

Perceptions on Kinship obligations among the Christianized Thadou Kuki community of Manipur.

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ABSTRACT

The Thadou Kuki of Manipur have undergone a number of social changes due to the advent of Christianity and the elements of the western culture which came with it. With the conversion to Christianity the definition of kinship has become ambiguous, and a new type of fictive kin, spiritual kin, emerged. Actually, people seem emotionally more attached to them than to blood relatives. Moreover, perceptions on kinship obligations have intergenerational differences.

Introduction

Anthropologists universally accept the fact that in isolated, homogeneous, and non literate small communities, social relations are informal, close, and multifaceted. All kinds of social relations are patterned as per the principles underlying the kinship and affinity rules of a particular society. Hence, there are several categories of kin and affine including kin through adoption or by ritual incorporation. Kinship not only defines biological relationships, but very often fictive kinship also substitutes and supplements actual kin. On the contrary, in large-scale, complex, heterogeneous, stratified and centralized societies, and particularly in the urbanized and industrialized ones, kinship has a rather small scope to cover up social interactions. In *Kinship Organization in India*, Irravati Karve (1953) points out that to understand the kinship web not only kinship terminologies are important, but also ritual practices, gift exchanges, folklore and other forms of cultural communication.

Traditionally kinship was regarded as both biological and heteronormative, with the blood bond serving as the basis for the creation and continuation of family kinship systems, but as Carsten (2000) remarked, our understanding of what makes a person a relative has been transformed by radical changes in marriage arrangements and gender relations, and by new reproductive technologies. “Both anthropological and sociological work on kinship increasingly reveal that people have complex relationships with relatives and others whom they may define as close or kin of choice. Central to this work is the growing importance of the distinction between biological and social kinship, biological and social parenting, and the biological and social construction of the family.” (Logan 2013:36) The focus of this paper deals with the Thadou Kukis’ the new perception of kin and kinship, due to Christianization as well as the intergenerational differences about kinship obligations.

The Thadou Kukis

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The Kukis live in Manipur, Nagaland, Assam, Mizoram and Tripura. In Manipur they live in all the five hill districts and in certain areas in the Imphal Valley. The Thadou Kuki, who belong to the Tibeto-Burman family of the Sino-Tibetan languages, are the most numerous and constitute the second most populated tribe in the state of Manipur.

In Myanmar, the Kukis are generally classified as Chin, whereas in Bangladesh they are identified as Kuki, Bawm, Lushai, etc. Though they are recognized differently, they exhibit a common history, origin and traditions with slight variation in language and practices. On the basis of the 2011 Census of India, and available Census reports of Bangladesh and Myanmar, Kuki population in India, Myanmar and Bangladesh is estimated to be around 9-10 million (Chongloi 2018).

Thadou settlements are located in forests, and sites on the tops of ridges or just below ridges are preferred. Villages are not arranged according to an established urban plan and there is no marking of the perimeter of a village (Gangte 1991, 1993). In discussing the relationship between 'Land' and 'Identity,' Sitlhou (2011) studied how external factors such as the colonial and the post-colonial State caused the restructuring of Thadou Kuki society, both in terms of geographical relocation as well as in the ideological and cultural reconstitution. The two are interdependent, he writes, as geographical restructuring is always followed by ideological revolution.

The debate about traditional chieftainship and its relationship with republican institutions is still hot today in Manipur (see, for example, Haokip 2018, and Chongloi 2018). Traditionally, the Kukis lived in small settlements in the jungles, each ruled by its own chief. The eldest son of the chief inherited his father's property, while the other sons were provided with wives from the village and sent out to found villages of their own. The village chief's house is usually the largest dwelling within the village. Outside it as well as outside the homes of wealthy villagers, there is a platform upon which men gather to discuss matters of importance and to mediate disputes (Gangte 1993).

According to Chongloi (2018), a Kuki village is generally headed by a chief who is called 'Haosa' assisted by his council of ministers called 'Semang-Pachong' or 'Haosa-Upa'. Though the ministers are either elected or nominated from time to time, the position of the chief remains inherited. The chief decides, administers and commands the army through the advice of the council of ministers. Every household pays tributes as a mark of due recognition to the chief as a legal inheritor and protector of the village. The chief treats all villagers, irrespective of clans, as his own kinsmen. This scholar, however, points out that since the initial contacts around 1776, British officials and writers, as distant observers, could not agree to the nature of the function of chieftainship, which, they felt, was autocratic in nature. Colonial antagonism against the institution of chieftainship increased, as it became a binding force to oppose the colonial influence in the region. The colonial influence on the area not only spurred changes in the relationship with the land (Sitlhou 2011), but also brought about a change in the religious beliefs of many Thadou Kukis with the advent of Christianity.

Christianity is the second-largest religion in Manipur, a state of India in its Northeast region, according to 2011 census data published by the Government of India. It can be traced back to Anglican missionary William Pettigrew who started to work in Manipur in 1894. At first Pettigrew was met by the hostility of both the British officials and the local chiefs; he persevered, however, and succeeded in establishing a permanent mission, but not before 1919-1920. Most Manipur Christians belong to different Protestant denominations, but there are also Catholics. According to the 2011 census about the percentage of Christians in the Scheduled Tribes, 98.03% of the Kukis and 97.85% of the

Thadou Kukis are Christian. This fact has affected Kuki institutions, among them their kin system, which had not passed through the colonial and post-colonial periods unscathed.

Methodology

Between the time of the 19th century precursors of modern kinship studies and the present era, a huge body of literature on kinship and marriage has accumulated: actually, in the first half of the 20th century it accounted for more than a half of the total anthropological literature. At least since Malinowski’s work on the Trobriandese, kinship came to be seen as indispensable for the proper understanding of small-scale societies. Notwithstanding a shift in the focus on kinship studies and a more refined contextualization, especially in the second half of the 20th century, kinship (and its obligations) is still a useful conceptual tool.

My fieldwork was conducted among the Thadou Kukis of Kangpokpi district from June to October 2017 and in Chandel District from January to March 2018, and among the residents of Imphal between 2015-2016.

The study group comprised 25 families consisting of primary and secondary kin, a total of 320 participants without including the individuals below 18 years of age. The group consisted of 140 females and 180 males.

Table 1: Generation, gender, and the median age of the participants from the study group:

Generation	Total		Males		Females		Age included
	N	%	n	%	N	%	
First Generation	35	10.93	20	11.11	15	10.71	56 yrs-100yrs
Second Generation	120	37.5	70	38.89	50	35.71	31yrs -55yrs
Third Generation	165	51.56	90	50.00	75	53.57	18yrs -30 yrs
Total	320	100	180	100	140	100	

The purpose of my research was to understand the nature of the obligations between individuals and their preferences in their choices of kin, that is either extended blood kin or fictive kin. Hence, the perceptions on kin and kinship obligations were taken into consideration, and the attitudes towards kinship obligations amongst different generations were compared and analyzed.

In order to have a more detailed picture, my first question was: Is there anyone very close to your family who is not blood or marriage-related but is treated just like a relative?

Fig. A shows that 75% of respondents said they had someone who was not related by blood or marriage, but who was nevertheless considered a relative. The highest number of these people belong either to the same-faith group or the same Christian community, and the second highest number was scored by people living in the same village or nearby. Although the reasons given by the respondents vary, yet most believed that the advantage of having a non-blood relative consists in the lack of traditional obligations enforced by the customary laws of Kuki society, thus allowing a freer relationship.

Hence, we can say that in the Christianized Thadou Kuki society of Manipur the weight of kinship networks has shifted from blood kinship to fictive kinship developed with the so-called brothers and sisters in Christ. I termed this new kind of kinship fictive kinship or spiritual kinship. This fact has led, on the one hand, to an identity crisis and a conflict between this relatively new kinship network which does not necessarily follows the rules of traditional Kuki blood kinship, and on the other hand to the opening of new chances to people marginalized for various reasons by the patriarchal traditional kinship system.

Perceptions of obligations

Some of the respondents replied to the question about what kind of obligations does one have to the kin or relatives this way:

Hemmang (60 years) replied that

obligations are very much needed in the society and the family. According to me, it is inevitable for the smooth running of the families since we are people with customs and tradition, I believe the fulfillment of customs and traditions of the family is the most important obligation for a person. In doing one's duty of fulfilling the customary obligations people will be closely knit together in the family circle and maintain the closeness of different families who live near and far. For instance, it is customary for a person to do certain things in life such as in the naming of a child, arranging or organizing a prayer feast for one's married daughters children or sister's children, giving different designated parts of the animal killed and slaughtered to the designated persons within the family and clan as customary. In fulfilling these duties, I feel that a person has done his obligations in life.

Nengchin (45 years) stated that

the obligation to me is to give regards and respect to all the elders of the family friends. It is respect that binds everything together. When you respect somebody one will surely fulfill his or her responsibilities willingly and diligently. So, having and building regards and respect in itself is a form of showing obligations to one another.

Lalthanglen (40 years) said that

obligations are very important part of one's life in order to be able to stay in the loop of the society and family. It holds the society and family together but I think the most important obligation of all is obedience to my parents and do things according to their expectations and wishes. My parents are old and deserve my respect. They are the type of parents who don't expect much financial assistance or money, but they expect respect and obedience on my part and consider it the most important obligation that a son owes them. They wanted me to always be beside them and never leave them alone for anything in the world. They expect me to support their decisions and these are all the things I also want from my children, and it will make me happy if they do so because I learned from my parents that respect and obedience to parents are the best obligation to be fulfilled for the family.

Lunkholet (30 years) said

the most important obligation to me is that my kin must be beside me on the day of joy and sorrow. There may be a lot of obligations that must exist between relatives and friends, while some may also be prescribed by the society to different individuals, but me and my family, making oneself available at the time of needs is the most significant obligation a person could have because it is during this hour of need that our degree of closeness could be understood even if its within the families. Especially among our tribe, we have different occasions where we do expect the least from our relatives to be available on that occasion irrespective of their residential location. Near or far we want them to be present there. It is during this time which brings the kin together so it is obligatory on every person to be present. For those living in close proximity, we expect a regular visit while for the further ones we consider their absence for petty things but expect them to be available at least on important occasions.

Lhaineikim (28 years) stated that

obligations to kin and the near and dear ones may be a lot but for me, but they provide to grant the basic needs when required by their kin. To provide economic aid is the best way of showing obligations to the near and dear ones. Because it is only from our near and dear ones we can expect financial aid without feeling embarrassed or to fear reciprocity. These obligations I think it is what differentiates one's kin from the other. For instance, I am pursuing higher studies and for that, I require a huge amount of financial assistance and will depend on my kin for support besides my parents. Even my married brothers are obligated to provide me such help. How can I depend on others for economic aid? Even my distant kin every now and then supports me in such matters so, I think giving financial assistance is what differentiate kin from others.

Satpu (20 years) said that

the kind of obligation that we have towards our kins is to look after one another in times of need. There are certain things in life that we cannot simply depend on other people except our family members and some close relatives. So, we expect certain obligations and are expected from us by our kin. If one is not of any use to the kin in times of trouble then, there is no point in being a family or kin. For instance, my father was hospitalized for a chronic illness for so many years and my family was facing a lot of hardship at those times and if it was not for my uncles and aunt we would not have survived those times. Some of my relatives don't even show up during those times and we are not very close anymore with them as my family feels that they were not beside us when we needed them the most, when we as kin have to decide certain crucial things.

The spontaneous answers have been coded in different categories which are (see Fig. B):

- regards and respect
- non-economic aid (physical presence when required)
- emotional support
- maintain close social contact,
- economic aid as and when required.
- others

The most common reply was that the specific obligation to kin is to provide non-economic aid which may help in different forms requiring the physical presence during certain works or feasts or customary rites. The next highest response dealt with the emotional support to kin in different

ways. Giving economic and financial aid was the third-highest response; this question was put on to kin in general without specifically mentioning which type of kin. But when these questions were rephrased differentiating between either blood kin related by blood or through marriage (-in-laws) or fictive kin, it was found that giving economic aid scored the second-highest response. However, non-economic aid stood out even if the category or kin typology was differentiated. Now we will analyze the intergenerational attitude in kinship obligations.

The coded obligations were further modified removing the 'others' category, according to what people considered an ideal pattern of kinship behavior. These questions when rephrased and coded responses were put before the interviewees.

- non-economic aid (physical presence when required) ,
- regards and respect and obedience
- emotional support
- maintain close intimate social relationships
- economic aid as and when required.

From these responses, we could also answer the questions about intergenerational attitude towards ideal norms of kinship obligations.

From figure C (see Fig. C) comparing three different generations we can see that all the three generations consider the physical presence of a (both blood and fictive) relative is an ideal norm of kinship behaviour. We can also see, however, that from the first to the third generation there is a decline in the frequency of the non-economic motive.

The 1st and 2nd generation gave the second-highest frequent response concerning economic aid as the ideal norm of obligation, but maybe surprisingly the third generation gave the same number of responses for both the economic and the non-economic norms of obligation.

Emotional support has a positive growth curve from the first to the third generation, and is the latter's third choice. Maintaining close intimate social contact finds the highest support amongst the 2nd generation, but it is the least frequent amongst the 3rd generation. Regard and respect have a negative curve as we move from the 1st generation to the third one; when we asked the reason why they did not choose respect and regard as the ideal norm, many felt that people who are respectful are expected to give economic as well as non-economic support to kin automatically.

In sum, the ideal norm of kinship obligation that scores the highest frequency is a non-economic one: the physical presence and participation on an individual to both happy and sad events as well as customary rites and feasts is considered the most important obligation, which reinforces kin's closeness.

The maintenance and reinforcement of kinship ties and obligations depend strongly upon the frequency of contact with kin (Lévi-Strauss 1969).

As Aldrich *et al.* (1973) noted, both descent theory and alliance theory have been subjected to strong criticism, because they tend to view kinship in normative terms, ignoring the variations of gender and of different social actors and omitting the experiential and emotional sides of kinship. Moreover, they exclusively dealt with "primitive" cultures, and are lacking in the analysis of residence

and other aspects of kinship. In fact, these scholars write, industrialization and urbanization usually cause value changes which place each generation in conflict with the following one on the issue of kin obligations. Kinship interaction patterns play a vital role in understanding the relationship between family value systems, socialization practices, attitudes and behavior of offspring in communities especially experiencing rapid social change. Blood (1972), in turn, pointed out that the objective need for assistance /aid is the main motivator for the establishment of fictive kin.

The relationship between modernization and extended kinship may have been forgotten in the West, but it is alive in the East Asian newly industrializing countries (NICs). In fact, as Marsh and Hsu (1995) remark, they contain a patrilineal extended kinship system, at least as an ideal pattern, which modernization may indeed affect. Moreover, they add, the weakening of extended kinship ties represents a greater threat in the East Asian NICs, since they are not yet sufficiently welfare states where one can leave the care of extended kin to what accrues to them from state welfare arrangements. Modernization theorists make an analytical distinction between ideal normative patterns and actual behavioral patterns of extended kinship. Marsh and Hsu data from Taiwan indicate that ideal obligations to extended kin declined, while actual behavioral ties to extended kin increased.

Among the Thadou Kuki fictive or spiritual kin related to Christian religious-based groups are considered to be closer than extended blood kin. As to the fulfilling of obligations to kin, people feel they are more obligated towards their fictive kin in comparison to the extended blood kin.

A number of studies have shown that participation in religious institutions facilitates the civic incorporation of contemporary immigrants. Negotiations and disagreements between generations shape the civic engagement of multigenerational Christian congregations. Kurien's research (2013) on congregations consisting of first- and second-generation immigrants belonging to the ancient Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Christian church based in Kerala, shows how first- and second-generation Mar Thoma American conceptions regarding ethnic and religious identity and social obligations mandated by religion were based on very different understandings about Christian worship, evangelism, social outreach, and their interrelationship. Kurien found that the immigrant generation's ideas were shaped by the doctrines and practices of the Mar Thoma denomination in India, whereas those of the second generation were influenced by nondenominational American evangelicalism. The second generation developed ideas of American identity and Christian obligation in interaction with and often in opposition to those of their parents' generation, with the result that contradictory forces affected the civic engagement of these multigenerational congregations.

Conclusion

Among the Thadou Kukis I found a different intergenerational attitude towards kinship obligations, in particular as to non-economic support and physical participation to kin events, although there is a decline in the frequency of the respondents about non-economic aid as we move from the first generation down to the third one. Economic support scores the second-highest figure for the first and second generations, but it scores the same figure as the non-economic support for the third one. Close intimate social contact is the most important norm for the second generation, but the least important for the third one, whereas regard and respect drops from the first generation to the third one. The advent of Christian denominations to Malipur has influenced the kinship structure of the Thadou Kukis, which tend to privilege fictive, spiritual kinship above extended blood kinship. This is a trend that can be perceived in the intergenerational different weight people put on obligations.

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Figures

Fig. A

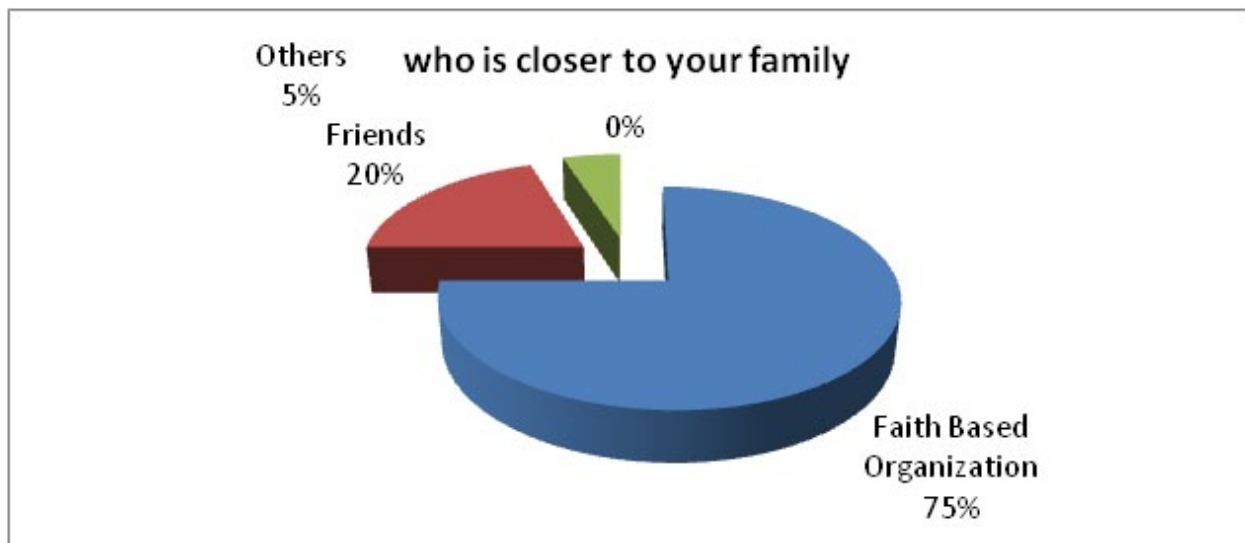


Fig. B

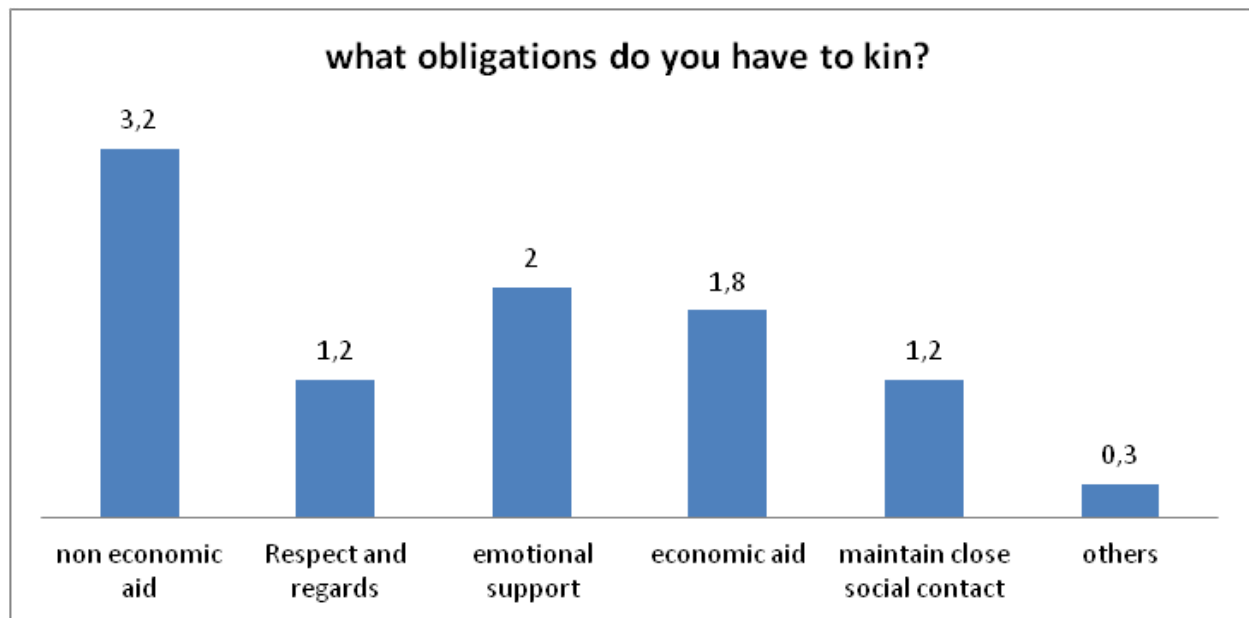


Fig. C.

