

The Kukis of Naga Hills: Rethinking Kuki-Naga Relations in Light of Kukis Contribution to the Early Naga Movement

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Whenever we heard about the Kukis and Nagas, the binary identity is often assumed to be antagonistic and synonymous with conflicts over land and the antagonistic positions taken by both the communities over any issue in Manipur, which had clouded over all other stories of the past. The past may not be rosy but it is different from what has often been portrayed - a history supposedly of continuous hatred and killings. In the dispensation of sub-nationalist struggles in the northeastern region, often diatribes directed towards each other are a result of the present fights for bigger control over land and resources, particularly in Manipur. The Kukis and Nagas lived together for centuries in Manipur and composite Assam and their relationship in the past was not necessarily antagonistic, as often portrayed. In the then Naga Hills the relationship was even closer where the Kukis played an important role in the early Naga movement. This essay will trace the relationship between the Kukis and Nagas in the Naga Hills and discuss the contributions of the Kukis in the Naga political movement. Besides, this work shows the fallacy of focusing on conflicts of the past when warfare was a way of life in the tribal world, be it within the Kukis and the Nagas - often within tribes and clans, resulting in inter-village feuds. The Kuki and Naga relation in the past has elucidated interest in recent years. This study aims to present the historical facts so that people contemplate the past without relying on hearsay.

Keywords: Kuki, Naga, Naga Hills, Manipur, Relations, Conflict, Christianity, Naga-Movement

Introduction

When histories are written keeping in mind the present socio-political circumstances, the present can hugely influence historical writings. More so, people often engage in subjective narration of the past for political gains, making history dangerous for peaceful coexistence. A subjective historical narration is not only bad, it can mislead

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a whole generation into believing a lie, and the seed once it germinates can have catastrophic proportions. Such has been the history of the Kuki-Naga relations. While some printed the narration, others mostly disseminate orally. One doesn't need to quote from books about such histories, and if we just keep our eyes open and ears wide alert, the undercurrent is clear: Kukis and Nagas were sworn enemies in the past. Since colonial policies also often pitted one against the other, savageries were often committed. Some of these barbaric killings have indeed happened and some constructed, and some were under the patronage of a more powerful ruler than them.

In the absence of local written records, and since the oral stories sometimes are prone to exaggeration where emotions are involved, one has to go back to the archives. Though archives in itself has limitations, nevertheless they are the opinions a third party colonial officers observations which can be more truthful in this regard. Even the most savage tribe had reason behind such savagery.

The relationship between the Kukis and Nagas in the then Naga Hills was mostly confined between the Kukis with the Zeliang-Nagas and Angami Nagas till the nineteenth century since they were neighbours. The relationship between the Kuki and Angamis was similar to the relationship between, say for instance, Angamis and Semas. In fact, Kukis and Angamis would relate more to each other than an Angami to a Sema since they often crossed paths. The Nagas themselves are so diverse that there were little or no pan-Naga feelings, and it was the Naga Club which was formed in 1918 that first attempted to bring the recalcitrant tribes under one Naga body. It was in this body that the Kukis also played an active part. British policies towards the Kukis also shaped their relations with the Angamis and Zeliangs in a big way. The British had used Kukis as a cornerstone in its policy of subjugation of the upland "North-East India".

The Kukis of Naga hills, in fact, contributed more to the early Naga Movement than many tribes of Naga Hills comparatively. Besides, though Kukis and Nagas couldn't work out together in the early days of India's independence in Manipur, the Kuki Tribal Union that was formed tried to work with the Naga National Council for a common objective. Thus, the straight jacketed distinction and differentiations that is often portrayed and the histories of pain and anger that is lived would also be interposed with a history of the other side, of love, of brotherhood, early church histories and significant roles in the Naga movement.

How was it that Kukis could play an important role in the early Naga Movement? To understand that, early relationship of the Kukis and Nagas of Naga Hills will have to be traced.

Tracing Early Relations

The British first came into contact with tribes in the Naga Hills in 1832 when Captain Francis Jenkins and Captain Robert Pemberton crossed into the Naga territory during their strategic survey of the road communication between Assam and Manipur. After Lord Dalhousie's minute of using buffers instead of direct conquest, Government officials pointed out that the plundering inroad of the Angami Nagas on the low land of Assam and Cachar could be more easily prevented by the establishment of effective

means of defence in the British frontiers. Thus, Raja of Manipur and the Cachar chief Tularam Senapati were asked to check Angami aggression. But these measures instead of solving the Angami problem aggravated it and the Angami raids went on increasing (Alexander 2005: 101-103). It was in this context that the Kukis, especially those living in North Cachar, were approached and utilised as a buffer or screen between the more timid subjects and the Angamis who frequently plundered and raided Kacha Nagas, Meekirs and other tribes.

In a letter written by Jenkins to Captain Henry Bivar, Junior Assistant, Nowgong, 29th July 1856, he wrote:

All the tribes proper to North Cachar, the Cacharies, Meekirs and Aroong Nagas appear to be utterly unable to defend themselves against the Angami Nagas, they are totally useless and will still be only preparing for fight and not for resistance. But I have still more hope on the Kukis who are also archers. I have constantly heard of the bravery of some of these tribes, and in more than one occasion you have expressed much confidence in them, and if I recollect rightly, there has no instance occurred as yet in which they have been attacked by the Angamis showing evidently that they are held in dread by these savages.

Some of their Rajas are able, I believe, to bring so large a number of followers with them that there will be little or no danger of their being liable to attacks from the Angamis even if left to themselves but if they succeed in establishing flourishing villages in the fine and fertile country we are now abandoning, there would be nothing to prevent our assisting them with small guards of Sepoys should they wish it., or to our siding them with gifts of fire arms and ammunition, which would be more desirable arrangements for they should go forward under the full knowledge they would be accustomed to trust entirely to themselves the more fitted would they become for the position they would take up and the more effectually would our purpose of defending the frontier by means of these warlike tribes would be fulfilled (Barpujari, 2003: 62-63).

In 1856-57 lands were assigned rent-free for 10 and afterwards for 25 years to any Kukis who would settle to the east of North Cachar beyond the Langting River. Firearms and ammunition were given to them by the government. In 1859 about 600 Kukis had accepted settlement on these terms; and in 1860 the colony contained 1,356 inhabitants in seven villages (Mackenzie 2005: 146). The Langting colony was originally settled on the deserted tracts between the Langting river and the Dhansiri river, to the north-east of Assaloo. In 1866 when the Naga Hills district was formed, it did not include the Langting colony proper as well as a big chunk of the land between the Barail range and the Barak river. In 1872 the British administrators discussed about changing the boundary between Manipur and Assam which would affect the Langting colony.

Alexander Mackenzie, Esq., offg. secy. to the govt. Of Bengal, wrote to the commissioner of Assam:

It has been further decided to advance the southern boundary of the Naga Hills district

to march with Manipur. The Kuki colonies lying between the present Naga Hills district and Manipur will now fall within Capt. Butler's Jurisdiction, and will be treated by him precisely as are the villages of the Nagas. It has been further decided to advance the southern boundary of the Naga Hills district to march with Manipur. The Kuki colonies lying between the present Naga Hills district and Manipur will now fall within Capt. Butler's Jurisdiction, and will be treated by him precisely as are the villages of the Nagas.¹

Thus, in the 1870s a substantial number of Kukis were transferred with their land and amalgamated with Naga Hills. These were beside the few villages who had already settled there from the seventeenth century.² The British policies towards the Kukis would have deeper impacts in their relations with the Angamis and Zeliangs.

Kukis relation with the Angamis and Zeliangs

The Kukis had good relation with the Angami Nagas, especially of the Semoma *khel* of Khonoma. The Semomas under Visher Semoma and Kukis under Paujalut Singson reached an oath of alliance by drinking water through the pipe of a Muzzle Loading gun, to enter into a truce and lasting brotherhood for them and generations to come (Thangkhochon et.al. (n.d): 1-4).

Moreover, The Zeliangs also requested Hotinmang, Chief of Jampi village in Manipur, to come and protect them from the continuous raids and torture by the Angamis. Khotinthang consented and migrated towards Naga Hills. He persuaded the Angamis not to harass the Zeliangs and this was carried out based on mutual respect. They entered into a treaty of friendship with each other to avoid clashes and bloodshed. They took oath of alliance by drinking water through the pipe of a muzzle loading gun and exchange of valuable things. The Kukis gave a chain of conical bead, a Burmese gong and a muzzle loading gun. The Semomas gave a Lohe cloth and a spear designed with lamb's hair. The oath of alliance served its purpose and there was peace in the region (Thangkhochon et.al. (n.d): 4-12). The Kukis call the Angamis *Galleng* which means 'king of war'. The Angamis in turn call the Kukis *Kotsiamia* which means strong, great and mighty warriors.³ The other explanation for *Kotsiamia* which is slightly different is "People who use bow and arrow". Kukis were said to have helped the Khonoma people in building and re-building the Tseka/ Chakka forts.⁴

Meanwhile, British geo-political ambitions pitted Kukis and Angamis against each other since there were many Angami villages which were still hostile to the British. The British policy of placing Kukis at the frontier areas to guard Angami inroads into Assam plains was bound to cause a conflict. However, Angamis bypassed Kuki villages and hardly any skirmish was witnessed (Mackenzie 2005: 146). To guard against the depredations of the Angamis in and around the first British outpost at Naga Hills in Samoogooting, 20 Kuki scouts were also appointed as guards whose duty was scouting round Dimapur and Samoogooting and the road between those posts clear of prowling parties of Angamis who had earlier speared some British sepoy.⁵

When the Angami Nagas rose in rebellion against the British in the famous village of Khonoma, James Johnstone led a contingent of 2000 forces from Manipur to suppress the rebels. Out of the 2000 forces of Johnstone, about 1000-1200 were Kuki irregulars (Johnstone 2002: 128-129). However, it should be noted that these Kuki irregulars were sepoys of the Manipur Raja and not people acting on their own whims. It was the same case when the British brought 800 Porters from Naga Hills (most of which were Angamis) drafted for the Labour Corps for France to Manipur to deal with the Kuki Uprising 1917-1919 (Reid 1997: 162-163). A draft of 817 Naga Hills recruits which was waiting to go to France was diverted to the Kuki Operations in January 1918. The draft consisted of 60 Lhotas, 90 semas, 120 Aos, 60 Kukis and Kacha Nagas and 480 Angamis (Reid 1942:162-163).

Infact, during the Kuki Uprising the Kukis sent emissaries to the Angamis bringing the *Thingkho le Malchapom*, a Kuki King chilli tied to a wood, which signals war. The Angamis, especially those of Khonoma, were requested to participate in the war in the side of the Kukis. W.J.Reid wrote:

...while I was at Khonoma, a day or two ago, one of the goanburas in a half apologetic way handed over to Hutton a charred and a cleft piece of stick which held a chillie. This had come to him from certain Kukis, and was I am told a symbolical invitation to Khonoma to join the Kukis in armed resistance. I hasten to say that Khonoma are unlikely to play the fool at present. The two khels that Woods expelled from the village in 1910 has only recently been allowed to occupy their sites again, and the village is very much on its good behaviour. But as you know, the Khonoma people have always taken interest In Manipur affairs, and it certainly would not be good for them to learn that the authority of the state could be flouted with such impunity. Hutton tells me that Khutinhang visited one of our Kacha Naga Village and made them ration his followings and supply them porters as he did with the Kabui Nagas.⁶

The Kukis and Zeliangs had lived together for a fairly long time within their various boundaries. Their villages were an independent entity with each village having its own sphere of influence. The two peoples would live together as *jol le gol*, a traditional form of true friendship (Haokip, 2008 : 117). In fact there were many villages that had both Kuki and Zeliang inhabitants. Villages like Henima (Tening), Paona, Chamcha, Kholuilen, Jolpi, Tolpi, Kaimai, and Mechangbung were examples of Kukis and Zeliangs living together in the same villages often under the headship of men from both the tribes.

Conflicts that were common

Nevertheless, there were instances of skirmishes among the various tribes of the Kukis and Nagas which were more of village to village issues and never on tribal identity level until the birth of Jodonang movement (see Haokip 2013, 2016). Other conflicts between a certain Kuki and Naga villages, be it in Manipur or Naga Hills, also has to be situated with the prevailing situations of the time.

In 1871, Hotingmang Sitlhou attacked the village of Impamai otherwise known

also as Tapemai or Tofai. It was found that the reason for his attack was due to a plan by Impamai and Bipwegwemah to attack Hotinmang's village in a league. However, Bipwegwemah withdrew from the attack. Hotinmang reported about the league to Captain Butler, the Political Agent of Naga Hills, and asked him to punish them. However, Captain Butler protested that no action could be taken against the Zeliang village without listening to their side of the story. The issue had to do with petty dispute over selling cows and the resultant disagreement. However, Hotinmang, without waiting for Butler's intervention attacked the village.⁷

In one incident, Lunchison of Saihrem went to Aishan, and demanded rubber from Chengchamei and Amimi. They offer about 2 maunds which they had. Lunchison said if he did not get 30 maunds, he would cut up the village or get his friends to do so. The Tangkhuls then killed 5 men of lunchison who came later to demand this. Lunchison then prevailed on the Aishan people to raid the two villages. Chengchamei had about 30 houses and Amimi had 60 or so. Chengchamei was raided first and many people were killed and some carried away. Konshei said some 200 or so were killed in both villages.⁸

In June 1991, Pakap the chief of Chongjang village from Naga Hills went to Sangmei Naga village in Manipur with 12 others and demanded 26 horses. They were given since they were well armed. This was the number which used to be paid to the Manipur Raja as tax.⁹

In 1903, the Deputy Commissioner was informed by the headmen of Jatsami that his village was raided by Aishan Kukis and Melomi and they burned down 30 houses and took 13 heads. The headmen of Sohemi came on 16th January 1904 and told him that Aishan Kukis were oppressing them for which he sought help against. Sohemi chief also confessed of his intention to destroy Nahatomi. The British told them that they could not interfere in trans-border affairs.¹⁰

On the other hand, in February 1877 the Mezomas also raided the Kacha Nagas of Gumaigaju in NC Hills killing 6 and wounding 2 (Piket: 17). Thus, in those days of frequent tribal warfare, it was easy for a village or a tribe to be pitted against each other, but the conflicts were not ethnic in nature. For example, there were raids by Kukis from Somra track of Burma and Aishan village of Manipur on the Lapvomi area, in the present Phek district. But in the same area, two Angami traders were killed by Tangkhuls.¹¹ The Tangkhuls also frequently raided the Nagas of Lapvomi, and these were Tangkhuls from the Somra Track.¹²

For example, just within a year the following incidents took place, and that too within a small geographical area of the Tran-Dikhu frontier region among the Semas, Aos, Sangtams, Konyaks etc. In May 1909 some Semas of Yemathi and Satami went to raid the Mozung village of Hiribung but were beaten off losing one head. In the same month the Mozung village of Hakchang ambuscaded some men of Tobu and took three heads. In April 1909, 3 men of Nakaho met a party of Sakohi village returning from a raid on Kanyaoki carrying one head. The Nakojo men attacked them and took one head. In the latter part of May 1909 Alisubo accompanied by some men of Char, Changtongbang, Chongliemdi, Tunga, Lungkitu, and Halupa raided Litam taking eight heads. Litam in turn pursued the attackers and took five heads. In

the flight one Chabisu of Alisubo took refuge in British territory and was captured. In May 1909, all the men from the Angpan and Totang morangs of Wanohing raided Phun (Mongne) losing 18 heads to the latter. The trans-Dikhu village of Ongdi and Yangpi jointly raided Yasin taking two heads. In September 1909, the Lomou Khel of Mosungjami raided the Mozung village of Yingohing and took one head. In October 1909, Mosungjami and Hiribung raided the Yechum village of Hopo taking two heads. In November 1909, Wakching attacked Mongne wounding 3 men. In March 1910, a raiding party from Chongwe took the head of a man of Check. In February the Mosung village of Kachok raided Alisubo taking two heads. In February 1910, the Palasi Khel of Mosungjami and Hakchang jointly raided Chamnu killing ten men but taking eight head. In February 1910, a raiding party from Chongpu Khel of Mosungjami and the Mosung village of Nakoho waylaid two men from Shakohi taking their heads.¹³

The above list is not an exhaustive one, yet, if this much can happen within such a small area, it is evident that it was very much the norm in most parts of the hill areas of Assam and Manipur. However, they were inter-village feuds, and hardly took a tribal or ethnic angle. Thus, such skirmishes in the border area were more general occurrences among many tribes on those days and thus cannot be treated purely as enmity particularly between some particular tribes.

During the Kuki Uprising 1917-1919, Chengjapao, who was considered as the *pipa* or head of the Kukis, tried to obtain the cooperation of the Angamis. At Haijang, he maintained himself by looting neighbouring villages, and when a post was established at Lapvomi, he went out of his way to attack it and obtained the cooperation of Toljakhup and Laljashoung. He stockade himself at Haijang and when ejected from there by the Lapvomi-Shilloi Column in March-April 1918, he migrated to Vahong in the 'Cross hatched area' where he fortified himself and continued raiding for supplies in the neighbouring Naga Villages, in the course of which his men helped Tongkholun of Chassad in perpetrating a horrid massacre at the Tangkhol village of Kasom, and also burned Kasom Khullen. Khotinthang (Kilkhung) also killed a mithun and distributed its flesh to all parts of the Naga Hills (both to Kukis there and Khonoma) relaying to prevent recruiting and provoke resistance, on his position as the most important chief of the Thadou-Kukis. He not only prevented other Kukis going to France, but also forbade Naga villages to send labourers, and deterred them from doing so by threats. He also took part in the opposition to the Henima-Jampi column in 1918 (February-March), and compelled various villages to give him supplies and provide guns. He ordered, and was present at, the burning of Senting (Kuki) village in revenge for the Chief's not having joined the rebellion. At Senting village 29 children died as a result of exposure consequent on the houses being destroyed in the rainy seasons. Moreover, he carried off the Chief's son and held him to ransom. Enjakhup Kholhou, who was a sepoy of the Naga Hills Battalion for over two years, got in touch with Khotinthang (Kilkhung) of Jampi and Tintong of Laiyang and interested himself in the question of Kuki coolies going to France. He then went to Imphal, and then came with Tintong into the Naga Hills in order to further the cause of the rebellion, and he threatened the Henima Kukis with a view to prevent them from helping the government, and tried to get Sailhem to join the rising, and also

invited the Angami Nagas. He returned to Manipur state where he took part in the resistance to the Henima-Jampi column, 1917-1918. He organised a drill of standing force from 20 to 60 muskets to fight against the government and to raid the country for supplies and guns. He was also there among those who organised and or help attacked the Dulin Guard and the burning of Senting (Kuki) village and Dulin Kuki village, whose chiefs had surrendered to the Henima Column. He toured with 20 muskets west of the Barak in the rains of 1918 to collect supplies and guns. He also took part in leading his band in the war between the Kukis and Kabuis in the course of which many Kabui villages were burnt.¹⁴ It is interesting to note that the Kukis were against anyone who were supportive of the government and thus when they attacked, they did not differentiate Kukis or Nagas who were friendly with the government. Thus, it was not just the Nagas who suffered from the hands of Kukis during the Uprising, even Kukis were not spared if they were pro-government.

J.E. Webster , Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, wrote that:

Mr. Higgins himself suggests that some who were inclined to surrender and bring in their guns were afraid to do so, because they would have left their tribesmen defenceless against reprisal of Kabui Nagas infuriated by the Kuki raids from which they had suffered. As a matter of fact, one of the problems with which the administration is now confronted is how to prevent such reprisals on the part of the Nagas...the chief Commissioner desires to emphasize the fact that the rebellion was confined almost entirely to a section of the 'New Kukis' comprising most of the Thadous, with the Manhlun Kamhao clans of the southern Hills and a few Baite villages among the Mangvung Haokip clan in the south-east of Manipur state. With these exceptions almost all the non-Thadou and old Kuki tribes, as well as the Nagas, remained loyal. Brutal outrages were committed by the rebels on the loyal villages and in considering the punishment to be awarded to the rebels it is necessary to take into account the wrongs and resentment of the men who went to France, and returned to find their friends and relations harried, robbed, and murdered by men who refuse to go, or send men, to the war.¹⁵

As mentioned above, during the Kuki Uprising of 1917-19 the Kukis were able to supplement their supplies from their neighbours. A Kabui (Rongmei) village, to pay off an ancient grudge, raided a small Kuki hamlet and massacred the inhabitants in Manipur. The overlord of the hamlet, one of the rebel leaders, assembled his forces and destroyed 20 Kabui villages in Manipur taking 76 heads (Barpujari 2003: 262). In the Naga Hills, the Kuki Uprising was rather quiet due to the prompt action by J.H. Hutton, the Deputy Commissioner of Naga Hills, in the two areas of Henima and Lapvomi where there were some disturbances. However, the occurrences in Manipur soon had its effects over Naga Hills in the later years. When Jadonang's movement stated in 1930s, he claimed that he knew by his miraculous power that during the Kuki Uprising the Kukis captured two Zeliangrong girls, and brutally murdered one and buried one alive. Therefore the Kukis were to be exterminated within three years. Jadonang also expressed his dislike for Angamis regarding them as oppressive overlords over the Kacha Nagas and Kabuis. By his fictitious story of the Naga girls,

Jadonang worked the Zeliangs of Naga Hills district also into a great state of excitement (Barpujari 2003: 250). Jadonang's dream can best remain a dream but the end result was that many Kukis lost their life and Jadonang as well as Gaidinliu became heroes overnight.

Interestingly, a certain Kuki protected Tangkhuls from being harassed by fellow Kukis during the Uprising. J.H.Hutton in one of his tour dairies records:

To Kanjang. This village at present only a Hamlet started by Nguljalen to form the nucleus of a village-is the result of Kuki operations. During those operations, Nguljalen and his brothers raised force, commandeered all the local guns, licensed and unlicensed, mostly the latter, built a fort and garrisoned it, and thus prevented a number of Memi and Tangkhul villages from raids by hostile Kukis. It was no small thing of Nguljalen to remain loyal against the order of his 'Piba' and remain actively so, particularly as he had an old grievance against government. His brother Pasut also acted as a guide for us against several hostile villages.¹⁶

In a way, British policies again seem to pit tribes at a logger head, knowingly or unknowingly. Nagas of Naga Hills (most of whom were Angamis) were sent as coolies to help in the fight against the Kukis. It is to be remembered that the Kuki leaders have frequently invited Angamis to also rise against the British before and during the Kuki Uprising. In the south-eastern Hills, friendly Chins, and in the south-west Lushai and friendly Kukis, were armed and employed as scouts and irregulars (Reid 1942: 162-163,81).

Love that was not lost

In spite of these stray incidents in Naga Hills, love was not lost between the Zeliangs, Angamis and Kukis. Moreover, relationships were strengthened with the growth of Christianity in the Naga Hills. The first church among Kukis began in 1912 in Sirhima village, followed by Paona in 1915 which did not last long since they had to flee to Chalkot village due to persecution by fellow Kukis. There in Chalkot they established the Church and a Christian village in 1918. Both the churches were planted by Rev. Nisier Angami and Krunieze Angami and was supervised from the Kohima field led by Rev. Rivenburg (Hangsing 2008: 1-5). The Kuki and Zeliang converts also were under one organisation known as Zeliang-Kuki Association which started in 1926 (some records say it is 1937) and the Kukis spread the gospel among the Zeliangs, since the growth of Christianity among Zeliangs was slow though first conversion began way back in 1899 (Haolai 2003: 07-15; Haokip 2012: 36). Some of the earliest Kuki converts were Ngulpu Hangsing, Khupsei Hangsing, Sojang Hangsing, Jamngul Hangsing, Paochug Haolai, and among the Zeliangs they were Keneise, Houbuing, Nsarangbe etc. From 1926, the Kukis and the Zeliangs being under one same association, had conferences in Chalkot, Mandei, Inbung, Tesangki, Benreu, Kanduma, Kesen and Molvom (both Kuki and Zeliang villages) and they last had their joint conference in 1953 at Heningkunglwa. American Baptist Missionary Bengt

Anderson also came along with his wife for that conference.¹⁷ Even the problems created by the Heraka/Rani Gaidinliu's movement could not dissuade them. They were only separated due to growing members of the church and due to language barriers (Lenthang 2008 : 17-19). After that, the Kuki Baptist Association (KBA) was first led by K. Savino, an Angami, as the Field Director from 1953. It was a normal practice till the 1960s-1970s that a Kuki or Zeliang could stop by on any Kuki or Zeliang house on the way to rest for the night if they were on a long journey, say, to Dimapur or Kohima from Henima side. In fact many Zeliang Christians who faced the wrath of Gaidinliu's followers found shelter in Kuki homes.

Kukis contribution to early Naga movement

The turn of the nineteenth century saw the Nagas form an organisation known as the Naga Club in 1918. The club was formed by Naga officials working under the British who felt insulted by the British having an exclusive British Club where Nagas were not given entry. Some returnees of the Labour Corps to France also joined and played active part. The real birth of the Naga 'nation' was ushered with the formation of Naga Club which took huge efforts to mobilise these recalcitrant, scattered and diverse tribes under one body. The success or failure in making a pan-Naga body thus fell on these few pioneering tribes of whom Kukis were active members.

G.H. Damant wrote, 'but it may be anticipated that, as our authority extends eastward, we shall have trouble with such tribes as the Hatigorias (Aos) and Semas, all of whom we speak of as Nagas, but who acknowledge no tribal connection with each other, and who for the most part, cannot understand each other's speech.'¹⁸ Naga Club's first great achievement was to give the different Naga tribes a platform where they could feel they belong together.

The Kukis, like the Angamis, being closer to Kohima (the centre of activity) contributed immensely. What would have been the status today, of what we now know as a Naga 'nation' had the Naga Club failed? We can only make a guess. But it is highly probable that if the Naga Club had failed in the initial stages, there might not have been a petition to the Simon Commission which is the bedrock on which Naga politics stands. In the memorandum given to Simon Commission in 1929 by Naga Club, Pu Lengjang Kuki was also a signatory from among the six tribes that signed it. The memorandum was directed against the proposed inclusion of Naga Hills within the Reformed Scheme of India.

The idea of forming Tribal Council in Nagaland was first mooted by Mr. C.R. Pawsey, the then Deputy Commissioner of Naga Hills District, who in support of his action said that without Tribal Council the different tribes in Nagaland cannot escape from the monopoly of the plainsmen when once India becomes independent. The Tribal Council, Mr. C.R. Pawsey contended, are mainly to protect the traditional customs, habitats and enforcement of traditional customary laws of the different tribes. The result was the formation of the Naga Hills District Tribal Council (NHDTTC) in April 1945 (Rengma 2011: 10). The NHDTTC called its second meeting at Wokha on 19th June 1946. Prior to this all Naga tribes held a meeting on 10th June 1946 at Kohima and passed a resolution that all Nagas should come under one common

platform to fight for the Naga cause. In the Wokha meeting, NHDTC was changed to Naga National Council (NNC).

Two leading Kuki social and intellectual stalwarts of the time, Seikhohen Kuki and Jangkhosei Kuki, were elected as members of the Naga National Council (Lenthang 2008: 8-10). Lengjang's legacy was thus continued by the Kukis of Naga Hills. There was a Kuki Tribal Council under the Kohima Central Council of NNC (Aliba Imti 1988, Appendix-12). Immediately after the visit of the Advisory Committee of the Constituent Assembly to Naga Hills, Sir Akbar Hydari, the then Governor of Assam, visited Kohima from June 27-29, 1947. He had long discussions at Kohima with the NNC leaders. The result was the 'Nine Point Agreement/Understanding' between the Governor and the NNC. The following tribes were represented at the discussion with the Governor: Western Angamis, Eastern Angamis, Kukis, Kacha Nagas, Rengmas, Semas, Lothas, Aos, Sangtams and Changs. This important agreement would later become a great thorn in the Indo-Naga relations as both side interpreted it differently and Nagas blaming India for failing to keep its word (Ramuny 1988: 38-39). Seikhohen Kuki became a member of the first Naga delegation to meet Jawaharlal Nehru for Naga independence. In the meeting, Nehru straight away rejected the Naga demand for independence. If you insist on it, Nehru said, it would be opposed until no stones are unturned. The Nags delegates were also incensed and allegedly replied that the Nagas would also go on their own way, and left the meeting. When the NNC was first formed, every Naga citizen was supposed to contribute towards it. Contributions ranged from 1 rupee to 100 or more. But only seven tribes namely Ao, Sema, eastern Angami (Chakhesang), Angamis, Lotha, Rengma and Zeliang-Kukis contributed to it (Rengma 2011:17-22). During the Naga plebiscite on 16 May 1951 the Kuki leaders of that time like Onpao Kuki (president, Kuki union), Paochung Kuki (chief of Khaibung), Dr Lenzalal Kuki (chief of Bungsang, father of late Seikhohen Kuki) pressed their finger in favour of Naga independence. This marks the Kukis' unflinching support to the undisputed leadership of A.Z. Phizo (Haokip, 2008: 115-116). Meghorto and Pule also went around Kuki villages to collect thump impression.¹⁹

When the Naga People's Convention (NPC) formed a committee to draft the '16 Point Agreement' with the Indian Government, Jangkhusei Kuki was also a drafting member (S.C.Jamir 2017:49-50). Finally, when the 16 Point Agreement was signed between NPC and Government of India, Thinuowholie Leigiese signed as a representative of Zeliang-Kuki (Rengma 2011:17). Thus we can see that the Kukis played major role in most of the important moments of the early Naga movement. Like a section of the Nagas who were opposed to the early Naga movement under NNC turning violent (Sanyu 2017: 134), some Kukis were also not supportive of that brand of a violent secessionist movement. By 1954, pockets of areas in Tuensang and Naga Hills slowly witnessed violence between government forces and the Nagas. Phizo announce the installation of an independent Republican Government of Free Nagaland at 'Kautaga', an imaginary place, in Tuensang Frontier division on September 18, 1954, with 'Hongkin' as President. Phizo had vowed 'Non-Violence' in Naga Hills, yet the increasing violent incidents made some NNC leaders worried

over the turn of events. Phizo was also viewed with suspicion by a section of leaders. T. Sakhrie, the man behind some of the most poetic and heart touching letters and memorandums, resigned from being the General Secretary of the NNC. By June 1955 the rift became wider: Sakhrie's group on one side and Phizo with his extremist lieutenants on the other. Erstwhile close associates of Phizo, like Silie Haralu, Jasokie, Thinoneiu and others dissociated themselves with him. Sakhrie in one of the meetings held in Khonoma on 16th May 1955 delivered a strong speech giving his view against violence. On 18th January 1956, however, Sakhrie was pulled out of his father-in-law's house and killed. The murder of Sakhrie resulted almost in a civil war in Naga Hills. Fighting between Naga Army and the Indian Army soon became very severe (Ramuny 1988: 77-91).

The Indian army rounded up and killed some Naga leaders in February and March 1956, hanging their bodies in public view in Kohima as a warning to all. The Naga National Council under President Phizo decided to resist the Indian occupation more actively, and launched an attack on the Indian army barracks at Kohima on 11 June 1956 (Sanyu 2017: 25).

Visier Sanyu writes,

When the Naga Army attacked the Indian garrison at Kohima in June 1956, violence spread very quickly as the Indian Army sent in re-enforcements and led a general attack on Naga Villages in the region. Many people secretly prepared to leave our village. Over a series of nights people slipped away in family groups-but only member of two khels, Merhuma and Semoma...Most of the third Khel, Thevoma, who supported autonomy within India, stayed there under the protection of the Indian Army, but a few joined us. Indeed, some Thevoma joined the Village Guard set up by the Indian military and fought against their own people. This was a time of great village upheaval, bitterness and division' (Sanyu, 2017: 47).

The Kukis requested for .303 Rifles for self defence from the Government of India. As matters got worse, the Kukis formed themselves into five different groups and camped at various villages for emergency care and protection. This was a time when village groupings happened everywhere in Nagaland.²⁰ The Kuki camp at Chalkot was attacked on the 16th of July 1956 and Bongkolong village on 24th August 1956 where exchange of fire occurred as a result of which two Kukis of Bongkolong were seriously injured. Defence Camps or village groupings were organised in the villages of Molvom, Khaibung, Chalkot, Bongkolong and Mechangbung, solely depending upon the licensed government arms and ammunition available in each village, muzzle loading and breech loading guns with a limited quantity of ammunitions.²¹ The times were such that everyone was nervous, and life was lived with great uncertainty.

Since the Kukis were not part of the Naga Army set up initially, they had to bear the brunt of the underground forces that would swoop down to demand rations, or demand youths to join their ranks.²² Some villages were also attacked in the process. Sensing that the only way out for them was to join the Naga Army, so the Kukis entered the Federal Army in 1960 (Lenthang 2008: 5-6). The NNC leadership were not blind to the presence of Kukis in Manipur and their difference with the Nagas as

such (Aliba Imti 1988, Appendix-6), but gave space and acceptance to the Kukis of Naga Hills due to their unique history.

Infact, even the Kukis and Nagas of Manipur had occasions when they did things together which would raise eye brows today. On 30th December 1944, various Kuki and Naga leaders of Manipur sent a memorandum to the governor of Assam to forward it to V.P.Mennon, the Political Reforms Commissioner to the last three Viceroys during British Rule. This was then to be forwarded to the Viceroy of India. Some portions of the Memorandum are reproduced below:

We the humbly subjects of your Excellency of the Naga Hills and Manipur state Hills beg leave to communicate to you our decisions in the following lines for favour of your kind consideration and forwarding the same to his Excellency the Viceroy of India with our prayer to forward them again to His Majesty the King.

That the Govt. of India Act of 1935 through the foresight of your Excellency excluded us from the legislation of India which is to our benefit and safety for which we are very much indebted and grateful to Your Excellency who is our sole administrator through your British officers. It may not be out of place to mention here, that we had never been subjugated either by the Burmese, Ahoms, Kacharis or even the Moguls who all knew us as Head-Hunters. We were absolutely independent until we became subjects of the British to whom we have devotedly submitted all our cares and who have kept us free of outside interferences and made protection their responsibility and under whom we are beginning to progress towards civilization, not forgetting our gratitude to the American Missionaries who have helped us with their education and enlightenment.

The first Chief Commissioner of Assam, the then Col. Richard Keating, later Gen. Sir R.Keating, V.C.K.C.B., I.C.S., visited our hills and selected Kohima as the Headquarters of the Naga Hills District. Ever since this formation, we have been controlled purely by British officers and therefore we are used to British influence and would not be able to tolerate changed conditions.

We are led to understand and believe that after the political leaders of India, Viz. Mr.Jinnah who is fighting for a Pakistan India and Mr.Gandhi who is fighting for a Hindusthan India, came to an agreement to divide India between the Muslim League and the Hindu Congress, the British Government will fulfil the terms of the Cripps Missions with certain reservations. We now claim one RESERVATION and that is an Independent Naga Hills directly under the British Rule. In this connection we want to point out to you that before this war we had scarcely come in contact with the outside World. Our world was only our villages and our protector was our Sub-Divisional or Deputy Commissioner. The war has to a great extent brought us into the lime-light and at least to make us understand who are the so called Indians, the Gorkhas, the Chinese, the Africans, etc., and we think it is just by a Historical accident that we Nagas and Kukis had been tagged on to a province of India. From every point of view, either in culture of habits or religion, or any other outlook, we have nothing in common with the people who call themselves Indians. Neither do we have any inborn love with each other. We are more akin to all the hill tribes bordering the plains of Assam and Burma such as Abors, Mishmis, the Khashis, the Lushais, the Chins, the Kachins

and the Karens of Burma. It would therefore, be a great advantage if some sort of Administrative unit be formed up, comprising all the hill areas of Assam and taking the similar areas of Burma.

Should the time come to fulfill the Cripps Award, it should be understood that we the Nagas and Kukis are not ready to take our place in a democratic constitution or to compete with the sophisticated so-called Indian politicians. The British government will be leaving a great asset to the two political parties of India by having given them Roads, railways, canals, river navigation, and air ways, together with a full complement of well trained Indian soldiers with modern armaments. They have given also colleges of Arts and Sciences, Mechanism and Industries and opened out mines of different Geological products. But in our cases we have nothing of such advantages. But we hope after the partition our British rulers will find a way to bring us up on equal terms with the rest of the Asiatic nation.²³

Though the petitioners were mostly Tangkhuls and few Kukis from Manipur, their thoughts point to an inclusive approach where both Kukis and Nagas could live harmoniously in an independent Naga Hills which would be under the British till such time as they are ready to rule themselves.

Persisting problems

There are glaring problems between the Kukis and the Nagas in Manipur which were there since many years and traces of which we still see today. The problem is that, when certain things happen in Manipur, sometimes the effects are felt even in Nagaland. One of such problem is The Exclusive ownership mentality of the Nagas over all the Hill Districts of undivided Senapati, Tamenglong, Chandel and Ukhrul Districts. However, it should be borne in mind that some of these districts which were created as a sub-division only after the Kukis were defeated in 1919. The Kukis had held sway till then. Now, the sub-divisional headquarter could have been anywhere and the British, where possible, would never place an office where the security could be threatened, and the Kukis with whom they just recently fought would have made them think twice to place it in their territory. The Sub-divisions also would not have become a Kuki Sub-division, say, if it was in Jampi instead of Tamenglong or Chassad instead of Ukhrul. Any exclusive claim over a territory occupied by both is dangerous. Robert Reid writes that, 'At an open Durbar held at the Palcae in Imphal on 16th October, 1919, by the Chief Commissioner, Sir Nicholas Beatson-Bell, the new proposals were proclaimed. For the better administration of the Hills the areas was divided into four sub-divisions, one with headquarters at Imphal and three outside, viz., for the south west area, inhabited by Kukis, with headquarters at Churachandpur; for the North-West area, Inhabited by Kukis, Kabuis Nagas and Kacha Nagas with headquarters at Tamenglong; and for the north-east area inhabited by Tangkhul Nagas and Kukis, with headquarters at Ukhrul.' (Reid 1942: 85)

From 1st January 1930, a rearrangement of the administration of the Hill areas was tried. The subdivisions constituted in 1919 were abolished, the outlying sub-divisional headquarters being done away with, and the whole hill areas was placed immediately under the President with two sub-divisional officers to assist him, one

being in charge of the South and one of the North. In October, 1932, after the uprising under Jadonang, the North-West of Tamenglong Sub-division was reopened and from 1st May, 1933, a new arrangement was made whereby the hills were divided into 3 subdivisions, Sadar, Ukhrul and Tamenglong (Reid 1942:86-87)

Ursula Graham Bowers talk about the scarcity of land and the increasing population among the Zeliangs and the Kukis which led to a feeling of insecurity among them in the early 20th century (Bower 2002 : 41). This insecurity was felt more by the Zeliangs. Woods notes that 'In the old days, before the Khonoma expedition, Khonoma used to hold sway over nearly all this country, and many small Kacha Naga villages had to move, and those who remained called in the Kukis to their aid from Manipur. The Kukis of course were given the best land, etc., but now that they are no longer of any use to protect the Kacha Nagas, the latter are constantly complaining about the land being taken up by the Kukis. I don't sympathise much with the Kukis, but in all justice, I think they have some claim to the land for the past services rendered. Strange to say, the Angamis, and in fact all Nagas, seem to have a wholesome dread of Kukis. The Kukis have always had a great name for fighting in Manipur, and the various Rajas used them freely, especially in subduing Naga Villages.'²⁴

The Kukis, on the other hand, were not only wasteful cultivators, they were also disrespectful of other people's land among their neighbours. They were also just too violent at times, and some of their actions during the Kuki Uprising in burning villages or killing some tribes loyal to the government, had sown deep rooted feelings of anger. Much could not be done when they were still powerful, yet, after the Kuki Uprising, most of their weapons were seized.²⁵ Thus, they became easy targets in the 1930s when the Jadonang movement started. The gradual fall from grace of the Kukis, and the subsequent rise of the Nagas, especially with the growth of the Naga movement, made some hitherto smaller Naga tribes to seek revenge where possible.

William Shaw (1929: 24) writes that,

The Thadous (Thadou-Kukis) believe that they are destined to be rulers of their earth and not to be submissive to any one and so they are sometimes carried away by their ambitions and swayed by this belief in their destiny into ill considered action, a process which culminated in the Kuki Rebellion of 1918-1919. They do not consider themselves beaten yet and still brood over the future ahead of them which to their sorrow is not developing as fast as they would like. In fact by the establishment of three subdivisions in the hills of Manipur state, their prestige among other hill tribes has been much shaken. Also many who went to France in the Manipur Labour Corps are now convinced that the earth is not as quite as small they held it to be previously. However, these are in the minority and ancient thoughts and traditions carry more weight among those still only slightly affected by contact with the outer world. Meanwhile conversion to Christianity is spreading rapidly among them and ere long these old thoughts of their destiny are likely gradually to fade and to lead no doubt to a better understanding between the Thadou and other Hill tribes among whom they reside. Yet they still think they own the country they inhabit and regard the other tribes as their underlings, a point of view which they frequently evince to those engaged in their administration. Respect of other's property, moveable and immoveable, they have practically none,

but it is slowly dawning upon them that times are changing too rapidly.

In the olden days, though there were wars, people also had ways of mitigating their anger in a peaceful way, though misunderstood to be savage tribals. There was more honour, truth and honesty in their dealings. In our so called modern world, while conflicts of the past are also looked upon as a means for political ends, the chords of peace are more difficult to untie. One of the ways in which the olden generation would solve a dispute or a conflict was noted by J.H. Hutton: '(2nd June, 1926) Halted Tesangki. All day is poured with rain in a solid sheet. I went down to the river in the morning just as the rain started to diving oath between a Kuki and a Kacha Naga. The pool would only hold one as the other was caught by the current and washed out when he tried to dive, so I made them dive one at a time and timed them. The Naga won by half a minute completing almost 60 seconds under water.'²⁶

Conclusion

The Kukis of Naga Hills participated in the Naga movement as people living within a specific boundary, whose future destinies were commonly entangled. Besides, they neither considered themselves as separate from the Nagas nor were they looked upon or treated as the 'other' by the majority Naga tribes of Naga Hills. The relationship which the Kukis shared with Angamis and Zeliangs over a period of time also meant that there were not much ideological differences between them. The growth of Christianity side by side with the awakening of nationalist spirit among them meant that they all swam together since Angamis had evangelised the Kukis and the Kukis likewise the Zeliangs.

The term 'Kuki-Naga conflict' that is often used today is a misnomer. There was never a Kuki-Naga conflict, even if there were misunderstandings between sub-tribes of the two groups. Neither does the more simplistic 'Tangkul-Kuki clash' which is used to explain the recent turmoil of the 1990s explain the whole picture. It is just somewhere in between. The conflict that erupted in the 1990s was neither a sudden occurrence nor an overnight savagery by misguided young thugs. The seeds were sown in the old tribal wars and for many years stories were nurtured and instilled by many well respected leaders who neither foresaw the outcome nor thought through the whole implications. Often it is a one sided history. It is also a story of history repeating itself and a victim today becoming the victor tomorrow and *vice versa*. But, it would have been simpler had it been the old-head hunting days. But the political aspirations and demands of an illumine modern men coupled with renewed thrust for freedom in his exclusive land had muddied the water even more. Historians have also added fuel to the fire by cementing ambiguously issues of land ownership in favour of one without much scrutiny to the claims of the other.

As mentioned above, warfare in the tribal world was often the norm than being the exception. However, life was also much simpler, and killings also didn't have the ethnic colour by which we want to paint them now. The villages of Khonoma and Mezoma, both Angami villages, were eternal enemies and even within the Khonoma village, the Thevoma and Semoma Khels were old enemies again.²⁷ Fights between Tangkhul villages were also common, and there were serious fights between the

Sitlhouse and the Singsons (William Shaw 1929: 45) and between Lushai, Thadous, Suktes within the Kukis also. Angamis tortured Zeliangs, and Jadonang hated Angamis (Barpujari 2003: 250). During the Kuki Uprising, not only were the Tangkhul, Kabui and Anal villages were destroyed for turning pro-government or refusing to help, even many Kuki villages like Santing and Dulen were razed to the ground for defiance.²⁸

Notes

¹ West Bengal State Archive (WBSA), Kolkata, Judicial proceedings no 243. Letter no.4568, dated Calcutta, the 31st July, 1872. From A.Mackenzie, Esq., offic.secy. to thegovt. Of Bengal, Political Dept. To-The commissioner of Assam.

² See, B.B.Ghosh Ghosh, B.B., *A History of Nagaland*, S.Chand and Company, New Delhi, 1982

³ Thangjamang Misao, “The Kuki Concept of Hinkhom(Living together):Aquest for Harmonious living” B.Div Thesis, Senate of Serampore College(university), 2013, p.46

⁴ This was from a book written by Nichuriazoo quoted by Thangjamang Misao, “The Kuki Concept of Hinkhom(Living together):Aquest for Harmonious living” B.Div Thesis, Senate of Serampore College (university), 2013, p.17

⁵ WBSA, Kolkata: General proceedings no.33.1866

⁶ Nagaland State Archive (NSA), Kohima. Political proceedings No.132. Naga Hills Administration-1917

⁷ National Archives of India(NAI), New Delhi Political proceedings (Foreign dept.) no.465-470.-August 1871.

⁸ NSA, Kohima, General File no. 243, Raid by Aishan Kukis with a History of their origin, 1906-07.

⁹ NSA, Kohima, Political proceddings, no.35. 1981.

¹⁰ NSA, Kohima, Political Dept., Proceedings no.70, serial no. 324, 1903, Raid by Aishan kukis and Melomi and Lapvomi

¹¹ NSA, Kohima, Genenal proceedings 273 Administrative report of he Naga Hills district, 1909-1910.

¹² NSA, Kohima, Political Department, File No.401, 1924.Tour Dairy of the D.C.Naga Hills for 1923.

¹³ NSA, Kohima, General Proceedings, File No.273, Administrative Report of the Naga Hills District 1909-1910.

¹⁴ Foreign and Political Department (FAPD), NAI, Secret-I, Proceeding Nos.4-12, January ,1920. Rebellion of the Kuki Tribes of Manipur State.

¹⁵ FAPD, NAI, Secret-I, Proceeding Nos.4-12, January ,1920. Rebellion of the Kuki Tribes of Manipur.

¹⁶ NSA, Kohima, Political Department, File No.401, 1924.Tour Dairy of the D.C.Naga Hills for 1923.

¹⁷ Souvenir, Kuki Baptist Association Nagaland Golden Jubilee Celebration 1953-2003(Editorial).

¹⁸ NSA, Kohima, Political Proceedings, File No. 367. Report of the Administration fo the District of the Naga Hills for the year 1878-1879. p.26.

¹⁹ This was narrated to me by Laljaseh Kuki of Molvom village, a former General Secretary of Kuki Union Committee, Nagaland.

²⁰ NSA, Kohima, Confidential Dept. File No. 169, Regrouping of Villages in Naga Hills 1957.

²¹ NSA, Kohima, Confidential Department, File No. 91, Petition from the President of the Kuki Union Committee Naga Hills for Arms to the Kukis for self defense against Naga Hostilities, 1956.

²² NSA, Kohima, Confidential Department, File No.67. Infiltration of Naga hostiles into United Mikir and N. C. Hills, 1956.

²³ Political Department(Pol.Branch) serial No.(1)-(2). File No.3(7)-P/45.,1945. Petition of the Nagas and Kukis of Manipur State for constitutional changes. Also see, Future administration and Constitutional position of the Present Excluded and Partially Excluded Tribal areas on the border of Assam NSA, Kohima, Confidential Department, File No.3, 1945. The signatories were Phanitphang of Lalloi, T.Luikhan of Ukhrul, M.k. Shiurag of Ulahral, Shairi of Serudal, Uengai of Fkurdung, Phungshin of Phadang, Misang Hiog, Alangyur of Phaungkam, Awaiurf of Khungkur, Lingami of Nunghang, Mungchpai of Shangshak, S.Hailong of Sirarukhong, Saphu L.Shimray, Phmshim of Lellai, Vegozak of Phunggam. Dated 20th December, 1944. Thump Impression: Kembun Chingsanglakpa of Thorcham for Anal tribe, Mangjakhup Chief of Khongtal for Chin Hill tribes, Ngulkhup Chief of Mombi for Kuki tribes in Mombi areas, Kamol Anal Chief of Lamphon Charu, Benung Anal headman of Khobung Khulen, Vamon chief of Semol, Rongrhing Anal headman of Logpokpi, Chonung Anal headman of Oklu. Dated: 30th December, 1944

²⁴ NSA, Kohima, Secret file 434, Tour diary of Mr.A.E.Woods I.S.C. Assistant Commissioner, Naga Hills

²⁵ FADP, NIA, New Delhi, External-B, Proceedings No.7, October 1919. Despatch on the operations against the Kuki tribes of Assam and Burma from November 1917 to March 1919. Even after the war got over, the British obtained 1158 guns from the Kukis showing the enormous weapons in their possession.

²⁶ NSA, Kohima, Appointment & Political Department, Political-B, File No.416, year 1927. Tour diary of the Deputy Commissioner, Naga Hills for the year 1926

²⁷ NSA, Kohima, Secret file 434, Tour diary of Mr.A.E.Woods I.S.C. Deputy Commissioner, Naga Hills(for October 1900)

²⁸ FAPD, NAI, Secret-I, Proceeding Nos.4-12, January, 1920. Rebellion of the Kuki Tribes of Manipur State.

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