knew all the attendant circumstances. The sick brothers were given pieces of dead men's livers and 'were eventually cured, while all the villagers drank of the blood as a prophylactic against any further spread of the dread disease which had, they believed, originated in the evil works of the sorcerers' (McCall, 2003: 72-73).

The subject of witchcraft had harassed the society so much that the British administration was often dragged to a disquieting 'law and order' problem. Thus, since from the inception, the colonial administrators initiated certain line of policy to tackle the recurring problems in local society infested with the idea of witchcraft and sorcery. McCall, for instance, noted that 'on occasions when a *stir* was being caused by the presence of a suspected sorcerer' district administrators used to order that the chief should not issue any 'sanction of murder'. But 'in order to relieve the people in their present *very real anxieties* he would give the suspected sorcerer twenty-four hours in which to make himself scare, the man, or woman, being ordered to *seek shelter in a village over a hundred mile or so distant*'. Meaning: expelling them from such village in order to avoid any 'murder' of them by the enraged/charged crowd that would caused greater embarrassment to administration.

McCall (2003: 72-73) went on saying: 'It is admitted that not every society similarly situated would have been willing to condone *this merciful settlement* [wizards family] and the murder of the five victims detailed above may mark *the true feelings of the people*'. Truly, 'murder' or death was the result of the fatal wrath against the 'merciful' wizards and *kaose*. Indeed, that marked 'the true feelings of the people' against the 'evil' (*athenglou*) practice. 'So strong was the feeling about these wiz-

ards', Shakespear (1983: 109) also remarked, 'that four or five households of their relatives had to be given a special and isolated site, as no village would receive them'. Parry (1983: 18) also noted that:

Dawi is magic and a *Dawithiam* is a wizard. In the old days if a man accused another of being wizard, he would probably have been murdered by the person he accused. If a man could clearly be shown to be a wizard, no chief would allow him into his village and he would have had nowhere to live.

The feeling of hatred against them was so great that many of them, having boycotted by the society, were forcibly dragged toward Christianity when the missionaries accepted them. It is evident that some of the early Christians in Lushai Hills were those who had been boycotted by the society as *khawhringnei* or wizards.⁴ They constituted the early population of the 'Christian villages'. Evidence also suggested that this belief had also been utilised by some chief as a tool to expel some well-to-do families in the village. Parry (2009: 18), for instance, remarked: 'In the old days chief were rather given to accusing well-to-do people of being *Dawithiam* or *Khawhringnei* as then they could turn them out of their villages and confiscate their property'.

We can see similar response from the people of Chin Hills. Here, people hardly differentiated between *kaose* and witchcraft; both are equally feared and hated. Carey and Tuck, for instance, noted that the Chins have begged their permission 'to shoot individuals who have the misfortune to be pronounced wizards'. When they were told that British 'do not admit of the spilling of blood except when blood has been intentionally spilled', the Chins replied that the customs of the British 'are most unjust and protect the wizard who is allowed to practice his uncanny occupation in peace and who kills people right and left, but, because he spills no blood, we take no notice'. This means that, like in Lushai Hills, death was the societal response to anyone who is declared wizard or possessing evil eye. If not to kill them was consider 'unjust', then killing them was consider to be the 'just' way to deal with them. What is even more interesting in the Chin's notion of witchcraft and evil eye was that accusation was not restricted to individual alone; they also believe that the whole members of certain tribe or community were wizards and evil eye so that they took all measures 'not to see' them or mingled with them in any manner. This is also shared by other tribes but in less intensely than the Chins. We will come back to this latter point shortly.

Thus, we can see that *kaose* and *doi* have really become a nightmare to the local society in the past. They were feared and hated as if they are criminals. This was translated into a mixture of collective societal response ranging from the refusal to let them an entry into the house or village, preventing them to their sight, the refusal to nuptial relationship, and range of cultural and ritual denial to killing them. Whenever they were allegedly caught in their attack on other persons, they were either appeased by offering them something or utilise violent methods even to the cause of death, expulsion from the village, and so on. In other words, a combination of force and blandishment method was used to deal with *kaose* and *doithem*.

Myth or Reality: Understanding *Kaose* and *Doi*

The pertinent question then is – how are we going to understand these historical accounts of *kaose* and *doi* then? Were they really existed or was it a mere social construct? Several studies on witchcraft around the world show that it was neither an ‘art’ nor a ‘practice’. It was merely a ‘social construct’ whose reality lies in societal urge for supernatural explanations of worldly ailments. Studies on European witchcraft show that such idea gained popularity since the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. Certain factors were found to be responsible for the upsurge with the idea of witchcraft such as the intense religious (Christian) awakening of the sixteenth century and an exposure to frequent famine, plague, poverty and crime. The new religious fervor sharpened the idea of devil’s intervention in human affairs. Hence, certain people were thought to be entering a ‘compact’ with the former and received supernatural power to enable them to practice black magic and commit secret killing. The increasing human calamities due to famine, plague, poverty, and crime lend support to such religious idea as society was still lacking science and medicine to define such recurring calamities. Hence, there was an intense craving for supernatural explanations and cures for personal or community disasters.

Interesting cases were excavated from the social experiences. That the accusers and accused generally knew each other well and were usually neighbours who quarreled. Often trouble started when someone begged for food. In France and Switzerland, beggars who were denied charity were likely to accuse their ungenerous neighbours of witchcraft. In England, beggars who were denied charity or rejected by neighbours were blamed for local calamities and charged with witchcraft. In both the cases, witchcraft was the product of the breakdown of neighbourhood relationship when people were desperately poor and hungry. In other words, witchcraft was the result of a neighbourhood tension. In this, women were the usual victims for some familiar reasons. They were thought to be spiritually weaker (as in biblical Eve and Adam story) so that demonology was conceived of in explicitly sexual terms – female witches fornicating with the devil for favour. Women identified as witchcrafts were generally socially objectionable persons (old, numbing, ugly, poor, and beggar). They were generally convicted of witchcraft mainly due to the inhuman torture procedure applied during interrogation in which they were forced to declare ‘yes’. To the rich and higher class witch-hunting was politically and socially safe as they were hardly implicated, so witch-hunting went on that caused the lives of several thousands of the weak, the poor and the hapless.

Thus, we can see that intense religious awakening, an exposure to the wrath of nature, the growing neighborhood and social tensions, and gender disparity have all played pivotal role in the proliferation of the idea of witchcraft in early modern Europe. In conceptualising European witchcraft, Eva Pocs (1999), for instance, identified three varieties of witch in popular belief: ‘neighbourhood witch’ or ‘social witch’, ‘magical’ or ‘sorcerer’ witch, and ‘supernatural’ or ‘night’ witch. ‘Neighbourhood witches’ are the product of neighbourhood tensions, and are found only in self-sufficient serf village communities where the inhabitants largely rely on each other. Such accusations follow the breakdown of some social norms and exchange. Claims of

‘sorcerer’ witches and ‘supernatural’ witches could arise out of social tensions, but not exclusively. ‘Sorcerer’ witches were persons who had, through magic, increased her fortune to the perceived detriment of a neighbouring household. Due to neighbourly or community rivalries and the ambiguity between positive and negative magic, such individuals can become labelled as witches. The ‘supernatural’ witch had nothing to do with communal conflict, but expressed tensions between the human and supernatural worlds; and in Eastern and Southeastern Europe such supernatural witches became an ideology explaining calamities that befell entire communities. It is from this European background that we may be able to see more clearly of the cases in the Kuki-Chin world. A brief discussion on the social and political background, therefore, becomes pertinent.

The Social and Political Background

With such burgeoning knowledge on witchcraft, the question is – where do we put *kaose* or *doi* of Kuki-Chin cultural world in historical context. It would be too early to give a concrete answer to the pertinent question that we put to ourselves: whether *kaose* is a myth or reality. Nevertheless, in situating the belief in historical context would certainly generate some dividends toward that end. First, although we have certain reference of a very old tradition (Santhuh *kaose* or *guldu* origin of *kaose*) what becomes of a more common genre among the Kukis was *selpaothei* origin of *kaose* which traced its landscape of memory in the Chin Hills. The emptiness of *kaose* in any other older traditions, be it folklore, folktales, legends, myths and so on, makes *selpao* tradition even more significant. The Lushei tradition of *dawi* origin also lends support to the *selpao* tradition. The Lushei tradition placed river Barak (Tuilong) from where the art of black magic had eventually fall into the hands of human beings (the Lhangum Kukis) from where Lusheis also learned it. Such origin stories may appear ‘absurd’ in the eyes of scientific history, but something was certain here. They pointed out that the idea of *doi* and *kaose* gained popularity when the Kukis lived in a particular geographical space called Chin Hills.

The traditions should be taken as a topographical metaphor in which a cartographic recollection of the past had a significant social dimension of the ‘art’ in question. It is a well established fact in history that the so-called ‘new Kukis’ (Chin, Kuki and Mizo) escaped to the Chin Hills from Burma plain in about thirteenth and fourteenth centuries although the advance groups (mostly ‘old Kuki groups’) might have gone there many centuries before. The advance party of the ‘new’ groups might have already reached Barak river corridor somewhere in the fifteenth and sixteenth century because it was during this time that Tripura court chronicles had mention of the Kukis who had close relationship with that kingdom.⁵ If *kaose* and *doi* traditions trace its origin to the period around this time, it certainly gained its popularity in the eighteenth century in a situation when the Kuki-Chin world witnessed one of the most stressing social and political turmoil in their history.⁶

In about the middle of eighteenth century the Chins got western-made firearms from Burma through the trade channel. This had provided them an edge over other communities who had been till then living together with them in a geographical space

at the centre of present Chin Hills although their population spread out sparsely till part of the present Mizoram and Manipur hills. Thus, by breaking the balance of power at the core of their world, the Chins began to take a policy of war and conquest over other tribes/clans. The Hakas, Falams and Suktes emerged dominant over the present Chin Hills, whereas the Lusheis, Thadous and other tribes had to either submitted before the new conquerors or migrated to other places. The Lusheis migrated to the Lushai Hills in about 1810 and very soon built-up their hegemony over the whole Hills, subjugating or expelling those tribes/clans who live there. This situation of internecine warfare, deaths, subjugation, absorption and criss-crossing flights and migration strongly shattered the social and cultural landscape of the Kuki-Chin world. From each tribe/clan to another or often from one village to another, everyone seems to have been on war and contestation.

Unlike in the calm of their earlier settlements, each village was now consisted of mixture of different clans and tribes. The village community was generally divided into ruler and ruled or the dominant/prevaling chiefly clan and the subjugated/absorbed clans. William McCulloch (1980: 58), for instance, aptly noted this changing social composition in the Kuki villages:

Since their expulsion from their own hills, the different tribes have become *mixed up together* in villages situated in positions selected with reference to convenience of cultivation... a popular chief is sure soon by accessions from less favoured ones to become large, but its inhabitants will remain in it is *uncertain*, for the *ties* by which they were held together in their native hills have been *rudely broken*, that they have scarcely existence, and any whim may lead them to another village. (*emphasis mine*)

This situation was even more markedly noticeable in the Lushai Hills and the Chin Hills where we have good numbers of large villages sprouting up by the additional number of subjugated population consisted of mixed clans. Haka population, for instance, consisted of almost entirely the 'Chiefs and slaves', the chiefs being drawn together by the need of controlling their 'powerful dependents' (Carey & Tuck, 2008: 202 & 204). Falam was divided into six quarters under six 'Elders' and Haka into several quarters under different chiefs. Interestingly, there was a 'royal' quarter called 'Boto quarter' in Falam where the five council men lived with their retinues (Carey & Tuck, 2008: 149-50). In the Lushai Hills, a large village, which contained mixed population, was divided into several quarters or '*veng*' generally inhabited by people of the same clan, each having its *zawlbuk* (bachelor's dormitory) (Shakespeare, 1983: 20).

One can now well imagine the social situation in such villages where rulers and subjugated population lived together. Truly, the concentration of a large number of 'mixed' populations in such villages had indeed 'rudely broken' the earlier 'ties by which they were held together in their native hills'. This 'broken' social ties was not only the source of political 'uncertainties' to the prevailing chiefly clans but was also the root of conflict and neighborhood tensions in the village. With warfare, death, subjugation, displacement and flight becoming a regular phenomena through the

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, scarcity and poverty, and hence many unwanted social elements such as the poor, orphans, widows, destitute, and so on, also escalated in the society. The overwhelming neighbourhood tensions, social conflicts, and community disengagements eventually produced a situation where each of them, individually and in group, suspected the others, especially the weak and minorities, for all mischievous acts whenever any personal or community disaster fall upon them. The increasing human calamities due to warfare, deaths, poverty, diseases, and crime and the lack of science and medicines to explain, define, and cure such calamities led to an intense craving for supernatural explanations and cures. Thus, all sicknesses and human calamities that befell upon individuals and community were considered to be due to interventions of the spirits. Carey and Tuck, for instance noted: ‘The people fully believe that spirits seize and maltreat them, and when a man explains that he has been knocked down and badly mauled by a spirit, no one can convince him otherwise, though we put the occurrence down to fainting and other kinds of fits’ (Carey & Tuck, 2008: 198). The village *thempu* or *puithiem* (wise men or medicine men, as they were known and who claimed to have understand what the spirit wants) would be invariably consulted for the cures. Thus, the role of supernatural power was not only highly suspected for human disasters but was often sought after as a social therapy by way of appeasement through *thempu*. In a worst case scenario, certain people such as *kaose* and *doithem* were believed to have the power to control some supernatural powers. Thus whenever certain disaster took place in the society certain people would be not only suspected but also been accused for the calamity. Those accused people become *kaose* or *doithem* in the local society and if the accusation was proved they would be invariably be punished. Therefore, it is within such distressing social and political circumstances that the gaining popularity of black magic or witchcraft (*doi*) and *kaose* or evil eye must be best situated.

The gaining momentum in the belief in *kaose* and *doi* generated an interesting social dimension on the subject. The number of *kaose* and *doithem* increased when the society was undergoing crisis not because more and more people become one of them but because the society had produced more and more of them out of social tensions within the village society as well as between two or more villages, clans and tribes. Here, politics and power relations played a vital role. At one level, the neighbourhood tensions in the village led to the accusation of, and the criminalisation of, the weak, the poor, and the hapless innocent individuals as having in control of the spirits to cause harm on the dominant and powerful. At another level, conflict between villages, clans, or tribes also ended up in accusing each other for all the disasters that befell upon their community. This led to criminalising each other as *kaose* or *doithem*. As in the village society, such accusation between villages, clans, and tribes also took the direction in which the powerful tribe accused the weaker tribe. Thus, in both the cases such accusation was closely related to power and social relation in the nutshell. These forms of defaming, criminalising and labeling the weaker ‘others’ as *kaose* or *doithem* by the more powerful persons, clans or tribes merely on political and social ground is what I called the politics of defamation, the point we shall now come.

Politics of Defamation: Kaose and Doi as Product of Neighbourhood Tension

Our few historical accounts suggested that the growing popularity of the belief in *kaose* and *doi* (when the society was undergoing crisis) was the product of neighbourhood tension in the village society. The intense belief in the idea of black magic and *kaose* due to the growing tensions in the society transformed them to be a neighbourhood nightmare. This nightmare had haunted both the one and the many, the rulers and the ruled, the powerful and the weak, so that whenever disaster felt upon anyone they invariably see toward such supernatural power as the cause and also for the solution. As it was believed that such supernatural powers had been under the control of certain persons called *kaose* and *doithem*, whenever personal or community disaster occurred certain people would be eventually accused for the plot. Yet, interestingly our evidences suggested that the idea of *kaose* and *doi* had been rampantly employed as an effective instrument of social control and oppression by the powerful, the haves, and the One, against the weak, the poor, and minority clans/tribes. Evidence suggested that the powerful chiefs or members of the prevailing clan in the village often used this social rhetoric as a handy tool to criminalise, to punish, and to oppress the weak and minority clans (*khochaga*) in the village.

Thus, the Lushei chiefs were said to have condemned certain well-to-do people in their village as *dawithiem* or *khawhringnei* so that he could expel them from his village and, according to Lushei custom, owned their properties. Similarly, the weaker and marginal clan(s) in the village (the *phungchaga*) would be always the victims of the wrath of the members of the dominant clan(s). Whenever any disaster felt upon any or all members of the dominant clan, these ‘merciful’ clan(s) will not only be suspected but also, in most cases, accused of using black magic or sorcery against them. Thus, we see that the minority Gangte clan of Zawlnghak village were ‘reputed’ to be wizards not because they possessed such black art but because they were accused to be one. A strange happening in a house or seeing one of them in a dream was a sufficient evidence to proclaim them as wizard. Such declaration invariably followed the murdering of them and then an expulsion from the village. We also see that whenever any incurable sickness befell members of the dominant or chiefly clan the weaker and poorer family or clans would be normally blame for the cause through wizardry. Thus, an attack by tuberculosis to two of the chief’s brother led to the barbaric murder of five members of a poor family whose livers were eaten and blood were drank by the whole village population. And the illness of an aged chieftainness in 1897 led to the massacre of three whole families suspected of ‘bewitching’ her and their livers were cut out and portions carried to the victim.

On the other hand, we also see that certain persons who belonged to the poorer class or of minority clan could use the social rhetoric of *doi* or *kaose* to defend themselves from any tyrannical control of the powerful. Certain persons who were accused as wizards had threatened others of possessing supernatural power that eventually led to their death in the hands of the intolerant powerful class. Thus, we can see that before the gory massacre of five family members took place, these persons were seen to have ‘threatened’ other people against their possession of supernatural power. In this sense, the public rhetorical space on the notion of black magic or *kaose*

was often utilised by the weak and powerless in the village community as an instrument to warn or threaten the dominant and powerful class not to take them lightly. It could be a means to evade any tyrannical dealing of the chiefly clan.

Besides, if certain wizards were a 'reputed' magician before they were murdered, it is also possible to think that they could have been a popular magician or wizard in the local society for some good reasons such as in healing certain ailments. Otherwise, they would have been killed long time back. They were murdered now mainly because the powerful might have been envious of their popularity in the local society or of his gaining wealth. The fact that the whole Gangte clan members rose up in protest against the murder of their kinsman Keitawna have shown that the latter was either not a wizard at all or that he could be a popular magician who served the local society for some positive reasons. In this context, it was not on a mere suspicion that he had been murdered by a young warrior but it could have been a sinister design by the chiefly clan to eliminate him in the local society. The protection given by the chief to the murderer, his most powerful warrior, and his acceptance of Gangte migration to Manipur (which was normally disliked by most chiefs) lends support to this argument. Thus, we can see that *kaose* and witchcraft were the product of local and neighbourhood tensions and was closely related to social and power relation in the village society. The breakdown of traditional ties among different social groups (tribal, clans, families or individual) and the dominance of tense social relationship among them eventually produced more and more number of what was considered to be witchcraft and *kaose*.

The fact that it was only women that the *khawhring* can possess is again significant. This takes us to the important subject of gender that dominated the notion of European witchcrafts. Thus, it was women who were at the receiving end of the male-dominated patriarchal society. The fact that *khawhring* can be women only shows that the 'evils' of the society can be performed only by women. If any woman was known as *khawhring* (or *ahmaw* or *kaose*), then 'no one wants to marry' them, no one would let them enter their houses, they will 'certainly be fined a metna' if she sits on other's bed, and worst 'they were always killed'. They were said to be the 'most disgusting people' in the society as the witches of early modern Europe. Thus, the patriarchal society sees women as the 'weaker' section of the society and hence is vulnerable to having relationship with supernatural powers in order to put herself up on equal footing with the male. The male dominated societal wrath over the *khawhring* was therefore the male act against ambitious women. In this way, unfortunate and hapless women were often criminalised to be *khawhring* or *kaose* whenever some human calamities fell upon certain members of the society.

Politics of Defamation: Kaose and doi as product of community conflicts

Evidences also suggested that the growing popularity of *kaose* and *doi* were also largely the product of social or community tensions. The inter- and intra-tribal warfare and conflict across the hills, as noted earlier, generated a strong sense of hatred towards each other. This resulted into labeling each other as wizards or *kaose* to defame and criminalise them as the 'most disgusting people' in the society. What was

significant in this politics of defamation among different tribes/clans is that it followed certain unique pattern. The political relationship between different tribes was apparently central to this pattern. Thus, we can see that it was always the powerful tribe who accused the weaker tribe(s) as wizards and *kaose* or evil eye. But interestingly, such accusation was hardly reciprocated by the latter tribe. Instead, the latter tribe would declare that they were not wizards or evil eye but passed on the bug of defamation to the tribes who were weaker than them or whom they considered as inferior to them. This will be repeated by the latter tribe/clan in the same manner. Thus, the accusation went on, following a particular direction based on the power matrix across the hills until it dovetailed and proliferated among the mixed population of the village *vengs* (colony). It is in this mixed colony where we see that such accusation had become fashionable as a social therapy to sickness believe to be caused by malevolent spirits and was mainly directed to the innocent *khochaga* or *phungchaga* (the weak, the poor, the minority clans, and the women).

At the pan-tribal level, we have already noted the power grid and political matrix across the Kuki-Chin world where the Chins (Hakas, Falams and Suktes) and Pois (of Lushai Hills) had emerged victorious over other tribes like Yahows, Siyins, Lusheis, Thadous and so on. The Lusheis, in their turn defeated the Thadous and other 'old Kuki tribes' of Lushai Hills. And the Thadous were successful in establishing themselves as the paramount powers over many of the Naga tribes in the present hills of Manipur. We can see that the politics of defamation more or less followed this matrix of power relationship. To understand this power matrix, it would be proper to begin with the way in which the plain dwellers of Burma thought about the people living at the margins of the valley, in the Chin Hills. To the 'civilised' and powerful Shans/Burmese population of Burma plains, the Chins who lived at the margins of the valley were infamously known as 'necromancers' and 'sorcerers' whose mere glance was thought to have caused sickness and even death.⁷ But such accusation was flatly denied by the Chins. The Chins, although they strongly believe in 'witchcraft' and 'evil eye', would instead declare that they did not practice or possess the 'evil' art but said that all the other tribes around them such as the Siyins, Yahows, and many of the Lusheis were proficient with it. Carey and Tuck (2008: 200), for instance, noted this clearly:

The Chins fully believe in witchcraft and the power of the evil eye. The Hakas and independent southerners are particularly bad in this respect and consider that the Siyins, Yahows, and many of the Lushais are wizards, whose single glance is sufficient to bewitched them and who are capable of causing lizards to enter the body, balls of string to form in the stomach, and to inflict any and all those afflictions which are the evil gifts of the spirits.

Parry (1988: 465) also noted that the 'Chins also believe in witchcraft and the evil eye, especially among people belonging to other tribes'. Phayre also noted similarly among the Lungkhes and Tseindus of Arakan (Chins/Pois by Lusheis) declaring that 'We do not practice witchcraft, but other people around us do'.⁸ Such defamation charge had been actually grounded in the minds of the people so much so that when

ever a disaster/sickness befell upon anyone they would immediately blame those people they defamed and criminalised as wizard or evil eye. Carey and Tuck, for instance, inform us an interesting case on this count. One Surgeon-Major Newland had once told them the story of a Chin who came to him and ‘complained that *a rat had entered his stomach at the glance of a Yahow* and he went to hospital quite prepared to die’. This man was given ‘an emetic and reported in the morning that he had vomited up the rat in the night and he then went home happy and cured’ (Carey and Tuck 2008: 200). Shakespear (1983: 110) also noted another interesting case when he, with Captain Hall, forced their way to Haka in 1890 to join General Symons. He said that ‘the chiefs of that village [Haka] besought the General not to allow any of our Lushai followers to go within sight of it, lest they should, by merely looking at it cause *fearful misfortunes*’. Carey and Tuck (2008: 200) also mention another similar case in 1893.

In 1893 when a Lushai officer came to Haka to take over mules, he was accompanied by Lushai coolies, who strolled down to the village to chat; their approach was marked by *a stampede of the women*, who fled to the fields or hid in the houses and who afterwards explained that *the mere sight of one of these Lushais was sufficient to cause sickness and distress. (emphasis mine)*

Accusing a particular person when one gets ill just because he belong to a particular community (say Yahows or Lusheis) or preventing them from entering their village or a ‘stampede’ to get rid of them when they came for a friendly ‘chat’, are extreme cases to show that such politics of defamation and criminalisation of a community had eventually become naturalised and a cultural reality in the minds of the accusers when the accused remain innocent and clean.

Similarly, the Lakhers (Pois), who were also another powerful tribe of Lushai Hills and who had ‘pressed’ the Lusheis northward, also considered other tribes around them in the same manner. Parry (1988: 465), for instance, noted:

Black magic which is known as *deu* or in Savang as *thaihna*, is also much feared by the Lakhers, who say that though *there are no magicians in the Lakher country*, there are many among the Tlaikopa (Lusheis), Tikupa (Tipperahs), Takangpa (Chakmas) and Kalaspa (Mughes). In consequence, the Lakhers are very careful of their behavior when travelling among these peoples. *(emphasis mine)*

Parry also noted one interesting case where he found the Lakhers acting in a similar fashion, as we see in the Chin Hills, against the Lusheis. He remarked:

When I first took some of the Lakher chiefs into Aijal they *absolutely refused* to go into any of the villages we passed through on the way, or to go and dine or drink with any of the Lushei chiefs, though they received several invitations, as *they were afraid of being enchanted*. They believe that the magi

cians put some substance, possibly an insects or a small stone, into food or drink, and that this eats the internal organs and so causes death (Parry, 1988: 465). (*emphasis mine*)

Absolute refusal to enter the Lushei's villages or 'to go and dine or drink' with them despite receiving several kind 'invitations', is again another extreme case of how criminalisation of a particular tribe had become a social realism. Thus, in the Chins and Lakher's worldview, the Lusheis were undoubtedly known as the infamous wizards and sorcerers.

But surprisingly, such accusations were never reciprocated by the Lusheis. They, instead, passed on the bug of defamation to other tribes whom they consider as inferior or weaker to them and exonerated themselves from such defamation charge by declaring that they did not practice witchcraft and magic. Thus, the Lusheis declared that there was no witchcraft or wizards among them but said that the tribes to the North of them were 'very proficient'. Parry (1988: 465), for instance, noted that the 'Lusheis in the same way say that though there are no Lushei magicians there are many among the Thados'. Shakespear (1983: 110) also clearly noted how the bug of defamation was passed on from Chins to Lusheis and then to other smaller tribes: 'The Lushais maintain that the tribes to the north of them, such as Paihte, Bete &c., are very proficient at witchcraft, while the Chins consider the Lushais such experts at the craft'.

We have already noted how the Lusheis tradition claimed that they learned the art of witchcraft from the Lhangum (Kuki) clans indicating the fact that it was not them but the Kukis who were proficient in the art. True to the matrix of the politics of defamation, the Thadou-Kukis would not, again, reciprocate the Lusheis but pass on the bug to the weaker tribes like Koms whom they claimed as proficient in the black art. The Thadous were particularly bad in considering all the Nagas as *kaose*, a defamation that is extreme in their worldview. Hence, the defamation went on and on. Parry (1988: 465, f.n. 1) remarked this prevailing politics of defamation in the Kuki-Chin world lucidly: 'All the Lushei Kuki tribes seem to be fond of accusing their neighbours of practicing wizardry and witchcraft, while maintaining that they themselves are guiltless of these practices'. Considering the damaging consequences of being labeled as witchcraft and *kaose*, every tribe would do anything to show that they are 'guiltless of the practices'. Hence, passing on the bug to other tribes was one strategy for the same reason.

The matter being a serious defamation charge, such accusation between different tribes/clans/villages, at times, caused warfare and bloodshed. This happened in a situation when accusation took place between two tribes/clans/villages who were equally powerful or who consider themselves on the same plank in the power matrix. The Suktes, who were mainly responsible for pushing the Thadou-Kukis toward the north from Chin Hills and who felt victorious by conquering most of the Kuki villages until the valley of Manipur, for instance, accused the latter as *kaose* and wizards. But this had caused heavy bloodshed between the two tribes. It was said that the Kukis could not take the defamation charge lightly and responded with attacks on the

Suktes (also known as Kamhows). This was popularly known among them as *Suhte gal* that centred primarily on the question of such defamation charges. Carey and Tuck noted one interesting case of how the Chins felt about the Kukis. During their political tour in the Chins Hills they found ‘some tall stone pillars still standing’ in the original site of the Chassad Kukis (or Taksatte by the Chins). But when they asked the Chins about the pillars ‘they were silent, or said they did not know’. But afterward a friendly Chin ‘quietly whispered’ and told them: ‘Those stones at Taksat were set up by the spirits: but do not tell anyone that I have told you so, as the spirits would be avenged on me if they hear that I have do so’ (Carey & Tuck, 2008: 199). Thus, even after the Chassads leave their original sites the Chins were still in great fear of the spirits which were worshipped or under the control of the Chassads. This in fact was a clear case in which the politics of defamation as *kaose* and *doithem* had so ingrained in their minds that even the remains/relics of them (such as stone pillars) were still feared. Similar was the case between two equally powerful villages within the same tribe or between different clans. Thus, in 1870, the Guites under their chief Sumkam attacked ‘a Manipuri village’ (possibly the village belong to the Thadous), noted Shakespear, ‘to avenge a charge of being wizards [read as *kaose*]’ (Shakespear, 1983: 143).

The fact that certain tribe were not reciprocated with similar defamation charge whereas certain other tribe/clan/village were not only reciprocated but also attacked for the same charge is a significant marker to what we called the power matrix between them. We can see that an accusation on the ground of *kaose* or witchcraft had indeed amounts to declaration of war. An attack and bloodshed usually followed when such accusation was made between two equals. The fact that the weaker tribe refused to reciprocate the same charge made on them to their accuser, invariably the more powerful tribe, but simply passed on the bug to the weaker tribe was strictly in keeping with this power matrix. The fear of an attack from a more powerful tribe/clan in case of reciprocation and the safety from any such attack from the weaker tribe when accused leads to what we know of the politics of defamation. In other words, such politics of defamation was politically and socially secure to them. It was politically safe because it prevented an attack or bloodshed from both the powerful and weaker tribe/clan/village. Socially, it saved the accusing tribe/community from the charge of wizard or *kaose* as if the bug was passing on to the weaker tribe/clan while they remain ‘guiltless’.

But more importantly, the politics of defamation was also politically and socially motivated. Politically, because the defamation charge was mainly motivated by political/community conflicts between two or more tribes/clans/villages. Thus, in labeling the ‘enemy’ tribes/clans/villages with such a powerful instrument of defamation the accuser wanted to show that they are a more powerful and dominant tribe than the accused. It was something like a slap on the face of the defeated tribe, a criminalisation of the worst kind, so that they would never rise up again into prominence. Sequel to the first, it was also socially motivated because the accuser felt that they were at the higher level of the civilisational ladder. To declare the enemy tribe as unwanted or evil people (*athenglou*) was not only a means to proclaim oneself as

‘clean’ and ‘guiltless’ (atheng) but was also a civilisational tool to pronounce the ‘others’ as crude, coarse and uncouth. To proclaim someone as ‘uncivilised’ is a means to proclaim oneself as cultured and civilised. Thus, to the Burmese, the Chins were ‘necromancers’ and ‘sorcerers’ because they were, in their perspective, uncultured people who lived beyond the pale of civilisation. To a civilised people, ‘necromancers’ and ‘sorcerers’ are shorthand to describe the ‘others’ as savage, barbarians and uncivilised hordes who just befit all the social obnoxious of civilisation. In this context, such defamation charge was actually civilisationally motivated. It was largely within this civilisationally framed charge that the politics of defamation need to be located.

For instance, the politically victorious Haka and Falam Chins felt that other tribes around them were uncivilised and uncultured. Vumson (1986: 5), for instance, noted that the Hakas, in their ‘arrogant social posture’ above the others, understood or used the generic term ‘Zo’ to mean their relatively ‘uncultured’ and ‘uncultivated’ people of southern Haka division. This ‘arrogant social posture’ towards the other tribes was therefore central in the politics of defamation. Thus when the Chins accused the Lusheis, Yahows, Siyins, Thadous and so on as infamous wizards and evil eye whose ‘single glance is sufficient to bewitched them and who are capable of causing lizards to enter the body, balls of string to form in the stomach’, they actually means to defame them as uncultured and uncivilised people. This was simply a means to ‘cleanse’ themselves from the bug of defamation caused to them by the plain dwellers as well as to proclaim themselves as an advanced, cultured and civilised people over and above other tribes. Thus, the same attitude was shared by all tribes toward their politically inferior tribes such as Lusheis to Thadous, Paites, Bete and so on, and Thadous to Koms, Nagas, etc. Thus, from such politics of defamation on the ground of *kaose* and *doi* one can clearly see how the civilisational notion of the plain dwellers (the state people) had eventually climbed up the hills among the tribes (the non-state people). In this political relation between different tribes was central. Therefore, the passing of defamation bug from one tribe to another was indeed the passing of the cultural notion of things in history instead of being the existence of something in reality.

Kaose and Doi as a Social Construct

It is too early to go for any hard-line conclusion from our historical tour into the dark world of *kaose* and *doi*. The little evidences that we put up here still run the hazard of counter-opinion from the centuries old belief and character of the black art. Nonetheless, few materials that we could ponder upon suggested, in clear terms, certain definite idea on the subject for further investigation and sustained debate. We can see that the belief in *kaose* and *doi* proliferated and stayed on in the society as a privilege cultural/civilisational tool of the powerful against the weak, as an instrument of control and domination by the dominants upon the hapless poor, minority clans, and women. In other words, it was merely the product of social and political tensions between different and warring tribes/clans/villages/individuals. Lacking reason, science, and medicine, all ailments were traditionally believed to be caused by the inter

ventions of supernatural powers such as malevolent spirits. But the new idea (that probably gained ground when they were in the Chin Hills) that some of these ‘spirits’ were under human control make things worse than anticipated. *Doithem* (variously known as magician, wizard, sorcerer, witchcraft, etc.) and *kaose* (variously known as vampire, evil eye, witchcraft, etc.) were two powerful human figures that emerged powerfully in Kuki-Chin worldview. The growing tensions between different social groups across this country in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries provided a fertile breeding ground or a congenial social and political atmosphere for the growth of numbers of accused *doithem* and *kaose*.

In this context, *kaose* and *doi* were merely a social construct which has become popular as an effective and powerful instrument of defamation by the powerful to the weak. Accusing someone as the ‘most disgusting people’ in the society was merely a political and social tool not only to defame the ‘enemy’ as uncultured and uncultivated but also to cleanse oneself from the bug or the ‘guilt’ of similar defamation charge made on them by a more powerful neighbours. This idea percolated at the tension-ridden village community where we found that the powerful and chiefly clan(s) used it as a weapon to kill, to expel from the village, to devastate, to control, or to oppress the innocent minority clan members (*phungchaga*), the weak, the poor, and the hapless women (*khochaga*). Sometimes, it was used to control the properties of certain well-to-do people in the village but the bug was predominantly used against the ‘weak’. On the other hand, the weak also sometime proclaimed as having the power to control the supernatural ‘spirits’ (which they never had in reality but merely taking advantage of the social rhetoric on black magic) and threatened the intolerant dominant clans/community of the village to keep away from any untoward tyranny against them.

If it is a social construct and that everyone proclaimed that they never had such power in reality, then why *kaose* and *doi* stay-on in the society? This is especially so with the case of *kaose* among the Kukis. What is interesting about the politics of defamation charge was that once a person or community is accused nothing could stop the accuser from believing in what they had declared it to be true. This was despite a strong presence of social mechanism to check on false accusation, say, a fine of Rs. 40 (among the Lusheis) or Rs. 60 (Lakhers) or one mithun (Lakhers and Kukis). But the fact remains that the effectiveness of such control mechanism depends upon who accuse who. Normally, when a case of defamation came up in a village the matter was decided at the Chief’s court. But the problem with this justice system is that there was no one or no mechanism to check the chief’s decision. It would be fraud to say that the chief followed certain inviolable rules in the justice delivery system. The truth is that when the accusation was made by the chief himself or by his family members against the poor and the weak members (*khochaga*) of the village community or by his clan members against minority clan members (*phungchaga*), the chief invariably sided in favor of the former.

The irony is that once the chief decided (as the final arbiter) the matter in favor of his own men the matter ends there, and there was no higher court for the accused to relieve himself from the injustice. The chief’s decision, how bad it would have

been, was considered as final and the truth was said to be finally established among the village community. To go against the chief was a serious challenge to his authority. Among the Thadou-Kukis the grand council of the clan heads (*pipa* or *phungupa*) can check such injustice but that was hardly sought after considering the difficult geographical or political terrain of the time from where such help might come. Hence, the poor and the weak have to withstand the worst of such injustice done to them without any chance of succor. The matter stays there and from generation to generation, those families who were once accused and declared (out of social or political spite) as wizards or *kaose* will continue to be known by the people like that, openly or secretly. We will come back to this point shortly.

The village society had at least the chief court to decide case of accusation, no matter to what extent it could provide justice to all. At least the chiefly clans or powerful people could get justice if accusation is made against them, unless it is from the chief himself. But think about the politics of defamation between two or more rival and warring tribes. In such case, the hill society as a whole lacked any common court of arbiter where such charges could be settled. Therefore, such accusation between tribes (say, by stronger tribe to weaker tribe as we see it) remained unattended. In certain cases, we have seen that bloodshed took place between the two tribes/clans/villages due to such defamation charge. In both the cases, the matter ended with the spiteful accusation and hence it stayed on so much so that the accusing tribe would eventually act hostile to the accused while the latter would continue to act in feign ignorance. Thus, there was a stampede among the women of Haka when some Lushei coolie strolled down the street, in feign ignorance of the accusation, for a talk. Similarly, Lakher chiefs had 'absolutely refused' to enter Lushei villages or had food and drink together with them when the Lushei chiefs, again in feign ignorance, kindly 'invited' them to their houses. Thus, what was purely political in character now turned into social and cultural reality. The Chin women (and men) had not realised that they were similarly accused and thus treated by the Burmese when they visited the plain and that the latter's behavior was a mere civilisational gesture to the people they thought were uncultured and uncultivated. It was this civilisational thinking, which centres on social and political relationship between two or more communities, which perpetuate the belief on *kaose* and witchcraft in history and in our society.

When such power matrix had been broken between different tribes with the coming of colonialism and when the 'uncultured' tribe exalted in the new colonial world orders, the idea on such politics of defamation had died out just as the belief also gradually waned. If such accusation ever arises again, the society was now provided with an overarching colonial administration to arbitrate the matter and provide justice. Truly, if justice based on science and reason is to be given in each case, tribe to tribe or individual to individual, there is no way to prove that certain tribe or individual is *kaose* or wizard in the first place. The belief lingered on even during the colonial period but it has lost its killer instinct as in the past. Already in the 1920s Parry informed of *khawhring*: 'Nowadays, most people are not afraid of "Khawhringnei" and do not worry about them but the belief still lingers on'. On sorcery/witchcraft or *doi* he informed similarly: 'Although the belief in magic is gradually dying out it still exists especially in the more backward villages and cases

fairly frequently arise in which a man complains that some one has accused him of being a “*Dawithiam*” (Parry, 2009: 18). We have noted that when such cases arose in the village the British administration immediately intervened, prohibited the chief to any order of persecution, ordered the accused families to migrate to other places where we see that the administration had at times created new village for them and thus resolved the problem. We have also noted that it was this section of the socially ostracised population who had embraced Christianity and become one of the early Christians who took up the mission to spread the new religion across the hills. This new mission would surely have not only destroyed a fearful image they have carried before to those accusers but also demolished the very idea of witchcraft and *khawhring* that does not really exist. Thus, the belief had eventually died out in the Lushai Hills in time and in parts of Chin Hills where similar development had taken place.

But the same belief lingered on among the Kukis. It is difficult to say for sure why it has been so? Yet certain factors may be considered as crucial. Perhaps, the foremost reason for the continuing popularity of the notion of *kaose* among the Kukis may be located on its very principle of ‘unsayableness’ (*seingailou*) which we called as the conspiracy of silence. Contrary to this principle, in Lushai and Chin Hills we have seen that the social response was broadly open and direct. We have seen that the *khawhring* and wizards were openly confronted by the society. They were openly socially boycotted – denying marriage, prevent them from entering other houses, fine for sitting on others bed, or denying all the normal life of the society. Or they may be immediately murdered or expelled from the village and find nowhere to live in or may be refused an entry into the village to keep them out of sight. This ‘openness’ brought the matter to the fore. Under such situation, the accused got the opportunity to sue before the court (chief or colonial) and hence appropriate ‘justice’ given accordingly such as killing them, expulsion from village or exonerating from the defamation. Such justice hardly comes about among the Kukis due to the ‘opaqueness’ of social response or where the story of *kaose* remains a ‘secret affair’. People were secretly ‘notified’ through the darkness of a ‘secret’ family conversation by the society. And under the carpet of small talk and across the subterranean world, people were not given to open confrontation with *kaose* unless they were ‘caught’ in the ‘evil’ act. Thus, when everyone knew who are the *kaose* among them no one ‘as a rule’ spoke of them in the open for fear that they may be overheard by the latter. This is what we called the conspiracy of silence, which was central to the continuing importance of *kaose*. Therefore, a brief discussion on this aspect of silence among the Kukis has becomes pertinent.

When I search for historical or ethnographical accounts on *kaose* from my research materials I was surprise to see that there was none that can provide any substantial story on it. I was especially surprise to see that the official ethnographers on Kukis like William Shaw and John Shakespear were completely in dark on the subject. It was only J.H. Hutton whose academic excellence and in-depth understanding of tribal world was able to add few lines in the appendice of Shaw’s monograph. This remains perhaps the only account we have so far to ponder upon on the subject which was so ingrained in every Kukis mind. In fact, this should not surprise us much

mainly because the fear of being heard by the *kaose* compelled everyone to shut up his or her mouth. Hence, we have no historical account of *kaose* available to us for in-depth analysis.

In other words, the orthodoxy with the 'rule' or the principle of 'unsayable' or 'undiscussable' on the subject of *kaose* created a situation where an 'outsider' found the poverty of knowledge on the subject so common to everyone. But surprisingly enough, this was, and is, not so much the case with an 'insider' who learned the story of *kaose* behind the safety of a closed door and in the subterranean veil of family conversation. Indeed, the ideal of 'unsayableness' makes Kukis virtually a silent community whose knowledge about *kaose* was communicated as if information is passing among members of a secret society. This silence is perhaps the longest surviving 'conspiracy' in the history of the Kuki whereby people collectively maintained silence in the open of something which each one of them is personally aware. This state of thing is what Zerubavel (2006) has called 'conspiracy of silence'.

Ironically, this conspiracy of silence was even murkier to the accused. Most of them did not even know that they have been labeled as *kaose* by the society which everyone was aware. Even when they heard from some 'muhchuh' (out-spoken) they would truthfully deny that they are not *kaose*. But that normally won't help as the protest will not be reciprocated by the hostile and silent community who simply felt that the denial was 'obvious' (*asei dinga lha*). Since the accusation, spread through the subtle string of the 'secret' family conversation and within the rumor-mongering subterranean world, there was no way the accused could find any justice in the Chief's court or elsewhere. Even if he find the accusers, it was even more difficult to prove before the chief court that he was not a *kaose* just as it was difficult for the chief to decide he is positive or not. The matter becomes worst when the accused belongs to the poor, widow, and powerless and the accuser is the powerful and chiefly clan members.

Thus, the story of defamation charge went on and on under the carpet and without the chance of recall. A situation, therefore, was reached when the hostile society remain silent in the open of the accusation and when the *kaose* themselves deny that they never knew about any accusation. Such a 'co-denial' is unmistakably a social phenomenon that involves mutual avoidance. But the irony is that such a situation of co-denial eventually produced an 'open-secret' identity of section of the population who had become not a member of the society but 'unsayable' person outside of the society. Thus, within the notion of 'unsayableness' and in the subterranean world of Kuki's conspiracy of silence certain myths (such as the *selpaotheinete* or *kaobelpote*) or certain 'un-recallable' old accusations had continue to haunt, truncate and devastate the lives of certain clans, villages, families or thousands of innocent Kukis even till today. Thus, while the familiar belief such as *khawhring* and *ahmaw* had died out in Lushai Hills a long time ago, the Kuki society was and is still haunted by the ancient spelt of the politics of defamation.

Besides, Christianity has been often said to be one powerful factor that ends *khawhring* and *doi* in the Lushai Hills. Here the church, under the western missionaries, particularly took keen interest on the subject. It was, as they said, ably success

ful in exorcising (*nodoh*) the 'spirit' from the accused *khawhring* and won over the minds of people. This had provided them the first fertile ground for conversion among this 'merciful' population. As the *khawhring* converts were the early batch of the so-called 'Christian soldiers' (*Christa sepai*) it was possible that their influence over the subject was tremendous and hence its eventual evaporation from the minds of the people. But the same church had no similar impact among the Kukis. Here, we found that church did not take any particular policy on the subject nor was it keen to abolish it. This is particularly for the same reason noted above. The belief or practice had gone too 'underground' within the subterranean world of social conspiracy of silence that the western missionary, just as the district officers, were not able to find the subject demanding church action. Thus, if the openness against the *khawhring* provided a good ground for the church to intervene and demolished it, the 'opaqueness' of or the principle of 'undiscussableness' of *kaose* prevented any meaningful interventions from the church as to state. Hence, *kaose* neither appeared as anti-Christ practice nor as 'law and order problem'. This is similarly the case in present Kuki church. Therefore, *kaose* stayed on under the gripping garb of Kuki's conspiracy of silence over the age and is still lively.

The above discussion takes us to some clean thought. Taken from the point of its origin, its belief and practices, and from the point of social responses to the so-called black art, and seen them from the prism of politics and in the context of power and social relations in the hills, what eventually emerge in a clean sheet is the fact that the belief in *kaose* and *doi* remain as a 'belief' rather than reality. It was and is a social construct over a period of time that spread and concretised as an instrument of the powerful against the weak, nothing more. Seen from this power prism the belief is far from real. From the existential question, the belief is studded with myths and mythologies, whims and whimsical allegories, farces and farcical stories, believing the unbelievable fiction, and so on, which science and reason would find having uncomfortable bedfellows.

Why do we Need to Study *Kaose* now? – A Missive to Kuki Readers

The historical injustices and certain alarming recent happenings over few of the Kukis prompted me to write this small piece in order to open up a debate so that we could puncture the balloon of silence for a meaningful resolution on the subject. This silence, as we noted, will take us nowhere. It was not the *kaose* but our conspiracy of silence about the *kaose* that enchanted the Kuki community for this long. Unless this silent is broken and until the subterranean conspiracy is brought overground, in the open, and before proper social forum there will not be any justice to section of Kuki population who had endured with unwarranted defamation charge over the centuries. This historical injustice is now compounded by the alarming growth of such defamation charges since the 1990s when the Kukis experienced another phase of political and social turmoil. More and more number of accusation charges has come up and many cases were the first time in their family history. The two cases referred to above, were tip of an iceberg of defamation charges which had taken place in recent times. The '*kao* doctor' mentioned above also claimed with pride that he alone was

able to ‘cure’ more than a hundred cases of *kaobol*, indicating the fact that the belief had grown in an alarming proportion again. In places like Moreh where thousands of displaced Kukis (in the wake of Naga’s ethnic cleansing programme) were settled, the mind of the people had already been ‘engulfed’ or ‘besieged’ by the fear of *kaose* and *doi* so much so that accusations and hatred of certain families or persons had studded the everyday chores of the enchanted population.

Unlike in Lushai Hills, the Kuki Churches have hardly taken any serious concern over the subject. Truly, it provided equality to all, including the *kaose*. Truly, it was also able to destroy most of the traditional rituals and ceremonies where *kaose* found no equality with others. Pastors may repeatedly preach against any discrimination on the ground of *kaose*. Yet the Church failed to take any proactive step on the question of *kaose*. It was also apparently restrained by the social principle of ‘unsayableness’ about *kaose*. Its silence, in fact, leads the Church to silently accept the ‘norms’. Worst, its silence on *kaose* on the one hand and its forefront principle of ‘war’ against ‘Satan’ and other malevolent spirits (*thilha* or *lhagao-boh*) in the society inadvertently and silently brought *kaose* under the latter category. It tends to consider *kaose* in the way witchcraft was considered by the Church of early modern Europe. This is most visible in its conflicting injunction of people accused of *kaose*. On the one hand, the Kuki church maintained that all *kaose* are an equal member of the church and can attain salvation. On the other hand, it deplores ‘*kaotom*’ (possessing the other or entering into other’s body to torment or kill) and declares as a ‘sin’ to do so. This means that the Church condemn the act of *kaose* but endorsed the existence of *kaose* in the society. In other words, the Church quietly and silently accepted that *kaose* existed in Kuki society and its aim is not to destroy it but to control it from attacking people. This is but surrender to the myth of ancient belief in *kaose* and an expression of defeat.

I am saying that the Kuki church silently accepted defeat before what it considers as ‘*lhagaoboh*’ or sin particularly on certain ground. It silently accepted that certain medical illness are ‘*kaobol*’ (an attack by *kaose*) and vehemently deplored that such ‘*kaobol*’ is a diabolical act (*dai-bol* or *kholai-lang bol*). Thus, what is socially condemned as *athenglou* now becomes *chonset* (sin) in the church. Recent cases of ‘*kaobol*’ involved Church leaders, elders, or people who took the name of Christ to ‘expel’ or ‘exorcise’ (*nodoh*) the *kaose* from the victim’s body. We even have a person who is popularly known as ‘*kao* doctor’ who was a devoted Christian and who claimed that he was anointed by the angels (*lhagaotheng*) to ‘heal’ (*damsah*) people possessed by ‘spirits’ (*lhagao-boh*) and *kaose*. When asked whether *kaose* is *lhagao-boh*, he promptly answered ‘Yes, *kaose* is *lhagaoboh*’. Thus, the social concept of *kaose* intrudes in the church definition of diabolical works. In this context, Kuki church lacked any definition of *kaose* or simply silently accepted that it is a diabolical conspiracy against Christianity. It was under such circumstances that the belief in *kaose* ‘stay-on’ among the Kukis even after the celebration of hundred years of Christianity. This is again unfortunate.

Today *kaose* lived a normal life in a village community as if they are normal people in the eyes of an outsider. Most village chief stopped discriminating them in

the village affairs on the ground of *kaose*. But the truth is that no one forgets them as *kaose* and the diabolical conspiracy against them is as lively as it used to be in the past. Besides, the rapid decline of what I would call the traditional ‘shields’ against *kaose* such as the cross-cousin marriage (the *pute-chanu kijuon*) could not prevent us from thinking about, not to mention of believing in, the *kaose*. Discrimination on the ground of sharing comb, in communal feasting, and inter-clan or family interactions, and so on, had all subsided or gone. But this could not prevent us from thinking about *kaose*. Broadly, *kaose*, as an ancient idyllic, instead of dying out, continues to remain well-entrenched and deep-rooted in our time. One glaring example of this can be seen when a person chooses his/her life partner. Young people may stop asking this question to their partner, but their parents would not. In a most devilishly language parents may ask: ‘*itobang mi hinao vem?*’, the language, how ambiguous it might have been, was however easily knowable to their children. Or a secret mission is always an optional in the conspiracy. If they found the partner’s family in state of even ‘*sei-a theng sei-a boh*’ they would do anything to prevent the nuptial relationship.

The worse thing is, many young men and women till today consciously avoided those people who are accused as *kaose* or have any blood relationship with *kaose*, for a lover or partner. *Kaose* are silently condemned to remain outside the corridor of the charm circle of usual matrimonial selection. They have been silently rejected, boycotted, and ostracised as in the past. They continue to remain in a society not as a person and family when they thought they live as a person and family, incomplete and mutilated when they are complete as much as we are, ‘unsayable’ when we all say secretly. They are in a way undergoing a ‘bare life’ having no identity other than they are secretly known by the larger public. When they thought they are part and parcel of the community, the community actually deny them any membership; their identity is a mere ‘unsayable’ which is not even a being. But the pertinent question is – how long are we going to remain silent and let our own brothers and sisters remain as unsayable, undiscussable persons? How long are we going to say ‘*sei ngailou ahi?*’? How long are we going to keep this ‘conspiracy of silence’ concealed? Unless we are able to puncture this balloon of silence, *kaose* will remain lively and vibrant in the society. Instead of ending it, it will continue to proliferate in the society and we should be warned that this got the potential to break the social fabric in a big way. My objective is to start puncturing this balloon of silence and see how this ‘conspiracy of silence’ could be taken up for intellectual debate and discussion. I see this as a necessary step toward the emancipation of our brothers and sisters from being hostage of an ancient spelt on two grounds.

- First, the belief in *kaose* cannot be buried away even in the face of an overarching dominance of the Church, the chiefs and the declining customary practices of discriminations against them because it relies on a *concept* rather than *practice*, an *idea* rather than *art*, a *belief* rather than *fact*, a *thought* rather than *science*, and finally a *myth* rather than *real*.
- Secondly, since *concept* can be destroyed or demolished only by a counter-concept, the role of intellectuals becomes necessary to find out the way how this

concept could be demolished. For that, the truth about *kaose* should be first established.

This paper is not only to point out what had happened in the past but more importantly to say that what had happened in the past says that *kaose* never existed in reality, it was just a social construct, it was a mere civilisational tool in the hands of the powerful to defame, criminalise and devastate the weak. It was the product of social, political or neighbourhood tensions. The victims of *kaose* were actually attacked not by *kaose* or spirit but they were actually suffering from a psychological state of dissociative disorder particularly that of dissociative amnesia caused by constant state of mental stress and trauma or in most cases were caused by certain diseases like tuberculosis, malaria, stomachache and so on which medical science can give clear definition and which medicine can provide sure cure.

We also wanted to warn those people who are still flattened with those ancient spelt, that if *kaose* really existed they should first accept that they are also one of them on two grounds. First, if a mere accusation makes someone a *kaose*, history has it that all the Kukis (particularly we the 'Thadous') had been once accused as *kaose* and *doithem* by both the Lusheis and the Chins. We have been hated as if our single glance would cause sickness and misfortune to them. Such accusation stayed on and we had not been able to correct that in the past except shedding some bloods. The same pattern was repeated within the tribe, clan, or village level in which the weak, the poor, and the hapless section of our population have been often accused whenever some disaster befell upon the powerful and chiefly clans/class. History has it that such accusation was nothing but a mere politics of defamation and was merely an expression of the civilisational notion of the powerful against the weak, produced in the context of social and political tensions between different tribes/clans/villages. Certain people became *kaose* merely, because they were not able to defend or find justice due to the overwhelming power of the accusers. *Kaose* exist merely because of that, nothing more. Therefore, if you accept that *kaose* really exist than you should accept that you are as well *kaose* who had been once accused by the Lusheis and Chins and who had not been able to correct the defamation charge. As the politics of defamation shows, once bitten is always bitten. Hence, you have been bitten and bitten now; there is no escape.

Secondly, if you still think that you are safe from such politics of defamation, you still consider you are *kaose* because you are in no way safe from it. Consider the cases in which we, as the theory of *kaose* says, can become *kaose*. There are two ways a person could become *kaose*: blood-line (marriage) and through the hairs. You are not married to a person who is accused as *kaose* or is not the children of one of them, but please recall your past and ask yourself: have you, your parents, grandparents, at anytime, shared a comb (*samthi*) or a *nam* (cane plaited hair band for carrying goods) with other persons who could have been *kaose*? Have you or anyone of them had ever visited a barber's parlour to cut your/their hairs where all the so-called *kaose* have also cut their hairs once? It is hard to believe in today's world that you/your parents and grandparents had not visited a barber's parlour a single time in your/their life or never shared combs with any other persons. This is especially true

to those people living in urban centres, but equally true also to those living in the village whose life was closely connected to the urban centres. Those who believe in *kaose* must think about this seriously. If you had a history of that, make sure that or accept that you are one of the *kaose* because it was from such barber's parlour or sharing of combs with others that the spirit of *kaose* had already entered your body and resided there. You got the power to command now. What remains is, you just have to give a command and torment people. Can you do that? If you can, accept that *kaose* exist. If you cannot, then reconsider your belief in *kaose* and start saying that *kaose* do not exist in reality, instead of lingering on your thought with the farcical ancient spelt of barbarism, savagery, and primitive memory. This is the new world of science and reasons.

The Road Ahead

If *kaose* is historically incomprehensible combing, other sciences (social and medical) must buy more time to show that it is a social construct and one that is a medical subject. They need to, one by one, deconstruct what I would call the theories of *kaose* through meticulous research and dedication. Until that is done, I am afraid we would be able to convince the mesmerised mind of the thousands whose belief in *kaose* was built on the deep of the seven layers of the earth (*leitho-thosagi*) and secured inside the seven layers of the 'iron gate' (*thihpi-thosagi*); they are being enchanted. Can we release this enchanted community now?

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Notes

¹ 'Will-o'-the-wisp' is 'a dim, flickering light seen hovering at night on marshy ground, thought to result from the combustion of natural gases'. It is a phosphorescent light seen hovering or floating at night on marshy ground and thought to result from the combustion of natural gases. See any English dictionary. For different ancient ideas on this, see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Will-o%27-the-wisp> (Accessed May 17, 2016)

² It is mainly caused by traumatise or stressful event. Currently 'trance and possession' disorder came under the generic dissociative disorder, which is purely of psychological causation and can also be due to brain damage.

³ For this ritual see Parry, *The Lakhers*, pp. 463-64.

⁴ I am thankful to David Vumlallian Zou for bringing this to my knowledge. Of course more missionary accounts on this 'evil' practices can add more insight and it is up to future researchers to find out more from those missionary accounts.

⁵ See *Rajmalah* (the Royal Chronicles of Tripura Kingdom).

⁶ For detail discussion on this crisis situation see Jangkhomang Guite, 'Civilisation and its malcontents : The politics of Kuki raid in nineteenth century Northeast

India', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 48, 3 (2011): 339–76.

⁷ See, for instance, Fr. Sangermano, *A Description of Burmese Empire: Compiled Chiefly from Burmese Documents*, trans. W. Tandy (London, 1966 [1833]), p. 43.

⁸ As quoted in Parry, *Lakhers*, p. 465, f.n. 1.

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