

Belief in Malevolent Spirit “Inn-Kaose” in Traditional Religious System of Chin-Kuki: A Descriptive Analysis

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Abstract: Belief in the existence of evil or malevolent spirits has been a commonplace feature of the religious belief systems of almost all known tribal societies. Though such a ‘belief’ remains a mystery, for it is not amenable to scientific, empirical explanation, it nevertheless constitutes an important feature of the religious belief system of such societies. In this paper, attempts have been made to provide a detail account of such a belief in evil or malevolent spirits amongst the ethnic Chin-Kuki groups of Manipur. To this end, specific focus has been given to the belief in a particular malevolent spirit known as *Inn-Kaose* in local parlance which is believed to be capable of causing human suffering, misery, and misfortunes. Based on in-depth interviews, the paper seeks to delineate the pervasiveness of the belief in *Inn-Kaose* and how it plays a pivotal practical role in structuring socio-cultural life of the community. It also brings out to the fore the different oral-traditions that explained the origin and evolution of the *Inn-Kaose/Lhagao-Boh* evil spirits.

Keywords: Malevolent Spirit, Inn-Kaose, Chin-Kuki,

Introduction

Prior to the advent of Christianity, the religious world view of the hill tribes of Northeast India had been under the grasp of mythical

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attitudes, beliefs and practices. Each of these hill tribes has its own belief in the existence of both malevolent and benevolent spirits. The belief provides an explanation of human suffering and misfortune as well as that of prosperity and good fortune. Prime attention has been paid to the malevolent spirits as they require constant appeasement to pre-empt any misfortune flowing from their wrath. As per the belief, a failure to satiate the malevolent spirits result in adverse consequences to a person's health, wealth and even endangering the wellbeing of his posterity. Little attention, however, is being given to the benevolent spirits as they are concern with the overall wellbeing of the people.

Among the Thadou and their cognate ethnic Chin-Kuki groups too, a belief in the existence of an evil or malevolent spirit is pervasive. The evil spirit is known as *Kaose* in local parlance. They are known variously as *Khawhring* among the Mizos; *Hnam* among the Hakas; *Ahimaw* among the Maras of Mizoram.¹ Though, in slightly different form, such a belief system has a corresponding presence among the Tangkhuls, Aos, and Khasis. Among the Ao Nagas, there is a notion of the continuation of tiger descendants *keyi tanula*.² The Khasis have a similar belief in the existence of a spirit that can manifests in the form of *Nong-ai-ksuid U-Thlen*³ in their community.

Oral Tradition with regard to the origin and evolution of *Inn-Kaose*

There exist three main versions in Chin-Kuki tradition, which account for the origin and evolution of *Kaose*. As per oral tradition with regard to the migration of the Chin-Kuki group from the mythical settlement *Khul*, a mythical cave to which the progenitors of the present Chin-Kuki tribes are said to have originated, oral tradition has it that when the Chin-Kuki groups migrated from *Khul Pu Chongthu* and his kith and kin were said to have been constantly tormented by certain inexplicable spirits believed to have been rooted in the surrounding environment. During such time, a customary meat-share - *sa-chan*, meant for a common feast on the occasion of the marriage of Pu Chongthu's eldest son Thangpi with Seichin, the daughter of Vanlai village. Santhu, a man who is said to have been possessed with such malevolent spirit, was caught red handed in his

attempt to steal the meat-share. In a fit of rage Pu Chongthu cut-off his head. However the dead corpse was brought alive by a floral based reptile *chilchitenupa*, later transforming him into a wild gibbon *guldu*. Legend has it that from such tragic episode, there evolved a ritual activity called *mapi-thoina*,⁴ a rite being performed to heal any wounds caused by any sharpened implements. A decree was issued prohibiting the consumption of the cursed wild animal *gibbon*. However, in the preceding years it is asserted that the subsequent generations of the migratory ethnic groups broke the decree and consumed the gibbon–meat in the course of their journey. Those individuals who committed such heinous offence against the advice of their forefathers were said to have been infected with the dreaded evil spirits having the capability to cause harm to the flesh and souls of other normal human beings.

The second version has that when the Chin-Kuki people began their next phase of migration, they encounter a mithun which can speak, known as *Siel Paothei*⁵ in local parlance, at Falam Hills, presently located at Myanmar. Many of the tribesmen felt that this mithun had already been cursed by the evil spirits of the jungle *gammangte leh gamgilte*. This led to a decree cautioning the people against any consumption of such an evil possessed animal. However, going against the decree, a mithun was surreptitiously killed by the clans of Kipgen and Chongloi – two prominent clans of the Thadou-Kuki tribe. After consuming the flesh, mischievous spirit from the dark world began to reside inside their body, apart from controlling their minds and enslaving their souls. Inter-marriage among the people subsequently led to the increase in the number of people infected with nemesis of such unseen evil spirits.

The final version traced the origin to the repercussions of the curse upon an unfortunate moving band of tribesmen at Falam Hills by Pi Nemneh, an old matriarch who missed the opportunity to cross over the last exit point of *Khul Lamkha*.⁶ In Lushai version, this firstly emerged from a woman having had a contact with the fats of an evil possessed wild boar and later transmitting to a person who subsequently came into contact with her in myriad forms; in the form of hand shake, sharing the same dress and cane basket.⁷

***Inn-Kaose* and their characteristics**

The Chin-Kukis believe that the evil spirits of *Inn-Kaose* had an evil eye or lust for food and drinks. In other words, these spirits bewitched food and drinks. At unearthly hours, the spirit of a possessed individual may leave the physical body (where they reside) and crawls like a snake in the form of fire-glow or a wild dog, searching for an easy prey. In case of accidental encounter with larger foes leading to the heavy injuries, the spirit may later fail to re-enter the flesh, leading to the death of such person. Usually, *Inn-Kaose* vent their wrath upon others out of lustfulness *ngaichatna*, and covetousness *thangthipna*.⁸ One cannot eat and drink alone in front of possessed people without inviting them or else greater misfortunes like stomach ache, vomiting, hysteria and amnesia could befall him or her. Another usual practice is to keep aside a certain portion of food to evil spirits before eating and drinking to pacify the covetousness of their desires.⁹ This practice is usually done to satiate the lust of the evil spirits and thereby avoiding their wrath. If someone, to his misfortune, comes under the possession of such evil spirit, the killing of that person has a social sanction. Within the society, there existed an intense aversion to an individual or family who are known to possess such evil spirits. They are usually subjected to social ostracisation. They are usually avoided as marriage partners. This practice can be attributed to the belief that the *Inn-Kaose* spirit is contagious and hereditary. Putting differently, the commonly held belief is that the cursed spirits of the individual *lhagaoboh-hina* goes along the veins of their blood and could pollute one's family line for generations.¹⁰ In the past, young maiden were strictly instructed to maintain their combs separately due to the fear that sharing of such a comb can make one vulnerable to being possessed by the *Inn-Kaose* evil spirit. The usual approach towards them is to maintain distance from them and avoid provoking their wrath.

The *Inn-Kaose* evil spirits are said to feast upon the mortal body of the unfortunate victim during a pre-burial ceremony when it was rested inside the portico of a house in olden days. At that instance, they were invisible to a naked human eye however one can observe their behaviour by using the bones of a completely natural black coloured cat *apumpi'a vomlheng mengcha gu*.¹¹

In modern medical terminology, epilepsy disease has the nearest resemblance with a person who has the misfortune of being possessed by such evil spirits. When a person gets possessed, the physical body of the victim along with perpetrators lays in coma, saliva emitting out from mouth and remains unconscious state for prolonged hours.¹² In such situation, it is believed that the mischievous spirit torments and preys upon unfortunate victim, devouring the vital organs of the victims such as the heart and the lung. Distance is not a matter for the ferocious spirit to unleash vengeance act as it can traverse against time and space in the atmospheric zones. There is a saying in Thadou *gun gal in akhen louleh kaose ten mithusei aja thei ji uve*, meaning “the physical ears and minds of the accursed person do have the innate strength to hear one’s accusation if their locations are not separated by a stream or a rivulet.” Another manifestation of the *Inn-Kaose* evil spirit is that a possessed young maiden could exhibit dramatic enhancement of her physical appeal to attract a larger pool of potential suitors for marriage. She controls the passive mind of a soft hearted man and later traps him in her labyrinth for romantic affairs. Within the *Inn-Kaose* family members, there is also a notion that the third son or daughter stays immune from being possessed by the family’s evil spirits.

Certain religious rituals were launched to propitiate them so as to contain the menace in secret exclusive spots as exposure of the real culprits in larger scale would bring bad reputation to the family of such possessed spirits. Unfortunately, failing to lure them into such simple appeasement policy may invite harsher counter-destructive mission when victim’s family swears to performs a most dread the *Khengsumlhah* rite. The term *Khengsumlhah* technically means the striking of a particular object by a special tree called *Khengshum* and expecting a positive outcome at the end. This propitiation is accorded the highest status as it may be carried out after finding that a simple propitiation failed to pacify the wrath of the perpetrators. If a successful assignment is carried out, it is said that it would have direct impact on the physical body of the tormentor, and finally an invitation to death. On the other hand, failing to achieve the specified task could usher greater fatal consequence on the victim’s body. Hence, this has to be done with much precaution and given

utmost care after weighting the pros and cons of the outcome. Here, terracotta or bee wax image of a human figure is being put inside a hole along with household eatables like chilly, oil, maize, rice, wine, intestines etc. Holding the *Khengsum* tree grinder, the priest starts to hypnotise the wild evil spirits with the following incantation words as:

*Kaose hungdohna Selpao, Selpao sane Kipgen leh Chongloi,
Kipgente cha kaopoh, Chongloite cha kaopoh,
Kaodip mompin lhan, Kaolai hehpi lhan,
Kaogu chip in lhan, Kaochang chip in lhan,
Kaonu lhan, Kaopan lhan.*¹³

Translation:

An Evil spirit from a speaking mithun, consumed by Kipgen
and Chongloi,
Offspring of Kipgen and Chongloi which has evil spirits,
Free from the clutches of their web and lock,
Sanctify thyself from the cursed bones and limbs,
O Male-Female evil spirits, you may release this person
immediately.

At the first phase, suspected names and lineage of the different clans of the Chin-Kuki were invoked and if necessity arises, they could still keep on mentioning the neighbouring communities like the Meiteis, Tangkhuls, Karen, Mikir, etc. Any insect or a reptile which intruded into the specified ritual hole has to be grinded into pieces by the helper of a priest. The general notion is that the spirits of an accused evil spirit comes in the form of insects, thereby meeting his or her last fate as a permanent death to the tormentor's physical body. If none of the insects or reptiles show up at the sanctified hole, the image is buried in that hole, assuring that both the victim and the alleged perpetrator have to die instantly in such a compelling situation. In case the victim's family wishes to counter in a lesser drastic way, they used to perform *Sagujuon-kithoina* and *Sa-phephou*; a simplistic rituals for a mere appeasement, rather than

causing fatal injury to the spirit and flesh of the alleged person. Here, different food items ranging from hot to sour elements along with the dead carcass of a fully black fowl are placed on the top of a pillar where no one can disturb it or glimpse the sacrificial items from the ground. In order to cast-off and appease the spirits, the village priest *khosung thempu* starts to propitiate the following ritualistic archaic words as:

*Kaose hungdohna Selpao, Selpao sane Kipgen leh Chongloi,
Kipgente cha kaopuoh, Chongloite cha kaopuoh,
Kaodip mompin lhan, Kaolai hehpi lhan,
Kaogu chip in lhan, Kaochang chip in lhan,
Kaonu lhan, Kaopan lhan.¹⁴
Insah a dahte, inhang a dahte,
Intom a dahte, inmai'a dahte,
Lamlhah a dah te, Khomuol a dahte, Najuon a kimtai.
Na sunkim man, nalhang kai man (sun ahileh),
Nasunglhum man, na jankim man akichehtai (jan ahileh)*

Translation:

An Evil spirit from a speaking mithun, consumed by Kipgen
and Chongloi,
Offspring of Kipgen and Chongloi which has evil spirits,
Free from the clutches of their web and lock,
Sanctify thyself from the cursed bones and limbs,
O Male-Female evil spirit, you release this person immediately.
Dwellers of house portico and house courtyard
Settlers of backyard and front-door,
Occupiers of village path and entrance, Thou wishes are
fulfilled by now.
Thy patience over the whole day till dusk (in case of day),
Thy perseverance during dark till dawn has been repaid by now
(in case of night).

The above mentioned rites were meant to tame and hypnotise the

vengeance and venomous fangs as it is feared that untimely intervention would have caused untold miseries to the unfortunate victims. Lastly but not the least, a last option to crush such threats called *thoulen-kikhum*¹⁵ may be initiated for speedy and concrete outcome of one's action.

Contemporary Approach to the belief in the existence of the *Inn-Kaose* Spirit

Since the later part of 19th Century, the advent of Christianity among the Chin-Kuki people, as a consequence of British colonisation, ushered large-scale changes in the socio-cultural life of the people. However, one can admit that the newly introduced faith failed to eradicate peoples' belief in the existence of the *Inn-Kaose* evil spirits. Newly introduced Christian concept of cleansing a believer's body and soul with the blood of Christ is vehemently countered by some knowledgeable old-aged persons, claiming the permanence of the evil spirits of *Inn-Kaose*. However, they do not dare to encroach beyond the authority to judge the salvation of their soul.¹⁶

Based on my personal interactions with few families who at one point of time had been victims of the wrath of the evil spirits of *Inn-Kaose*, I find that certain social practices continue to remain influenced by the belief systems associated with the *Inn-Kaose* spirits. Several of them continue to cling onto the cultural practice of matrilateral cross cousin marriage (marriage of a man with his mother's brother's daughter) known as *pute-chanu kijuon*.¹⁷ It remains a commonplace practice among them as they are not ready to take any chances of inadvertently or accidentally marrying someone who is possessed with the evil spirits of *Inn-Kaose*. Besides there is an overwhelming belief among them that people possessed with such evil spirits cannot enter the celestial heaven (biblical concept) and eternity of peace their after-life.¹⁸ Aversion to such people possessed by evil spirits of *Inn-Kaose* remains observable in several walks of social life: choice of marriage partners, communal feasting, and inter-clan interactions. These glaring discriminations engendered by such belief systems remains outside the purview of intellectual discourse within the community. Adherence to such practices are however

common among the more traditional families.

Among the more educated and liberal lots, such discriminatory practices are on the wane. Rather than to Christianity, such changes in people's belief towards *Inn-Kaose* evil spirits can be attributed more to the advancement of science and technology and liberal education. The educated lot and the intelligentsia have become more cynical of such belief systems that has no empirical basis. They would rather dismissed it as mere folk-tales *tounthu*, legendary tale *khanglui thusim* and primitive beliefs of the past ancestors *pu leh pate khanglui tahsan*. For the present younger generation factors like material possessions and HIV/AIDS matter more in determining one's choice for marriage partners.

Conclusion

The Chin-Kuki tradition of believing in the existence of home based evil spirit indeed emerged in the form of a myth, folklore and legends of the past ancestors and later accepted to be a reality, which still prevails in the present society. Despite being not amenable to any empirical investigation, the pervasiveness of the belief in the existence of such evil spirits is unmistakable. The general belief is that their existence is well beyond the understanding of mortal human beings. Even in rare cases where someone accuses another of being possessed by an *Inn-Kaose* evil spirit, the accuser always turns out to be a loser for want of evidence. Even traditional tribal adjudication system has never been known to affirm the existence of such an evil spirit. The issue has relevance only in one's personal domain but becomes a taboo in public. And with forces of modernity gaining momentum and having increasing control over people's lives, the belief in the existence of *Inn-Kaose* evil spirits and its concomitant discriminatory socio-cultural practices are likely to fade away in future.

Endnotes

1. Personal interaction with some elders of Lakher (Mara) and Mizo community confirms that it did exist in the erstwhile Lushai Hills and such families were socially boycotted. However, the mass scale conversion into Christianity

has melted down such beliefs. From their source, it is noteworthy that these evil possessed persons no longer settle at their present settlement areas, but are still largely found among their kinsmen in Myanmar.

2. Ajungchang Jamir admitted that the descendants of a particular village where tiger family do still survive in his ancestral village as a normal human being. There is a commonly accepted notion that by early dawn, their spirits leave behind the physical body and later transform into tiger, preying on animals in the nearby forested areas. In case of accidental misplacement of the dormant physical body, the spirit may sometimes fail to enter the physical body, which could result in a mortal death of such person.

3. A ritual term given to the worship of a mythical snake by propitiating with the bloods of human beings and animals and this concept is said to be still in practice in the villages of Sohra in Meghalaya. Reference, see www.wiki.indianfolklore.org and <http://hmmohrmen.blogspot.com/2011/07/khasi-pnarbeliefs>.

4. Tarun Goswami, *Kuki Life and Lore*, Haflong, North Cachar Hills District Council, 1985. This Oral version is supported by Pu Semkhosei Haokip Aged, 90 of Mongbung Village.

5. The oral version is based on the narration of Pu Pauzathang, Old Samtal, Chandel, Aged 89.

6. Oral version of Pi Phahat, Aged 85 of Ukhurul Phunchong village.

7. J. Shakespear, *The Lushei Kuki Clans*, p.112.

8. The concept of covetousness of the evil is based on the interpretations of Paul Ricoeur in his *The*

Symbolism of Evil, translated by Emerson Buchanan (Harper & Row, New York, 1967), p. 27.

9. Singkhawkhai, *Zo People and their Culture*, pp.139-140.

10. According to the eye witness version of Pu Pauzathang, a post – harvest festival was conducted at the chief’s courtyard ‘Inpite-Leitol’ of Aihang village, Chandel District, Manipur. During the ceremonial dancing session, a bubble of saliva was seen coming out from a beautiful maiden and instantly, a bead or necklace ‘Khibaa’ fell from her neck. In a minute, she was proclaimed dead. Later investigation revealed that that woman is accused with the said evil spirit and caught redhanded while tormenting her neighbouring villager on petty issues. The victim’s relative is said to have cut their son’s neck in real act, which resulted in the death of both the victim and the accused lady.

11. Lawmsanga, *A Critical Study on Christian Mission with Special Reference to Presbyterian Church of Mizoram* (Unpublished Ph.D dissertation, Univer-

sity of Birmingham, 2010).

12. In my interaction with Pi (L) Hemlam Lhungdim, she affirmed to me that this difficult task of detecting the non-visible spirits was one of the rarest of the rare cases as the bones of cat has the hidden quality of fetish components; and it can also be instrumental in achieving other mischievous activities like – robbery, stealing etc. as the holder of such black art is said to be immune from other forces.

13. Letkhojam Haokip, *Thempu ho Thu: The Life and Lore of Priests*, (Self Publication, Churachandpur, 2000), p. 22.

14. *ibid*, Letkhojam Haokip. The ritual propitiation words were once experimented by Pu Jamthong Aged 87 of Boljang village. He was once an assistant to a village tribal priest for the successful completion of propitiating the curses of both village and jungle evil spirits in 'a lhagaoboh leh gam kao thoidamna.

15. Here a fishing net or mosquito net is widely used as trap to cover up the physical body of the victim and an inhumane thrashing is being given so as to let the tormentors to speak out the reasons why he or she is being harassed inhumanely from time to time. There goes a belief that during the thrashing, the physical body of the said victim is totally immune from pain and instead the agony goes to the perpetrator of such evil design. In this regard, I have had a childhood memory when a drunkard married man (L) Tongkam went on initiating such measure against her ailing wife of epileptic disease, fearing that such evil spirits might have possessed her. So, this premeditated action is given utmost care so that greater consequences might have taken place in the physical body of the alleged victim.

16. A Church based Evangelist on condition of anonymity confessed that he indeed belongs to the lineage of *Inn-Kaose*. He shared that if his spiritual life backslides in worldly affairs the indebted evil spirit resurfaces again and runs along his veins of blood. In case of resurgence in his spiritual and moral life the accursed evil spirit used to leave him for a temporary moment. He lamented that the inheritance of such spirits, passing down from generation to generation was neither a free will nor by choice but a compelling bad omen that befallen an individual or a family.

17. Most of the Chin-Kuki men do follow a tradition of marrying the daughter of his mother's brother although recent medical scientific study finds that an inter-marriage of close blood relationship is not feasible for the well-beings of the newly born offsprings. In the words of Pu Haomang, maintaining a 'pure blood lineage' was once a serious issue and in order to avert from the accidental

nuptial knot with unknown family, the tradition of marrying maternal uncle's daughter, *pute-chanu kipui*, was commonly put into practice and remains a practice to date.

18. Pu (L) Jangsei recounted a revivalist crusade of a Baptist Church had taken place way back in 1970s at Ukhurul District of Manipur. The campers were said to have been fully drenched with holy spirits and their souls ascend to heaven, experiencing the glimpse of a celestial heaven during their mass prayer. However, few selected individuals were totally immune to the gifts of a holy spirits and thus, their souls failed to reach the said destiny as the guardian angels of the gate forbade them to enter as they have been possessed by curses of dark angels. Later, investigation reveals that they were the lineages of *in-kaose* family.

List of Interviewees

1. Tlualaisa Hlyccho, Saiha, Mizoram, interviewed on 25 June 2011.
2. Ajung Chang Jamir of Mangkonglemba Village, Mokokchung, Nagaland, interviewed on 22 August, 2004.
3. Semkhosei Haokip, aged 90 of Churachandpur Mongbung Village, interviewed on 23 June 2010.
4. Mrs. (L) Hemlam Lhungdim, aged 89 of Churachandpur Mongbung Village, interviewed on 25 June, 2010.
5. Hemkhai Guite of Lamzang Village, Churachandpur, interviewed on 28 May 2008.
6. M. Haomang Haokip aged 85 of Churachandpur Mongbung Village, interviewed on 15 August, 2010.
7. Mrs. Phahat aged 85 of Sangaikot Mateijang Village, interviewed on 22 May 2010.
8. Pauzathang Haokip, aged 89 of Old Samtal Village, Chandel District 25 June 2009.
9. Jamthong Haokip, aged 87 of Boljang Village, Ukhurul District on 25 May 2007.

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