

A STUDY OF ZU (LOCAL RICE BEER) AMONGST THE KUKI OF ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

This paper is about *zu* (local rice beer) and its significance in Kuki society. *Zu* was part and parcel in Kuki culture and any rituals and ceremonies was incomplete without it. Right from birth to death *zu* has witnessed their happiness, sorrows, victory, etc. But after the advent of Christianity such an important tradition was uprooted from their culture. It is not in practice anymore. It has rather been replaced by tea. To find out the main reason why such an important tradition which was part and parcel in every ritual, customary practices, life cycle events, and worshipping god has just been abolished is the main objective of this study. Has Christianity something to do with its abolition? If yes what does the scripture say? Or is the community itself responsible for not continuing this age old tradition? Are the types of questions that comes to our mind which will be answered in this study. It will also highlight the roles and importance of *zu* in animist Kuki society.

KEYWORDS: *Zu*, Society, Christianity, Kuki, Assam

INTRODUCTION

The Kuki were once animist worshipper, who practiced head hunting and lead a simple life. They shared their food in their clan, danced together and drank together. The Kuki, being animists, believed in a future state of retribution, and a plurality of gods or spirits. Not only this, the Kuki worshipped objects and natural phenomena because of one basic reason-fear. Ignorance about nature increased this fear and thus to appease the anger of the deities and gods, sacrifices of domestic animals like hen, pig, etc were made with the help of *thiempu* (priest). They affirm that these gods or spirits have equal power. Animals and fowls, pigs and spirituous liquor are offered in sacrifice on all occasions of sickness, famine or other affliction, which they conceive is the surest method of averting evil and bringing their wishes and understanding to a successful termination. Both men and women participate in the performance of the religious rites and on such occasions rice beer was consumed by both the sexes.

The Kuki were fierce hunters and many festivals and rites were connected with it. Mention may be made of *chon, sa-ai*, etc. The Kuki were also agriculturist and their staple food was rice. Many rites and festivals were also connected with it. Amongst them we may mention *chaang-ai, chavang kut*, and *mim kut*. They were also fond of war, and the celebration for the victory may be called as *gal-ai*. Not only were they hunters and agriculturist, the Kuki had a strong love for Music. It was a medium for expressing their feelings toward their partner or loved ones. They produced their own traditional musical instruments. The Kho'ng- pi (big drum), kho'ng – cha (small-gong) pe'ngkul (trumpet), gocem (bagpipe), theile (flute), theiphi't (whistle), se'lki (horn), are some of the musical instruments most commonly used. The women-folk also used a peculiar mouth instrument called Lhe'mlhei. Not only do they play music the Kuki also loved to dance in the beat of the music. They danced to show their happiness and unity. Some of the traditional dance of the Kuki

are- Suhta Lam, Pheiphit Lam, *Jangcha Lam*, *Vakol Lam*, *Salu lam*, *Vachih Lei Thai Lam*, *Khul Lam*, *Saipi Khup Suh Lam*, *Saol Phei Khai Lam*, and *Sel Pang Lam*. From the life and lore of the Kuki people the concept of 'the mutuality of being' by Marshall Sahlins was found, 'who live each others lives and die each others death.'

To the Kuki *zu* was not only just a mere beverage, it act as a fun and an energy booster in the different festivals and celebrations and also a medium of appeasing their gods. It signifies a symbol of love, unity and integrity amongst the people. *Zu* creates an atmosphere of oneness and chase away the differences in them. In the animist Kuki culture the task was well distributed amongst male and female. Hunting was male task and they took pride in the number of kills they secured in their life time. A fierce hunter held a high position not only in the society but also in *mithiko* (an abode of the death). So when a hunter comes home it calls for a sure feast followed by consumption of *zu* which is prepared by the women folk. This was how the Kuki ancestors once lead their life.

The main objective of the study is to find an insight into, why *zu* (local rice beer) such an important part of Kuki tradition has been abolished today. Base on this objective some methodologist has been adopted like interview method, case study method, participation method and observation method. Some information was also collected from secondary sources like, books, internet, and bible to show why the Kuki people had to give away their culture of drinking local rice beer (*zu*).

The first part of the paper will discuss about the animist Kuki culture where *zu* (local rice beer) was a pre dominant feature in different rituals, customary practices, life cycle rites, religion, feast and festivals. To analyse the main objective of the study the second part of the paper will answer some of the questions like- Has Christianity something to do with the abolition of *zu*? If yes what does the scripture say? Or is the community itself responsible for

discontinuing this age old tradition? After answering the above questions the third part of the paper will be a concluding part.

Importance and Role of Zu (Local Rice Beer) in Animist Kuki Culture

The importance and role of *zu* (local rice beer) in Kuki society is that, no rites and practices, rituals, festivals and celebrations could be completed without it. It was the heart and soul of every occasion. The rites, rituals, festive and celebrations where *zu* (local rice beer) marks a very important place are- in the festivals and rituals like *Chon*, *Chang-ai*, *Sa-ai*, *Gal ai*, *Lom kivah*, *Som kivah*, *Mim Kut*, and *Chavang Kut*. *Zu* was a predominant feature in religious rites like- *Indoi*, *Practise of Genna*, and *Aiphu Kivailhun or Thempukikou*. In Life cycle rites like- in child birth ceremony *zu* is served in rituals like-*naodop ju*, and *Thingkhosuh*. In life cycle rites of Marriage also *zu* plays an important role in its two forms of marriage viz., *Chongmouva Kipui* and *Sahapsat Kipui*. In the customary rites and practices also *zu* plays an important role. Such as in case of *Salam sat*, *Toltheh*, *toltha*, *tosol*, etc. In agricultural rites too *zu* plays an important role. Mention may be made of rituals Like- *Daiphu* ritual, *Dainit*, *Daivetni*, *Muchilhahni*, etc. In the selection of a new site or entering a new house too *zu* plays an important role in the ritual like- *Ahtuisan*, *Sungloini ritual*, and *Inthahlut*. In the most important institution of the society that is selection of *Tucha* and *Becha* tradition too *zu* is served as a symbol of oneness. Only 3 three areas where *zu* plays an important role will be discussed in this paper as it be very broad and descriptive to cover the whole areas. The areas that the paper would cover are- in religious ritual '*indoi*', in birth ritual called *naodopju* and *naodopan*, in its role in marriage ceremony.

Religious Ritual 'Indoi'

Shaw terms *Indoi* as the house magic - a bundle of charms which is made either by the *Thempu* or by another person who has the requisite knowledge of what is required for the ceremony. For the purpose of making a new *Indoi*, the following things are collected, a piece each of the *Shething* and *Thinhi* tree; (special trees for this purpose) a small bits of *Gopi* (garden bamboo) *Vomgui*, (a creeper) a goat, a pig, a fowl and an egg. Also needed for this ritual is a small portion of a gourd; *Khaopi* (the bark of a special tree that makes excellent rope) and *Haihi* (a particular species of gourd). A sword and spear and a women's brass wristlet called *Chao* are given to the priests. The *Thempu* takes a small bit of each of the above and with the spear, dao and wristlet in his hands makes an incantation. The prayer is mainly for the house-owner for whom the house magic or *Indoi* is being made. The *Thempu* asks *Pathen* to bless the owner of the house for whom the *Indoi* is made and blesses the *Shetoi Nampha* (the best *Sething* tress) and *Thing-hi-toi nampha*- the best of the *Thinghi* trees. Likewise he invokes more blessings from *Pathen*, and blesses the *Gopi Chengnampha* (the bamboo); *Vomgui* (the creeper); *Vohpimaikem* (the Pig); *Kelcha Kihe* (the goat); *Pengiomba* (the round ground); *Tengmumpha* (the spear); *Chaoveipha* (the Wistlet) *Khaopithosom* (the tree whose bark makes rope); *A'tolngo* (the white fowl) *Katuilungtheng*, *Katuilungva* (the clesn and clear egg). The *Thempu* then continues to bless the owner of the house for whom the *Indoi* is made for the wealth, longevity and prosperity of the house owner. He also prays that the householder may be blessed with many sons and daughters. The *Thempu* then repeats the genealogical tree of the household, and prays to *Pathen* that the present maker of *Indoi* be prevented from harm and suffering that often results as the consequences of the sins of his forefathers. So saying this, the parts of the articles enumerated are put into a small gourd and hung up outside the front wall of the house above the door. As the ceremony ends, plenty of *zu* are consumed by all.

In Birth Ritual

Naudop ju leh naudopan: *Naudopju* is the name of the wine prepared for the birthday celebration and is taken by all who participate in the ceremony. *Naudopan* is the food prepared for the occasion and is served only to old men and women. The old men and women eat rice and meat and also drink the offered wine. But the others only drink the wine. The wine is offered in an earthen pitcher. A wine-sipping pipe of bamboo is placed inside the pitcher. A thin piece of bamboo, that serves as a measuring-stick is placed inside the wine-jar. Before the wine is sipped from the jar the tip of the measuring-rod remains submerged. A person goes on sipping the wine till the tip of the measuring-rod becomes visible. Before the next person is invited to sip, water is added to the wine in the pitcher till the measuring-rod gets submerged. The priest remains present in this ceremony and also partakes of the food and wine.

In Marriage

In Kuki traditional marriage *zu* plays a very important place. The male member who wants to seek the girls hand in marriage had to go to the girls house with their *Tucha and Becha*. And they have to take with them *Zubel* which is a pot to store the rice beer. The negotiation generally takes place three times. And the first negotiation will determine if further negotiations are required or not. That is, in the first negotiation the *becha* of the male will talk about their purpose of visit that they had come to ask their daughters hand in marriage with their son. After that they offer the *zubel* which contains *zu*. If the parents of the girl has no problem with the proposal they will accept the *zubel* and serve the *zu* amongst all. And after that the next date for negotiation is fixed. But if the parents of the girl has an objection with the proposal then they would refuse to accept the *zubel*. And no further negotiation about the marriage would take place. Thus, *zu* plays a very important

role in Kuki marriage. Base on the acceptance and rejection of the *zu* the marriage proposal is determined. Thus, from all the above discussions we could find that *zu* played a very strong role in the animist kuki culture.

Has Christianity Something to Do With The Abolition of *Zu*?

Yes Christianity has something to do with the abolition of *zu* (local rice beer).

What Does Scripture/ Bible Says About Consumption of Alcohol?

The Bible does teach total abstinence from alcohol. Both the main Hebrew word for wine and the Greek word for wine can mean either fermented grape juice or intoxicating wine. The English word wine originally had two meanings also - unfermented juice or alcoholic drink. In the Bible, verses to show God approves of wine are speaking about unfermented juice. Verses that expose the evils of wine are speaking about intoxicating wine. The Bible says alcoholic drink is evil. It is not just the amount one drinks that makes drinking a sin. God condemns the drink itself. (Proverb 20:1 KJV) Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise.

- Genesis 9:20-26 - Noah became drunk; the result was immorality and family trouble.
- Genesis 19:30-38 - Lot was so drunk he did not know what he was doing; this led to immorality
- Leviticus 10:9-11 - God commanded priests not to drink so that they could tell the difference between the holy and the unholy.
- Numbers 6:3 - The Nazarites were told to eat or drink nothing from the grape vine.
- Deuteronomy 21:20 - A drunken son was stubborn and rebellious.
- Deuteronomy 29:5-6 - God gave no grape juice to Israel nor did they have intoxicating drink in the wilderness.
- Deuteronomy 32:33 - Intoxicating wine is like the poison of serpents, the cruel venom of asps.
- Judges 13:4, 7, 14 - Samson was to be a Nazarite for life. His mother was told not to drink wine or strong drink.
- 1 Samuel 1:14-15 - Accused, Hannah said she drank no wine.
- 1 Samuel 25:32-38 - Nabal died after a drunken spree.
- 2 Samuel 11:13 - By getting Uriah drunk, David hoped to cover his sin.
- 2 Samuel 13:28-29 - Amnon was drunk when he was killed.
- 1 Kings 16:8-10 - The king was drinking himself into drunkenness when he was assassinated
- 1 Kings 20:12-21 - Ben-Hadad and 32 other kings were drinking when they were attacked and defeated by the Israelites.
- Esther 1:5-12 - The king gave each one all the drink he wanted. The king was intoxicated when he commanded the queen to come.
- Psalm 75:8 - The Lord's anger is pictured as mixed wine poured out and drunk by the wicked.
- Proverbs 4:17 - Alcoholic drink is called the wine of violence.

- Proverbs 20:1 - Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging.
- Proverbs 23:19-20 - A wise person will not be among the drinkers of alcoholic beverages.
- Proverbs 23:21 - Drunkenness causes poverty.
- Proverbs 23:29-30 - Drinking causes woe, sorrow, fighting, babbling, wounds without cause and red eyes.
- Proverbs 23:31 - God instructs not to look at intoxicating drinks.
- Proverbs 23:32 - Alcoholic drinks bite like a serpent, sting like an adder.
- Proverbs 23:33 - Alcohol causes the drinker to have strange and adulterous thoughts, produces willfulness, and prevents reformation.
- Proverbs 23:34 - Alcohol makes the drinker unstable
- Proverbs 23:35 - Alcohol makes the drinker insensitive to pain so he does not perceive it as a warning. Alcohol is habit forming.
- Proverb 31:4-5 - Kings, Princes, and others who rule and judge must not drink alcohol. Alcohol perverts good judgment.
- Proverbs 31:6-7 - Strong drink could be given to those about to perish or those in pain. Better anesthetics are available today.
- Ecclesiastes 2:3 - The king tried everything, including intoxicating drink, to see if it satisfied. It did not. (Ecclesiastes 12:8)
- Ecclesiastes 10:17 - A land is blessed when its leaders do not drink.
- Isaiah 5:11-12 - Woe to those who get up early to drink and stay up late at night to get drunk.
- Isaiah 5:22 - Woe to "champion" drinkers and "experts" at mixing drinks.
- Isaiah 19:14 - Drunken men stagger in their vomit.
- Isaiah 22:12-13 - The Israelites choose to drink; their future looks hopeless to them.
- Isaiah 24:9 - Drinkers cannot escape the consequences when God judges.
- Isaiah 28:1 - God pronounces woe on the drunkards of Ephraim.
- Isaiah 28:3 - Proud drunkards shall be trodden down.
- Isaiah 28:7 - Priests and prophets stagger and reel from beer and wine, err in vision, and stumble in judgment.
- Isaiah 28:8 - Drinkers' tables are covered with vomit and filth.
- Isaiah 56:9-12 - Drinkers seek their own gain and expect tomorrow to be just like today.
- Jeremiah 35:2-14 - The Rechabites drank no grape juice or intoxicating wine and were blessed.

- Ezekiel 44:21 - Again God instructed the priests not to drink wine.
- Daniel 1:5-17 - Daniel refused the king's intoxicating wine and was blessed for it along with his abstaining friends.
- Daniel 5:1 - Belshazzar, ruler of Babylon; led his people in drinking.
- Daniel 5:2-3 - The king, along with his nobles, wives, and concubines, drank from the goblets which had been taken from God's temple.
- Daniel 5:4 - Drinking wine was combined with praising false gods.
- Daniel 5:23 - God sent word to Belshazzar that punishment would be swift for the evil he had committed.
- Hosea 4:11 - Intoxicating wine takes away intelligence.
- Hosea 7:5 - God reproves princes for drinking.
- Joel 1:5 - Drunkards awake to see God's judgment.
- Joel 3:3 - The enemy is judged for selling girls for wine.
- Amos 2:8 - Unrighteous acts of Israel included the drinking of wine which had been taken for the payment of fines.
- Amos 2:12 - Israel is condemned for forcing Nazarites to drink wine.
- Micah 2:11 - Israelites are eager to follow false teachers who prophesy plenty of intoxicating drinks.
- Nahum 1:10 - The drunkards of Nineveh will be destroyed by God.
- Habakkuk 2:5 - A man is betrayed by wine.
- Habakkuk 2:15 - Woe to him that gives his neighbor drink.
- Habakkuk 2:16 - Drinking leads to shame.
- Matthew 24:48-51 - A drinking servant is unprepared for his Lord's return.
- Luke 1:15 - John the Baptist drank neither grape juice nor wine.
- Luke 12:45 - Christ warned against drunkenness.
- Luke 21:34 - Drunkenness will cause a person not to be ready for the Lord's return.
- Romans 13:13 - Do not walk in drunkenness or immorality.
- Romans 14:21 - Do not do anything that will hurt your testimony as a believer.
- 1 Corinthians 5:11 - If a Christian brother is a drinker, do not associate with him.
- 1 Corinthians 6:10 - Drunkards will not inherit the kingdom of God
- Galatians 5:21 - Acts of the sinful nature, such as drunkenness, will prohibit a person from inheriting the kingdom

of God.

- Ephesians 5:18 - In contrast to being drunk with wine, the believer is to be filled with the Spirit.
- 1 Thessalonians 5:6-7 - Christians are to be alert and self-controlled, belonging to the day. Drunkards belong to the night and darkness.
- 1 Timothy 3:2-3 - Bishops (elders) are to be temperate, sober, and not near any wine.
- 1 Timothy 3:8 - Deacons are to be worthy of respect and not drinkers.
- 1 Timothy 3:11 - Deacons' wives are to be temperate and sober.
- Titus 1:7-8 - An overseer is to be disciplined.
- Titus 2:2-3 - The older men and older women of the church are to be temperate and not addicted to wine.
- 1 Peter 4:3-4 - The past life of drunkenness and carousing has no place in the Christian's life.

The above verses from the scripture clearly shows why it is un appropriate for a Christian to drink or get drunk by consuming alcohol.

Is the Community Itself Responsible for Not Continuing Consumption of *Zu* (Local Rice Beer)?

Yes, the community is responsible for discontinuation of consumption of *zu* (local rice beer) after accepting Christianity. To lead a life according to the scripture and by the teachings of Jesus Christ the Kuki people had to give away what they once valued and treasured.

CONCLUSIONS

From the above discussions we have found that the life and culture that the Kuki people once lead had drastic contradictions with that of the teachings and concept of Christianity. Consumption of *zu* may have been very important part of every occasions then, yet after accepting Christianity they preferred to lead a life holy and pleasing to god even at the cost of giving up their age old tradition. They gave away the tradition of head hunting and started worshipping one supreme god and began to be called Kuki Christians (followers of Christ). They were no longer guided by fear nor do they need to appease the old god by various kinds of sacrifices. As such *thempu* (priest) was no longer needed. They threw away the vessels were they cooked and stored *zu* and started drinking tea instead. This may have some how brought the Kuki community into civilized community. But we should know one thing that Christianity did not civilized the people in the sense that British mythology likes to content. Instead it brought about a new world with new rituals, new ethics (moral practices/ beliefs). As such with the fading of some age old tradition *zu* lost its importance and today it is completely abolished and has been replaced by tea. But the tradition of drinking *zu*, and how the Kuki people once lost themselves in merry making, singing and dancing to the beat of the Music has still been left as a beautiful myth in the minds and memory of the Kuki people today.

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