CHAPTER 2

Social Ecology

2.1 Introduction

Rev. M. Barbe best describes the Kukis' affinity to land in 1845, where he writes:

I admired the idea of the Kookies, who believe that the greatest happiness of man after his death consists in being placed on the summit of the highest hill to enjoy the pleasure of seeing the beauties of nature. The existence of a Supreme Being who is to give a spiritual reward being above their conception, how can they imagine a greater happiness than the view of the most beautiful scenery (Barbe, 1845, pp. 381-382)?

Humans everywhere surrounds their mother earth, the land which feeds them and the environment which gives them shelter and protection, with beliefs and ideas. They as a rule surround it with a mythical and historical tradition and define their relation to land in more or less precise legal statements. At the same time they use the land and appropriate, distribute and consume the produce from it (Malinowski, 1945, p. 129). The chapter will study how the Thadou-Kukis weave around their soil with traditional legends, beliefs system, and mystical values and transforms the soil from a merely physical into a culturally determined object. It attempts to explore the relationship between some aspects of ecology or ecological infrastructure—land, pattern of land utilisation, forests, symbolism of land, certain agricultural practices, and some aspects of social structure—social institutions and practices like chieftainship system, priesthood,

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1 The term oekologie (ecology) was coined in 1866 by the German biologist, Ernst Haeckel from the Greek oikos meaning "house" or "dwelling," and logos meaning "science" or "study." Thus, ecology is the "study of the household of nature." Haeckel intended it to encompass the study of an animal in relation to both the physical environment and other plants and animals with which it interacted (Who coined the term "ecology"? http://www.answerbag.com/q_view/41808, accessed date 19th May, 2011).
rituals and traditional forestry management. Therefore, the focus is on the influence of the ecological relations on the political and other institutions as also how the social structure in turn influences the conceptualisation of the ecological relations. It will focus on the man-land relationship in the pre-colonial times and the changes brought forth by colonialism.

2. 2 Primal Religions of the Thadou-Kukis

The primeval religion of the Thadou-Kukis reflected their worldview. To the 'Thadous', their world was full of play and counter play of mystic powers which supposedly influenced the shape and destiny of man. When they failed to understand natural calamities and events, they tried to attribute the cause of problems to some unknown and unseen forces. They resorted to every means possible to understand reality as it appeared to them at that particular point of time. Magic and magical rites in its totality are traditional facts. For an action to be magical it needs to be repeated and the whole community needs to believe in its efficacy. Moreover, the ritual needs to be transmissible and is sanctioned by public opinion (Mauss, 1972, pp. 18-19).

The Thadous from time immemorial had traditional method of controlling supernatural powers or to subordinate them through certain actions or occultism or esoteric practices, rites, rituals and ceremonies or celebrations in accompaniment with offerings, prayers or sacrifices so as to appease, placate or propitiate in order to enjoy a trouble-free life, having no anxiety or tensions.\(^2\)

\(\text{Goswami recorded in his book, "Kuki Life and Lore," the origin of the practice of appeasing demons for fear of them. In the past, the humans were able to see the ghosts with the naked eye and so killed them mercilessly. The few who were left approached the Supreme God or 'Chung Pathen' and reported to them about the massacre of their kind. God gave them some leaves substance with a black round spot in the middle. He asked them to go back to their village and put a few of them on the tall tree near the main entrance to the village of the human beings. The devils on the tree were asked to sprinkle the magical leaven particles on all the human beings passing below the tree. From that time onwards, the human beings were incapable of seeing them. It so happened that the eyes of the dog, which accompanied the human, was not struck by the leaven particles. Till today, it is believed that dogs can see the devils and that the eye-balls of}\)
This in course of time, gradually take the shape of an institutionalised systems of beliefs, rituals, rules, procedures, etc., through cults or systematised celebrated rituals or manifestations. With the passage of time, these are handed down from generation to generation and are entrenched into the thickly woven fabric of culture (Gangte, 2010).

The belief in the existence of one Supreme Being, who is the creator and sustainers of all, is central in the primal Kuki religion. This Being is addressed as Pathen (Holy Father) or Chung Pathen (Holy Father of above). Chung means 'above', and therefore, is an attribute of Pathen, rather than part of the name, denoting the abode of Pathen, which presumably is located high up in the sky (Chongloi, 2008, p. 134). Pathen is the central focus of people's religiosity (ibid).

William Shaw wrote in 1929 on the rites and beliefs of the Thadou-Kukis based on his seven years of residence as sub-divisional officer of the north-west area of Manipur state. He wrote:

The Thadous believe that life is given to everything by Pathen (supreme god) who rules the universe. He has the power to subdue the evil influences of the thilhas (ghosts) and it is to him that they performed sacrifices in order to regain health or escape any adversities. He is supposed to have made the heavens and earth and is all-powerful. To the Thadou, the world is the land they live in and the surrounding country, for the peoples of which they have names, and there it ends. No explanation of rain exists beyond stating that it rains just when Pathen pleases. They explain thunder and lightning as an exhibition of the powers and anger of Pathen, who visits those with whom he is displeased by striking them with lightning (Shaw, 1929, pp. 71-72).

the human beings became black because of this. When they became invisible, they started harassing the human beings who could no longer see them. To protect themselves from the mischievous actions of the devils, the human beings began to appease them with offerings and rituals. We see the hierarchy in the kind of gods that are worshipped. Pathen was believed to be superior over the malignant spirits who equally revere Him (Goswami, 1985, p. 312).
Lieut. R. Stewart wrote in 1855, the new Kookies (Thadous) have a much more
defined notion of religion than any of the other tribes on Chachar (Cachar).

They (the Kukis) recognize one all powerful god, whom they call
"Puthen," (Pathen) as the author of the universe, and although they consider him
to be actuated by the human passions, yet they look upon him as a benevolent
deity who has at heart the welfare and enjoyment of his creatures. He is the judge
likewise of all the mortals, and awards punishments to the wicked both in the
world and the next, by inflicting death or disease. In all circumstances of affliction,
his name is called upon and sacrifices of animals are made to him, imploring the
cessation of his own anger, or the averter of the effects of that of other deities.\(^3\)
Puthen (Pathen) has got a consort, a goddess of the name of "Nongjai" who has
likewise the power to inflict and remove diseases; her name is generally taken in
conjunction with that of Puthen (Pathen), and in cases of great urgency she is
implored to influence Puthen (Pathen) in behalf of the petitioner. Puthen (Pathen)
and Nongjai have a son called Thila, who acts under his father, and has power to
inflict diseases on those who displease him. He is considered a harsh and
vindictive god, though not entirely malignant. His anger is averted by prayers and
sacrifices made either directly to him or to his father (Stewart, 1855, pp. 628-629).

Thila has a termagant of a wife called "Ghumnoo" who is also possessed of the
power, and makes it flat in the shape of slight distempers such as headaches,
toothaches, &c. She is described as being most jealous of her husband, and of her
own position, resenting all omissions of her name in prayers offered up to her
spouse. "Ghumoishe" (Gamhoise) is the deity or demon who exercises the most
baneful effects upon mortals. Death is supposed to be induced by his apparition
and diseases of the worst description are caused by anger, which is supposed to
arise from natural bad temper and cruel disposition and not to answer the ends of

\(^3\) Turner distinguished four components in Ndembu religion which is strikingly similar to that of
the Thadou Society:-- (1) a belief in the existence of a high god (Nzambi) who has created
the world but does not interfere with worldly human activities (this god is largely absent from
Ndembu ritual and prayer); (2) a belief in the existence of ancestor spirits or "shades" who may
afflict the Ndembu (their importance is manifested by the numerous performances of rituals of
affliction among the Ndembu); (3) a belief in the intrinsic efficacy of certain animal and vegetable
substances; and (4) a belief in the destructive power of female witches and male sorcerers.
justice. By some he is said to be an illegitimate son of Puthen’s (Pathen’s), but others deny the relationship, and say, he has no connexion with the gods whatsoever. Ghumoishe (Gamhoise) is married to Khuchom, a malignant goddess who has special power over diseases of the stomach, and these two are the terror of the Kookies; prayers are never offered to them, but sacrifices are made to appease their wrath, and Puthen (Pathen) is likewise called upon to avert it. Hilo is the daughter of this couple and the goddess of the poisons, having power to make all eatables disagree with those who have offended her; she is also appeased by sacrifices or her influence is counteracted by prayers to Puthen (Pathen) (Stewart, 1855, p. 629).

It must be noted that the Thadous attempt to propitiate evils, whereas ask God for deliverance from evil. Pathen is considered as creator, father, judge, so forth, and has a general correspondence to the Christian’s understanding of God. Some of the common spirits known to the Thadou-Kukis are:--

1. Gamhoise means evil spirit of the jungle and his wife Inmunse means evil spirit of the house (Shakespear, 1975, p. 199). Together it means ‘accursed place’ by a combination of the two words. They are souls of the persons meeting unnatural death or thi-se (Gangte, 2010, p. 30). They are supposed to inhabit the densest forests on the highest mountain tops, and when passing through such their dread names are never mentioned (Shakespear, 1975, p. 199).

2. Joumi is a spirit, which is said to be as tall as trees. Jou denotes ‘a densely forested region’, and mi means ‘human’ or ‘dweller’ (Chongloi, 2008, p. 139). They are reportedly very fond of chicken and kill them by throttling the neck and sucking its blood. The mere sight of them is enough to make people die out of fear (Gangte, 2010, p. 30).

3. Kulsamnu is a female spirit, which attacks on the souls of the death person and tries to possess it. The Thadou-Kukis in the past believe that after death, the

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4 For Shakespear, Zomi or Joumi is a sight of which is a sure forerunner of some dire misfortune, and this could only be averted by the immediate sacrifice of dog (Shakespear, 1975, p. 199).
spirits of men and women, great and small go to *mi-thi-kho* (the abode of the dead). *Kulsamnu* sits on the roadside and seizes all wandering souls except those who had slain men and beasts or had given feasts in their lifetime (Shakespear, 1975, p. 199).

4. *Chomnu* is another female spirit but it rarely causes any trouble to humankind. It is considered to be a harmless spirit (Singsit, 2010, p. 97).

5. *Gamlahlen* and *Gamkao* are spirits of the jungle which causes serious sickness to person whom they meet (Gangte, 2010, p. 31).

6. *Kaomei* is another spirit, which flies at night like a firefly (Singsit, 2010, p. 97).

7. "*Kaosie* is a greedy spirit. It can enter in a person and convert such person into a different personality, changing the voice, the behaviour and the strength. Such spirit can be released only when it is appeased with what it wants (Gangte, 2010, p. 31)."

8. *Lhangnel* is another dreaded supernatural. Lhangnel is said to be capable of transforming itself to various animals such as big serpent, a small snake, wild coke, elk etc (Chongloi, 2008, p. 139). People prohibit and fear to utter the name near river or lake (ibid).

In 1882, Horatio Bickerstaffe Rowney wrote in the book, *"The Wild Tribes of India"* that the wilder Kookies (Kukis) believe in spirits having charge of their forests, hills, and rivers (Rowney, (1882) 1974, p. 187). The idea of Paradise for the Kukis represents a happy hunting-ground, where rice grows spontaneously, and game abounds as the heritage of the man who has killed the largest number of his enemies in life, the people killed by him attending on him as his slaves (ibid).

According to the Kuki creation myth, the face of the earth is stated to have been covered with one vast sea, inhabited by a gigantic worm (Soppitt, 1976, p. 26). One day, the creator passed by the worm and dropped a small piece of earth and
said, “Of this I mean to make a land and people (in) it”. The worm replied, “What! You think to make a habitable land of a small piece like this: why, it’s absurd: look here, I can swallow it! Saying this, he swallowed the lump (ibid)”. The legend says that to the astonishment of the worm, the lump passed out of his body and increase in size until it becomes the world we now see. Subsequently, men sprang out of the earth by the will of the gods (ibid). The myth reflects the ideology that the land is the manifestation of God on earth as it creates, recreates and nurtures (ibid).

2.3 Land and Culture Relationship

2.3.1 Ecological Sensibilities of Local Communities

The seasonal variations and distinctive action patterns for survival has contributed to the Thadou-Kukis understanding about themselves. Their relationship to nature is best understood in the way they conceptualised their natural environment which in turn reflects their understanding of it.

a. Naming of the Month

The Thadou-Kukis evolve naming of 12 months according to changes in nature and positions of the moons in the sky. The divisions into days, weeks, months, years, etc., correspond to the periodical recurrence of rites, feasts and public ceremonies. A calendar expresses the rhythms of the collective activities, while at the same time its function is to assume their regularity (Durkheim, 1915, p. 10-11).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. no.</th>
<th>Months</th>
<th>With English equivalence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td><em>Tolbol</em>—There is much dust due to dry season. <em>Tol</em> means ground and <em>bol</em> means dusty.</td>
<td>January</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td><em>Bulte</em> or <em>Bul</em> is a fruit-bearing tree. It is the time when jungles are slashed for jhum cultivation.</td>
<td>February</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td><em>Lhakao</em>—A small insect called ‘Kao-Jang’ comes out in large numbers during this month. It enters even in people’s clothes, creating great discomfort in wearing when people spend their days and nights in the field huts called ‘Lou-buh’. This is the time when the trees that have been slashed down are dried.</td>
<td>March</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td><em>Lhatun</em>—It is time for sowing seeds in the field. <em>Tun</em> means ‘to sow.’ It is April when a kind of bird which chirps as ‘Muchi-tuntun’ indicating that sowing seed should commence, people start sowing seeds.</td>
<td>April</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td><em>Lhapul</em> or <em>Phul</em> stands for ‘sprout’ and <em>lha</em> means month. It is the time when herbs, trees and all other greenery sprout and germinate.</td>
<td>May</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td><em>Lha-dou</em>—This is the time when bamboo shoot grows in plenty. Also a special kind of wild turmeric called <em>Aidou</em>’ blooms in great number. It is also a time when people go to work enduring all hardships including the rain. Such endurance and bearing of hardship is called <em>dou.</em></td>
<td>June</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lha-Mul-- This is the time when the grass grows in plenty. The ground becomes woolly which is called 'mul' with such growth.

Lhajing-- This is the time in which all the herbs, grasses and other greeneries grows in height and the thickets darkening the jungle roads. The sky is also always cloudy and moonlight is seldom seen, 'jing', therefore, stands for darkness. Therefore, nights are darkest during this month.

Lhalam--The sky is at its clearest during this month and the clouds of the monsoon season started to recede. Harvesting commences which is called 'chang lam'. The moon lit is bright and the girls can do their stitching work under the moon lit night.

El-Lha--Winter sets in and the fine weather give better health to the villagers, which makes them jovial, elated, fun and frolic loving called 'el'. This is considered to be the best time of the year.

Phal-lha--This is the time when paddy had been collected after harvesting which is called 'Changphal'. This is the gathering time.

Awl-Lha--People take rest from their hard labour and all year long toiling in this month. 'Awl' means 'leisure (Thomsong, 2006, p. 23).'

The counting of month-days is not based on a certain number of fixed days for a particular month. It is based from new moon to new moon. There are stages of marking the moon as follows: (1) Lhathah (New Moon) (2) Achol-ke (oval-shaped moon), (3) Avoni-lu-tai (like breast-head, almost full moon), (4) Alihtai (full moon), (5) Aheh suh tai (waning commences), (6) Avom-lu-tai (waning 1st stage),
(7) Acholketai (half waning) and (8) Nisa-to-kilhon-tai (goes along with the sun) (Gangte, 2010, p. 36).

As regards naming of the weekdays, the Kukis do not have them in conventional form. However, after becoming Christians, the pioneering Christian among the Kukis, Ngulhao Thomsong, in his Thadou primary book published in 1927 gave the names based on Biblical creation week as given below (Thomsong, 2006, p. 22). They are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No</th>
<th>In Thadou</th>
<th>English Equivalence</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Sempatni (beginning of creation day)</td>
<td>Monday</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Leisemni (creation day of the earth)</td>
<td>Tuesday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Vahchanni (day of award of light)</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Vanghomni (day of distribution of blessings)</td>
<td>Thursday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Gansemni (creation day of birds and animals)</td>
<td>Friday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Misemni (creation day of man)</td>
<td>Saturday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Pathenni (a day set aside to venerate God)</td>
<td>Sunday</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. 4 Human-Nature Relationships

Levi-Strauss in using the binary opposition of nature and culture to explain kinship system emphasized that human possesses a cultural heritage of norms.

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5 The book of Genesis in the Bible says that on the Seventh day, God finished His work of creation and He rested on that day (Genesis 2:1-3).
and values that separates their behaviour and societal organization from that of the animal species. Only a negligible trace of the universal cultural model, that is, language, tools, social institutions and systemized aesthetic, moral, or religious values can be found to be practiced among the superior mammals. Thus, the absence of norms or rules seems to provide the surest criterion for distinguishing a natural from a cultural process (Levi-Strauss, 1970). In all the history of the land tenure system in human communities, a need was always felt as regards the conformity of linkage between man and land. Thus, there was a trend in the traditional communities to make some positive arrangements to support it by magico-religious sanctions (Sarkar, 2006, p. 5).

Land is the part of the Mother Earth, which in the understanding of the people is something they have inherited from their remote ancestors. Thus, it is to be regarded as a sacred soil with which the descendents are connected through spiritual significance. The Ornons, a successful settled cultivating tribe of Chhotanagpur, considers the bond between land and man is not to be evaluated in the materialistic background, rather, it is processed by moral obligations and ritualistic contemplation. Since the land is inherited by them from their ancestors, so it must be protected with considerable reverence and due solemnity (Sarkar, 2006, pp. 5-6). The Kuttia Konds of central India use to practice the savage Meriahl Sacrifices of human beings who were offered to the earth Goddess in order to fertilize the soil (Elwin, 1964, p. 178).

The Polynesian Society in Tikopia has a feeling for the permanency of land as opposed to the fleeting presence of man who draws sustenance from it (Firth, 1957, p. 374). Firth wrote:

If two people fight over the possession of an orchard, the chief may send a message to them, 'Do not go and fight. Each man go and plant food for himself. The land is laughing at us.' As it is said, 'the land stands, but man dies; he weakens and is buried down below. We dwell for but a little while, but the land
stands in its abiding-place.’ In other words, ‘how futile are the struggles of men compared with the permanency of the soil’ (Firth, 1957, p. 374).

Cases such as this are not lone examples; rather they are universal occurrences in the tribal domain in respect of this type of conceptual idea on land and ancestor philosophy (Sarkar, 2006, p. 6).

2.4.1 The Priesthood or ‘Thempu’ System

Edmund R. Leach referred Malinowski, as an anthropologist who recognises that magic far from being an exemplification of primitive superstition and ignorance, is a social mechanism through which the “magician” asserts his status and exercises control over the actions of others (as documented in Malinowski, 1966, p. viii). Likewise, one institution or office that plays an important role in traditional Thadou-Kuki society in mediating between nature and human relationship is the institution of priesthood. Lieut R. Stewart wrote in 1855 about the ‘Thempu System’, amongst the Kukis of North Cachar, which now comes under the state of Assam. The ‘Priest’ or ‘Themppo’ or ‘Mithoi’ consecrated the duty of identifying the angry god who had inflicted diseases on a person. They underwent an initiatory education, before they are admitted into the order. They are supposed to have occult knowledge which enables them the privilege of bargaining with the gods, and divining the cause of wrath and the means of propitiation (Stewart, 1855, p. 630). The Thempoos (Thempus) themselves are very jealous of their secret and they have among themselves a language, most probably an entirely artificial one, quite different from that spoken by the people and perfectly unintelligible to them (ibid).

There has been debate on the nature of office of the priest in the Thadou society. While colonial writers like C.A. Soppitt in 1893 and Lieut. R. Stewart in 1855 termed it to be non-hereditary, native writers like T.S. Gangte (1993, 2010) considers it hereditary. The post could have evolved into a hereditary
membership, besides there is the rationality that it is to his own sons that the priest is likely to pass down the secrets of his crafts.

The priest chants esoteric words which express gratitude and promises for future, prayer for protection. This is done in his own broken doggerel language known as ‘phuisam’ with magic words called ‘doithu’, believed to carry magical potentialities that is supposed to have tremendous impact on the spirits (Gangte, 2010, p. 12). He is deemed as the only individual who could communicate with the supernatural elements in the form of sorcery or magic and thus mediate on behalf of human beings (ibid, p. 32). Max Weber explanation of the important role of the priest and magician in a society is relevant to the Thadou-Kukis. He wrote that the priest and magicians lays claim to authority by virtue of his service in a sacred tradition (Weber, 1978, p. 440). He further noted that without prior consultation with the magician, it was not possible for any innovations in social relations to be newly adopted in primitive times (ibid).

Being a patriarchal society, the priestly position was held mainly by the male members of the society. However, T.Kipgen has recorded a few examples of women who have held priestly office out of necessity. They are unofficial priestesses or sorcerers. They performed when there is no male representative to perform the ritual. Rev. Seikholet Singson, the first ordained minister among the Thadou-Kuki Christians said that usually the priest taught his skills to his son. However, incantations or ‘doithu’ was not permitted to be instructed in isolation. The condition required that his sister or mother accompanied the son.

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6 T. Kipgen (2004) recorded the following cases of Thadou-Kuki women who acted as priest in their respective villages—(1) Mrs. Lamkhoneng Changsan in Taizawl village, N.C. Hills, Assam (2) Mrs. Vahsi Sithou of Ponlen village, Sadar Hills, Manipur (3) Mrs. Vahhoi of Karakhun village, Sadar Hills, Manipur (4) Mrs. Deikho of Gampal village, Ukhrul District, Manipur
Therefore, there was a possibility for women to learn the art though it was not the intention of the priest to impart the knowledge to them.  

In every traditional Thadou-Kuki village administration, every village has a *Kho Thempu* (village priest). The priest is counted as one of the council of ministers who assists the chief in his administration (Kipgen, 2004, p. 73). Therefore, he is a highly esteemed figure in the social structure. He is sometimes made a ‘mediator’ in terms of conflicts in lieu of his social image derived from the sacred character of priesthood. Therefore, in the Thadou-Kuki society, priesthood can be regarded as religious agency having political significance, as both a political institution functioning within a set of religious ideas and values or as a religious institution functioning within a set of political ideas and values. Their office is a politico-religious institution of the traditional social order. Though their religious function has an important political role, left to itself, they have no political, administrative or judicial office.

Stewart explains how the system of priest hood works by narrating a case of the priest in his role:

> An individual of a village, being stricken with disease, goes to or calls for the Thempoo (Thempu), who feels his pulse, and questions him as to the spot on which he first felt himself affected, and on other matters regarding the nature of his recent occupations. Having meditated for a short time on the replies, he at length names the god who has been offended, and mentions the kind of sacrifice, which will appease him, particularising the colour of the animal that is required (Stewart, 1855, 630-631).

He also functions through oneirology, which he gets while sleeping (Gangte, 2010, p. 32) or resting. This is akin to the theory of ‘animism’ in E.B. Taylor’s book ‘Primitive Culture’. Taylor’s book also talked about dreams as spaces in

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8 Kilong, Helthang, Motbung Village, Interviewed on 14th of October, 2008
9 Kilong, Helthang, Motbung Village, Interviewed on 14th of October, 2008

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which the spirit visit a person in sleep. The primitive man believed in a spiritual self, which was separable from his bodily self and thus, could lead an independent existence (Taylor, 1871).

The village priest or Thempu acts as a mediator between the sick person and the offended god. He performs the necessary ritual that is required to cure the sick person. Khosung Thempu or village priest is also the Medicine man of the village. Literally speaking, he is the counsellor-in-charge of the public health in within the village (Gangte, 1993, p. 131). The Thadous' besides believing in a supreme God also believe that there are smaller gods living and ruling in the world who are capable of harming or helping them. The sickness of a person is attributed to an encounter with such spirits, and the sickness is called "Toh khah nei." The Thempu can determine whether that sickness is the sickness of "Gamlah nat" (sickness induced by the spirits of forests), "Twilam nat" (sickness induced by the spirits of water canals), "Kholailang nat" (sickness induced by spirits loitering about the village), etc. This belief tells us that the Kukis are constantly at risk of being attacked or captured by the smaller gods of the world. The smaller gods that can harm their soul and body needs to be constantly propitiated and appeased by the Village Priest.

Savyasaachi commenting on the Onges of Andaman Islands suggests that, rituals enable a social discourse between humans and spirits. The paths along which they take are different in the normal course of the day and during season otherwise a crossing of their paths causes' illness. The spirits are, 'beings' without a tangible body and it is difficult for the human eye to know their paths.

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10 The Thempu is expected to treat all the villagers free of cost. In return, he is allowed to take his share from the tributes of grains the villagers give to the village chief.
11 Lhouvum, Kailal, Cultural Specialist, Motbung Village, Interviewed on 12th Oct, 2008
Therefore, to ensure that their paths do not cross, magical substances are used (Savyasaachi, in Visvanathan (ed.), 2001, p. 87).

E.E. Evans-Pritchard has studied the Spirit and man relationships amongst the Nuer, a cattle-herding people dwelling in Sudan. Similar to the Thadous, amongst the Nuer, the priest acts as intermediary between men and God, the virtue, which gives efficacy to his mediation, resides in his office rather than in himself (Evans-Pritchard, 1962, p. 299). The virtue derives from the office is believed to be established by God at the commencement of things in the social order. Consequently, the priest is a ‘traditional public functionary’ considered as a representative of mankind, rather than of any particular individual, to God in certain critical situations (ibid). Therefore, when he appeals to God at sacrifice he does so in phrases and this action recalls the universal and enduring character of his role (ibid).

However, unlike the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard, 1962), who are more involved in ‘cattle husbandry’ and ‘fishing’, the Thadou-Kukis in the past and the present are highly agricultural community. Therefore, we find most of the role played by the priest revolving around land in its varied form. The following chapter will mainly focus on the priestly function in relation to land rituals. C.A. Soppitt wrote:

The principal duty of the priest is in offering sacrifices to the deities, appeasing the evil-inclined ones on the occasions of sickness, and propitiating the well-disposed at the time of rice-planting, &c (Soppitt, 1976, p. 18).

Shaw recorded the inevitable role played by the Thadou-Kuki priests in dealing with sickness, using virgin land either for cultivation or for building a village, life cycle rituals like marriage, birth and death, activities like hunting, wars, cultivation and in trials (Shaw, 1929).
2. 4. 2 The Chieftainship or ‘Haosa’ System

In Thadou-Kuki village that are still under chieftainship system, the allocation of Jhum land, site for settlement within the village, access to forest area\textsuperscript{12} and the regulation of the use of rocks, water, soil, woods, grass and other Non Timber Forest Products are done by the chief assisted by the council of ministers. This is where village institution of governance plays an important role in regulating and mediating between man and nature.

Traditionally, as per the custom of the Thadou-Kukis, the Haosa has absolute power over the village land and it is his duty to distribute the cultivable land to all the villagers at the beginning of every year. In doing so, he has to consult his council of ministers called ‘Semang-Pachong’ nominated by him from different clans of the village. It is obligatory for any hunter to offer to the hausa the head and the right hind-leg of any eatable animal killed by the hunter. The villagers are obligated to give the chief a basketful of grains of rice called ‘chang-seu’ at the end of the year (Devi, 2006, p. 52). This is done as an act of acknowledgment of the chief as an overseer of all the lands and all the produce that comes of it. Chang-Seu is not practiced anymore in some villages like the case of Tujang Vaichong of Sadar Hills Sub-division of Senapati District of Manipur.\textsuperscript{13} However, it is still prevalent, though sometimes taking monetary shape of payment in the case of Motbung village of Sadar Hills Sub-division of Senapati District of Manipur.\textsuperscript{14} Therefore, it differs from village to village as to how much and which parts of the customs and traditions of the Thadou-Kukis is retain in the present scenario.

\textsuperscript{12} The forests in the villages are clearly shared between the villagers and the forest department. The villagers with the permission of the chief can access the forest, which does not fall within the ambit of the ‘reserve area’ marked out by Forest department of the government of India.

\textsuperscript{13} Kipgen, Konkhochong, Acting Chief (on behalf of her son) of Tujang Vaichong village, interviewed on 9\textsuperscript{th} November, 2008

\textsuperscript{14} Kaikhosei, S.L., Chief of Motbung Village, interviewed on 13\textsuperscript{th} October, 2008
New settlers in order to get homestead land have to get the permission of the chief through the traditional serving of ‘ju’ or rice-beer to the chief. With the advent of Christianity, this has been replaced by ‘cha-omna’ or serving of tea. Gifts like cocks, shawls or vegetables could be given alongside at this time of negotiation. The land allotted to the villagers cannot be sold. If a family in the village wishes to migrate to another village, the land will automatically be return to the chief. The member of the chief’s council with the approval of the chief superintend and transact all business matters in connection with the land—cultivation, measurement, collection of tax, etc. when a particular land is to be cultivated for Jhumming purposes by a villager, it has to be brought into the knowledge of the chiefs for approval.\(^{15}\)

According to Priyadarshini M. Gangte, ‘Haosa’ system is indeed very similar to the Social Contract Theory of Rousseau who enunciates that rights imply duties. By this system, both the villagers on the one hand and the Haosa as the chief on the other are duty bound to fulfil their rights and obligations towards each other. Gangte continued that writers who have superficial knowledge about the Haosa systems try to draw a similarity between the Haosa and the Zamindar and often jump to a conclusion that the system of a ‘Haosa’ is despotic (Gangte, 2008).\(^{16}\)

The second obligatory function of the chief as a leader is at the time of the performance of rituals. Malinowski’s studies of the Pacific society revealed that there was a strong organic unity between political and religious power, that the chief acted as rainmaker and master of fertility, and that there was a strong nexus between chieftainship and ancestor worship (ibid). The chieftainship system is a ritual and moral structure, which epitomizes the unity of the Thadou society. The chief officiates at all the major rituals in the village alongside the priest.

\(^{15}\) Kipgen, Konkhochong, Acting Chief (on behalf of her son) of Tujang Vaichong village, interviewed on 9th November, 2008

\(^{16}\) Citing on Jean Jaqueu Rousseau: The Social Contract: 1712-1778

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In the 1970’s, Kate Millet in her ‘Sexual Politics’ (1971) introduced a new way of using patriarchy. Derived from the Greek patriarchs, meaning ‘head of the tribe’, the term was central to seventeenth century debates over the extent of monarchical power. Supporters of absolute rule claimed that the power of a king over his people was the same as that of a father over his family, and that God and Nature sanctioned both the forms of power (Bryson, 2003, p. 166). Similarly, the chiefs in the Kuki society were revered like a god. Lieut. R. Stewart wrote:

All these rajahs are supposed to have sprung from the same stock, which it is believed originally had connexion with the gods themselves, their persons are therefore, looked upon with the greatest respect and almost superstitious veneration, and their commands are in every case law (Stewart, 1855, p. 625).

Therefore, the dictatorial power of the chieftainship begins with this belief. Even when the society converted to Christianity, the chief has an important position within the church and its administration.17

2: 5 Land and Rituals

Most of the tribal religious practices like rituals, ceremonies, festivals and dances are all centred on the soil. Likewise, the Thadou-Kukis of the Kuki society in the past, and to some extent today, performed several ceremonies such as purification of forest at the beginning of jungle ceremony, purification of soil after slashing and burning down the forest, dedication of seed just before sowing seeds and during the weeding season, thanksgiving or the harvest festival. Therefore, each stage in the agricultural calendar has its own accompanying rituals. There is also a ritual for building a new village. Since the tribal depends heavily upon the fertility of the soil, they develop a respect for the earth. They invoke the soil to be kind, fertile and generous as they sow seeds on it. The value of an object is therefore determined by its meaningfulness to social life (Savyasaachi, in Visvanathan (ed.), 2010, p. 85).

17 My emphasis based on my observation in the villages of Motbung and Tujang Vaichong.
Rituals also lead to identity affirmation as customary practices offer an opportunity to emphasize values, to announce, define, and re-affirm commitment to sacred aspects of customary practices. Affirmation tends to highlight group boundaries. What use do rituals have for collective identity? Durkheim emphasizes the integrative functions that rituals serve for members of societies by revitalising shared sentiments and beliefs. The rites serve to sustain the vitality of [common] beliefs to keep them from being effaced from memory and, in sum, to revive the most essential elements of the collective consciousness. Through it, the group periodically receives the sentiments, which it has of itself and of its unity; at the same time, individuals are strengthened in their social natures (Durkheim, 1965, p. 420).

There is an attempt to revive the past to make it intelligible to the people the origin of the ritual. Sociological theories on religion like Durkheim's (ibid) concept of 'collective conscience,' 'collective representation,' and 'collective effervescence,' have been utilised to look at the land based rituals as a determinate system which has a life of its own though composed of a collective of individual consciousness. Though the intention is to appease the spirits concerned, the collective observance of the rituals have far reaching consequences in playing an integrative function that serve the members of societies by revitalizing shared sentiments and beliefs. The rite serves to sustain the vitality of [common] beliefs to keep them from being effaced from memory and, in sum, to revive the most essential elements of the collective consciousness.

In order to comprehend the local people's understanding of the relationship between man and soil, it is necessary to delve deeply into historical tradition and mythological foundations. We will discuss two rituals—the lou-mun-vet or 'daiphu' ritual and the Chaang-nunglah ritual. The thesis attempts to understand the local people's own reason for practising traditional customs and practices contrary to the colonisers or outsiders interpretation. The common understanding of the purpose of ritual and ceremony is rooted not in cultural
identity, but rather in superstitious and spiritual belief. If we delve deeper, the original purpose of a ritual might not only be to frighten away evil spirits, to bring about weather condition favourable to bountiful harvests, or to entreat the gods for a successful hunt or for victory in battle.

Every ritual has three important dimensions—

1. Who leads the ritual?
2. The patterns of participation in the ritual and
3. How the ritual is constructed?

According to Evans-Pritchard, the right intention is the most important characteristic of a ritual. The canon of sacrifice or four acts of sacrificial drama—

1. Presentation, 2. Consecration, 3. Invocation and 4. Immolation

Along with these four, other features may be added such as libations and aspersions and, mostly in sacrifices to spirits, hymn singing, but these are supernumerary acts. These are termed, “the canon of sacrifice” by Evans-Pritchard (Evans-Pritchard, 1962, p. 208).

In the pre-Christian Thadou-Kuki society, the village priest called ‘Thempu’ has always led the ritual. The villagers concerned with the ritual or in most cases, the whole villagers participate either as passive observers or according to the requirement. The ritual is constructed at the site selected for cultivation or harvesting in the case of the two rituals discussed. The priest plays a major role in the ritual. He is the only person who knows the incantation necessary for communicating with the spirits and gods.

In terms of his role in the field of land related rituals, the ‘village thempu’ (village priest) of the Thadou-Kukis is most similar to the ‘garden magician’ of the Trobriand Islanders in New Guinea (Malinowski, 1972, p. 59). Malinowski wrote:
Among the forces and beliefs, which bear upon and regulate garden work, perhaps magic is the most important. It is a department of its own, and the garden magician, next to the chief and the sorcerer, is the most important personage of the village. The position is hereditary, and, in each village, a special system of magic is handed on in the female line from one generation to another. I (Malinowski) have called it a system, because the magician has to perform a series of rites and spells over the garden, which run parallel with the labour, and which, in fact, initiate each stage of work and each new development of the plant life. Even before any gardening is begun at all, the magician has to consecrate the site with a ceremonial performance in which all men of the village take part. This ceremony officially opens the season's gardening, and only after it is performed do the villagers begin to cut the scrub on their plots. Then, in a series of rites, the magician inaugurates successively all the various stages which follow one another—the burning of the scrub, the clearing, the planting, the weeding and the harvesting. Also, in another series of rites and spells, he magically assists the plant in sprouting, in budding, in bursting into leaf, in climbing, in forming the rich garlands of foliage, and in producing the edible tubers (Malinowski, 1972, p. 59).

Thus, the Thempu controls both the work of man and the forces of Nature. The magician, in carrying out the rites, sets the pace, compels people to apply themselves to certain tasks, and to accomplish them properly and in time. In the end, however, there is no doubt that by its influence in ordering, systematising and regulating work, magic is economically invaluable for the natives (ibid, p. 60). The chief of the village officially inaugurates the commencing of the ritual. He also, by his mere presence acts directly as supervisor of labour, and sees to it that people do not skimp their work, or lag behind with it.18 Another institution that plays an important role as the locus of control in the ritual performance is

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18 Lhouvum, Vumpao, Joint Secretary of Motbung Semang-Pachong Village Council, interviewed on 14th October 2008
the ‘tucha’ and ‘becha’. They have an important role in almost all the rituals that are performed in the Thadou-Kuki society.

Another important characteristic of rituals is the words in magic called *doithu* and the incantations called *phuisam*. In analysing the direct verbal expressions in the magical formulae, we can assume that these modes of thinking must have somehow guided those who shaped them (Malinowski, 1972, p. 428). Each spell shows unmistakable signs of being a collection of linguistic additions from different epochs (ibid). The local people are deeply convinced of the mysterious, intrinsic powers of certain words as these words are believed to have virtue in their own right and have come into existence from primeval times and exercising their influence directly (ibid, p. 451).

In explicit phraseology, the predominant features of spells are—

1) Lists of ancestral names
2) Invocations of ancestral spirits
3) Mythological allusions
4) Similes and exaggerations

19 *Tuchas'* are considered the right-hand men of the ego. They have to do whatever work is there to be performed on behalf of the ego. The Tucha is selected amongst the father’s sister’s family, sister’s family or daughter’s family. The ‘Becha’ may be termed as representative in nature or spokesperson who has been vested with the full power and authority of an ego. A ‘becha’ need not be chosen from amongst one relative, but can be chosen amongst one clan members, a close friend or any person with the ability to shoulder the responsibilities required of the title.

20 According to Malinowski, in translating word for word the native text, each expression and formative affixes should be rendered to its English equivalent. There are two main difficulties to overcome in order to render it to free intelligible English. Many of the words found in magic do not belong to ordinary speech, but they are ‘archaisms’, ‘mythical names’ and ‘strange compounds’, formed according to unusual linguistic rules. Thus, the first task is to unveil the obsolete expressions, the mythical references, and to find the present day equivalents of the words. There is also the difficulty in linking these meanings together. This is because magic is not build in a narrative style and does not intent to communicate ideas from one person to another nor contains a consistent meaning. It is an instrument serving special purposes, intended for the exercise of man’s specific power over things (Malinowski, 1972, p. 432).
5) Depreciating contrasts between the companions and the reciter—most of them expressing an anticipation of the favourable results aimed at in the spell (ibid, p. 451).

2.5.1 Rituals for Purifying Land

a. The Lou-Mun-Vet and Daiphu Ritual

The Lou-mun-vet Ritual (ritual performed before cultivation): Lou means ‘field’ and boldan means ‘the method of cultivation’. The word louboldan means the method of cultivating one’s field. One person from each household in the village would go out in the jungle to locate a site for cultivation within the area earmarked for that particular year by the village chief and his ministers. (Gangte, 1993, p. 191) Here cultivation is related to the method of Jhum cultivation on the slopes of the hills.21 “In the process, each man makes his markings at various places at regular intervals by the side of a tree by cutting a little portion of its trunk. This marking operation is called ‘Lou Chan.’ Such sign-marks are much respected as they indicate that the particular portion or portions of land covered by such markings are already in possession of someone (ibid).”

In the Thadou Kuki society, the part of agricultural activity that require brawn like cutting and clearing of the jungle and burning them down is mostly attributed to men. Women predominate in the tasks of the more monotonous nature like planting, weeding, seed selection, winnowing of grains and seed storage etc. However, both men and women equally contribute in the harvesting and threshing of grains.22 The women are logically charged with all the tasks involving the protection of things that grow and shoot or that are green and tender. It is considered the women’s duty to watch over the growth of the young humans and animals. Besides hoeing, the women’s work includes gathering herbs and vegetables in the garden (Bourdieu, 2007).

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21 Lhouvum, Kailal, Cultural Specialist from Motbung Village, Interviewed on 12th October, 2008
22 The discussion on the social organization of farming is elaborated in chapter 6.
During the month of March, the Chief fixes a date for clearing the jungle in the Jhum fields by setting the jungle on fire. During the month of January (tolbol), February (bulte) and March (Lhakao) after the clearing of the jungle, there is a stage ‘chap-phou’, in which the cut-down twigs, trees are dried under the sun before it is burn. When the time comes to “slash and burn,” the chief takes into consideration the degree of sunlight (nisat dan), rain and dew drops frequency.\(^{23}\)

On the appointed date, all the villagers go to the fields and set fire on the jungle. After setting the jungle on fire all come back to the houses. The women of each house would clean and sweep the front courtyards. This is done because of the belief that if the courtyards of the houses in the village are not cleaned and swept well, fire would not burn properly in the jungle of the jhum fields (Goswami, 1985, p. 88). It is customary for all the villagers to remain inside their houses the whole of the next day, that is, after the day in which the forest is put on fire (ibid). This tradition of remaining inside the house is called ‘Vam-Nit’.\(^{24}\) ‘Vam’ means ashes and ‘nit’ means observance. This observance of curfew is done as a symbolic expression of condolences for all the animals and insects that have perished in the jungle fire (ibid).

This ritual is associated with the belief, which has passed down through generations that whenever there is fire in the forest, the relatives of the animals, the wild cats (Sangali) and ghosts that lives in forest, would come to search for the missing relatives. The touch of these forest spirits was believed to have a hazardous impact on the health of the person, leading to their death most of the time. This is the reason why people are terrified to spend the night after the burning of the jungle. One informant, Satkholal Lhouvum narrates an incident that involved a village priest (thempu) from one Buning village who refused to

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\(^{23}\) Lhouvum, Satkholal, Cultual Specialist & aged group of Motbung Village, interviewed on 12th October, 2008

\(^{24}\) Lhouvum, Satkholal, Cultual Specialist & aged group of Motbung Village, interviewed on 12th October, 2008
honour the belief. He died the same night. This might be the reason why there
is a taboo against sleeping in the field when the ashes are still black and fresh.

They would build a hut in their field for temporary retirement. To ascertain the
auspicious time for settlement, they plant onions in the field among the ashes.
Until and unless there is a sprout in the onion, they do not spend the night in the
field. With the first sign of germination, which is referred to as 'loumit asoh tai-e',
it is permissible to sleep in the hut built in the field. Bourdieu records that the
Kabylia people of Algeria celebrates the return of spring as the return of life. He
wrote, "...life has emerged on the face of the earth, the first shoots are appearing
on the trees, it is 'the opening'" (Bourdieu, 2007, p. 101). In order to appease the
spirits and relations of the animals that had died in the fire and for the blessings
in the form of a rich harvest, a ritual is done through the priest who acts as the
mediator between humankind and spirits. Gangte called these forest spirits,
'Gampi Gampa' (the owner of the jungle) and used the word, 'demon' to define
them (Gangte, 1993, p. 192). The priest chooses someone from the village as his
helper. They will start from the field that lies at the farthest most end, this will
continue for two days until they finish performing in all the field of each
villagers.

Each cultivator collects the following articles (Goswami, 1985, p. 88):--

1. An egg of a hen
2. Leaves of the shrub called 'daikham'. Leaves of the shrub called 'loudai'.
3. Nine small and one big bead of clay called 'khichang'.
4. One piece of very soft newly sprouted banana leaf called 'najih'.
5. A clay-figure of a squirrel called 'thoche' and that of a bird called 'vengke'.

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25 Lhouvum, Satkholal, Cultural Specialist & aged group of Motbung Village, Interviewed on 12th October, 2008
26 Onions take the shortest span of time to sprout and grow into a full plant as compared to other vegetables that are grown by the Kukis
6. A clay pot of wine called 'jubel'. A water pot of made of clay called 'twibel'.

7. Nine small and one big clay figures of mithun called 'sel'.

8. A clay figure of a dead body called 'sohlung'.

9. A small clay model of an elephant tusk called 'saiha'.

10. A piece of rootstock of a plant called 'daibal'. The daibal root is like the rootstock of colocasia of the arum family.

11. A piece of 'dai-ai,' a kind of wild turmeric

12. A piece of 'langbel (tiny crystal)

13. A swab of cotton and rice called 'phaidam'.

14. One 'gopitul' (bamboo pole)

The spirit manifests itself, is represented, or is propitiated in these material forms. The priest visits every cultivator's plot of land. At the edge of each plot, the priest arranges some articles in a circular formation beneath a tree. At the time of preparation, of the Daiphu the priest first arranges the materials in the formation of a circle. The egg is, however, kept apart for the time being either in the pocket or in bag of the priest or in a basket of the landowner. The priest then utters the following incantations sprinkling drops of wine near the daiphu materials in between his recitation:

O you wine which is prepared from the paddy and mim seeds.

May you propitiate the god of heaven and Nunjai, the god of the spheres.

(The priest sprinkles drops of wine from a small clay container he holds.)

Daikham Kaphu Bangin Daiyin

Loudai Kaphu Begin Daiyin
Siel Som Kapeh Kalhaina Nahe

Dah Pi Dahbu Kalutna Nahe

Khichang A Kalutna Nahe

Ka Ahpi Vom Tui, Ka Ahpi Bong Tui a Kalut Nahi.

Hiche Lou Munna Eisu Sedinga Daiyin

Mim Lha Chang Lha Kakouna Ahi

Tidam Ludam Kakouna Ahi

Free Translations:
Let the protecting herb calm the evil.
Let the calming herb bring in peace.
I offer you ten mithuns.
I submit before you with a set of gongs.
I surrender before you with beads.
I offer you in tribute the eggs of my black hen and grey hen.
Calm the evil that comes to destroy the paddy.
My prayer is for the souls of paddy.
My prayer is for good health (Gangte, 1993, p. 193). 27
The priest then takes out the egg, holds it in his hand, and chants the following incantation:

Nang ka tuilung theng ka tuilung vah
Kapun nadohngaija kadoh nahi
kapan Nadoh ngaija kadoh nahi
Tukum in Dampo'n nate phapo'n nate natileh
Tomsan tomvom in hin sep hen
Damna'n nate phana'n nate natileh

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27 Necessary changes made by Luntinsat Kipgen, Cultural Specialist, 28 July, 2010
Ka ahtui chih hunglet in hung thengselin (Goswami, 1985, p. 90)

**Free Translations:**

O, you egg! Your heart is clean and shining.

As my grandfather and my father used to ask you

I too now ask you whether during this year the owner

of this plot of land would be afflicted with diseases which

might even cause death to him. If it be so, as an indication

of it may the liquid inside you turn black and red. If it is not

to be, may the liquid inside you ooze out

in all its freshness.

After uttering the above words, the priest makes a small hole on the egg and peeps through it. If the inner liquid is fresh, shining and full, it presages good harvest and good health for the landowner. However, if it is black and red, it portends a bad harvest and possibilities of eventualities of death to the owner of the land. It is up to the discretion of the landowner to abandon cultivation because of such ill omen. Sometimes, the priest in his judiciousness does not reveal such ill-fated portent to the owner of the land (Goswami, 1985, p. 90).

He then plants the *turmeric* roots in a hole on the ground and covers it with soil and does the same with the *daibol* (the rootstock of colocasia of the arum family) roots (ibid, p. 91). He sprinkles drops of wine on the ring of bamboo sticks around the *roots* (ibid). After the ritual is performed, the owner of the land will go back to check on it, whether it is still intact. If the roots that is planted remains intact and articles inside have been lightly covered with soil, then it is presumed that the land was meant for them and that it would bring them good health and

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28 Necessary changes made by Luntinsat Kipgen, Cultural Specialist, 8 Nov., 2010
good fortune. After this, they wait upon the answer in their dreams, built a hut in the agricultural field and they would happily prepare themselves for agriculture.29

**b. Twikuh Thoina Ritual**

In case a natural water-spring happens to exist in a particular plot of land, the owner is required to perform the *twikuh thoina ritual* in addition to the *daiphu* on the same day (Goswami, 1985, p. 91). "Twikuh" means water-spring and "thoina" means rites. The priest makes a small depression at the mouth of the spring, to collect the spring water (ibid). He stands facing the current of the flowing water of the spring, keeps the *Longbel* (a type of tiny crystals) in his pocket and holds the *Phaidam* (a little quantity of rice within a cotton swab) in his hand (ibid, p. 91-92).

The priest utters an incantation and throws the *phaidam* into the water. If the *Phaidam* remains submerged in the water, it is taken as a sign to go-ahead with the ritual (ibid, p. 92).31 There is then a make-believe conversation between the priest and the spirits of the water-spring. In the ritual, the priest negotiates with the spirits of the water-spring. He presents them with objects, which represents a gong and a red cloth in exchange for protection from ailment of the body and the mind. He then requests them to remain seven steps under the earth while they would reside on the surface. He also explains to them the rationality of keeping a distance from the human inhabitants assuming that they would not like to smell the bad odour of urine and excrement. Saying the above words, the priest drinks a handful of water of the spring. He then puts the *langbel* on the ground by the side of the spring (Goswami, 1985, p. 92-93).32

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29 Singson, Tongkholam, Cultural Specialist, Motbung Village, interviewed on 13th October, 2008
30 Kilong, Helthang, Cultural Specialist, Motbung Village, Interviewed on 14th October, 2008
31 Even if the *Phaidam* remains floated the ritual is performed tough it may not be of much benefit
32 Necessary changes made by Helthang Kilong, cultural specialist of Motbung village, interviewed on 14th October 2008). Goswami did his fieldwork in Haflong, which is in North
In this ritual, we see them negotiating with the spirits who are thought to be earlier possessors of the land. Savyasaachi in citing a similar case of the Onges of Andaman Islands posits how ritual identifies those elements that transform a place into living space (Savyasaachi, 2001, p. 86). For the Onges, it is based on the belief that although spirits, humans, and animals share a common space, it is through their different capacities for movement that each remains alive within their different places within that space (ibid). The space is shared between nature (including humans) and supernatural (including spirits), and between human beings and non-human beings.

2.5.2 Ritual to Invoke Blessing and Good Fortune

a. The Chang-Nungah Ritual or the Ritual of the Maiden deity

A similar ritual, but one that is done after harvesting, is the Chang-Nungah ritual. The ‘Chang-Nungah’ is a rare paddy plant which remains without flowering or bearing grain and remains green throughout the entire paddy season despite the fact that the others plants are turning yellow and is ready for the harvest. It remains in that form unfazed with its green leaves intact refusing to change to the tunes of the changing times, unlike its counterpart who had moved on to the next stage by bearing grains of rice. When such a rare paddy is found in one’s field, it symbolizes the presence of the sacred and it was believed that a proper reception of it will augment the harvest manifold. Therefore, an elaborate ritual reception is arranged in which the village priest, representatives of relatives of the ritual performer all participate (Chongloi, 2008, p. 168-169).

The ‘Chang-Nungah ritual’ is an interesting agricultural related ritual performed to invoke blessing as also to foresee the fate of a family in terms of prosperity in a given year. These stalks were compared to an unmarried woman. They were

Cachar Hills, and Helthang Kilong is a cultural specialist from Manipur. There are regional differences in the mythologies and the narratives of rituals of the Kuki society within India, as well amongst the Kukis settled in Myanmar (Burma) and Bangladesh

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named *chang-nungah*, meaning maiden lady. In the lore of the Kuki people, this *chang-nungah* has an interesting significance. They were considered a harbinger of good fortune and harvest. Accordingly, they were revered and adorned as if a woman and the priest or *thempu*\(^{33}\) performs a special ritual to appease it to bless the harvest and the field owner’s family.

Legend has it that this practice was due to a story, which involved an old lady and two orphaned siblings. In the story, an old woman visits the village of the two siblings. The story says that the children were kind to her and accommodated her in their house. When the siblings went to the field, the old lady would close the doors, spread a mat like carpet named ‘*dop*’ meant for drying the grains over fire in the traditional fire place. She would spread the mat on the floor of the house. She would sit on the mat and then shake her whole body. A strange thing would happen. From her body, rice grains would keep pouring until the spread-out mat became full. They no longer had to strive for a living and they lived comfortably. They affectionately named the old woman grandmother *Chaiching* or *Pi Chaiching*. The old woman was actually the spirit of the rice paddy.\(^{34}\)

With her blessing, the children became wealthy. The children however became vain and started ill-treating the old woman.\(^{35}\) The old woman could no longer

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\(^{33}\) Thempu or village priest are ritual specialist. They have lost their significance with the advent of Christianity.

\(^{34}\) Singson, Tongkholam, Cultural Specialist & aged group, interviewed on 13\(^{th}\) October, 2008

\(^{35}\) One day, grandmother Chaiching told her grandchildren, “My grandchildren, when you are tending the field, do not let any weed grow unattended, because when you do that there will be something stuck in my teeth and I cannot sleep at night due to the pain.” The siblings had meanwhile become vain in their newfound affluence and status. They did not heed their grandmother’s request but mischievously defy it and intentionally left the weeds in the paddy field unattended. Chaiching used to groan with pain throughout the night. The siblings watched her in pain and even made fun of her in the morning. During the harvesting season, Pi Chaiching requested her grandchildren again, “My grandchildren, until and unless you have gleaned every single stalks of paddy, you should not burn it.” Once again, the children chose to disobey her. They burnt the paddy pile before the harvesting was over. Chaiching cried the whole night in pain and could not sleep. She said, “My whole body is burning.” In the morning, Chaiching
stay with them. Before she left them, she told them a technique in which they could still enjoy a bountiful harvest. She told them that whenever the harvesting season arrives, she would appear as a *chang-nunghah* or maiden deity. If they heed her biddings and follow her instructions, then they would always be rich and prosperous but poor otherwise.\(^\text{36}\) Then she told them how to tend the special paddy stalk or *chang-nunghah*. Pi Chaiching named the possibilities of her appearing in the form of different types of paddy stalks. They are—

1. *Sabolkhum*
2. *Sa-jam*
3. *Sakhongma*
4. *Samuntheh*
5. *Sabite*
6. *Sanelkai*

In case it appeared as *sabolkhum* and *sanelkai*, a pig had to be used in the ritual, whereas in all other conditions, a rooster was sufficient.\(^\text{37}\) This is the reason why in the olden days and even in the recent past, there was a belief that whenever a *chang-nunghah* appeared in the field, they considered it as the spirit of the paddy and believed that it would bring them fortune and good health if they tend to it according to the instructions given.

**b. Ritual for appeasing the Chang-Nunghah**

For the *chang-nunghah*, a hut is built with length and breadth of one foot each and half feet tall from the ground on which it is erected. The hut should have

\(^{36}\) Kilong, Helthang, Cultural Specialist and aged group, Interviewed on 14th October, 2008

\(^{37}\) ibid
everything that is usually in the possession of any ordinary young woman; spool, thread, spinning wheel, weaving arrangement, bamboo container, comb, and nine sheaves of paddy. Moreover, there should be a ready fire near the threshing mill, ten coins and ten gongs should be ready among many other things.\(^{38}\)

Each family gets ready for the ritual to appease the \textit{chang-nunghah}. They have to get the materials ready for the ceremony starting with a jar of rice-beer. After this, everyone will move towards the place where the already gleaned paddy stalks are kept. Then they will sit silently around the site usually in a circle. The Thempu or the priest would come with a robust rooster meant for the sacrificial ritual.

The ritual would include a drama in which the scene between the old woman and the children is replayed.\(^{39}\)

\textit{(Tehsepi) Hepi; Na inn na hunglhunging kate}

(Acting as the old lady) Will you let me rest in your house?

\textit{In asel-le (jesung\(^{40}\) ahi). Koima ka-in na hung lhung theiponte. Jinpha nahim; jinse nahim?}

(Acting as the villagers) It is not a good day/it is an auspicious day/a form of quarantine. Nobody is welcome in this house as there is no place to accommodate a guest. Are you a good guest or are you a bad guest?

\textit{Jinpha kahi-e; Changlha kapoi; mimlha kapoi; mitphat kapoi; hamphat kapoi; Chanu lha kapoi; Chapa lha kapoi; Sumlha kapoi; Sel lha Kapoi; Ti-dam kapoi; Lu-dam Kapoi; Valpa}

\(^{38}\) Kilong, Helthang, Cultural Specialist and aged group, interviewed on 14\textsuperscript{th} October, 2008

\(^{39}\) Kilong, Helthang, Cultural Specialist and aged group, Interviewed on 14\textsuperscript{th} October, 2008
bunga kon-na kahin vetleh; hilaija hin mei akhu-in; Sihmi lamjot; Khongbai lamjot kahin tho-a; kahin jot ahi.

(Acting as the old lady) I am a good guest; I carry with me the spirit of the paddy; the spirit of Job’s tears; I bring you blessings; I carry the spirit of the daughter; I carry the spirit of the son; I carry the spirit of wealth and money; I carry the spirit of the mithun; I carry with me good health; health in the head; when I look down from the sky (valpa bunga), I could see smoke in this place. So I have come here by imitating the walk of the ants and grasshoppers.

Hicheng po chuba kahol ahi; hunglutnin; ati-a lampi-a thingtoi khat; kotkhah ding bangakoi chu alah doh peh a phol la chu alha lubding ahi.

(Acting as the villager) I have been on the lookout for such a guest who carries all those traits. Come in. Then he will lift a small wooden log meant to be a make-belief door and lead the guest to the place where harvest is kept.

The Tuchapu would take the three sheaves of rice paddy from his haversack and pour it on the mat, and heads back towards the hut of the ‘chang-nunghah’. This dramatised conversation will be done three times and each time three out of the nine paddy stalks would be used. This would continue until the nine stalks are exhausted. This is an attempt by them to revive the past by enacting scenes.41

The most common cause of affliction is the neglecting or ‘forgetting’ (ku-vulamena) of the spirit. So, the most important aspect of the process of placation is to bring it back to memory, ‘to make it known before many people’ and to mention its name in their hearing’ (Turner, 1996).42 "Understanding ritual

41 Op cit
42 A similar belief existed among the Polynesian society of Tikopia in Solomon Islands. The attitude of respect for the soil in Tikopia is due to the belief that their ancestors, who in the past owned and cultivated the land, still keep watch and ward over it. Their descendents are obliged to walk carefully lest they offend the powerful spirits on whose goodwill the fertility of crops depends. The ancestors do not take undifferentiated interest in all the lands of the community, but exercise their powers on the territory of their descendents alone. For this interest, gratitude is shown partly in ritual formulae and partly by material expressions of acknowledgement. In natives’ own words: the cultivators must be regularly “bought” from the ancestors, and, “every
practice means restoring its practical necessity by relating it to real conditions of its genesis; the conditions in which it functions and the means it uses to attain them (Bourdieu, 2007, p. 114).” In sociological terms, this means that in a mobile and fissile society there is a strong tendency towards structural amnesia, which is dealt-with by rituals and which continually revive the memory of dead persons through whom the living are significantly interconnected (Turner, 1996, p. 295). Ritual enables the immediate past and the politico-kinship relations originating in it are to be alive, in spite of the social forces working in the opposite direction (ibid).

Then, the priest would take the rooster, pull out some of its feathers, and plant it in the front lawn of the chang-mungah’s hut. He will mumble some words and start his incantation as a part of the ritual. Then the priest will take the cock and the three bundles of paddy stalks and move towards the pile of harvested paddy. Then he will cite the following incitation in which he will request the spirits of the paddy to be all around and all over the field and not move out from the field as its presence means blessing for that field.

The Thempu will take the rooster and mumbles slowly the following lines of incantation: “if the following year brings forth with it health and wealth for the family, give us a sign by your right leg, if it is not going to bring the family wealth and health, show us by your left leg.” Then the priest would behead the rooster and unleash it inside the barn. The rooster would keep jumping around the inside of the barn until it eventually dies. If it tries to jump out of the barn, they will drive it inside again and before it dies the priest check the legs of the rooster. Only the priest knows which hind leg emerged victorious. This decides the fate of the family in the following year. Then the priest would proclaim season a ceremony takes place, the re-carpeting of the sacred houses, whereby a man renders due return to his forbears (Firth, 1957, p. 374).
aloud to the gathering including the landowner’s family, “we shall be prosperous; we shall be healthy”. 43

The folklore depicts the Kukis’ traditional belief that the rice plant has a spirit or a soul. It can be either appeased or grieved. The symbolic meaning of the rites and rituals performed by the priest is to request the spirits of the rice plant to remain and not loiter from that particular field. There is a common saying among this tribe that is used in scolding children who plays with their food. It is believed that wealth runs away from people who fight, play or do not have respect for their food. The rituals facilitate a social discourse between humans and spirits. Sometimes a bigger animal is used for the sacrifice. The symbolic meaning of the sacrifice seems to be the substitution of the lives of the animal and bird in exchange for the prosperity and good fortune of the family.

The Chang-Nungah is the visible evidence of the existence of the spirits of the paddy. They could communicate to the spirits of rice plant and negotiate with it to be good to them through the medium of the Chang-nungah. There is a relation of power in ritual attempts to exercise control over the natural environment. Mircea Eliade cites an example from Timor:

...when a rice field sprouts, someone who knows the mythical traditions concerning rice goes to the spot. ‘He spends the night there in the plantation hut, reciting the legends that explain how man came to possess rice [origin myth]...Those who do this are not priests.’ Reciting its origin myth compels the rice to come up as fine and vigorous and thick as it was when it appeared for the first time. The officiant does not remind it of how it was created in order to ‘instruct’ it, to teach it how it should behave. He magically compels it to go back to the beginning, that is, to repeat its exemplary creation (Eliade, 1963, p. 15-16).

43 Singson, Tongkholam, Cultural Specialist & aged group, interviewed on 13th October, 2008 128
2.5.3 Ritual of Thanksgiving for a Bountiful Harvest

a. Chang-Ai and Sa-ai

*Chang-Ai* is a festival performed by a person who has harvested paddy much above his requirements for more than a decade. The intention is to express gratitude to God for the bountiful harvests (Singsit, 2010, p. 92). ‘*Sa-ai* and *Chang-ai* are on the same scale—the former performed by man, and the latter, by woman. *Sa* means animal and *ai* is usually translated as ‘subjugation’, thereby denoting a ritual of subjugating or having complete dominance over the animals killed. In the same manner *chang* (paddy) *ai* is seen as victory over the soul of paddy. We prefer to see the occasion as the ‘conferment of degree’ to a person who has qualified for a higher degree in the many modes of existences in a person’s life. For man, it is his duty to hunt games and provide sufficient meat for family members, and also provide occasional feasting for the villagers. Woman on the other hand, is responsible for procuring abundant grain for the family. Therefore, when surplus grain is accumulated for several consecutive years, she is considered fulfilling her duty, thus entitled to perform *chang-ai* (Chongloi, 2008, p. 141).

In religious sphere, the person who performed *Sa-ai* and *Chang-ai* had earned uninterrupted passage to life beyond, that is, heaven. The Thadou-Kukis believed that a certain devil by the name *Kulsamnu* dwells on a path leading to *mithikho* (village of the death) and she delight in harassing everyone who pass through the path. But she dares not touch the souls of those who have performed *sa-ai*, *chang-ai* and *chon*. Thus, the function of the celebrations transcends beyond a mere show of extravaganzà or wealth or skill, but is a preparation to enter a different mode of existence. It is also a celebration that they have overcome the ‘difficult passage’ towards that changeover, and such persons when they die, their bodies are accorded honourable disposal different from the ordinary mortals (Chongloi, 2008, p. 141).
b. The Kut or Post Harvesting Festival

The importance of ritual and ceremonies to maintain and preserve a strong sense of identity is felt even in the modern times. Kut or the Harvesting Festival has attained the status of a state festival and is observed on the first day of the month of November. Kut is a post-harvest festival and the most important non-religious social event for all the Chins, Kukis and Mizos worldwide. The modern Kut, first known as Chavang Kut was revived in 1979 in the state of Manipur. It is celebrated every year in all Chin/Kuki/Mizo areas of Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Assam, Tripura, Chittagong Hill tracts of Bangladesh and in some areas of Myanmar (Burma) (Gangte, 2008, p. 78).

This Thanksgiving folk festival is observed with full gaiety after the year's fieldwork is done and reaping is stored for the next full year (Gangte, 2006). "The basic concept behind the observance is, therefore, that the toiling community has to have a short respite and recreation after the year's work has been reaped and before the new-year's work is begun (Gangte, 2008, p. 81)." It is observed to mark the end of the arduous yearlong toil, sweat and hard work. It is also an occasion when the village community praises God for the blessings given to them. Such activities that intercede between the supernatural object and the society being of collective welfare in nature, observance of certain occasions as Kut and the rituals associated therewith are essentially of community in nature.

44 In the past, the common ritualistic rites for this purpose are the offering of a cock and a bowl of rice placed at the altar of the deities. The village priest and the chief preside over the ritual. The neck of the cock is cut with a sharp knife and the blood is strewn on the altar and on powdered rice. Then, the village priest will start sipping the wine called 'ju', which is prepared for the occasion. The priest will spit out the first mouthful of the wine in a symbolic offering to the deities. He then invites the Chief of the village, followed by the eldest villager present to start sipping the 'ju.' The sipping bout continues by turn until the last person. With it, the celebration commences being followed soon by drinking, singing, merry-making, dancing, sporting and feasting (Gangte, 2008, p. 82).
Rites and rituals give strong elements of ethnic affinity and influence on their social cohesion and solidarity. It also symbolizes the integrating force among the members of community, cutting across tribal boundaries and linguistic differences. Relations established by rituals cut sharply across kinship and territorial ties and even across tribal affiliation in the case of the Kut festival. These ceremonial activities serve to establish as well as preserve the bondage between the people and their territories over which they exercise their control in their everyday lives.

2. 6 Conclusions

The Chapter shows the interdependence between man and nature and the respect attributed by the Thadou-Kukis towards the environment which sustains them. Agriculture or cultivation ensures the physical survival of the group. The fact that it is valued is signified by the fact that it is highly ritualised. The rituals are attempts to appease spirits that are believed to have a temporal authority over the land and its produce. Therefore, the idea is to appease them in their favour. Though it is a collective ceremony, where almost all the villagers participate, the ritual is directed to the family who initiates it. In Daiphu ritual, it is sometimes directed to the villagers as a whole as in the case of finding a site for the community Jhum land. The chang-nughah ritual also shows the symbolic relationship between land and woman in the society. The ritual is dramatised in a way to replenish society’s collective sentiments. The core purpose is the periodic reaffirmation of social order.

As Tinker had accorded in the American Indian case, the rituals of the Thadou-Kukis reflect the tribal worldview of a sense of reciprocity and respect towards the other creations in the cosmos. The local people know the need for a built-in compensation for human actions or some act of ‘reciprocity’ (Tinker, 2008, p. 68). Rituals facilitate a discourse between human and spirits to prevent a crossing of their paths. It is a clear demarcation and marking of each other separate domains
of existence or ‘space’ and an essence of respect for the other. This mark of respect for land is reflected in the socio-cultural life of the people, which in turn determines the way the society is organised.

Today the ‘Thempu’ or Priest’s role has been taken over by the Christian pastors. Prayer to gods and spirits has been replaced. People still pray before each stages of agriculture production or before choosing a site for cultivation but to a different God. With the degrading role of the village priest, the significance of the role of land rituals has also diminished. Compared to the priest, the chief’s role is still intact to a certain extent, in villages where chieftainship system still exists. The Kut or harvesting festival have been retained and have attained the status of a state level festival, not only for the Thadou-Kukis, but also for all Kuki-Chin-Mizo tribes. The relevance and significance of other festivals are minimal in the present day. Ritual plays an integral role in enabling the Thadou men to understand his identity in relation to other creations in the cosmos, and thus accordingly, construct the definition of his own identity. The worldview of the Thadous was a religious one, even before the arrival of the missionaries. This worldview associate’s nature, man and a Supreme Being as connected in a system and attributed the existence of the cosmos to the supernatural. The feeling of supremacy over nature, hierarchy, centrality or anthropocentric attitude, which is so familiar in modern day, was not evident in the past. The encounters between colonialism and land will be the subject for discussion in the next chapter.