CHAPTER-I

INTRODUCTION

Thadou Kuki tribe is one of the largest tribes of Manipur. Thadou Kukis live in Manipur, Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Myanmar. As per British record in 1904, the number of people who used Thadou dialect as their mother tongue was 31,439 persons. In 1971 census the population of Thadous in Manipur was 78,883. According to Hugh R.Page, the number of Thadous is 1,25,000 in Manipur, and 26200 in Myanmar.¹

Some scholars have grouped the Kukis into the old Kukis and the new Kukis. Lt.Col.J.Shakespear writes, "The term ‘New Kukis’ which appears so often in the records of Cachar and Sylhet in the middle of the last century and which has been adopted by Dr.Grierson in the Linguistic survey of India may be taken as synonymous with Thadou clan."² Thadous are sub-divided into a number of clans and sub-clans, such as the Sitlhous, the Singsons, the Hangshings, the Doungels, the Kipgens, the Haokips, and the Phohils.

According to Jimmy Jamkhomang Thadou, as per government order, amended Vide Govt. of India, Ministry of Law, Notification Order No. SRO 2477 A Dated 29th October 1956, New Delhi, the Thadou tribes included the following clans:


¹ Encyclopaedia of World Culture, Vol. III - South Asia

Origin

Thadous claim that they came out of a subterranean land called Noimigam, which was ruled by king, Noimangpa, or king of the subterranean land. Chongthu and Chongja were the two brothers of the king of Noimigam. The story goes that one-day, Chongthu with his dog went out to hunt and chase a porcupine. He saw a hole, and peeping through the hole, he saw a land, which was uninhabited. He went back and got ready to leave for that place. Chongthu and his group left on the day of Chon performed by the king of Noimigam. When Chongthu and his party came to the gate, they were obstructed by a very big snake called Gulheopi. In fact, Gulheopi was the gate-keeper there. The snake had already killed many people who tried to escape from Noimigam. Chongthu was clever and thus covered himself with phoipi (a tribal woven cloth used as blanket during winter) and killed the big snake with his dao (big knife). Soon after escaping from the snake, they were confronted by a lion, the king of animals.

Chongthu by his shrewed tactics pacified the lion and escaped unharmed. There were about ten big villages in and around Noimigam.

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The names of the villages are Noimangkho, Kholaichal, Khopalva, Khothipkho, Khomangkho, Khokanglai, Khokisupi, Kholoubol, Noiumkho and Khoken. It is believed that water, rain etc. were there in that subterranean or khul or cave. It was like a mini-world, where the sun, the moon and the stars were visible at their proper times. This account is not a myth. The Thadous while mentioning their genealogy often mentioned from Chongthu onwards.

A brief reference has been made to the origin of Thadous in themthu, a medical charm, chanted by Thadou physicians which was verbally passed down to the eldest sons of the family or families from generation to generation to appease the curse of Nemneh, a widow, who was left behind in khul or cave or Noimigam, by Chongthu and his party. It is said that Nemneh left her loincloth at khul or cave. When she came back to the gate, it was already closed. She was very upset and thus cursed the party of Chongthu that all sorts of misfortune would be their share in their journey towards the new land. Khaikhotinthang writes, "Whenever Thadou physician attends to a sick person, before making any sacrifices to the spirits which the Thadous believe to be responsible for sickness, he recites the lengthy medical charm, the first three lines of which runs thus: 'Khula ka pien, Sheenga kakal; Jonna ka kum chopeua ka chuh ...(born at Khul, climbed the Sheeng, proceeded down to the Jon and settled at Chopeu)."

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The exact location of Khul or Noimigam is not known. It may be somewhere in China or in Burma (Myanmar). From Burma, Thadous and the old Kukis moved to Manipur. Now Thadous are living in Manipur (in all districts), Assam, Nagaland, Mizoram, and in Myanmar.

**Language**

Thadous believe they had their own script, but it was lost due to their carelessness. In this regard, William Shaw writes:

There is a story among the Thadous that very long ago Pathien, the creator, gave the Thadou, Naga and Manipuri a separate language each, written on skin. The Thadou, owing to his habitual laziness and casualness, lost his script, which was probably eaten by rats, dogs or pigs. The Naga, because of his almost insatiable hunger ate this. The Manipuri, who is not flesh eater, and who is also prudent and thrifty, carefully kept his and eventually studied it. So, neither, the Thadou nor the Naga has a written language while the Manipuri has.6

Thadou language belongs to Tibeto-Burman family of Sino-Tibetan phylum. It shares many elements with Meitei, Kachin, Garo, Lushai and other old Kuki dialects. Scholars like Dr. Thirumalai and V. Kipgen opined that the “Thadou Pao” or Thadou language is one of the root language of the world.7 The second largest number of people in Manipur speaks the language, next only to Manipuri or Meitei language. This is why William Shaw said:

The Thadou language is spoken by all descendants of Thadou and non-Thadou clans absorbed by them. Most of the old Kukis can speak Thadou fluently although they have

6 William Shaw, Notes on Thadou Kukis(Tribal Research Institute, Aizawl, 1929), p.94-5.
7 Khaikhotinthang Kipgen, opcit p. 10.
languages and dialects of their own such as Kom, Khothlang, Waiphei etc.”  
8 As mentioned earlier, Thadous donot have their own script. They are now using the Roman script, which was adopted by Lt. R. Stewart. In this regard, Stewart said, “As there is no written character among the Kukis, the following Roman ones have been adopted by me, which appear to answer very fairly well all the requirements of the language.”

Thadous have written different books on various topics in the Roman script. Ngulhao Thomsong wrote the first Thadou Kuki Primer known as “Lekhabul”. It was published in 1927. The author expressed his indebtedness to who helped him in the preparation of the first primer in Thadou Language. He did mention the names of Dr. Hutton (who was known as Kahui Saplen), Crozer (Sap), Dr. Grozer and his wife (Pi Memsaheb). The said primer had been approved by the Government of Manipur as a text Book for Class A- I, vide order No. 18/6/78-SE (PT) Dated 4-3-1977.

Cultural:

For Thadous, life is very valuable. It begins with birth and ends at death. The following events in the life cycle play a very important role in the life of Thadous:

Child birth

A newborn child should be named as soon as its identity is known. Thadou woman gives birth to a baby at home by kneeling on some clothes

8 William Shaw opcit, p. 94.
9 Lieut. R. Stewart, A slight Notice of Grammar of Thadou (Bengal: Asiatic Society in its journal, Vol.XXIV at 178 to 188 ff; published in 1857).
and her husband supports her round her chest. *Naomin bol* or *Naominphuoh*, Child naming ceremony was very popular, which was followed by *Naodop an*. After these two, *kilhalho*, warding off ceremony of the evil spirit and any possible future illness was performed. The monthly child birth rate among Thadous in the two censal years (1961-1971) as recorded by Khaikhotinthang Kipgen was ninety nine (99) babies per hundred.  

Marriage

Marriage rite is the next important rite performed by Thadous. Marriages can be categorized into four kinds: *Chongmou, Sahapsat, Jollhai* and *Kijammang*. *Chongmou* is the ideal form of marriage. In Thadou marriage, the groom pays the brides's price counting in cash or in kind such as mithuns, small gongs and big gongs etc. *Thempu* or priest plays a very important role in Thadous marriage. In case of arranged marriage, the acceptance of the proposal is solemnized by killing a pig. The whole expenditure is to be borne by the boy's party. The feast is called *Keptansa*, and all matters relating to the marriage proposal is finalized on that day.

Death

Death is the end of physical life on the earth. The dead body is buried depending on how he or she died. Death may be of two kinds:

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natural and unnatural death. Death is considered unnatural when a person dies of accident, killed by enemies or by wild beast. When a person dies of old age, or of diseases, it may be called natural death.

**Life after Death**

Like many other tribes, Thadous held that there is life after death. All physical life ends with death, but the soul continues to live on in the land of the dead or *mithikhuo*.

**Family**

Family is the most important institution in Thadou community. Parents are expected to train their children at home. Father, as the head of the family decides all-important matters related to their family. The wife and the children assisted the father of the family. Children, though independent to some extent, depended on their parents to meet their needs.

**Social institutions**

There are two important social institutions: *Som* and *Lom*. Som is more than a dormitory for boys. It acts as an institution of both physical and educational training. Boys learnt martial arts and handicrafts. *Som* can be instituted in a house where there is a girl, who can act as a hostess. The girl has to do many things to please the boys who are lodging in her house. She has to wash their clothes, comb their long hairs and patch up their clothes. The dormitory has its own leader, who is entrusted to look after the affairs of the boys of his dormitory. *Lom* is another social
institution. It has been misunderstood by some writers and thus wrongly called labour corps. It is more than a labour corps. It is an important organisation where youth and adults are joined together for the purpose of economic life and administration in the village. This is a good place for the younger generation to learn leadership by actually joining the group.

The two common forms of Lom are:

*Lompi* and *Lomte* or *Lomcha*. There are certain codes that the members have to follow. Punishment was very severe. Many youngsters have developed their skill and leadership quality here in this institution. Members of *Lom* have a sense of dignity and oneness.

**Hunting**

Thadous are good hunters. They use different kinds or methods of hunting. Hunting and trapping are very common among the Thadous. Hunting was supposed to be continued even in the next life. The same idea can be gleaned from the story of *Khupting* and *Ngambom*. *Ngambom* was said to have killed a good number of animals while he was living in the land of the dead people called *Mithikhuo*.

**Fishing**

Thadous love fishing. They used different methods to catch fish. Some of the common methods were poisoning the water with leaves of poisonous trees or creepers, which were readily available in the locality or in the jungle. A fish basket or *Ngabom* is also used by many to catch fish
(a basket meant specially for catching fish may be called fish basket) The other method common to all Thadou fisher is *Lense* or *Lensep*, where a net is used to catch fish.

**Domestic animal**

Thadous are fond of rearing animals for meat and for different purposes. The domesticated animals are pigs, dogs, fowls, cows and mithuns. Some of these animals are used for sacrifices to appease the angry gods or spirits, whereas cows and mithuns are important for bride prices.

**Cottage Industries**

Even in the traditional society, Thadous know how to make things which would be useful for them depending on the need and the demand of the society. Thadou women know how to weave clothes for the family as well as for her need. Weaving clothes of various kinds were very popular in the past. Clothes such as *ponchen* (loincloth) *saipikhup*, *thang nang*, *mongvom phoipi* and *nihsan* were common in Thadou society. The local people consumed these products.

**Handicraft**

In the field of handicrafts, their products are very good. The common products are: *Beng* or basket for carrying and storing their belongings; *sinkhup*, which is small basket used as a handbag to put in small things like needles, mirror, etc. *Lelpi* or *Lel* is one of the most useful
products of Thadou handicrafts. This can be used as a suitcase. In modern days, some people misunderstood this important instrument and believed it to be the snake charmer’s box. Costly and precious goods are kept in this Lelpi so that it may not be lost.

Religion

Thadous believe in the almighty God or Chung Pathen, who is the creator of all things: visible and invisible. In addition to their belief in Chung Pathen, God of Heaven, they also believe that there are a number of spirits who caused sickness, death and misfortunes from birth to death. To appease the anger of these gods or lesser gods, or spirits, they sacrifice their animals. They also believe in a family god called Indoi. The presence of the family god is believed to be very important. Thadous performed various rites and rituals for the worship of the high God or Chung Pathen. Detailed discussion on the traditional religion of the Thadous shall be made in subsequent chapters of this thesis.

Christianity came to Manipur towards the end of the 19th century. The first missionary who came to Manipur was William Pettigrew, who landed in the soil of Manipur on 6th February 1894. His main purpose was to evangelize the plain people of Manipur, the Meiteis. He started a school in Imphal, but it was discontinued, as the Meiteis did not want him to work, as they feared that their children would be converted to Christianity. On the other hand, Watkin R. Roberts came to Manipur South District, Churachandpur, in May 1910. He came to Senvon, in response to the invitation of the chief, Kamkholun Singson. The gospel spread like a wild
fire, but the Thadous opposed the gospel. They drove out the preachers and the new converts from their villages. As times passed by, many Thadous have accepted the new religion. Within a short span of time, the whole tribe has embraced Christianity as their new religion. In the present days, there, perhaps, are no followers of the traditional religion among the Thadous, since the majority has accepted the religion Christianity.

**Aim and object**

In this research work, our main aim is to have an in-depth study of the traditional religious belief and practice of Thadou Kuki people of Manipur in general and their concept of God in particular. The study covers a vast area from the origin of the early Thadou religious practices to the acceptance of Christianity by the Thadous. In this work, we seek to understand Thadou view of God and the lesser gods who controlled their entire life cycle.

**Method used**

The method used in this dissertation is mainly of two folds: Interviews, which occupies a larger part, being supplemented by books written by Thadou speaking writers and non-Thadous who know the religions and its practices very well. We have also consulted various books on religion and Theology, philosophy and culture. The approach is descriptive, analytic and critical. The work begins with Chapter I wherein, we have given a general account of the Thadou Kuki people, their custom and cultural life.
Chapter II introduces the concept of God in different religions. A survey of the major living religions of the world on the concept of God has been made. The idea of God seen in Islam, Judaism, Christianity and Hinduism are discussed in a nutshell. This is followed by brief discussion of the attributes of God found in Christian Theology and philosophy.

Chapter III discusses the concept of God in Thadou Kuki religion. Here attempt is being made to dig deeper into the concept of God, lesser gods or spirits and indoi as a family magic or god. It also discusses the Thadous’ belief in the future life.

Chapter IV deals with the rites and rituals of Thadou religion. It begins with birth rites and ends with the idea of life after death. It discusses religious rites and rituals also.

Chapter V deals with the religious worldview of the Thadou Kukis. This chapter discusses the influence of omens, dreams, taboos and fetishes believed by Thadous.

Chapter VI deals with the comparison of Thadou concept of God with that of Chin-Kuki-Mizo group of people. Comparison is made on the beliefs in God, spirits, the role of priests and the concept of life after death.

Chapter VII deals with evaluation of Thadou concept of God based on different religions. It has pointed out the strong points in the Thadou concept of God and their traditional religion.
Chapter VIII is the conclusion of the dissertation. We have given an overview of what has been discussed in the preceding chapters and give certain remarks on the religion under study.