



## Modernisation and Change: A Case Study of *Lawm* and *Sawm* among the Kukis

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### ABSTRACT

*All the tribes in India follow a specific type of village-based youth organisation, called dormitories, and known by different names among the different tribes. This is also true in case of the tribes inhabiting the North Eastern part of the Indian sub-continent. It is well known that the socio-cultural life of the youth centre around these dormitories. Besides, it was a place of traditional learning. However, such fine and glorious institutions do not exist in the present time. The modernisation of the people brought about by British colonial rule, the coming of Christianity and the spread of the western model of education are important factors that brought about changes and transformation. This paper is an attempt to highlight the importance of such institutions with special reference to the Kukis. Besides, the various reasons that could have probably led to the downfall or decay of these institutions will be taken into consideration. The paper will try to understand the transitional process from the pre-modern institutional form to the modern youth organisation.*

### Introduction:

Modernisation brought about by British colonial rule, the coming of Christianity, and the spread of the western model of education in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had a transforming impact on the social, cultural and religious life of many tribal societies in India. The modernisation theory can be viewed as a theory that encompasses many different disciplines as it illustrates a descriptive and explanatory framework of the process of transformations a traditional or underdeveloped society experiences as it moves to a modern state through the processes of economic increases and growth, and social, political and cultural change (Thornton 2014). According to Armer and Katsillis (2006 as cited in Thornton 2014), “historically, modernization is the process of change towards those types of social, economic, and political systems that have developed in Western Europe and North America from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth and have then spread to other European countries and in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to the South American, Asian, and African continents”. In North East India, modernisation was the result of the colonial rule and Christianity. In this respect, Oommen T.K. (2009: 1-14) said, “While change has been occurring always an appropriate point of departure for North East India is the colonial period and the advent of Christianity. After Independence, the Indian state and latterly market and civil society also played significant roles”.

The purpose of this paper is to show the changes that took place in the youth organisational set-up of the Kukis. The transition from rudimentary traditional youth organisational set up to the

more complex modern youth organisations like youth clubs and Christian youth fellowships brought about by Christianity. It is a commonly known fact that the British rule, followed by Christianity and modern education, paved the way for modernisation among most of the tribes of North East India. All these factors are responsible for the disappearance of traditional youth organisation like the *Lawm* and *Sawm*, which I will discuss in detail and the emergence of modern youth organisation like youth clubs.

## **The Social Background of the Kukis**

The Kukis are trans-border tribes scattered across three international boundaries namely, India, Burma and Bangladesh. In India, the Kukis are found in almost all the North-eastern states of India except Arunachal Pradesh. However, tribe concentrate mostly in the hilly areas of Manipur. Accounts of historians, such as Majumdar and Bhattasali suggest that the Kukis were one of the first peoples living in India since prehistoric times, preceding ‘the “Dravidians” who now live in South India (RC Majumdar & N. Bhattasali 1930:6-7). The Kukis are patrilineal and endogamous and their kinship terms are classificatory. Unlike the other tribal groups of North east India such as the matrilineal Khasis and Garos, as a custom, rule of descent, law of succession and inheritance all falls in the male line. Children born in a family, either male or female takes the father lineage. And membership in the lineage remains even after death (for males). The majority of the population are Christians, with only a handful following Judaism. The Kukis people have a rich cultural heritage of their own. Much of the culture heritages are found in oral traditions handed down from generation to generation. During their heyday, the *Lawm* and *Sawm* were two important traditional social Kuki institutions, which played a very important role in the social-cultural, economic, and political life.

## **Methodology**

For the purpose of the study ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in the Tuilaphai area, Henglep Sub-division, located 24 km away from Churachandpur town. Altogether nine villages were visited for the purpose. During the course of the visit, interviews were carried out with the leaders of the youths (Youth clubs and Christians youth fellowship). Participation and observation of the daily activities was part of the data collection. Besides, various other secondary sources were also incorporated.

## **Youth Organisational Set-up**

In olden days, up to about the early twentieth century, the social, cultural and political life of the Kukis revolved around two important institutions known as the *Lawm* and *Sawm*. These two institutions played a very important role in the lives of the young members of the village.

## **The concept of *Lawm***

The term *Lawm* (Lom), simply put is an association of all the young members of the village. The main idea behind it is helping one another as well as helping those in needs for the all-round development of the village. Gangte (1993:132) defined *Lawm* as informal labour organisation in a simple and corporate village life of the Kukis, where in all the able-bodied young boys and girls are members. Tarun Goswami, a noted scholar working on the same tribe, described the *Lawm* as, “the youth corps of the village” (Goswami 1985:95). The *Lawm* consisted generally of both male and female representatives from each household. Young people were engaged in social activities for the welfare of the individual as well as the community. They also help each other in agricultural work irrespective of their individual capacity. As a traditional social institution, it was a source of traditional

learning imparting technical and practical knowledge to its members, especially economic activities as well as sports. It also provided room for love and affection, respect and obedience, and help for the weak and the poor. Looking at the nature of it, Haokip (1998:7) described it as a traditional form of youth club. The *Lawm* as part of the life of the young people served as one of the most important factors of unity in the village. It was an organisation where young people learnt a sense of duty and the dignity of labour and learnt the basis of leadership in the process. Thus, the *Lawm* was an important tradition around which the village social life revolved.

There are four types of *Lawm* viz, *Lawm-pi*, the largest corps meant for adults, *Lawm-lai*, middle-level corps meant for adolescents, *Lawm-neo*, a group where the third brother and sister of a family and other teenagers are members, and *Lawm-Changpah*, a group whose service at home are not very much required and they are in need of some sort of training in cultivation work (Gangte 1993:132-33). The *Lawm* officials were *Lawm* hausa, *Lawm* u-pa, *Lawm* becha, *Lawm* tucha, *Lawm* nungah, each two in number (Goswami 1985:96-97). The *Lawm* Lhangva was another important official of the *Lawm* organisation. Thus, Dounge (1992 as cited in Haokip 2013: 177-193), the main purpose of *Lawm* was to bring about economic development and welfare of the village, balancing economic inequality, helping the poor and the needy, to maintain unity and fraternity in the village, to help the chief and his council and to safeguard the village from external and internal danger.

### **The concept of *Sawm***

*Sawm* literally means dormitory. It is the name of the other youth organisation, which concerns only the able-bodied young boys of the village. It is the bachelor dormitory in which all the young boys of the village sleep together at night. Gangte (1993, 133) puts, “the nature of hostility and practice of tribal raids necessitate the existence of this organisation; so that in times of emergency, the service of all the able-bodied men might be available in short notice”. This is an organisation responsible for mobilisation of the services of the young men to meet the needs of the society.

The dormitory system of the Kukis was peculiar. Unlike most of its neighbouring tribes, the Kukis do not have a separate dormitory house. As a custom young boys who had attained a certain age were not allowed to sleep in their parent house. So, the young and unmarried boys of the village form several groups. Each group selects a potential and capable person to be the leader of the *Sawm*. The selected leader is called *Sawm-upa*. The *Sawm upa* serves as a guide and teachers to its *Sawm* members. This system of sleeping together in the house of another person is known as *Sawmgie* (Goswami 1985: 98).

Besides its main aim purpose of defending the village from external and internal dangers, *Sawm*, in times of peace renders every possible service to the village community whenever required. It is also an organisation for recreation of the young boys. The younger boys also learn social customs and manners besides obedience to the elders. The young people receive non-formal traditional education like (1) Handicrafts (2) Technique of war (iii) Tradition (iv) Stories (v) songs (vi) Dance (vii) Discipline (viii) Social etiquette etc (Lhouvum, 2014). Thus, it was a centre wherein young people were shaped into responsible adult members of society.

### **Changes in Modern Times**

The early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a gradual change in the socio-cultural life of the Kuki people. The institution of *Lawm* and *Sawm* gradually dwindled and began losing its importance. One of the most important factors behind it was the British colonial rule followed by Christianity and the

spread of western education. Christianity came to the hill people of Manipur during the British rule. Christianity was brought to the Kuki people of Manipur by two separate missions, The Arthington Aborigenes Mission, later succeeded by the American Baptist Mission through William Pettigrew in 1896 (Downs 1969). And, the Independent Welsh Mission called the Indo Burma Thadou-Kuki Pioneer Mission (IBTKPM) through Watkins R. Roberts in the southern part of Manipur in 1910 (Dena 1991) which was later changed into North-East India General Mission (NEIGM), and recently into Evangelical Congregational Church of India (ECCI).

Christianity has come a long way as the formidable agent that has brought about the transformation of people's socio-cultural and political life (Mawrie 2009:132-145). Socio-political consciousness among the tribal communities in North-east India has been a result of the on-going process of enlightenment brought about by education in particular. In spite of its educative value and social relevance, the institution of the *Lawm* and *Sawm*, which had once played a very important role, had completely disappeared today. In the modern Kuki society, the *Lawm* and *Sawm* do not exist in the actual sense as they were in the previous Kuki society, because people felt it more and more inconvenient to put them into practice. School and college going youths can no longer participate in group cultivation works. They also do not sleep together in the same houses any longer. Thus, the emerging new culture, modernisation and education owing to the coming of Christianity led to the end of the remarkable institutions of the *Lawm* and *Sawm*, once the centre of village social life, now being replaced by modern youth organizations like the youth clubs and Christian youth fellowships.

### **The Youth club**

One of the common features found in almost every village is the formation of youth clubs. A youth Club is an association of youths who are striving towards the achievement of common goals and objectives. It is formed, managed and run by the youths themselves, for the growth and development of the youths in particular and the community in general. The youth club provides a platform for the youths in a particular area to come together, meet and discuss, and plan activities for their own development as well as that of their society.

The youth clubs are run by officials known as the executives, with the President at the head and function as per the principles laid down in the constitution of the youth club. Encouraging the youths in education is one of the main aims and objectives. To meet the requisite goals, career guidance and coaching are conducted. Night curfews are imposed for students to get them off the streets during the exams. Felicitation programmes are also conducted to acknowledge the rank holders, and to encourage them to study harder. Besides, the operation of a youth club in a village is a great relief for the village council.

Youth clubs perform several activities that once performed by *Lawm* in the traditional times. Helping the chief and the village council, helping the poor and the needy, keeping the village clean and protecting the village from external and internal dangers are some of the various activities performed by the youth clubs at present. In some villages, selling and drinking alcohol and other intoxicants are strictly watched over by the youth clubs alongside the village council.

### **The Christian youths**

It is common to observe in Kuki villages today the existence of one or more churches segregating the youths in one or more groups. During the olden days, after long day work in the field, young

boys formed groups who went and sleep in their respective *Sawm*-nu houses, a practice which was also known as *Sawm-gie*. In the present context, members of the youth clubs, go and attend services at their respective churches. Every youth fellowship or department have their respective youth services. Here, the youth are taught not only the words of God, but also social etiquettes and discipline by the senior members of the youth department concern. They are also encouraged in their studies and thus help them to grow spiritually and secularly. The youth fellowship provides a platform for the youths to showcase their talents through its various activities. It is through the youth fellowship that young people learn the art of leadership by imitating their elder brothers and sisters. Besides, the youth fellowships organises music trainings, song competitions, bible verse competitions, seminars etc. for the welfare of the youths of the church. All these are conducted from time to time to keep the youth busy and also to keep them away from wrong doing.

The youths of the respective churches from time to time organise social work and keep the church and its surrounding neat and clean. For every church event, such as Christmas, New Year, Good Friday, marriage etc., the youth fellowships are entrusted with cleaning and decoration. In case of the death of a church member, the youth fellowship takes an active part in all the necessary arrangements along with the help of other youth club members. However, in cases concerning the village every member of the village, irrespective of the church affiliation, stand together as one in the name of the village youth club.

## Conclusion

From the above discussion it is clearly understood that even during the pre- Christian era, the Kukis had a well organised youth organisational set up. They were the forces of production, and the social-cultural and political life of the village depended on it. The coming of Christian missions and the introduction of modern education paved the way for modernisation and change. Thus, in the course of history, the tradition *Lawm* and *Sawm* physically disappeared from the society. Yet, it may be very wrong to conclude that they have completely died out. The youth clubs and the Christian youth fellowships which function at the village level still follow certain aspects of the traditional institutions such as working for the welfare of the village, help the poor and aged people, guarding the village in times of trouble and so on. Thus, youth clubs and Christian youth fellowships work hand in hand like the traditional *Lawm* and *Sawm* for the village community at large.

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