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Kuki Churches Unification Movements

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The coming of Christianity among the Kukis is now more than a century. Centenary of the gospel among the Baptists was celebrated in March 1996 with a theme "Christ the Hope of the Ages" and the Evangelical Presbyterians in 2010 with "Power of the Gospel" as a theme respectively. Within the twentieth century almost the entire population had been swept by Christianity and now Christians constitute more than 90 percent of the total population. This essay discusses the advent of Christianity among the Kukis and analyse the attempts made by church leaders to unify Kuki churches. It also made an enquiry into the reasons for the failure of such attempts to church unification and its implication on Kuki society.

Keywords: Kuki Church, Church Unification, Ecumenical Movement, Church division

Advent of Christianity

Christianity was brought among the Kukis by two main Christian missions, the Baptist and the Presbyterian. The first Kuki convert to Christianity in the then Naga Hills was Ngulhao Thomsong, who was baptised by William Pettigrew on January 20, 1908. In the Mikir Hills (Karbi Anglong) of Assam, Baptist missions first came and the churches were known as Kuki Baptist churches. Similarly, in Tripura and Burma, Christianity among the Kukis was brought in by the Baptist missions. In North Cachar Hills and Lushai Hills of Assam, Presbyterian missions first set in their foot and the churches in the Kuki areas were known as Ngalsong Presbytery. The Kuki Christians in Naga Hills formed the Kuki Christian Association in 1926. They have 200 baptised members in 1936, 700 in 1950 and 807 in 1953 (Hangsing 2010: 27). Christianity brought to them not only a life of spiritual salvation but also an end to the old ways of living; their outlook to life and lifestyle was transformed (Vaiphei, 1995).

William Pettigrew[1] was the first missionary to enter the soil of Manipur on February 6, 1894, sponsored by the American Baptist Mission Union. He first worked as a missionary in Dhaka under the Arthington Aborigenes Mission. Later he was forced to resign from the Arthington Aborigenes Mission and joined the Baptist church at Sibsagar in **1896** (Solo & Mahangthei 1986: vii-viii). While in Cachar he met some Manipuris and learnt their language with the hope of serving in Manipur. He was repeatedly denied

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entry into Manipur as the British power had not been fully established. When this was done Pettigrew got permission and he began his journey to Imphal and arrived on January 6, 1894 (Downs 1971: 76). He was granted permission by the acting political agent, Mr. A Portious, to open two Lower Primary schools at Moirangkhom and Thangmeiband, where the latter was renamed after him as Pettigrew School. He also established two other Upper Primary Schools at Terakeithel and Singjamei. Believing that his missionary call was among the Meiteis, Pettigrew soon began his proselytising activities among them in the two Lower Primary Schools (Dena, 2010). This provoked resentment among the Vaishnavite Hindu Meiteis. As the Government of India recognised their responsibility of governing Manipur state until the minor king could come of age, hence the propagation of Christianity among his Hindu subjects was not allowed. The Meiteis succeeded in persuading the Political Agent to discontinue his work. As a result, after six months Pettigrew had to search for a suitable place. From December 1894 till December 1895, Pettigrew searched suitable location for his new mission and finally left for Ukhrul to continue his works. While Downs records the first Kuki converts to Christianity were students of William Pettigrew's mission school, who were baptised in 1901 (Downs 1992: 85), KBC history records the first two Kuki Baptists converts as Nehseh Chongloi of Makui and Ngulhao Thomsong of the then Naga Hills. Both came to Manipur in 1910 to assist the mission work at Ukhrul centre. In 1912 Pettigrew's students - Teba Kilong, Longkhobel Kilong, Seilut Singson, Jamkithang Sitlhou, Tongngul Gangte followed by Helkhup and Pakho Sitlhou were baptised at Ukhrul (KBC 1987: 3).

In the following years, other Kuki students were converted and baptised by UM Fox. Fox also wanted to baptise the Christians of Tujangwaichong village, which was largely the product of Ngulhao Thomsong's dedicated work. While on his way from Imphal to Kohima for Furlough, Fox asked them to meet him at Karong as he was unable to reach the village. The villagers came accordingly, who were accompanied by their chief Songjapao Kipgen. He baptised 26 of them, including the chief, on December 12, 1914, at Karong river. On the same day, UM Fox declared the establishment of the Tujangwaichong Baptist Church and nominated T Lhingkhosei Kipgen and Let'am Kipgen as church pastor and deacon respectively. Thus, Tujangwaichong Baptist Church became the second Baptist church in Manipur, after Phungyo Baptist Church in 1902, and the first among the Kukis (Haokip, 2009a).

On the recommendation of the reference committee of the American Baptist Mission Society Dr. Galen Greenfield Crozier[2] and his wife were transferred to Kangpokpi from Garo Hills, during the height Kuki Uprising (1917-19), to meet the medical needs of the suffering masses in this area. They started the first missionary dispensary and leprosy asylum at the new mission station of Kangpokpi on November 17, 1919. Thus, Dr. Crozier worked together with William Petrigrew in the North and the Northeast of Manipur. This opening of mission headquarters at Kangpokpi was responsible for the enormous growth in the number of converts from the adjoining villages. However, the great growth of the Kuki churches actually began late in the 1940s and by 1945 there were 3,000 baptised believers (Vaiphei 1981: 56).

"But personal antagonism - in part theological - led them to divide Manipur into two spheres of influence" (Downs 1971: 158). William Pettigrew was assigned to

work in the Northeast of Manipur (Ukhrul) and Sadar Hills (North of Imphal up to Nagaland border), and Crozier, that of the dispensary and North West of Manipur, i.e. Tamenglong (Dena 1988: 41). Although Corzier was assigned to intenerate among the Zeliangrong Nagas, he had little or no direct contact with the people, because he devoted most of the time with the Kukis (Dena 1988: 102).

In South Manipur, the Kuki chief of Senvon invited Watkin Roberts of the Welsh Presbyterian Mission of Aijal (Aizawl) to do mission work. He came and formed the Indo-Burma Thadou-Kuki Pioneer Mission in 1913. Later, there was a need to change the name of Thadou-Kuki Pioneer Mission, as it reflects only the people of South Manipur. Thus, to better suit the work of the Mission and the areas it cover Watkin Roberts formed the North East India Genreal Mission in 1924 with its headquarters at Lakhimpur (Vaiphei 2010: 8). Later, under the division of NEIGM, according to languages, the people who still prefer Kuki were grouped under Kuki Christian Association (KCA).

Intra and inter-mission rivalry were common among the missions in Manipur. South West was originally the sphere of Pettigrew and the encroachment by Watkin Roberts was objected by Pettigrew. In one of these tensions in 1923, Rev. Pettigrew, who was in charge of the Aboriginese mission, complained to the Political Agent in Manipur about the workers of the Thadou-Kuki Pioneer Mission were proselytising outside the allotted area, in parts of the hills where the American Baptist Mission had converts. There were also verbal fisticuffs between Watkin Roberts and Dr. Crozier – between the Welsh mission and the Baptist mission, (Dena 1988: 58). Even between the William Pettigrew and Dr. Crozier there was intra-mission rivalry as it is evident from the words of Frederick Downs: "This was not helped by personal antagonism between the two Baptist missionaries working in Manipur – one working among the Nagas (Pettigrew) and the other among the Kukis (Crozier)" (Downs 1971: 111). Frederick Dawns speaks of tension between Pettigrew and Crozier, as well as "party spirit" within the churches, and with the Second World War (1939-45), "tribalism" emerged as an important factor in the life of the Manipur Church (Downs 1971: 158). It can even be assumed that on each policy of the British against the Kukis or Nagas, Dr. Crozier and William Pettigrew might have sided on the respective people they are working with. Crozier resigned in 1932 and his work was continued by John Anderson basing himself in Kangpokpi. With the growing number of believers and churches the Manipur Christian Association was formed in November 1916 to look after the churches. The Manipur Christian Association was later rechristened as Manipur Baptist Convention (MBC) in 1928 and it exist till today as an apex body of Baptist churches in Manipur.

One significant development was that the Kuki Christians who attended the mission school at Ukhrul volunteered themselves to transmit the new message to their own people scattered all over the state. From 1914 onwards, both the voluntary workers and paid mission workers traveled in all parts proclaiming the truth, Teba, head clerk, Longkhobel, second clerk, Sheijalut, third clerk in the sub-divisional office at Ukhrul and Ngulhao, an influential Thadou-Kuki, trained and taught at mission schools, were among others the pioneer workers who spearheaded the new mission movement among the Kukis and Anals (Petrigrew 1922: 13). Frederick S. Downs suggested that the failure of the Kuki Rebellion of 1917-19 led to large numbers of Kukis beginning to turn to

Christianity for the first time (Downs 1971: 168-169).

The early Kuki converts to Christianity were instrumental in spreading the gospel among the Kabuis. The first Kabui Christian convert was Namrijinnang of Bakau village who received baptism in December 1914. After having long conversations with two of the early Kuki convert from Ukhrul school, Teba and Longkhobel, he decided to become Christian. On December 6, 1914 they were baptised by UM Fox at Imphal.[3] Till the early 1980s where ethnic consciousness was not at its height among the people, the Kabuis sang various *Lenkhom la* of the Kuki *Lathahbu* in religious gatherings. The political and ethnic situation in Chandel district of Manipur would have been different had the early Kuki converts focus their mission on this district rather than the then British Tamenglong subdivision of Manipur.

Brief History of Church

The history of church is the history of division. There are more than a thousand faith groups professing diverse and conflicting beliefs in many parts of the world today. It is an irony that Christianity is severely divided based on faith and this division has led to the formation and existence of different denominations.

Even during the formative years of Christianity, the early church was already divided into Gnostic, Jewish, and Pauline Christianity. Following the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD and the break-up of Jewish Christian movement, Pauline and Gnostic Christianity were left as the leading groups. The Roman Empire recognised Pauline Christianity as a valid religion in 313 AD. Later in that century, it became the official religion of the Empire, and during the following 1000 years, Catholics were the only people recognised as Christians.

In 1054 AD, a formal split occurred between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. This division remains in effect till today. The 1054 split, also known as the Great East-West Schism marks an important date in the history of all Christian denominations because it designates the very first major division in Christianity and the beginning of "denominations".[4] The next major division occurred in the sixteenth century when reformation was ignited by Martin Luther when he posted his 95 Theses in 1517. More divisions took place and more denominations formed later on. Given that there was deep division in the missionary churches based on distinct denominations in the west, the late Christians in the Asian and African societies were already divided since the advent of Christianity.

There are also divisions of church based on race in the later days Christianity. Race was a source of the Methodist church's split in 1844, and reorganising required reopening the question of race in a new era. Here discourses of doctrine, theology, nation, and race came together in complicated ways. The deliberations of the Joint Commission on Unification of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in a series of meetings held between 1916 and 1920, reveal that social concerns about race held sway over doctrinal and theological ones, but that those social concerns had to be "explained in terms of some kind of acceptable Christian discourse" (Davis, 2008: 128).

Although known for its ecclesial divisions the Protestant Church in the Nether-

lands unified in 2004. Such unification was the result of untiring efforts of the church leaders spanning about forty three years. In 1961, a group of 18 pastors of the Netherlands Reformed Church and the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands issued an urgent appeal to end the long-lasting separation between the two churches and strive toward reunification.[5] Finally the organic unification of three protestant churches took place on May 1, 2004.

Ecumenical Movement

The beginning of the ecumenical movement can be traced to the first World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh which was held from June 14-23, 1910. The conference was inspired by the watchword of the Student Volunteer Movement for Mission calling for the "Evangelisation of the World in this Generation" without divisive doctrinal issues.

The word *ecumenism* is derived from the Greek word *ï0êïõìÝíç* (oikoumene), which means "the whole inhabited world" which appears in the New Testament (Matthew 24:14) to mean the entire world. The term *ecumenism* refers to all of activities and initiatives aimed at promoting mutual understanding and, eventually, unity among all Christian denominations and churches separated by doctrine, history and practice. Within this particular context, *ecumenism* refers to the idea of a single Christian Church. The first and foremost aim of Ecumenical Movement is to reestablish the unity of the church in response to the prayer of Jesus Christ "that they may all be one." Ecumenism as the praxis of dialogue between Christians and churches divided in matters of Faith and Order aims at full and visible communion through renewal, conversion and reconciliation (Raiser, 1999). Thus, the greatest aim of ecumenical movement is the reconciliation of the various denominations by overcoming the historical divisions within Christianity.

Church Unification Movements among the Kukis: 1943-92

The Kukis were the first to form their own church association with the initial name Kuki Christian Organisation (Downs 1971: 175) in 1943. In 1947 problem erupted between the Kukis and Nagas in North Western Baptist Association leading to a split between them as the Standing Committee of the Association and even the missionaries could not settle in the succeeding three years. Thus, the Kuki Baptist leaders met at Tujangwaichong Baptist Church in 1949 and decided to form a separate Kuki association (MBC 1996: 49). In 1950 the Kuki Christian Association (KCA) was established at South Changoubung with its office at Motbung. With the reorganisation of Manipur Baptist Convention in 1955, KCA was renamed again as Kuki Baptist Association (KBA), recognised by Council of Baptist Churches in North East India (CBCNEI) and Manipur Baptist Convention as MBA No. 5. In that same year, the Kuki churches in the North East of Manipur formed the North East Kuki Baptist Association, Manipur (NEKBAM) and was recognised by Manipur Baptist Convention as MBA No. 6.

The first effort towards church unification can be seen in the North and North East of Manipur. The Kuki Baptist Convention (KBC) was formed at Tujangwaichong on March 16, 1958 with the amalgamation of KBA and NEKBAM with its headquarters at Motbung and a Bible School at Phaicham Centre.[6] KBC was recognised as a linguistic

convention (KBC 1987: 11-12) with Tongkhojang Lunkim as its first Executive Secretary.

In March 1959, seven delegates representing all the Kuki inhabited areas of Manipur met at Kaithelmanbi military village to search the reasons for the disintegration of the Kuki Christian churches and to prevent further disintegration before unification. Resolution No.1 of the conference underscores the need felt by the delegates to form a Christian literature organisation of the commonly spoken language. In May 15-16, 1959, two delegates each from all associations met at Molnom village to discuss the matter further. At the Molnom Conference a federal organisation of the Kuki Christians called "Kuki National Christian Council" was formed comprising of all the then existing Kuki Christian associations. The council comprised of three committees: Kuki National Christian Council Literature Committee, Inter-denominational Committee and Church Union Planning Committee. Tongkhojang Lunkim was elected as the president and Khupjapao Singson as secretary of the council.

The delegates met again in August 1959, at Molvom village in the then Naga Hills where the council's name was rechristened as "Kukis Christian Council". Tongkhojang Lunkim and Seikholet Singson were given the charge of drafting the constitution of the council. At this juncture the Welsh and American missionaries, while hearing about the proposed unification of churches, said that if such Christian association is to emerge they have no work to do and must leave the mission works. Due to sympathy towards the American and Welsh missionaries the proposed unification movements was postponed indefinitely.

Nevertheless, the leaders of the unification movement revived the works again in the late 1970s. All church leaders were invited for the 16th Conference of KCC at Nomjang, North Cachar Hills, Assam in April 1977. At this conference, a resolution (No.11) was passed underlining the need to transform the "Council" into "Church". However, the churches at that time had already been fully established based on doctrine, language and clan affinity. So, even though the conference was attended by most leaders, the various associational divide was strong enough that upholding ones own doctrines and viewpoint override the move for unification. On April 8, 1979 in the 18th KCC conference at Chalwa, the federal council was transformed in to a "Church" and some groups started taking Kuki Christian Council as "disappeared", although it continues to be in existence under the Kuki Christian Church. Notwithstanding the continuance of the Kuki Christian Council by Kuki Christian Church most associations now have their own literature department.

Towards Ecumenism or More Division?

Even at the formative years of Kuki churches there was a search for ecumenism among the leaders. While speaking at Lincoln Christian College and Seminary in March 1980, Tongkhojang Lunkim deliberated that the objective of his visit to the United States, apart from fund raising, was "to find out if there was any person or church who had the same vision - One Church, if so then we (they) would work together with such believers, and raise funds to help build Christian Centre at Imphal, the capital city of Manipur state on the border with Burma" (Lunkim 2008: 2).

There is wide contestation and divergent interpretations with regard to the transformation of KCC from "Council" into "Church". The leaders of Kuki Christian Church hold the view that it was done as per the resolution of the 18th KCC Conference. As such, the Kuki Christian Church was formed on April 8, 1979 at Chalwa Baptist Church, Sadar Hills, Manipur. Even though ecumenism was in principle the perceived foundation of KCC, it maintains close linkage with the Christian Church, a mainline Protestant denomination in North America, for funding.

With regard to the transformation of "Kuki Christian Council" into "Kuki Christian Church" a former KBC pastor Thongsei Haokip (2009b: 44) observes:

> In order to translate the Bible and have a common hymn book by different Kuki denominations, Kuki church leaders formed an association named "Kuki Christian Council". However, when this Council was transformed into a Church, the future plans for unification was not successful.

What emerged out of this was a deep misunderstanding between the Kuki Christian leaders and the resulting division of the churches based on clans among the so called Thadou-Kuki tribe. In 1967 a quarrel broke out within KBC on the issue of language. The proponents of Thadou (mainly Sitlhou and Lhouvum) resigned from KBC on September 1, 1967 and reestablish the old KBA renamed as Thadou Baptist Association (TBA). While the Thouthang, Doungel and Dimngel clans formed the Chongthu Baptist Association (Ch.BA) in 1971. Again in 1973 a dispute broke out within KBC. Some groups mainly, Lunkim, Lenthang, Lhangum, Chongloi and Hangshing resigned from KBC and formed a separate association, Zougam Baptist Convention, which later came to be known as Kuki Christian Church. Other Kuki tribes also formed their own associations bearing their tribe name such as the Gangte Baptist Association, Vaiphei Baptist Association, Kom-Rem Baptist Churches Association, etc.

In South Manipur, the North East India General Mission (NEIGM) was later divided into a number of presbyteries based on tribes. The presbytery of the Thadou-Kukis was named as Kuki Christian Association. The Evangelical Convention Church was for the Paites, Manipur Christian Organisation for the Vaipheis, Evangelical Association Church for the Hmars, Evangelical Synod Church for the Gangtes, South East Manipur Anal Christian Association for the Anals and Evangelical Church of Manipur for the Baites. The Indo-Burma Pioneer Mission (IBPM) of Watkin Roberts was also divided into Independent Church of India (ICI) and the Evangelical Free Church of India (EFCI), both consists of the Hmar tribe.

In response to the worldwide evangelical movement,[7] the various protestant churches in South Manipur rechristened their associations previously named by their tribes to a genre preceded or succeeded by "Evangelical". Thus, the Kuki Christian Association becomes Evangelical Churches Association as per the annual assembly of the KCA at Tuibuong in 1996. The NEIGM founded by Watkin Roberts in 1910 was also rechristened as the Evangelical Congregational Church of India (ECCI) and the separated constituents once again come together under this evangelical movement. At present ECCI consists of six different conferences: ECA representing the Thadou-Kukis, Evan-

gelical Assembly Church (EAC) representing the Hmar tribe, Evangelical Organisation Church (EOC) representing the Vaiphei tribe, Evangelical Synod Church (ESC), representing the Gangte tribe, Evangelical United Church (EUC) representing the Anal tribe and Bible Believing Evangelical Church (BBEC) representing the Lushai tribe.[8]

Even though ECCI is a form of unification of some of the Kuki tribes, this evangelical denomination is committed to the propagation and perpetuation of the Evangelical Faith in partnership with the EC Church of America in India's Northeastern region and its neighbouring countries. Their focus is on evangelism and not on unification of different Kuki churches.

While "unification of churches" has been the catchphrase for the past two decades among the Kukis, one of the oldest associations KBC still faced dissension in the recent past and the ultimate split by some of its churches. As Alexander Mackenzie once said that the "Kukis are the most clannish of all the tribes with whom we have come in contact on this frontier…" (Mackenzie 2008: 83), clanism and even sub-clanism is prevalent as much as during the colonial period. Apart from the clan based church associations such as the Ch.BA and TBA, the newly formed Methodist Mission Church of North East India (the splinter group of KBC) is mainly constituted by the Mangvungs of the Haokip clan.

Church Division: Doctrinal Difference or Personal Antagonism?

A cursory glance of the causes of church division among the Kukis reveal that personal antagonism among the leaders coupled with deeper attachment to clan and tribe than to church were the main contributory factors rather than doctrinal differences. Tongkhojang Lunkim shares his personal experience with regard to this: "my physical participation in the then North East Manipur Baptist Association has shattered my joy because of the communal spirited leadership of the said association" (Lunkim 2008: i).

Looking back historically into how the existing associations among Baptist churches emerged reveals that it was none other than the workplace conflict of the first generation church leaders that led to the spurt in forming new associations. Workplace conflict is a specific type of disagreement that occurs in a work area and is uniquely influenced by the work environment. Conflict in the workplace can arise from personal disagreements. Personal conflicts occur due to a clash of ideas, values or needs between two or more coworkers. Workers with very different personal values can experience difficulty when working in close proximity. Clash of personality conflicts do not always have an immediate solution and can require further intervention by the supervisor. However, due to the non-existence of supervisor or higher authorities in Kuki religious institutions, it always resulted in parting of ways between the contending parties/leaders (Haokip 2011: 25-26).

Although many theologians blame the American Baptist Mission Union and Welsh Presbytery Mission for division based on religion within the Kuki society, a closer look into the existing reality shows that such blame game is a scapegoat as there is blurring of line between the Baptists and Presbyterians. The existent and evident division is between the Baptist churches. In fact it is religion that unfolds divisions in our society. From the once unified KBC emerged KCC, TBA, Ch. BA, etc. The latest imbro-

glio is the split in KBC and the dissenters joining the Methodist church.

Prim Vaiphei (2011), president of All Manipur Christian Organisation (AMCO), while pondering his views on church division among the Kukis, iterates:

> If we carefully see the history of the church, divisions within the communities were not caused by the church but the people divided themselves… Today frankly speaking there will be people willing to die for KBC, KCC, EBC, EOC, etc. But I do not know whether there will be anyone willing to die for Christ. It is because we are very much loyal to the group we belong. The attachment we have to our clan, tribe is much more powerful than our attachment to our Churches and God.

To substantiate his view Prim Vaiphei gives an example of how a Guite village was divided. "…it was in late 70's one CRC (charismatic) preacher of Guite clan went to a Guite village Baptist Church. The Church leaders refused to give him pulpit, but the village chief said 'How can we reject him, he comes to his own village.' That was how the Baptist Church of that village split into two."

Apart from personal antagonism among the church leaders, the antagonism between several Kuki insurgent group leaders has percolated the church associations. It is widely believed that the recent split of KBC was fueled and supported by an insurgent group.

Church Unification Movements: Post-1993

After several years of misunderstanding among the Kuki Christian leaders came the Kuki-Naga conflict, in which many lives, villages and lands of the Kukis were lost. In such period of suffering and turmoil the Kuki Christian leaders thought about reconciliation, keeping aside their personal differences, and formed the Kuki Christian Leaders Fellowship (KCLF) in 1993, which is a forum for church leaders. The fellowship was successful not only in reconciliation and working together of the church leaders but was also successful in inducing more love and closeness among the people.

The consciousness of the need for church unification slowly redeveloped among the church leaders. The nationalists more precisely, the extremists, felt the need for church unification for national, social and political reconstruction and therefore, there was plan for the unification of the churches under their initiative. When this plan was underway, the senior church leaders pleaded to the nationalists to transfer the unification work to them and the nationalists did so. Thenceforth, the church unification work was handled by the church leaders under KCLF.

Regarding the unification of churches, a number of seminars were held and there developed a difference in opinion regarding the structure which would eventually become an organic structure. This issue was put up in the assembly of different associations and most denominations favoured a federal structure except KBC, which favoured an organic structure even at the initial stage. The KBC General Assembly in 2001 again discussed the matter and agreed for a federal structure.

KCLF agreed that after unification of churches, the unified organisation would be called, "United Church of India". The aims and objects of KCLF are:

1. Unity of churches according to God's will, (John 17:11)
2. To make God our nation's Lord, (Psalm 33:12) and
3. The nation's exercise of strength in unity and in God's will.

After some years of the inception of KCLF, especially when the national crisis abated and ended, the organisational and personal differences began to loom large again. The associational leaders' meetings were mostly regarded as KBC and ECA. While other looked from a distance, KCC, which dedicatedly and tirelessly worked for the establishment of KCLF, and Ch.BA, withdrew from the Leaders' Fellowship. And others moved further away and eventually disappeared from the scene. Apart from the efforts made by church leaders even our nationalist groups made fervent appeal to the church leaders to come to terms. Several rounds of talks by the church leaders cannot even negotiate for a federally constituted union for all the Kukis.

Not withstanding its shortcomings the KCLF was rechristened as Kuki Christian Leaders' Fellowship International (KCLFI) in its Sixth Triennial Conference at Molnoi in Chandel District of Manipur in November 2009 (KCLF, 2009). However, after a year it was renamed again as Kuki Christian Leaders' Fellowship in its Seventh Conference at Joljam AG Church, November 26-29, 2010, due to pressures from many quarters. With regard to this frequent change of the fellowship's name N Lhungdim (2011), a retired bureaucrat, made a sarcastic observation of KCLF:

> …This shows that we don't like church fellowship but only leaders' fellowship. Why do forty one delegates representing twelve associations made a resolution to rename the fellowship, which would be renamed again after a year? It seems that whenever the leaders change, the name of the fellowship has to change. Frequently changing name lacks integrity of the fellowship. Until we reach the destination lets not change the fellowship's name… Is the organisation lacking integrity or is it the leaders? In church history we have moved back from milestone three to two.

The KCLF now focus on building relations between various Kuki religious associations and church leaders.

Some Views on Church Division

Among the Kukis there are many types of segregation, but church/religious segregation is much deeper and higher than all others. Seikholet Singson in his Good Friday message in Kuki Worship Service, Shillong (KWSS) said that the Kukis are segregated into fragments because we do not worship God but the "Church".[9] In another message in KWSS in December 2002, Hawlngam Haokip, the former General Secretary of KBC, said that for unification we must give away our individual preferences, humble ourselves and pray more. M. Haokhothong views that the Kukis always have plans for unification, but it is difficult. To him the Kukis should not hope for unification by creating one more organisation but only when the people become conscious about the need for unification then unity shall be achieved.[10] Alun Haolai, a senior pastor and former president of KBC, views that, "As people of an older generation and in a position of leadership, if the people cannot follow them and if there is no progress for the nation under their leader-

ship, and because they are still alive and their leadership cannot end, there is a suspicion that God do not use them anymore or has left them."[11]

A church historian Thongsei Haokip, in his recent essay, listed some of the causes as to why Kuki churches cannot unite by asking pertinent questions: "Why cannot the Kuki churches come together for a visible unity that the leaders of the churches longed for? Was it due to doctrinal and other differences that can be called theological or non-theological factors?" To him the problems were not doctrinal or theological differences but non-theological or rather conservatism plays a large part. The non-theological factors that hinder the progress of church unity are: clan differences, missionary communalism and the indigenous communalism, denominational ecumenism, property, possession and position, differences in theological orientation, human dislike of change, lack of sincerity and commitment, lack of mass awareness, vested interest, leadership struggle, and diversity of views (Haokip, 2008).

Organisation Theory and Kuki Churches

James *Mooney* defines *organisation* as "*the form of every human association* for the attainment of a common purpose" (Mooney 1947: 1). Even though several criticisms are leveled against the Classical Organisation Theory of Max Weber (1947), some of his postulations are still relevant for the analysis of the failure of Kuki religious institutions.

Weber argues that managers should not rule through arbitrary personal whim but by a formal system of rules. To him there is a career structure and a system of promotion based on seniority or merit based on the judgment of superior and expounds free selection of officials based on professional qualifications.

In stark contrast to the organisational theory what can be seen from the above analysis is that the incumbent leaders had used their leadership position to execute things in favour of them. The embezzling of land allotted to KBC by Manipur government, the language issue to the unending splits in KBC still haunts the congregations. The recent split of KBC can best be explained by the non-adherence to the system of promotion based on seniority, which has also been followed by KBC since its inception. When the turn of Kim Vaiphei has come as the senior most pastor to occupy the post of General Secretary of KBC, as the term of the incumbent was over in 2010, she was put aside by the Executive Council. In such case there is great degree of social and gender inequality as the spirit of impersonality or objectivity has been subdued.

Sociology of Religion and Conflicts

Another increasing concern is the sociology of religion among the Kukis. The conversion of Kuki Christians to Judaism and related beliefs such as Sabbath and Messianic Judaism and the resulting migration to their so called "Aliyah" *meaning* "let him go up" to Israel. The Kuki-Naga conflict in the 1990s and the Thadou-Paite conflict in 1998 have created pantomimes among such groups resulting in huge urge to escape from such situations and the resulting mass migration to Israel.

The PEW Forum on Religion and Public Life did a survey on changes in religious affiliation in the United States. Most people who have become unaffiliated to any religion say that they have become unaffiliated because they think of religious people as

hypocritical, judgmental or insincere. They also think that religious organisations focus too much on rules and not enough on spirituality, or that religious leaders are too focused on money and power rather than truth and spirituality.[12]

Although Kuki village administration is still under despotic chief system, with regard to religion they have given full right to freedom guaranteed by Article 10 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.[13] Hence, the freedom of religion in Kuki society has not only impeded the church unification movement but also resulted in heteroginisation of religious practices among the Kukis. The inroad of different religious practices can encourage secondary conversion.[14] As observed by Rodney Stark, secondary conversion can greatly expand the influence of Aliyah movement of the *Bnei Menashe* (Stark 1996: 20). It is high time for the religious associations to introspect and start treading on the path they have been called for.

The ethnic conflict between the Kukis and Nagas in the 1990s resulted in the immediate provocation by the Kukis and the resulting refusal to take part in the centenary celebration of Christianity among the Baptists in Manipur. Nitin Gokhale (1996) says:

> Both Tangkhuls and Kukis practice Christianity but the Kuki leaders refused to attend the recent celebrations organised by the Manipur Baptist Convention. The Kuki Inpi boycotted the celebrations during which Church leaders appealed to both the communities to live 'harmoniously'. The Kuki Inpi leaders termed the peace appeal and meetings as 'farcical', saying that after every such meeting in the past, a prominent Kuki leader was killed.

KWS as a Model?

Despite sincere attempts made by church leaders for the last two decades, there has not been a single progressive step taken by KCLF. The old issue of horse and cart problem remains. At this juncture the success of Kuki Worship Service (KWS) formed by diaspora Kukis in various cities of India and abroad can be the itinerary of church unification.

The first KWS was established on September 21, 1980 in Shillong with its initial name as Kuki Students Worship Service, Shillong (KSWS). During the inception days the fellowship functioned under Kuki Students' Organisation, Shillong as a department. As the number of family members continued to increase KSWS was renamed as Kuki Worship Service (KWS), Shillong in 1982 to provide more space and participation to family members. On May 6, 1986 KWS and KSO were made two independent bodies. In the 1990s a number of KWS were established in different cities of India starting with KWS, Delhi in 1992. During the first decade of the new millennium KWS units were even established abroad. The latest unit of KWS was established at Silchar, Assam in 2009 and more anticipated to be establish in different parts of India and abroad. Even Kuki Community Church of Tulsa, United States expressed their desire to join the global KWS network.

While assessing the future prospects of KWS, Dino Touthang (2008: 37-38) perceives KWS as a model for church unity among the Kukis and can also become a channel of blessing for the Kuki society at large. He listed some of the bases of KWS which make these fellowships successful.

Independent and interdependent: Each unit of KWS is an independent body, having its own constitution as a local unit. While preserving this independence, these units develop relationship and partnership with the other units, nurturing mutual understanding and growth.

Autonomous identity and dynamic relationship: KWS has a separate identity as a worshipping group from the student body KSO. But both the bodies have a close relationship as most of the members of KWS are members of KSO as well.

Exclusive yet inclusive: Most of the members of KWS are from Kuki community and it appears to be exclusive. KWS is, therefore, in some way a forum for preserving ethnic identity and culture, but this does not deter people from other communities from joining the congregation.

The above discussed bases of KWS prove a good model and can be the point of departure from where dialogic space can start for church unification.

Conclusion

"Unification" or "Integration" has been the catchword of ethnic groups in Northeast India for the past two decades. Various insurgent groups in Northeast India have been harping on the integration of various factional groups and the ethnic areas occupied by them.

The recent further division and split of churches is of serious concern for the Kuki society. While the KCLF talks about unification and unity, what the churches in practice pursued and tread is different to what they preach. Apart from the mushrooming of religious associations, there is always an attempt by various associations to allure each others churches to their fold or split bigger churches.

Even though Tongkhojang Lunkim claimed to have followed ecumenism movement in the west that the Kukis should be united in one church as "Christian Church" and thereby the association name be "Kuki Christian Church", the nature, mobilisation and formation of this church was not ripe. His parent church KBC always blames him of embezzling the land allotted to KBC by Manipur government and forming new association. There is also much criticism leveled against him and his church by others about the ties they have with the west and funds from them, which eventually is an obstacle to church unification among the Kukis.[15]

Since its inception the KCLF is purely a protestant Kuki ecumenism movement. Although a late entrant, Catholics among the Kukis now constitutes a sizeable portion of the population. The non involvement of this denominational Kukis in the KCLF reflects the inherent weakness since the start of the formation of KCLF. Even if the KCLF succeed in their ecumenical endeavours, excluding the Catholic Kukis in the process tantamounts lack of completeness.

Konard Raiser views, from his experience of involvement in the ecumenical movement for more than 30 years, that "the relationship of ecumenism and mission is still an area of controversy and even struggle." As such, the ecumenical movement is not going to be practical unless the worldwide movement is successful. Thus, as the first step in the process of ecumenical movement within the Kuki people, ethnic factors must be incorporated coupled with severing ties with external missions and denominations.

Epilogue:

I) This is a revised and enlarged version of the previous essay published in *Ahsijolneng Annual Magazine 2003*, A Publication of Kuki Students' Organisation, Shillong.

II) All translations from Thadou-Kuki to English are mine.

Notes

[1] William Pettigrew belonged to the Anglican Church of England but later felt his infant baptism to be inadequate and therefore received adult baptism while working as a missionary in Dhaka under the Arthington Aborigenes Mission. However, he remained as an Anglican and a missionary under the same mission till he was forced to resign and joined the Baptist church at Sibsagar in 1896. He was ordained to the Baptist ministry in 1897.

[2] Dr. Galen Greenfield Crozier and his wife, Medical Missionary doctor, were sent to Garo Hills by the American Mission Board to cater services to the people of West Garo Hills. They arrived at Tura in 1899 and gradually set up a small bamboo house for a dispensary. Starting with a mobile medical work, Dr. Crozier soon saw the great need of the people. With American funds they build a small 15 bedded hospital with dispensary, which was completed in 1908. The hospital was looked after by the American Missionary Doctors till 1967. Today it is owned and managed by the Council of Baptist Churches North East India (CBCNEI) through its Medical Board.

[3] N. Namsibo Chawang, "Advent and Growth of Christianity in Zeliangrong Naga's", http://nambon.com/growth-of-christianity (accessed on July 25, 2011)

[4] Mary Fairchild, "Christian Denominations: Church History", http://christianity.about.com/od/denominations/a/denominations_3.htm (accessed on April 7, 2011)

[5] A History of Unification, http://www.protestantchurch.nl/info.aspx?page=1504, (accessed on April 8, 2011)

[6] Kuki Baptist Convention website http://www.kbc.org.in (accessed on July 25, 2011)

[7] The term evangelical is derived from the Greek word "euangelion" meaning "gospel" or "good news". In this sense, to be an *evangelical* mean to be a believer in the gospel, i.e. the message of Jesus Christ. Evangelicalism is a Protestant Christian movement which began in Great Britain in the 1730s and gained popularity in the United States during the series of the Great Awakenings of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. In the present times, evangelical movement focuses on active missionary work to convert others.

[8] Detail information about ECCI can be obtained from their official website http://www.ecchurch.co.in/Who-We-Are.php (accessed on August 13, 2011)

[9] The author personally listened and noted down the points delivered in such religious gatherings.

[10] As the editor of *Christian Meivah*, M. Haokhothong occasionally expressed his views with regard to disunity among Kuki churches in 2003.

[11] His views can be found in *KBC Thuso*, the monthly bulletin of Kuki Baptist Convention, in 2003.

[12] The PEW Forum on Religion & Public Life, "Faith in Flux: Changes in Religious Affiliation in the U.S." http://pewforum.org/Faith-in-Flux.aspx (accessed on July 28,

2011)

[13] Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states:

> Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

[14] In sociology of religion secondary conversion refers to religious conversion of an individual that result from a relationship with another convert, rather than from any particular aspect of the new religion.

[15] Jamkhongam Lhungdm, an Indian Defence Accounts Service (IDAS), presently Financial Adviser of North Eastern Council, Chairman of Kuki Worship Service, Shillong and also an ordained elder and influential policy maker of Evangelical Churches Association, Manipur, openly talks about KCC's unwillingness to cut-off ties with the Western Churches and the resulting impediment caused by it to the church unification movement among the Kukis in the 4th Workshop on *Kuki Society Kitho-kitna Lampi* June 24-25, 2011 in Shillong, organised by Forum for Revival of Kuki Society (FFROKS).

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