

ESCAPE AGRICULTURE, FORAGING CULTURE

The subsistence economy of the Kukis
during the Anglo-Kuki War

Thongkholal Haokip

Consequently, the destruction of grain and cattle was very thorough, the punishment of villages by burning was systematic, and the rebels were driven out and had to take refuge further north.

—J. B. Marshall, Deputy Commissioner, Upper Chindwin

Introduction

The study of food supply during wars and military campaigns by predominant forces are aplenty. Indeed, many conflicts and wars were actually ‘economic wars’, where economic blockades or sanctions were imposed against the enemy. The study of how small groups of resistance fighters and their supporters gather resources to fight predominant power for months, particularly how they manage their food supply, is understudied. There are new interests shown in recent years on how marginal indigenous groups manage their fight against repressive outside forces. This chapter is concerned with how the Kukis procured and managed local food sources during the desperate months of the two winter wars they fought against the British in 1917–1919.

The economic life of a predominantly pre-modern society during the colonial era in upland northeast India had been largely mobile. In the context of Southeast Asia, Robert E. Elson (1992: 164) observes that ‘mobility rather than permanency seems to have been a keynote of peasant life in this era as well as in earlier ones’.¹ Including the hills of the northeastern region along with upland Southeast Asia in Zomia, Scott (2009: 25) argues that ‘such areas were marked by great linguistic and ethnic diversity and occasionally by a simplification of social structure and subsistence routines – foraging, shifting cultivation – to increase mobility’. He adds: ‘Most hill people pursue livelihoods that incorporate a certain amount of foraging and hunting and can, when pressed, rely heavily upon it’ (Ibid.: 185). In this study of the Kukis’ food supply during the uprising, the chapter will particularly focus on the sustainability of the subsistence economy by exploring the scattered sources of ethnography on the Kukis written by various colonial officers during their postings in various parts of the northeast frontier, but close to, if not, in the Kuki Hills.

Ethnographic sources will be complemented by colonial archives and other secondary sources concerning the Kuki uprising, scattered in different military and administrative reports, in order to understand how these hill-dwelling groups resist the colonial state. There are scant references to hill communities having written culture; they are basically oral societies and maintained their story of origin, migration, folklore and genealogy by handing down orally from generation to generation. As Roy (2018: 85) delineates about societies in upland northeast India: 'The inhabitants of north-east India at that time were mostly illiterate and lacked the tradition of maintaining written records. Hence, our historical analysis is dependent on the sources generated by their enemies, i.e. the files of the military department of British-India, regimental records, private papers of the senior administrators of the Raj, memoirs by the British military officers who participated in these campaigns, and observations by the 'politicals', i.e. civil officials who were in charge of administering the 'hill' tribes of northeast India'.

In small wars where a regular army is fighting against irregular forces,

when there is no king to conquer, no capital to seize, no organised army to overthrow, and when there are no celebrated strongholds to capture, and no great centres of population to occupy, the objective is not so easy to select.

The 'selection of objective' is governed by the 'circumstances which have led up to the campaign' (Callwell 1906: 34, 40). In the case of the so-called Kuki Rebellion, expeditions were dispatched with punitive intent so 'that the recalcitrant Kukis should be called to account without delay and that those who refused to submit should have their village burnt'.² The aim was to overrun the entire hostile territory. To overrun a sparsely populated country,

regular troops are forced to resort to cattle lifting and village burning and that the war assumes an aspect which may shock the humanitarian. . . .
If the enemy cannot be touched in his patriotism or his honour, he can be touched through his pocket.

In these punitive expeditions, strong economic measures have become a necessity as destruction of villages has little or no impact 'since the dwellings of these races can be reconstructed easily while their food supplies, if destroyed, cannot be replaced' (Callwell 1906: 41).

When, however, the campaign takes the form of quelling an insurrection, the object is not only to prove to the opposing force unmistakably which is the stronger, but also to inflict punishment on those who have taken up arms. In this case it is often necessary to injure property.

(Ibid.)

The 'Plan of Operations against the Kuki Rebels', formulated in September 1918, reveals how the British military was keen in proving its might to the opposing rebels:

One thing remains clear, viz., that the operations should in any event proceed and the entire rebel country be overrun and effectively occupied, roads

made and our troops should penetrate to every corner of every area. Only in this way, i.e., by actual demonstration will we prove to the Kukis our mastery and that resistance is futile.³

In this plan to suppress the uprising in which the Kukis deployed 'jungle warfare' in the previous operation, two prominent 'schemes of operations' include dividing the 'entire hostile theatre of operations into areas' and 'to be enclosed by a chain of outposts', and 'each outpost to furnish active patrols and to act as supply depots for mobile columns', in which

the stronger mobile columns can hunt them down and at the same time destroy rebel villages and sequester or destroy livestock and supplies. The rebels will be given no rest and attempts at preparing ground for cultivation or running up temporary villages will be frustrated.

The warfare tactics of the British, as noted earlier, was the policy of scorched earth, which

included indiscriminate burning of recalcitrant villages, their properties, foodstuffs, livestock and driving the hapless women, children and aged into the jungle under chilling winter and hunting them down from pillar to post to capture them, and to use those captured, particularly the women and children, to break the spirit of the Kuki fighters.

(Haokip 2019: 100)

One of the economic measures adopted by the British was blockade. As in the case of the economics of social banditry, Hobsbawn (1981: 85) pointed out:

It is therefore a mistake to think of bandits as a mere children of nature roasting stags in the greenwood. A successful brigand chief is at least as closely in touch with the market and the wider economic universe as a small landowner or prosperous farmer.

The success of the Kukis' resistance against the colonial forces lies in unnoticeable accumulation of food grains from the markets and an invisible source of food supply, which will be supplemented by forageable forest produce. When the rebel Kuki villages were prevented from swidden cultivation during the early months of 1918, by the middle of the year they were already in search of markets where they could possibly acquire food grains and other household needs. The colonial authorities also learnt during the first operations that 'they [Kukis] were able to supplement their supplies from Naga neighbours' (Reid 1997: 80). It was not only from the Nagas, but the Kuki rebels attempted to procure foodgrains from their other neighbours and from the local markets. While touring to Sekmai, the political agent in Manipur, Mr. W. A. Cosgrave reported:

From Faidinga I proceeded to Senapati as I had received information from several sources that in the last few days Kukis from the interior have been

buying large quantities of rice beer and other food supplies at Sengmai bazaar and in the adjoining villages. The Gurkhalis informed me that the Kukis had bought up so much rice that for four days they (the Gurkhalis) had been able to get none in the bazaar. It seems probable that the rice is being taken into the hills for the big concentration of rebel Kukis near Kaipu's village.

He also 'intends to place some armed police at Sengmai in addition to the civil police so as to close the bazaar to the Kukis'. Moving further north to Kanglatongbi, the political agent again reported: 'We also inspected the Sengmai Sarai in which a guard of 1 Non-commissioned officer and 10 sepoy Assam Rifles will be stationed so as to prevent Kukis visiting Sengmai and the adjoining villages'.⁴ It was clear from this report that the Kukis were preparing for the next winter war against the British, and one of the strategies for the British to press the Kukis to submission was not only to restrict the access of markets by the Kukis but also to search for stored (and even hidden) food grains during their campaigns.

Injure property, forbidding cultivation: economic measures against the Kukis

When recruitment for the second 'Manipur labour corps' was raised in June 1917, the Kukis in the adjoining hills of Manipur valley were opposed to this force recruitment. During the month of October 1917, the officiating political agent in Manipur, Mr. J. C. Higgins, toured the hills with the intention of bringing the Kuki chiefs to submission by threatening them that if they 'failed to surrender', their 'village would be burnt'.⁵ However, during his tour this intemperate officer burnt Lonpi on 17 October after its chief Ngulkhup failed to give himself up. Tension escalated in the southeastern hills, spreading quickly to all corners of the Kuki Hills. Ngulkhup sent a message to his kindred *pipas* requesting to fight the British with him. Since then the message spread like wildfire of the ensuing tension with the *sirkars* in the whole Kuki hills, and preparations were made before the formal declaration of war. The Kukis felt the necessity of ensuring sufficient food supply during the war, as they were to fight a much stronger and well-organised force. Thus in the following month the crops in their *jhum* fields were allowed to ripen and were gathered to be stored in hidden granaries. Meanwhile all other preparations were made for the winter war, including gathering of guns and preparing gunpowder. It was 'about the end of November or beginning of December' that a big meeting of the Kuki chiefs was held at Chassad. During the meeting, about 150 chiefs 'resolved not to obey any orders or summons from Government and to fight if Government tried to enforce orders'.⁶ Thus the passive resistance of the Kukis refusing to supply labour corps for France and to surrender guns was turned into a full-blown conflict.

It may be recalled that the organised resistance of the Kukis started only after they reaped the harvests from their *jhum* fields. This was also duly acknowledged in the official military circles. After the first military operations during the winter of 1917–1918, Robert Reid (1997: 80) reported: 'Between December 1917 and May 1918 three columns, aided by operations directed from Burma, acted vigorously and

continuously against the rebels with varying measures of success. . . . They were still far from being subdued'. He gives an obvious statist view:

A large number of villages had been destroyed, but, owing to the nomadic habits of the tribe and the flimsy nature of their houses, the loss sustained was small. More serious was the destruction of considerable quantities of grain and livestock and the interference with cultivation. But owing to their method of fighting, in ambushes and stockades, which they quickly abandoned, as soon as outflanked, the Kukis had sustained very few casualties, fewer, in fact, than they had inflicted.

As the political agent of Manipur during the uprising wrote that certain strong measures were to be taken by the government, 'If not, we all have to go on fighting, which may last indefinitely'.⁷ Settling in 'independent territory' among war-like neighbours, the Kukis had an inbuilt social structure and organisation that were adapted to be resilient to defend themselves. A. K. Ray (1990: 75) notes: 'Here it may be mentioned that the punitive measures alone could not bring the situation under control without resorting to strong economic measures'. Robert Reid also viewed that

any attempt to bring the enemy to battle and inflict losses on them would have been useless. Instead economic measures were taken. The rebellion broke out after the Kukis had reaped the harvest in 1917. Columns operating over a wide area prevented them from sowing and reaping a crop in 1918, and by 1919, resistance collapsed owing to the lack of food.

Writing on the ethnography of the New Kukis or the Thadous, William Shaw, the first sub-divisional officer of the newly created subdivision of the northwest region called Tamenglong, writes: 'The Thadou tradition runs that Chongthu came on to this earth with only millet and Job's tears. We are also told how he eventually discovered rice, also that the Mithun was first caught at Sisep and domesticated' (Shaw 1997 [1929]: 40). This mythology depicts the staple foods of the Kukis. And to bring the Kukis to submission it was necessary to confiscate such food grains and livestock and to destroy all hidden supplies which might be found. H. D'U. Keary, the general officer commanding the Burma division during the operations against the Kuki rebels, wrote to the chief of the general staff, army headquarters, India, of the reasons to forbidding cultivation:

My decision to enforce a blockade and forbid cultivation was only to come when I was convinced that guns could not be extracted by any other method. . . . For, had they not surrendered by the end of March, they would have been too late to prepare the ground for the next harvest, and would in consequence have been faced with a famine.⁸

For instance, the political agent of Manipur Mr. Cosgrave toured the southwestern hills during the months of February and March and every rebel village was punished in similar fashion. Here is his report about Henglep: 'We halted at Hinglep and punished the village severely by shooting more than 20 metnas and collecting a large quantity of paddy . . . and destroyed about 100 maunds of paddy'. When an

inadequate amount of paddy and other livestock were found, the military column would not rest until 'hidden stores' in the jungle were found and destroyed. Cosgrave also reported about Songphu village:

As the search parties which we sent out could not find any metnas and very little paddy while I had information that this is a well off village we decided to halt here for another day so as to search for and destroy the enemies' property.⁹

Describing the advantages that the Kukis had during the war, Shakespear (2004 [1912]: 236) said: 'who knew their hills and forests, carry no packs, do not bother themselves over supplies'. Let us now examine how the settlement pattern, social organisation, the type of farming and other subsistence practices of the Kukis help them in their resistance war against the British.

Difficult to approach, difficult to catch: settlement and social organisation of the Kukis

Some of the characteristics that still appear to stigmatise the Kukis today, and other upland peoples – their physical mobility (often derogatively termed as migratory habit), shifting cultivation, hunting, foraging, division into small groups, and other subsistence practices, which is considered in some discourses as 'far from being the mark of primitives left behind by civilization' – helped them in their resistance against the British for two winters during World War I. It was indeed an escape culture that were 'adaptations designed to evade . . . state capture' (Scott 2009: 9).

Living among the constantly raiding communities in highlands of northeast India, in the shadow of the lowland states and colonial empire, the selection of village location, their physical mobility, their social structure, the social organisation of *som*, and subsistence practices were strategic choices. Apart from positioning themselves at a safe distance from the valley states, the Kukis also positioned themselves vis-à-vis the other hill peoples whom they live with as neighbours. As Scott (2009: 181) pointed out, 'The quickest available refuge lies, generally, farther up the water courses and higher in the hills', the Kukis during the nineteenth and early twentieth century were largely a hill top-dwelling community. Writing one of the earliest accounts of the Kukis 'that live among the mountains to the north east of the Chittagong province', Macrae (1803: 186) describes their natural choice of the location of their village: 'The Kookies choose the steepest and most inaccessible hills to build their villages'. In his 'Notes on Northern Cachar', Stewart (1855: 635) mentioned that 'in their own country, the Kookies generally perched their villages on the tops of hills, not from any particular love for such elevation, but as offering greater advantages for defence'. A century later the official colonial ethnographer of the Thadous or the New Kukis, William Shaw (1997 [1929]: 83) also discusses their choice of village location: 'The Thadou usually selects the dense jungle for his village site, either on the top of a ridge or on the slope just below'. Shakespear (2004: 20) explains the compelling reason for this site selection:

chiefly, I think, in order to get a good defensive position. His migratory habits disinclining him to make the elaborate defences over which the Chins,

Nagas, and other dwellers in permanent villages took so much pains, he therefore sought for a site which was difficult to approach.

After the village is selected and houses built, defensive measures were then taken:

The village is next fortified, all roads leading to it being barricaded, admittance lying through a wicket, and the ground in the neighbourhood being thickly planted with 'panjies'. Guard houses are also built at the barricades where the young men watch and sleep at night.

(Stewart 1855: 635)

The social organisation of *som*, which is a bachelor's dormitory of which able-bodied young boys of the village are members, 'defend[s] the village from external dangers'. T. S. Gangte (2012: 133) explains:

The Kuki society is such that during the days when inter-tribal feuds were a part of their way of life, every able-bodied youth of a village slept together so that they might be readily available for deployment in times of emergency.

Such inbuilt institutions and settlement patterns help them cope with the war without much preparation.

The lived experience of small and scattered societies in premodern society is largely shaped by the modes of subsistence. Among the modes of subsistence available to upland northeast Indians, foraging and dry farming is best suited to such ecological settings.¹⁰ Evidently there was limited pastoralism due to unavailability of enough grassland in the highlands. Many of the cultural practices and rituals were directly linked to such subsistence system. These were cultural adaptations, indeed survival strategies tailored to suit a particular ecological condition. The subsistence economy of the highland massif societies evidently depends on physical mobility, swiddening, foraging and limited forms of animal husbandry.

Mobility as political adaptation

Mobility and migration, the much stereotyped, pervaded and chivvied characteristics during the pre-globalised world, was indeed the history of many communities in Asia and several others elsewhere. Every community that settles in the present northeast India traces its origin somewhere else beyond the region. Within the regional conflicts in the past, displacement and resettlement were common. Indeed they were moving communities until they finally settled in their present habitat between South and Southeast Asia. In his study of upland Southeast Asia and Northeast India, Scott (2009: 106) observes that, 'The dispersal and mobility of the upstream population made them virtually immune from punitive expeditions, let alone systematic coercion'. Mobility and dispersal were not only a strategic choice to escape from the reach of the lowland states; they were also indeed a strategy to escape raids from other groups. In the case of some marginal groups in China, Michaud (2006: 180) also mentions that it 'could also be used as an escape or a survival strategy adopted temporarily by populations needing to move'. At the time of occupation of Assam

by the British, Mackenzie (1884: 7) remarked about the ‘numerous savage races’ surrounding the Assam valley:

we found the Assam Valley surrounded north, east, and south by numerous savage and warlike tribes whom the decaying authority of the Assam dynasty had failed of late years to control, and whom the disturbed condition of the province had incited to encroachment.

As seen in other principalities and kingdoms during Middle Ages, incorporation and resistance were common features, as much as raids and plunders were common in the hills.

In his study of tribes in the North Cachar Hills, the colonial military officer lieutenant Stewart (1855: 633) observed:

The Kookies are naturally a migratory race, never occupying the same place for more than two or at the utmost three years at a time, but removing to new sites as soon as they have exhausted the land in the immediate vicinity of their villages which they appear to do in much less time than any of the other tribes.

Colonial accounts on the Kukis are filled with platitudes about their physical mobility. While writing *The Native Tribes of Manipur*, Hodson (1901: 308) remarked that ‘the Kukis are migratory, from the force of circumstances, and possess a strong fissiparous instinct. Indeed the Kuki is to be found almost everywhere in the State except in the territory occupied by the Mao confederacy’. Similarly Hodson (1911: 2) also wrote how a Kuki man once told him: ‘We are like the birds of the air. We make our nests here this year and who knows where we shall build next year’. The last of the ethnography that wholly looks into the Thadou-Kukis also puts: ‘The Thadou is migratory and moves from village to village on the slightest pretext. Sometimes whole villages vanish to be absorbed in others just because they have had enough of the place and the wander-lust has got hold of them’ (Shaw 1997 [1929]: 16).

This appellation by colonial military and political officers is understandable and may have an unpalatable tone evidently for their dislike of mobility and invisibility, as it posed difficulty in imposing their rule. Colonial governmentality involves visibility of the subjects, and ‘invisibility created within the mind of the powerful a deep anxiety, a paralyzing sense of powerlessness’ (Bhattacharya 2018: 76); as such, mobile societies were seen with disdain. As shown in other studies, the state wants to sedentarise people through any means available. Scott (1988: 2) sees these efforts as ‘a state’s attempt to make a society legible, to arrange the population in ways that simplified the classic state functions of taxation, conscription, and the prevention of rebellion’.

How indigenous societies came to be remembered and understood depends on when they first appeared in written literatures. Their first appearance in literatures normally happens during their initial contacts with Western colonizing powers. During such times of initial contacts, the descriptions of the colonial powers were laden with brazen categorisation of these kingdoms, as in the case of the northeast frontier of British India, as weak and fraught with internal rebellions. The Kingdom of Ahom and Manipur that were invaded by the Burmese Shans during the 1790s were

described by Mackenzie (1884: 3) as filled with ‘confusion and misery’, which were ‘deliberately relegated to anarchy and civil war’, in which the native rulers were lacking ‘capacity or ability to govern’ or were ‘mere worthless debauchees’. Similarly the hills beyond the inner line were seen as unadministered space inhabited by ‘numerous savage and warlike tribes’, ‘barbarians’, ‘head hunters’, ‘raiders’ and so forth.

For such societies it can be a case of ‘self-barbarization’, as Scott (2009: 173) puts it, ‘to evade taxes, flee the law, or seek new land [by] continually moving into barbarian zones’, and ‘civilizational discourse, however, made such conduct unthinkable’. The New Kukis or Thadous, at the time of their first contact with the colonial power, were hard-pressed from the south by kindred tribes who recently acquired arms from different sources and were engaged in raids. Shakespear (2004 [1912]: 190) describes about such situation in his ethnography of the Lushei Kuki clans:

It appears almost certain that the Kamhaus, Soktes, and Siyins were the first to disturb the Thados, many of whom entered Manipur territory to escape from these active foes, while others probably moved westward and settle in the hills to the south of the Cachar district, whence in 1848–50 they were derived into Cachar by the triumphant Lushais.

Such circumstances may have compelled the Kukis to adopt mobility as a strategy of survival among the so-called other war-like tribes which they settle. This mobility would have also helped them in coping with the constant burning of their villages by the British forces, as they decided not to attach their sentimental value to the places they had settled because of these circumstances. Shaw (1997 [1929]: 83) made a similar view: ‘Being migratory he attaches little sentimental value to an old site which has been occupied for any length of time’. Even after the war and in a slightly different context while dealing with the tribal justice system, Chaube (1999: 114) also mentions about the policy of Manipur government:

the Kuki’s migratory character made the Manipur government in 1928 ban the establishment of new Kuki villages with less than ten households. Any violation of the order had to be punished by eviction, if necessary by burning of the huts – a self-defeating punishment.

However, the largely mobile *jhumias*, pastoralists and hunter-gatherers who simply refused to settle down do not mean that they don’t have territory. In his study of pastoralists in the highlands of western Punjab Bhattacharya (2018: 408) writes: ‘Before British rule, as we have seen, the bar was under the control of different nomadic groups, each with their distinct areas of control’. During different historical times the stronger pushed the other and displaced the other and consolidate their power. As such, ‘If the territory defined the limits of pasture, the limits of territory – always tenuous and fluid – were continuously negotiated through the politics of grazing and raiding’. Such areas, as Bhattacharya (2018: 15) points out,

In colonial imagination . . . had to be surveyed, mapped, and bounded. The rights of commoners had to be restricted, the movement of mobile people regulated, pastoralists turned into peasants, large-scale farming established, canal irrigation introduced, and ‘scientific’ agriculture encouraged.

In his study of the function of nomadism in the traditional way of life of the Yomut Turkmen of northern Iran, Irons (1974: 635) argued that they ‘maintained the degree of mobility which they did because of its political advantages’.

[He] suggest[s] that some of these groups have maintained a nomadic residence pattern in order to enjoy the political and military advantages of nomadism despite the fact that their economy required only the more limited mobility of a semi-sedentary pattern of residence. . . . There is ample evidence that in other areas nomadic populations have enjoyed a military advantage because of their mobility.

This was what the Kukis practiced during the nineteenth and early twentieth century because of their predicament: by indulging in physical mobility and agriculture that supports such mobility. To the surveillance state it is hardly surprising that sedentarisation, fixing such population in space – ‘in settlements in which they can be easily monitored’ – has been the state project par excellence and why the state, in Scott’s words, has always been the ‘enemy of the people who move around’ (Scott cited in Baruah 2003: 325).

During the war there was ample evidence of how the constant mobility of the Kukis was annoying, and as a result some measures were taken to control it as the war was going on. A colonial military officer observed: ‘Eastern Kuki should be thoroughly subdued, as they have always been the least tractable, probably owing to their proximity to and intercourse with their unadministered [*sic*] relatives across the border’¹¹. Major Vickers, commandant of the Naga Hills Battalion, suggested for the establishment of outposts throughout the Kuki country so as to not only confine the movements of hugely mobile Kuki rebels but also prevent them from rebuilding their villages or cultivation (cited in Haokip 2018: 125).

Escape agriculture, escape crops

Agriculture in highland massifs till today is mainly dry farming. Most of them are still rain fed and largely in the form of swiddening as in the past, with few irrigated farmlands. The steep terrain, remoteness and inaccessibility posed constraints, particularly on water supply, despite technological advancement and state intervention. Such rain-fed agriculture in steep ranges is often looked upon with prejudice. In the context of the Himalayan region in India, Pratap (2011: 33) pointed out: ‘The mainstream thinking on hill agriculture development was dominated by the biases against hill farming, marginal land based limitations, forest conservation as a priority, etc.’ Despite such predisposition, certain dry farming practices and crops are most suited for people in the so-called marginal areas; these practices supported them tremendously during trying times.

[In] such an unfamiliar and confusing ethnic landscape, Scott suggests, fits well with slash and burn agriculture – the common mode of livelihood in these hills – which means dispersed and mobile populations that could not be captured for corvee labor and military service by the labor-starved states of the plains; nor could tax-collectors monitor either the number of potential subjects or their holdings and income. It is from the perspective

of the surveillance systems of states that the ethnic landscape of the hills appears so non-transparent.

(cited in Baruah 2003: 325)

Rice is the staple food of peoples at the highland massif of northeast India and many societies in Asia and beyond. Giving an account of the hill territory surrounding Manipur valley Brown reported in 1874:

Their cultivation is entirely jhoom. They have amongst them a superior variety of rice, the seed of which, they say, was given them by Raja Ching-tong Komba, or Jae Singh, during his wanderings in the hills after having been expelled from Manipur by the Burmese.

(Brown 1975 [1874]: 52)

In the North Cachar Hills,

The rice raised by the Kookies, and indeed the whole of their agricultural produce, is of a much superior quality to that of the Cacharees and Nagas, which may be owing to their not tilling the soil to the same extent, but abandoning it after the first or second crop.

(Stewart 1855: 633)

In the ethnography of the Thadou Kukis, Shaw (1997 [1929]: 87–88) also mentions: ‘The Thadou’s staple diet is rice but . . . are said to be particularly fond of bal [taro] and rely on it a good deal’.

During any war between state and non-state forces, food supply is one of the enduring challenges that a smaller resistance force has to face. Tropical mountains are suited for a certain farming practice, in the form of dry farming, and the forest produces a wide variety of leafy vegetables, roots, tubers, beans, barks, maize, and readily consumable fruits. Dry farming has greater escape value than terraced and irrigated farming. While irrigated farming requires more labour, in maintaining irrigation and tilling the land, dry farming requires a comparatively lesser labour than wet farming. This is reflected in Shaw’s (1997 [1929]: 87–88) description about the mode of cultivation of the Thadou Kukis:

The Thado’s ideal of really satisfactory cultivation is to fell virgin forest and grow a single crop among the fallen logs and then repeat on fresh forest for the next year. This method gives the highest possible return for the lowest expenditure of labour.

As dry farming, particularly in the form of swiddening, requires swiddeners to shift the location of their cultivation in a year or two through the practice of slash and burn, it is indeed a mobile form of cultivation that supports physical mobility of those who practice it. Michaud (2006: 179–180), in his dealings with the history ‘majority of Tibeto-Burman, Mon-Khmer, and Miao-Yao groups’ argues that mobility or semi-nomadism ‘in the massif have also been strongly associated with swiddening, a form of itinerant agriculture most adapted to populations willing, or required, to keep on

the move'. This form of cultivation was possible when population was minimal and the vast mountains were still virgin and unoccupied.

Most of the crops that were grown in the highlands of the Kuki Hills have values that supported the particular lifestyle that the Kukis led. Take for instance the case of one of the most favourite tubers – taro, which is locally called *bal*: it could be grown at relatively high elevations, and can 'be planted anytime; it ripened quickly; it required little care or preparation before eating; and once ripe it could be left in the ground and dug up as needed' (Scott 2009: 199). Many other tubers which the Kukis were cultivating, such as yam, sweet potato and cassava have similar properties:

they are of staggered maturity, fast growing, and easily hidden, if they require little care, are of little value per unit weight and volume, and grow below ground, they acquire greater escape value. Many such cultivars are ideally adapted to swiddening routines, in which case their escape value is still further enhanced.

(Scott, 2009: 199)

At the time of their resistance war against the British, the Kukis were semi-agriculturalists and semi-foragers. When their granaries, and even their hidden ones, were either confiscated or burnt down, as in the case of the first winter war in 1917–1918, or they were forbidden cultivation in 1918–1919, they heavily depended on foraging in the forest for livelihood.

Hunting and gathering: the forage economy of indigenous peoples

The subsistence economy of the Kukis at the time of the war with the Raj, and to some extent till today, was close to what Barnard (2002: 7) termed it as 'immediate-return economies', in which foraging culture continue to exist with certain adaptations. In such economies,

They take their food from the wild and generally use it immediately, without storing it and without either the necessity of storage or the need to plan for the future. Of course, they do accumulate and store, but the point is that they value sharing over accumulation.

The staple food crop(s) such as rice, millet or maize were cultivated in swidden fields. And 'when rations ran out on the settlements' due to conflict or raids, 'they were compelled to subsist in the bush' or the forest, as in the case of highland massifs (Altman 1987: 3). In such foraging economy, 'hunter-gatherers live a relatively high quality life of reasonable food security combined with a disproportionately large amount of leisure time' (Kolig 1987: 424). Despite such anthropological studies showing the relative ease with which people in such societies can live, colonial accounts are filled with platitudes describing them as 'lazy'.

The currently prevalent anthropological view stresses the comparatively larger contribution made by the foraging women than by the men, whose hunting and fishing success is believed to have been uneven and their contribution, on the average,

therefore markedly smaller. During the war ‘women, hampered to some extent by infants and young children, perform most of the gathering; foraging around the temporary camps for the edible fruits, seeds, nuts, tubers and other plant materials which form the staple part of the family diet’ (Serpell 1996: 3). A wider range of vegetable foods such as tubers, shoots, mushrooms, buds and roots were available. In addition, wild fruits plentifully available in their hills can nutritionally supplement their diet under such pressing circumstances. Fruits included guava, passion fruit, wild mango, gooseberry, goldenberry, plum, peach, leafy wild vegetables and leaves, and beans such as parkia. Apart from the wild foods, pre-modern society was heavily dependent on hunting. In such societies ‘[t]he men do most of the hunting and butchering of game, and they manufacture . . . weapons for this purpose’ (Serpell 1996: 3).

Looking into one of the earliest accounts of the Kukis in the North Cachar Hills, John Rawlins (1790: 191–192) observed: ‘In regard to their civil institutions, the whole management of their household affairs belong to the women; while the men are employed in clearing forests, building huts, cultivating land, making war, or hunting game and wild beasts’. Stewart (1855: 642) also reported:

The Kookies are great hunters, and are passionately fond of the sport, looking upon it, next to war, as the noblest exercise for man. They kill tigers, deer and smaller game by means of poisoned arrows. The bow is a small one made of bamboo, and very slightly bent, the string being manufactured of bark. The arrow, the head of which has a barbed iron point, is about 18 inches long, being drawn to the chest and not the ear, and therefore delivered with no great force, the destructive effect lying chiefly in the poison. With such an instrument the great art in hunting lies in stealthily approaching the animal near enough to deliver the arrow with effect, and in following it up after being wounded to the spot where it is found lying dead. In this the Kookies excel, being able to prowl about the jungle as noiselessly as tiger-cats, and being equal to North American Indians in distinguishing tracks. Tigers are also killed by spring bows with poisoned arrows set in the jungles, and by poisoned panjies planted in their paths.

They ‘also spear fish, but have not much idea of catching them by the hook or net’ (Stewart 1855: 643). Brown (1975 [1874]: 52) also reported in Manipur that ‘they do not form the large hunting parties that they used to; but those who possess firearms, occasionally shoot pig or deer. They sometimes use small nets in fishing. . . . they also poison the hills streams’. Shaw (1997 [1929]: 88) also describes about how much a Thadou Kuki man is fond of hunting:

In hunting the Thadou is particularly expert. Nothing pleases him so much as to be out after game with his muzzle-loading gun or arranging and setting up traps to snare wild animals. He is a good tracker and has an uncanny knack of knowing where the game is likely to be.

The hunting and semi-gathering culture of the Kukis did sustain them when their principal means of livelihood was cut off during the war. Indeed, they had to heavily depend on this when the whole population was overrun by the British forces from pillar to post.

The art of 'half-tamed' and 'half looked-after' animal husbandry

Humans' approach to animals is either to leave them alone as wild or to tame some of them as domestic animals. Unlike lowland peoples who practice different forms of sedentary agriculture and use domesticated animals for tilling the land and/or for transport, for the pre-capitalist hill people, especially with high physical mobility, domesticated animals had lesser value unless they were adapted to a certain pattern that eases the rearing and yet has significant utilities. The burden of looking after them was paramount when the vast forest offers lots of wild animals to be killed for meat at the hunter's discretion.

During the early decades of the twentieth century the domesticated animals of the Kukis, Shaw wrote, were mainly *mithun*, buffalo, pig, goat, dog and fowl. He does not explicitly mention why the Kukis choose certain animals to be domesticated and not others. However, such selection entails an art; by being selective it involves not only the consideration of economic utility but also to suit their strategy of political adaptations of their circumstances. The selection involves, apart from meat, not only the ease with which such animals can be reared but also their contribution in a symbiotic relationship. Their choice was definitely the art of 'half-tame' and 'half-feed', yet full utilisation of their innate habit through symbiotic relationship. Let us look into this art of the Kukis through the ethnographic work done by William Shaw on the Thadou Kukis just after the war in the northwestern areas to the valley of Manipur.

The particular dislike of a Thadou Kuki for cats was evident from the shared eating habit with cats, despite in other societies cats providing relief to the problem of rodents. Shaw (1997 [1929]: 87) describes: 'He is very fond of eating rats of all kinds and this may be a reason why he does not like keeping cats which would reduce his supply of this delicacy'. The diversification of what the Kukis eat, and in fact eating almost anything, was helping them in their food procurement during the war. Shaw (1997 [1929]: 86) also mentions:

Pigs are fed regularly and come to the call of Lui from their owners while Chi is the word used for dogs. The voice is the only distinction recognised by the pigs and dogs as to whether their master is calling one or the other. Pigs play a very important part in the sanitation of a village which does not debar them from being a delicacy on the breakfast table.

There are two things that can be drawn from this. First, the pigs and dogs could have run away from the village to the surrounding forest without being caught while the houses and granaries were being burnt down by the British forces during the war. Later, when the need for such animals came for consumption as food, they can be called out forest by their owners. Second, both the animals play a vital role in sanitation by their consuming of faeces, and also being half-fed with such activity. Similarly the fowl help in the scavenging duty, while the bigger non-carnivorous animals were half looked-after. Shaw (1997 [1929]: 86) said:

Goats are kept for trade and food, and are not fed but allowed to graze in the jungle. Sometimes miniature houses are built are built for the goats

to sleep in at nights. The same for fowls. Fowls are also scavengers of the village and are not fed.

Among the animals, mithun played an important role culturally among the Kukis, besides being a meat source during cultural events. However, they were generally half-tamed and half looked-after, reducing the burden of rearing yet fulfilling their cultural role when needed. Shaw also noted:

The mithun are left to roam about the jungles on their own and are really only half tame. The same applies to buffaloes. Sometimes they are persuaded to collect near the village for salt, but this is only done to keep them from wandering too far and thus calling for the use of tremendous amount of energy when the time comes to kill them.

(Shaw 1997 [1929]: 85)

The art of half-tame and half looked-after animal husbandry of the pre-modern Kuki subsistence economy indeed assist them in this desperate fight against the *sabibs*. This art indeed helped them to cope with the immediate scarcity of food that ensued after all their properties were burnt, and prevented starvation and a famine-like situation in their hills.

The moral economy of Kuki *khankho*

The lifeworld of the Kukis is filled with certain culturally distinct values which are intrinsic to them in their existence as a social group. To them, '*tomngaina* and *khankho* are the "code of ethics" and universe of all philanthropic activities. Both the terms are related to the 'norms' in a cultural society' (Haokip 2018: 283). These cultural values instruct them to act in times of need. During peacetime, the agricultural practices under the *khankho* instruct a Kuki not to harvest all agricultural crops but leave a certain portion of it, known as *changkhai*. These unharvested crops are intentionally left for the poor and needy. After the harvest, those in need would be in search of such left leftovers and collect them. In the payment of *changseo*, which is a kind of annual tribute payment to the chief by the villagers, villagers who have not enough harvest can be exempted from such payment by the chief.¹² During lean periods, the wealthier households share their food grains and other crops with the poor and needy without any expectation of repayment. Everyone in the village shares the burden of how the poor and needy will lead their life, particularly how the children will grow up in the village, and offer their help by sharing food and clothing. This is the moral economy of *khankho* in the traditional Kuki village, which is a certain social insurance scheme in a closely knit society.

In such semi-hunting-gathering society,

They value sharing not just in the sense of a belief that those who share are 'good people', but in the sense that failing to share is an act of bad faith. It is literally anti-social, as society itself is constructed on the ideal of widespread sharing. Those who do not share are ridiculed for not doing so. Furthermore, the ideology of sharing persists among part-time and former

foragers. Sociality depends on sharing, and is offended by accumulation. Such an attitude to labour and to saving is entirely contradictory to that of members of other societies.

(Barnard 2002: 7)

In his study of the political economy of rural society in Vietnam, Popkin (1979: 6) finds that

social relations in precapitalist settings are invariably ‘moral’. . . . When villages are ‘closed’ or ‘corporate’ – that is, with limits on the ability of nonvillagers to own land or involve themselves in the internal affairs of the village-and particularly when there is property held in common by the village (communal land), it is assumed that such communities are more humane and protective than are open villages with private property and fewer restrictions on the ability of nonvillagers to involve themselves in the local economy.

The moral economy of *khankho*, in the sense of sharing, would have contributed to the sense of collectiveness in an economic situation. Moreover, the *changkhai* and other related social insurance systems would also help them to subsist in such times when they were hard-pressed.

Conclusion

Despite having resilient subsistence practices and other political adaptations to be able to withstand the ever-widening state control through military campaigns, why did the Kukis fail in their fight against the British colonial forces? If the forest, including wild animals, can supply foods, why did the Kukis go hungry at the end of the war? There will not be a single answer but a combination of factors in their subsistence system.

Historical and anthropological studies show that pure foragers were difficult to incorporate due to their mobility and total dependence on forest produce. By the time the Kukis fought a resistance war against the British, they were already half-foragers and half-cultivators who depended on crops grown by them through dry farming. Colonial ethnographies clearly show how the Kukis during that time were to an extent dependent on forest produce. However, their dependence on rice was already beyond measure. As Scott (2009: 185) argues, ‘Shifting cultivation (swiddening) affords less mobility than foraging but much more mobility than fixed-field farming’, dry rice cultivation in jhum field has only a semi-escape value. Despite the location of cultivation mostly far away from lowland states, it can be noticed more easily and confiscated and destroyed easier than other crops, compared to tubers. One of the reasons for the failure of the Kukis in their food supply was a strong dependence on rice.

As regards the social insurance system offered by the moral economy of *khankho*, when the whole village, and indeed the whole community in the entire Kuki hills is in search of *changkhai* and other leftover tubers, leafy wild vegetables and beans, such resources deplete in no time. The concept of ‘carrying capacity’ in scientific forestry

can be brought here to understand the situation. As much as land has carrying capacity to jhumming, the forest also has carrying capacity. Had only the Kuki fighters depended on the forest produce, they could fight through the second winter war. The forest could not supply the whole Kuki population for more than four months. In similar situation but different context in Vietnam, Popkin (1979: 6–7) observes: ‘These relationships and organizations work well enough, moral economists assume, so that before capitalism (or colonialism) individuals starved if and only if the entire community was endangered’. Scott (1976: 9) also made similar observation in the context of Southeast Asia: ‘While precapitalist society was singularly ill-equipped to provide for its members in the event of collective disaster, it did provide household social insurance against the “normal” risks of agriculture through an elaborate system of social exchange [*sic*]’. He also admitted: ‘Foraging for forest foods is the ultimate in unobtrusive subsistence; it leaves no trace except for the passage of the forager. But pure foraging is rarely sufficient’ (Scott 2009: 181). By the end of the war, it is reported that a ‘certain Kuki on that border are hard pressed for food, and mediating submission’. Many of the *pipas* gave up their fight as early as the beginning of the second winter war.¹³ The war ended with the surrender of Pache, the *pipa* of Haokip clan, in April 1919.

Notes

- 1 As much as many hill communities in northeast India trace their origin to Southeast Asia, their culture, economic life and livelihood have much similarity with their Southeast Asia counterparts.
- 2 Manipur State Archives, Imphal (hereinafter MSA), R-1/S-A/12, Tour Diary of J. C. Higgins, Officiating Political Agent in Manipur, October 1917.
- 3 British Library, London (hereinafter BL), AAC, IOR&PP, IOR/L/PS/10/724: 1917–1920, File No. P-5728/1918, ‘Plan of Operations Against the Kuki Rebels, September 1918’, GOC, Burma Division to Chief of Army Staff, Army Hqtrs., 5 September 1918.
- 4 Manipur Secretariat Library (MSL), Imphal, File No. 1, Cabin No. 1, Tour Diary of Mr. W. A. Cosgrave, Political Agent in Manipur, 30 May 1918.
- 5 MSA, R-1/S-A/12, Tour Diary of J. C. Higgins, Officiating Political Agent in Manipur, October 1917.
- 6 BL, AAC, IOR&PP, IOR/L/PS/10/724: 1917–1920, IOR/L/PS/10/724: 1917–1919, File No. 2686/1919: ‘Report on the Rebellion of the Kukis on the Upper Chindwin Frontier and the operations connected therewith’ by J. B. Marshall, DC, Upper Chindwin District.
- 7 Political Agent of Manipur letter to Parker on 27/30 November, cited in Haokip (2017: 34).
- 8 BL, AAC, IOR&PP, IOR/L/MIL/17/19/42 (1919): Henry Keary, G.O.I., Burma Division, to Chief of General Staff, Army Headquarters, India, Shimla in June 1919.
- 9 Tour Diary of W. A. Cosgrave, Political Agent in Manipur, for the month of March 1918, Manipur State Archives, R-1/S-A/12.
- 10 Lived experience is basically the ‘human experiences, choices, and options and how those factors influence one’s perception of knowledge’ (Given 2008: 489).
- 11 *Documents of the Anglo-Kuki War 1917–1919*, edited by D. L. Haokip, 2017, p. 36: J. C. Higgins Letter to Parker, 4 January 1918.

- 12 Changeo is a fixed annual payment of a basket full of paddy to the chief.
 13 'Pipa' in traditional Kuki society refers to the head of the clan in the lineage, whose word is generally obeyed by the younger brothers and their descendants.

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