5. SYMBOLISM: MEANING AND CONCEPT

5.1. INTRODUCTION

Oxford Dictionary defines Symbolism as the use of symbols to represent ideas or qualities, and the symbolic meaning attributed to natural objects or facts (Distionary 1334). It is also the term used to denote the art movement of 1880-1910 Symbolism. The term Symbolism here refers to the symbols, signs, meaning and concepts represented in the Kuki traditional art and crafts. It should not be confused with the art movement called Symbolism of 1880-1910. But some of the key ideas, concepts and theories may be partially similar to the art movement.

The Symbolism artistes give emphasis on emotions, feelings, ideas and subjectivism like religious, perverse, erotic and decadent (Story, 2015). They express their personal idea through forms and signs which can be easily understood. The traditional Symbolism is the representation of various signs, meanings and concepts in the Kuki traditional art and craft. The Kuki traditional artistes were like the court artists of the Mughal period. They were not free to express their personal idea, but worked according to their traditional belief and custom-culture.

The traditional Symbolism here is the interpretation of certain symbols and signs represented in the Kuki society. There are some meaning and implication in the traditional practices of the Kuki customs-culture. According to their belief, there are certain rules as to what can be done and what cannot be done. They also have some specific symbols and signs to represent the good and the bad. The typical way of giving a message to others with signs and symbols was also practised in the Kuki culture. Keeping in mind their interpretations and beliefs, superstitious or rational, the study may re-interpret or cross-interpret the traditional interpretations in social, cultural, customary, economic and political perspective.

The study is limited to the meaning and concepts of Symbolism in the Kuki traditional society. Without going deep into the origin and history of Symbol, Symbolic, Symbolism and Signs, the study gives primary importance to the application of symbols in Kuki society.

5.2. SYMBOLISM IN HOUSE

Construction of a Kuki traditional house followed certain rules or conventions. From selection of the venue for a house to the house warming ceremony, they performed certain customary rites. They also followed various regulations like number of pillars and beams to be constructed, system of construction and what to do or what not to do. There were also some materials which could not be used in house construction like *Gotang*, cane for binding beams etcetera. The Kuki traditional house was constructed as per the above regulations and systems.

5.2.1. Site Selection

The Kukis performed a ritual for selection of village site and a venue to construct their dwelling. For selection of a village site, the ritual was performed by egg (Doungel). An egg was holed at the top and held-up on three wooden posts in triangular position like a tripod. The priest sprinkled drops of wine on the egg and chanted the following words (Goswami)

> *Nang ka tuilung theng, Ka tuilung vah, Ka doh ngai nahi, Ka hou ngai nahi, Ka pu'n nadoh ngai, Ka pa'n nadoh ngai nahi, Hiche min [mun] hi ka lou jou nah, Ding le na phul hung pha hen, Lo jou ponte nate, nati leh hung poh jah jeng in*

Translation

> O holy egg and shining egg! I always worship you and seek advice from you. My father and my grandfather also sought advice from you. May all your albumen and a little of your yolk ooze out if I am at all fated to settle here permanently and if not may everything inside of you burst out.

After chanting, the ritual was performed by burning the egg from bottom. If the albumen came out normally, the site was good for settlement whereas if the egg burst, it was a bad sign for settlement. Scientifically, if egg is burned from the bottom without any disturbance from wind, the albumen comes out normally and steadily. But, if the fire is disturbed by wind and the fire burns un-uniformly, the egg bursts. Though the Kukis performed this ritual according to their belief, the scientific experiment of fire being disturbed by wind may be the main reason of egg burst. Therefore, a site where proper wind movement and proper furnace was chosen for the village as it was climatically and scientifically good for settlement.

After selecting the village site, selection of village gate called *"dongkot"* was also done by performing a ritual. The priest by saying some chanting words divided a local rhizome called "Ai" by cutting with Dao at the edge of pothole. If both the cut pieces of Ai faced downwards, it was taken as good and they erected a stone with that Ai (S. Haokip). According to their belief, an erected stone with Ai prevented the villagers from unwanted epidemics, wild animals and evil spirits. For this ritual, it is very difficult to give an experimental proof as it depends on the way *Ai* is cut and the position of the cut piece after they fall on the ground.

The ritual for selection of house venue was performed by placing of rice in a small cleaned up space. A small space was cleaned-up and little rice was kept on the ground for a night. If the place of the rice was not disturbed, they chose the site for construction of the house (Doungel 4) and all necessary works was begun.

For the traditional Kukis, a good site for construction of dwelling house was where no insects or animals dislocated and disturbed the rice. The place where insects and animals dislocated or disturbed the rice in the night meant that there were insects and animals at night which would also be harmful or dreadful for the occupants. Therefore, they chose the site where rice remained undisturbed during the nights.

5.2.2. Direction and Position

The Kuki traditional houses usually faced the Eastwards. There was no restriction for facing only the East but, they maintained it as far as possible, according to the landscape. They never constructed a house facing the West. According to them the East, from where the sun rose was for life and the West was for death. They also maintained some restriction about direction in their culture. They never slept in a direction where the head was towards the west. Only the dead bodies' head pointed towards the west direction. They also never put the main firewood called *"thingkhokhap"* towards west.

The Kukis also followed some restrictions in repairing or extension of house. Repairing or extension of house was due to increase in family members and belongings. Extension of house needs changes in size. When extending the size of a house, one or two side can be moved or extended. It was taboo to extend the house up-hillside and

frontward, which they considered as an act of cowardice. Turning the direction of a house from one direction to another was also taboo (Lamkhotin). This turning the direction of a house is called *"in-ngonghei"*.

5.2.3. Materials

The selection of village site and house was followed by preparation of house construction materials like wood, bamboo, thatch grass and creepers. The Kukis had no rituals for preparation of house materials. The only restriction or taboo they had was in regard to the materials which could be used and which could not be used for house construction. There is a bamboo locally called *"gotang"* (dendrocalamus latiflorus) which is not used in construction of a shed for domestic animals.

The *gotang* bamboo was taboo to utilize for structures of domestic animal house (U. J. Haokip). According to their belief, animals like chickens, dog, pig, buffalo and cow could not live in a shed where *gotang* was used as construction structure or as tying strips (Lamkhotin). The chicken carrying basket called *"Ahbom"* made from *gotang* is dangerous for the chickens. Keeping chicken in such a basket will cause death. Any animal tied or kept in *gotang* for some hours will be dead. The reason why animals tied or kept in *gotang* strip or cage died is unknown. This belief is still prevalent even in the present Christian era.

5.2.4. Decoration or Trophy

The Kuki traditional house was decorated with killed animal heads, skulls and horns, bird's feathers and the agriculture products (Visual 5. 7: Displayed **animal heads and skulls as a trophy in front wall of a house**All the heads of animals killed by the house owner were considered as trophies and exhibited on the front wall of a house (N. Haokip), and the agricultural products were hung in row, below the roof of the house (Singson). All these were their trophies exhibited in their house. The traditional Kukis' socio-economy depended on hunting, cultivation and celebration of their success. The exhibited trophies symbolized the social and economic status of the family, especially the husband and wife. One could easily find the trophies of husband displayed at the front wall of the house and that of the wife inside the house.

The displayed trophies were not just for decoration or exhibition. It served as a communication to the visitors and their offspring. From the displayed trophies, visitors knew the status of the occupants and gave respect and honor according to the number of trophies. Anyone who wished to know about the class of game which was played in any particular neighborhood had only to have a look at the collection of skulls in the verandahs of the houses (Tuck).

5.2.5. Hearth and Shelf

The hearth and shelf of Kuki traditional house needed some regulations to be maintained. The Kukis practiced some regulation to maintain their hearth. The Kuki traditional hearth was always kept burning with firewood. Before the main firewood called *Thingkhokhap* was burnt totally, new piece of *Thingkhokhap* was placed again towards the main door like the previous one. They also never burnt single firewood at the hearth. To keep on burning, *Thingkhokhap* with smaller firewood called *"Thingkho"* was put continuously without total consumption. According to their belief, total consummation of *Thingkhokhap* foretold untimely death of both heads of the family. The burning of single firewood might result in companionless of the owner of the house. Totally burning out firewood in the hearth was a sign of bad omen causing loss of the family.

The interpretations and beliefs might seem superstitious, but it may be a very important culture in their social order. About the belief on fire wood, the Kukis were hard working people and had a sound work culture since ancient time. They settled in hilly forest where plenty of wood and bamboo were found. The belief or the saying might be a parable which was good to practice in work by the youngster so that they might work harder in fetching firewood. Moreover, in the olden days, the use of matches might have been very less. They produced fire from dried fibles, stones and grasses. So, keeping the hearth continously might have saved the trouble of igniting fire again and again.

A woman who was within the age of conceiving of babies was not allowed to fill up the cracks of the hearth (Goswami 80). Cleaning of hearth every morning was the duty of women, specially the wife of the eldest son or grandmother before others woke-up. And

if the wife of the eldest son or grandmother were not there, other female members of the family would do the work conventionally.

5.2.6. Numerical

The Kukis strictly maintained the number of pillars and beams in the traditional house construction. As per their belief, the number of pillars and different beams in construction of a house should not be in even number. According to their traditional numerical count, even numbers symbolized loss and odd numbers was for gain or profit. The Meiteis also have this type of traditional numerical counts in their belief. The Meiteis count the house structure, especially the pillar as *"Mei-Ising-Nungsit"* or *"Chang-Si-Chang". Mei-Ising-Nungsit* means Fire-Water-Wind and the free translation of *Chang-Si-Chang* means Incoming-death-Incoming.

5.2.7. Dos and Don'ts

The Dos and Don'ts were the restrictions for individual while constructing a house. The Kukis had restrictions on the use of certain words and where to start and finish the work. On house construction day, all the workers including children were not allow to say the word *"Jong". Jong* has different literal meaning. When it is used for calling a person in a bad mood, it denotes 'Monkey'. If the word is used with a prefix *'Mi'* and become *"Mijong"* it is used to denote pervert.

The restriction on construction work was also strictly maintained by the Kukis. After erection of the columns, pillars and stilt, beams and rafters were constructed so as to start roofing. The process of roofing was always started from left and ended at right. They started roofing from the left, and the persons who were engaged in roofing moved towards the right. It was forbidden to move leftward. For them moving leftward was the direction of evil, and rightward led them to good fortune. Naturally, moving towards right side is more convenient for right handed persons in roofing of thatches.

Holding house construction materials like bamboo and tree on one end and pulling was also a taboo. According to their belief, pulling of woods on the ground on one end made the big wild animals angry who would make nuisance at night. They always carried wood and bamboos somewhere in the middle where the weight was balanced, and never pulled on the ground. If the wood or the bamboo was big and heavy to carry

by single person, two or more persons could lift the material to avoid pulling. In physical work culture, it is very necessary to have good strength to work with rules. Pulling of material on the ground instead of lifting also specify laziness or insincerity of a person on his or her work. Therefore, the restriction of pulling materials on the ground may be for better try hard and for working sincerely in their work culture.

5.2.8. House Warming

The traditional practice of house warming in Kuki society has a specific metaphor. For the Kukis, house warming is a dedication service of the house and the occupants to God. The traditional practice of house warming before Christianity and after Christianity is almost same. It was necessary to perform the ritual before the family occupied the new house. Before they followed Christianity, house warming was performed with a ritual and chanting the incantation by the village priest called *Kho Thiempu* (Lenthang 144).

Chunga pathen noija pathen neihin veuvin
Manmasi chate khum lhan jalhan namun na
Jinglam chapa (Lushipher) in
Khan hinbol thei pon nate
Phi phi pho, Leithoulpi chunga konin
Kitol doh in kitoldoh in
Veiset aiset jouse kitol doh in
Muthei lou thilse bol jouse kitol doh in
Manmasi chate pathen khut kingapna mun ding in
Chunga pathen nin athenso a asuhtheng ahi tai
Hijeh chun tidam ludam hunglhung hen
Mitphat haphat hung lhung hen
Manmasi chate dingin.

Free translation

God of heaven and earth, look upon us
Sons of *Kuki* (Manmasi) will stay in your place
Son of satan-lushipher, you are not allowed to enter
Phi phi pho (chanting)
All sickness and disease go out of this house
Unseen evil spirits go out of this house
This is the place for the god of *Kuki* (Manmasi) descendants
As Heavenly God dedicated and cleaned the house
May good eyes and teeth be had
May sound body and head be had
By the descendants of *Kuki* (Manmasi).

From the incantation, it is seen that the Kukis believed in the supreme God, who is in heaven above. All the bad things were sent out of the house, and asked good health for the occupants. After they adopted Christianity, house warming service came to be perfomed by the church pastor or leader. The same prayer of words above is asked to God for the family members in the name of Jesus Christ.

5.2.9. Symbols in *Indoi*

Indoi is an installation from different resources to make the complete symbolism to worship god. The origin, history and legend about the *Indoi* were already discussed in the previous chapter. The *Indoi* and its components have certain symbols and meaning in the Kuki culture.

About the concept of *Indoi*, there are two versions. Some of the writers relate *Indoi* as Kuki traditional religion and believe that they worship it as a "household god" (Shaw 73) or main religious deity (Gangte 209). Scholars like (H. Chongloi), (S. Chongloi 110-121) and others says that all the components of *Indoi* are the religious symbols of the Kukis used for worshipping god. According to their belief, by using *Indoi* as a religion or as a symbol for worshipping God, they were blessed in numerous aspects.

In the incantation word while chanting in *Indoi,* we found the phrase like *Take care of me as you have taken care of the mother pig with the slanted forehead/he-goat with twisted horn/indispensable sword made from Gopi/useful gourd jar/beautiful bangle made from Gopi/pointed spear made from Gopi/cord made from a fiber tree called Khaopi* and so on. From the above, it is clear that they prayed for care, in the same manner as the slanted forehead of the mother pig, the twisted horn of the he-goat, the indispensable sword and the useful gourd jar etc. were taken care of. Taking the mother pig as an instance, in the phrase "*Take care of me as* ***you*** *have"* the performer (priest) was addressing some being (H. Chongloi 244) and from the phrase "*taken care of the mother pig with the* ***slanted forehead****",* they used the slanted skull of a mother pig as a symbolism in an invocation to God.

The articles they used in *Indoi* are all the best of possessions found in their surroundings and symbolizing different blessings. The Kukis applied different articles for representing their needs in their worship. But the best articles which symbolized

good and best were chosen for *Indoi* articles because all articles of *Indoi* are used as a symbol of worship. The components used in *Indoi* are a mother pig with a slanted forehead (vohpi dekon), he-goat with twisted horn (Kelchal kiheh), useful gourd jar (Um), Dao made from Gopi (Chemkol), Spear made from Gopi (Teng), bangle made from Gopi (Chaothen) and Cord made from a fibre plant called Khaopi. The feathers of white fowl, Se tree (Sething), a wild creeper (Vomgui), Thinghe tree, and spike made from Gopi are some supplementary components of *Indoi.* In such a way, the priest chanted the incantation by mentioning all the above components. For what and why they used the specific article for worship is the symbolism characters of Indoi.

Vohpi dehkon, Kelchal kiheh, Um pha, Gopi Chemkol, Gopi Teng, Gopi Chaothen, Pocha and Khaopi (H. Chongloi 193-200) are the main components of *Indoi*. There are also articles like *Ahmul kang, Sething/Sekon, Thinghe, Seboh, Goboh, Gopi tul and Vomgui* used for decoration and display of Indoi (H. Chongloi 200).

a. Vohpi dehkon

Vohpi dehkon is a mother pig with a slanted skull. A mother pig and its slanted skull symbolize fertility and long life respectively. Dehkon, the slanted skull conveys the central subject why and for what symbolic it is used for. Among the domestic animals of the Kukis, pig is the most productive in litter and annually.[56] Therefore, the Kukis use the slanted skull of the mature mother pig in their religious worship, symbolizing its fertility and its long life. The Kukis believe that having a longlife and many offspring is a blessing from God who also blessed the mother pig with slanted skull and production. It is my argument that, the use of a symbolic mother pig with a slanted skull was for fertility and longlife of the female member of the family.

b. Kelchal kiheh

Among the domestic animals of the Kukis, goat has a very typical character in various forms. He-goat with a twisted horn has a symbolic representation of long life. Twisted

[56] Normally, mother pigs have 5 to 10 piglets per litter and two litters in a year. According to Ask (http://www.ask.com/pets-animals/approximately-many-piglets-sow-litter-b3689b3502106ce3), some pigs have more than 10 piglets per litter and up to three litters per year. It can produce more than 20-30 piglets in a year. The life span of a pig is up to 30 years. Only an aged old pig has a slanted skull. The average age of a pig having a slanted skull may be 20. That means, a slanted skull mother pig living for an average of 20 years can produce around 500 pigs in her life time.

horn symbolized long life, and he-goat represented the male of the family.[57] The Kukis treasured goat as a domestic animal since time immemorial. Only a blessed and cared one could stay till the horns become twisted. For goats, their horn is their pride. According to their belief, they can be blessed and cared like he-goat till the age of twisted horn. About the presentation of gender, I agree with (H. Chongloi 245-246) statement "if the female principle of the cosmic force is represented in the female pig, the male side is represented by the he-goat". The Biblical Commentary gives; male goat represents strong-mindedness, singleness of purpose, and leadership rather than following (Ritenbaugh). Further, if we observe about the status of goat in Kuki society and their patriarchal culture, the statement of Biblical Commentary may be very much applicable to represent male by he-goat.

c. Um pha

For the Kukis *"um"* gourd is used for different purposes. It served as a primary need in their culture for storing water, wine, and seeds for sowing and as a mug. The use of gourd jar in Indoi may be related with a Kuki legend "Ucha Pasal ni leh Tehsepi".[58] The symbolism of gourd jar is a little different from the other components. The gourd jar symbolized good agriculture production. The meaning of *"um pha"* is good gourd jar. About the symbolic, it can be interpreted in two ways. They used the gourd for worship to get the blessing like the good gourd plant and fruit are blessed. Another

[57] According to the Biblical Commentary, the male goat represents strong-mindedness, singleness of purpose, and leadership rather than following (Ritenbaugh). Physically, goat has a specific character in nature; curious and intelligent, willing to eat almost anything; can climbed the mountain, will explore new things in their surroundings. Generally, the average life span of goat is 20 years and he-goat living till the horn in twisted is very rare. Their age can be counted from the layers of their horn. When the horn becomes twisted, the age of that he-goat may be above 20 years.

[58] There is a legend about the gourd and its sacred uses. The legend was told by Pu Ngulkhopao Hangsing of Khengjang Village, Sadar Hills, Manipur and cited by H. Chongloi in his book hongloi, Hemkhochon. Indoi: A Study of Primal Kuki Religious Symbolism in the Hermeneutical Framework of Mircea Eliade. New Delhi: ISPCK, 2008, pp.195-196. "Once upon a time there were two orphan brothers in a village. They hardly have two square meals a day. One day an old and ugly lady visited the village who was refused haspitality by all except the two orphans. They took her as their guest but apologized to her that they could not procured anything for her to eat. However, she miraculously produced rice sufficient for the three each morning and evening without the two knowing from where it came. So she stayed on. The old lady urged the two to prepare jhum cultication. They complied, although worried how and where they will get seed to sow. The lady again miraculously procured the right amount of seed by shaking her skirt. This, the two sowed. Only gourd vine sprouted up from the field. During harvest time, the two were asked to collect all the ripe gourds. They were to break all these ripe gourd and the result was a big mound of rice matching the height of the nearby hill. From thence they became rich."

interpretation is the quality and product of seeds stored in a gourd. Like the quality and product of seeds which are stored in gourd jar are cared and blessed, they prayed for ask their agricultural products to be cared or blessed.

d. Gopi

There were some Indoi components made from a bamboo called Gopi. There are two admired idioms, *"Ingo leh gamgo iti kite thei ding ham?"* and *"thing umlou na'a Go kimang"*. The free translation is: "it is unthinkable to compare the cultivated [domestic] bamboo [Gopi] with the ones in the forest (H. Chongloi 197)." and "application of bamboo (gopi) in place of wood where there is no wood" It will be convenient for the study to make clear the details of Gopi beforehand. The specialties of Gopi are:

a. Gopi is the most durable among the bamboo species.
b. It has the straightest and smoothest trunk.
c. Not like the other bamboo species, gopi is never extinct because of flowering.
d. It is the most useful bamboo, for art and craft.
e. It can be used for any craft and construction.
f. Because of its hardness, spears and knives are also made from it, and can be matched with the iron knife.

e. Chemkol & Kolteng

As the two components of *Indoi Chemkol* and *Kolteng* symbolized security (defensive and offensive) (H. Chongloi), both can be summarized here together. *Chemkol* and *Kolteng* are made from a bamboo called gopi as a replica. The incantation says "*Chemjam pha nasah bangin hinsan, Kolteng pha nasah bangin hinsan"* meaning "take care of me as you have taken care of the dao, take care of me as you have taken care of the spear from Myanmar[59]". The two components are indispensable implements used every day as weapons, so the symbolic meaning for *chemkol* and *kolteng* are

[59] In various iron implements, the Kukis always mention about the implement made from Myanmar (Burma) iron locally called "Kolthih". The Myanmar iron may be most popular for its durability, sharpness and temper. One of my interviewee stressed that the iron tools from India need tempering and modification as it was not handy to use in hilly reason. Therefore, we preferred the Myanmar iron tools which are good tempered to use in our culture.

different from other components. The subject of incantation was not the material but its power of protection.

f. Gopi Chaokol

The Kuki traditional bangle is called *Chaokol* originally of brass material, but for *Indoi* it was made from *Gopi*. About the term, the *Kukis* from Sadar Hills called it *Chaothen*, and the Kukis from Chandel, Churachandpur and Ukhrul districts called it *Chaokol*. Literally translated, the word implies *Chao*=bangle, *Kol*=round and *Then*=clean. It symbolized a Kuki damsel and her beauty. Beauty includes physical, character and socio-cultural traits of a girl. For what and why they used the article was for a life of purity as exemplified in the virgin damsels (H. Chongloi 249-250), H. Chongloi also noted that the Kuki's ethical sense of purity got top priority.

g. Pocha

Pocha is a traditional basket of the Kukis made from the bamboo gopi. While some called it *Pocha* others called it Miluh and Pothul. The difference is in the regional use. Miluh is a Meitei term used for measuring rice to cook. The capacity of Miluh may be less than or equal to one kilogram. Pocha is of different sizes, the smallest will be larger than Miluh, but can be used for measuring rice to be cooked. Pothul is another basket for measuring and storing rice, which is larger than Pocha but the designs and utility are similar in nature. The basket is indispensable to management of household chore.

h. Khaopi

Khaopi is *a* cord made from a wild fiber tree called Khaopi. Khaopi tree has more than 7-10 layers of fiber. It can be used for making various ropes. A rope in two-ply made from Khaopi in nine *"Lam"* (traditional technique of measuring from one fingertip to the other hands stretched straight at the shoulder level) (H. Chongloi) was used to tie all the component of Indoi. For the Kukis, the chief is the head of the village administration, responsible for the economy, custom, culture and safety of the villagers. The thick layer of Khaopi was compared with the chief's reasoning. In all aspects the chief could have a number of reasoning layer to administer the village. The two-ply rope of nine "lam" symbolized the plaiting of social and religious life of the Kukis.

i. Miscellaneous

There were some items which were not included among the core components of Indoi, but played a primary role in assembling and decoration purpose. As mentioned earlier, the Kukis selected the best animals and plants to worship God, the best of items like *Ahkang-mul, Sekhom, Seboh, Thinghe, Goboh, Gopi-tul* and *Vomgui* were collected significantly. These were temporary components, used for a year only. Though they were not included in the core components, the articles have each symbolism in the worship.

Ahkang-mul (a feather of white fowl) was used to decorate the Indoi installation and its pillar. The white feathers were the feathers of fowl used in the *Hun* ritual, performed at every beginning of the year. We will not get into the details of the *Hun* ritual, which was already discussed in the previous chapter as this is just the formal study of aesthetics of Indoi.

Another temporary component but one of the main was *Sekhom* (post made from *Se* tree) or *Doikhom* (post of *Indoi*), the pillar to hang the *Indoi*. For *Doikhom*, a young *Sething* having a branch towards the East was selected, which symbolized morning[60]. That branch was used for hanging the *Indoi.* The post was erected in front of the house and decorated with *Seboh* (bundle of *Se* leaves) and *Goboh* (bundle of bamboo leaves) by tying in *Vomgui* (wild creeper). In the Kuki culture *Sething* (*Se* tree) was the primary material for any structure. *Seboh* and *Goboh* were chosen because of its thick foliage. The post of *Indoi* was erected with young and elongated *Thinghe* (local tree, like *Se* tree) and tied with *Vomgui.* The Indoi was hung by the use of *Gopi-tul* at the post. *Gopi-tul* was cut from the cultivated bamboo which was smooth and of full-length.

5.3. SYMBOLS IN SCULPTURES & MONUMENTS

The use of stone in the Kuki myths, legends, history and culture has varied symbolism. The different dialects of the Kukis call stone as *Lung* or *Song*. There are several places

[60] According to the Kukis, East is associated with morning. For them morning means new day or life, early age, remain a longer life to live, hope, bright life etc.

named after the term *Lung* or *Song*. The symbols represented in stones or rocks are related with traditional ritual, culture and religion.

The monuments and monoliths like *Lhansong, Gamgi song, Kho song, Molsong, Selkhom, Doikhom* and ritual gemstones like *Salung, Changlung, Sumlung* and *Kholung* have their own symbolism.

5.3.1. Lhan-song

The Kukis practiced erection of *Lhansong,* a memorial slab for the departed family members since time immemorial. Among the Kukis, the Muyons have still treasured the legend about the origin of erecting memorial slab.[61] Carving of images like head of a man, woman, children, animals, gongs, beads, guns (Tuck 193) etc. in traditional Kuki memorial slabs started during the late 1800[62]. This era would be the first development stage of Kuki traditional memorial slabs after its inception. The second stage would be carving or engraving of scripts after the coming of Christianity and education among the Kukis (Visual 5. 8: **Memorial Stone (Engraving of scripts)** The third stage might be the introduction of colour, three dimensional and modern (contemporary) sculptures.

The erection of memorial slab in the primal stage symbolized remembrance. In the next stage, the carved image of man, woman and children signified head of the family, his family members or the heads of enemy he killed. The animal images were the animals he killed in his life time. The materials like gongs, beads, guns were the valuable treasures he acquired. In this stage, memorial slabs not only served the purpose of remembrance but also communicated the status of the departed person to others by using image as symbols.

---

[61] The legend of Muyons tells that, the *Khul* or *Khur* origin people, Chin-Kukis began erection of memorial stone when they crossed the so called mythical cave (Koroung). While crossing the cave, the snake and the tiger killed many of them. The Chongthu, who is the head or leader of the masses, informed all the family heads to bring one slate stone each and kept in one place to know the number of people killed by the snake and tiger. From that, the practice of erecting stone to remember their love and well known persons was started.

[62] This was the written information and experience of Bertram S. Carey and H.N. Tuck given in their book "The Chin Hills" commenced from the last week of October 1894 to April 1895. During their two years (1894-1895) expedition the experienced and information they collected may be later than that year. Therefore, the exact time was not known and it will be sure that what they experienced will be later by some more years.

Engraving of scripts in memorial slabs also provided the same purpose like in carving of images. In this stage, they transcript the images of the later stage into words and sentences in Roman script. Here, modern education played the role of communication and became one of the symbols to represent their idea. The latest stage also supplied the same symbolism like others. But, this is the introduction stage of three dimensional sculptures in their society. The sculpted portrait or life size three dimensional sculptures of deceased person were exhibited with inscription of his or her status on a plate. Compiling from all the development stages, the symbolism of Kuki traditional memorial slab is for communication and exposure of their social status. It is not fully based on religious and ethical belief.

5.3.2. Mol-song

Every celebration of success was commemorated with erection of stone and wooden pillar called *Molsong* and *Chon Selkhom*. The word *"Mol"* is taken from the word *Molso* (fulfilled dream) to denote the fulfillment of dream. *Molsong* was mostly erected by a person who fulfilled his/her dream individually. It is neither not related with the traditional rituals and beliefs nor custom and culture. The word *"Chon"* and *"Selkhom"* was already discussed in the previous chapter. The pillar called Selkhom was made from Sething, with bold carved line, diamond shape by carving crossing pattern, and the head or full image of the animal killed for the fest. The designs and patterns decorated the pillar and also symbolized the socio-cultural value of the festival. The image of killed animal of the fest symbolized the status and ability of the host.

The use of stone as a material to commemorate the celebration of success was also found in some old Kuki villages. One such monumental sculpture may be "The Elephant", "The Chon" and "The Sa-ai" (titles are coined by the researcher for presentation) commemoration stone found in old village site of *Chassad*[63] king in

[63] The Chassads are the eldest of Haokip clan among the Kukis. They were one of the most influential Kuki chief since before the First World War. According to the oral tradition pass on from generation to generation and some written records, it can be calculated as 100 to 300 year old sculpture. Around late 17th Century, (C. Haokip) the *Chassads* ruled south of Manipur valley and settled at *Thiengbung* hill range. The Chassads occupied Chin Hills of Myanmar to the southern part of Manipur valley for more than a century. In the end of 1877, (Mackenzie, 1884: 211) the Chassads with their tributary off-shoots once leaved Manipur valley as the chief was murdered by a high Manipuri official, when he was invited by the then Political Agent Colonel McCullock. From the above statement, it can be said that, the Chassads settled at Thiengbung Hills from late 17th Century to 1877. Therefore, the monumental sculptures will be more than 140 years old.

Thiengbung Range of Churachandpur District, Manipur. Presently, the site is occupied by his (*Chassad* king) younger brother *Singsei Gelbung* chief. The representations on the stones are images of animals like elephant, tiger, deer, wild pig, goat, a girl etcetera. Observing the images of animals and figures, it can be stated that, all the images symbolized the socio-cultural life of the Kukis rather than their religion.

5.3.3. Gamgi

The Kukis have a border pillar locally called Gamgi-song to demarcate their respective chief's land. Naturally, river and mountain range are the best boundary between two ownership of land. The Kukis erected border pillar for two reasons, first, where there is no river and mountain and second was applied to disputed border between two chiefs. The erection of border pillar was done in the presence of the Chief and his Council members, the village priest, chiefs from nearby village. They erected stone at the place where everyone agreed by taking *Sathin-salung*[64] (traditional agreement pact with pledge). Any person who went against the decision or dismantled the stone would have bad fortune in his life.

5.3.4. Fiberglass sculpture

Fiberglass sculptures are contemporary art for the Kukis. Everything about the fiberglass they practice is same with the universal practice. The fiberglass sculptures of the Kukis are *Pu Ngulkhup Haokip* statue at *Lonpi* Village, Chandel district, *Pu Tintong Haokip* statue and *Nampi Kipumkhatna Maicham* (Statue of Kuki Integration) at *Songpi* Village, Churachandpur district. Pu Ngulkhup Haokip and Pu Tintong Haokip were among the Kuki chiefs who fought the British during 1917-19 in Kuki Rising (P. Haokip). Observing the fiberglass works, the main symbolism became socio-political and religious monumental piece.

---

[64] *Sathin-salung* (animals' liver and heart) is a Kuki traditional agreement pact concerned with the highest decision making made by two or more chief with their council member to solve disputed problem or whenever they took an important decision like war. After a detailed discussion of everything about the particular matter, the congregation comes with an agreement or conclusion. A pig or *mithun* was killed for the entire congregation, and the liver, heart, lung, intestine and its back fleshy was for the decision making members only. By eating the meat they are taking pledge to adhere with the judgment. According to their belief, *Sathin-salung*, the inner portion of the animal symbolized family, unity, secret deal and primal body. Anyone who goes against the decision after taking the pledge by eating the *Sathin-salung* will be thrown out of the society, or event capital punishment can be given to him.

5.3.5. Installation Art or Sculptures

In the history of art, the so called artistic experimentation "installation art" was publicized during the 1970s (Harvey). The Kukis started installation of art since time immemorial. The Kuki traditional installation art were found in *Inndoi, Hun-ahkangtha* and *Kithoi. Kithoi* was the Kuki traditional ritual by sacrificing animals for healing. The items included in Kithoi were a macaque type clay sculpture of men, animal and fowl with a flag made from different colour of thread (O. Haokip). According to their belief, the sacrifices were made to appease the various evils which could make them sick.

5.3.6. Lom Selkhom

Lom Selkhom was the Kuki traditional feast of the different labour corps celebrated once in a year after the seed sowing season (Singson). Each Lom (labour Corp.) youth with a senior craftsman contributed one day to prepare Selkhom. A good and healthy Sething, straight, and having a number of branches was selected for Lom-selkhom. The carved textures and designs like line in criss-crossing manner, circled the wooden post with cut-mark texture. A bundle of topmost leaves of *Se* tree were kept for decoration. Therefore, visitors could easily identify that the post was *Lom Selkhom or Chon Selkhom*. The profiles (size, designs, pattern, and number of branches) of the post symbolized the profiles of Lom in capability, strength, technical knowledge of craft and their unity (Visual 5. **5: Selkhom & Mithun's head (Mizoram State Museum, Aizawl)**

5.4. SYMBOLISM IN CRAFTS

5.4.1. Thul

Thul is a Kuki traditional basket with a conical lid and is typically used to keep valuable things. It is crafted from a finely split cane, but where there is no cane, bamboo is also used. *Thul* is also called *Lel* by some Kukis of Manipur. If a man carrying *Thul* travelled with women and children, people understood that the family was shifting their village.

5.4.2. Sum

Sum is a wooden mortar used for husking or pounding rice, hilli, pepper etc. The Kukis have three different types of mortar rounded, flat and small mortar. The mortar when not in use was kept upside down, so that animals could not mess with it. It is prohibited to lick the hole of mortar by tongue as there was a story of "The Dog and The Goat"[65] in which the Dog lost his horn because of its greedy nature. Therefore, there is a Kuki parable *"Uicha'n alop jehin Aki achan'e"* translation "the Dog lost its horn because of its greediness". They never lick any remains on the mortar by tongue. Licking the mortar by tongue symbolized greediness or insatiable character.

There was also a game played by *Sompa* (*Som* boy) to test his girlfriend by placing Egg on the mortar. The boy would keep an Egg on the mortar without informing anyone. In the morning when the girl finished cleaning-up, she should pound rice at the mortar. A wise girl would check the hole of the mortar before putting the rice for pounding. A wise girl would check it so, because she knew that the mortar should be kept upside down when not in use. But a foolish girl would put the rice for pounding without cleaning the mortar. This way a Kuki boy tested his girlfriend whether the girl would be a wise wife or not.

5.4.3. Bukhe/Khelhei

Bukhe is a wooden spoon for scooping curry and rice. It is made from a good quality wood or thick bamboo. According to their belief, if the spoon was broken while serving the food or rice, male members of the family were not allowed to eat that food. It was taboo to eat food served in a broken spoon. But, actually it might not be a taboo; rather this tradition was practiced to discipline the male members of the family. As men, it was their responsibility to have a good rice spoon. Breakable spoon meant that the spoon was not of good quality. Therefore, to discipline themselves, they were not given food for not making a good quality wooden spoon.

---

[65] There is a saying *"Uicha'n alop jehin Aki achan'e"* translation "the Dog lost his horn because of his gluttonous". Once upon a time, the Dog has horn and Goat does not. One day, a lady after grinding sesame seeds at the mortar left it without turning upside down of the mortar. The insatiable Dog and the Goat begun to licked the remaining sesame seeds at the mortal. The Goat can easily lick as he does not have horn to disturbed, but the Dog cannot do like the Goat. The Goat played a hoax to the Dog by telling the Dog to keep out his horn so that he can licked easily. The insatiable Dog was tempted. The Dog takes it off his horn and start licking the mortar. While the Dog was busy in licking, the Goat stole the Dogs' horn and run away. From that day the Goat has a horn and the Dog became hornless.

5.4.4. Weaving and Handloom

There was a saying *"Numei ponkhong theilou chun aji-acha te ipiti phalbi adousah ding ham?"* which means *"*How a woman who does not know the art of weaving keeps her family worm during winter season?" In this sentence, the knowledge of the Kuki traditional weaving was the primary needs for and of the women. The knowledge of weaving symbolized the women and her position in the society.

Where do they (women) get the knowledge of weaving? A Kuki girl of 6-10 age groups learned and practiced weaving by the used of *Aige-Hoh*[66] and *Pat-sum*[67] (U. J. Haokip). After that, by helping the senior weavers they picked up the technique of weaving and thus, they acquired the skill (Lenthang). The seniors passed on their skills and knowledge to the juniors; they also do the same instruction to their juniors when they became senior weaver. The process and development of learning weaving skill was the symbolism of Kuki traditional education system for women.

5.4.5. Origins of designs

The different cloth designs of *Kukis* are manufactured by copying the beautiful shades and colours of snakes, animals, birds, landscapes, flowers, stars, atmosphere, agricultural products etc (Visual 5. 2: Symbols **used in cloths**Each cloth design has its own origin and history. The different designs and techniques of weaving are acquired from their surroundings and passed on from generation to generation after they came out of *Khul/Khur.* The Kukis creativity and skills in weaving can be traced back to the *Khul*.

The first cloth they wove may be in a pattern and colour of tiger that obstructed the gateway of Khul[68] (Bhadur 132). The woven cloth was now known as *Laijiang* or *Ponchial Rulpuiyek* by *Aimol, Ponthal* by *Koireng* and *Thompui* by *Kharam.*

---

[66] Bark of plant (rhizome family) shredded into thin strips.

[67] Short strands of thread generally of 10/12 inches cut out from the edge of woven cloth and tied together to make long strands.

[68] See, Bhadur, Mutua. Tribal Hand Woven Fabrics of Manipur. Imphal: Mutua Museum, 2000, p.132. When the *Kuki* (*Songthu/Chongthu*) group of people came out from *Khur/Khul* a tiger obstructed them at the gateway. One of their leaders wove a cloth in the same pattern and colour of the tiger. With the help of the cloth the leader crossed the gateway. The tiger considered him to be one of its fellow tigers and

Another Kuki two cloths copied from the pattern of snake (python) are Khamtang and Thangnang (Doungel 30), (Lenthang 125) (Guite) and (Koroung). Guite (76) mentioned that it was during some 500 BC. As *Thangnang* and *Khamtang* designs are copied from the snake pattern, the Kukis belief that wearing of *Thangnang* and *Khamtang* considered dangerous while crossing the big rivers. The above mention cloth designs and its origination symbolized the creativity skill and advancement of the Kukis in weaving of clothes.

The Kukis also wove the designs and patterns of what they used in their everyday culture on their cloths. The design of *Changmai-mu* (Cucumber Seed) symbolized their fond of cultivation cucumber in their field (N. Haokip). In the cloth like *Thangnang* and *Saipikhup*, the design of *Gosem-jang*[69] (bamboo tube used in Gosem musical instrument) symbolized their music culture with different tunes and note sounds.

One of the most common cloth designs is *Saipikhup*. The designs are used by *Aimol, Koireng, Kom, Purum (Kom)* and *Thadou* clans among the Kukis. The *Saipikhup* of the *Thadous* are *Pasal-Saipikhup* (for male) and *Numei-Saipikhup* (for female). The *Thadous* have a number of modified and distracted skirts with *Saipikhup* and other designs. The introduction of *Saipikhup* design and its new and innovative modification symbolized their creativeness in weaving and textiles.

5.4.6. Musical Instruments

The Kukis are music loving people. Where there is any occasion their musical instruments are played. On festivals and happy occasions, music was followed by dancing and singing. They played some of their musical instruments even on death occasion. Their traditional musical instruments which were used in different occasion of celebrations are *Pengkul, Khong, Dah, Lhemlhei, Pheiphit, Theile, Selki, Goshem* and *Pehkhong.*

---

therefore did not kill him. Then the leader killed the tiger with his spear. Therefore the whole family came out safely.

[69] The part of bamboo pipe in a *Kuki* musical instrument called *Gosem.*

[13] The *Thadou* term *TOHSAM* means incomplete work which was impossible to continue by other, used when someone died before completing his/her works (especially in craft), that incomplete work or craft was called *TOHSAM.*

The *Goshem* is a traditional Kuki musical instrument like a Scotch's bag-piper. Goshem is the most valuable musical instrument of the Kukis. It is made from a matured dry gourd, seven bamboo tubes of different length and a fiddle made from a copper plate. The performer makes various sound notes by blowing inn-out at the mouthpiece and opened or closed the holes with the fingers. The number of bamboo tubes is different among the clans of the Kukis. The instrument was used by boys when they go out for hunting a girl and in any happy occasions. The Thadou's has seven tubes[70], Mizo's have nine tubes (Lianhmingthanga 28) and the Mru's of Bangladesh have six bamboo tubes.

There is no exact and fixed number of bamboo tubes to be used; the difference in number of tubes was may be regional issue or the advancement to get the complete musical notes. The different tones produced from each tube which can be played for different songs symbolized the musical knowledge of Tonic-solfa (Western) and Suur (India) they have in their traditional musical instruments. When a boy played a Gosem inside the village at night, it symbolized he was returning from his girls house.

Another Kuki traditional musical instrument *Pengkul* (trumpet) symbolized information, salutation of guest, pronouncing of victorious. The Kukis used trumpet to convey information of time for work and rest to all the *Lom* members. Whenever any social or special guest visit the village, they also used it to give a salutation of welcoming. Any person who killed big animals like tiger, elephant et cetera and also used it for pronouncing their victorious of war.

Of all the musical instruments of the Kukis, Gong is the most peculiar and core of their culture. Gong, a circular metal plate like percussion instrument is used as musical instrument for all occasion (Lhungdim), as a bride price (O. Haokip) and ex-gratia (Doungel) in Kuki culture. As a musical instrument, it is used in all occasions (happy or grief). The sound of gong for different occasion can be differentiated according to the

[70] According to my interviewee, Tongkholam Singson about the Gosem of Thadous, "The Changkhatpu was the first person who played the Goshem. The seven brothers of Thilhas stole Changkhatpu s' Goshem, broke the gourd and divide one each to them saying that "if one person (Changkhatpu) can played it well why shouldn't we?" But, when they played one each they cannot play like the sound played by Changkhatpu. So they returned back to him. Then Changkhatpu re-assemble it in a new gourd. A bronze which is a very precious iron family for the Kukis in the past known as Mailang was cut and thinned by knife. It was not the musical instrument of Thilhas; it was made by the Kukis."

beating timing and types of different sound. Among the Thadou Kukis, it is still used as a bride price and some they make it obligatory. In their bride price, they called it "Ju pemo-Va pemo", meaning "a material that could not be destroyed by anything". If someone was killed (not in war) knowingly or unknowingly, a responsible person should give some amount of money with some cultural materials like necklace beads, shawl and gong to the decease family as compensation. Therefore, gong is used in every culture of the Kukis and it symbolized the core material of the Kuki culture.

5.4.7. Costume and Ornaments

The Kuki traditional necklace is called "Khi" made from red beads or dark amber. *Khichong* or *Khiba* is a group of beads which makes a complete necklace, *Khipi* is the main and biggest bead piece of the necklace in the central (Lhungdim). In poetic word the Thadou-Kukis called it *"Bakhi"* (O. Haokip). Necklace is not only for an ornament, it is a very necessary cultural material for the Kukis in their socio-cultural being. It is also use as *Numei man* (bride price), *Longman*[71], *Upa-naopa kilutna*[72], *Unu lutna*[73] and *Nule pa lutna*[74].

The red bead necklace of the Kukis is the most valuable traditional ornament for fashion. A Kuki women of wealthy family worn a good number of necklace and symbolized the wealth status of the family. Like gong, it is obligatory in price bride and corps price. It is included in "a material that could not be destroyed by anything" class. It is presented to the girls' family by the boy. The girls' family will present another necklace to their daughter as dowry. The Kuki traditional necklace was also used for compromising between two brothers, parents-children and as barter to elder sister by a younger sister in case of married before her sister. Therefore, the application of

[71] *"Puten tute longman adel"* is a corps price taken by maternal families to keep the relationship between the mothers family and fathers' family. In case of un-natural death cause by someone knowingly or unknowingly, two pieces of necklace beads are compulsory in the ex-gratia or corps price.

[72] *"Upa-naopa kilutna"* is a memorandum of understanding when two brothers have any misunderstanding, to compromise they present each other or the wrong one will give to the other.

[73] *"Unu Kilut-na"* is a barter given to elder sister when a younger sister married before her elder sister. She used to give the necklace to her sister.

[74] *"Nule pa lutna"* is a presentation given to mother and father by their sons or daughters to say sorry, when there was a great misunderstanding in the family, which were happened due to the negligence of sons and daughters.

necklace in Kuki society symbolized wealth, core cultural material and most valuable fashion piece.

The traditional practiced of headdress before and after the Christianity have some contrast in their culture. Before they practiced Christian belief, headdress was for both man and women. It was made from a white mollusca shell, traditional cloths and cloths given by other kings. The social status of the Kukis can be identifying by the cloths of their headdress. For that period, headdress symbolized their social and economical status. After following Christian teaching, the practiced become only for women to cover their heads according to First Corinthians chapter eleven of the Bible (Paul 809-810). Therefore, in their Christian era headdress symbolized tenderness, dutiful, submissiveness of women for Christ to her man.

The traditional hair dresses are comb made from fine bamboo splits, hair band made from a white mollusca shell as a crown and hair-clip made from a bamboo rode. The Kukis never share a hair-dresses especially comb with strangers. According to their belief, sharing of comb with strangers spread various diseases and even the evil spirit of a person they called *"Kaose"*[75]. So, for the Kukis hair-dresses symbolized beauty, health and holiness.

5.4.8. Earthen Pot

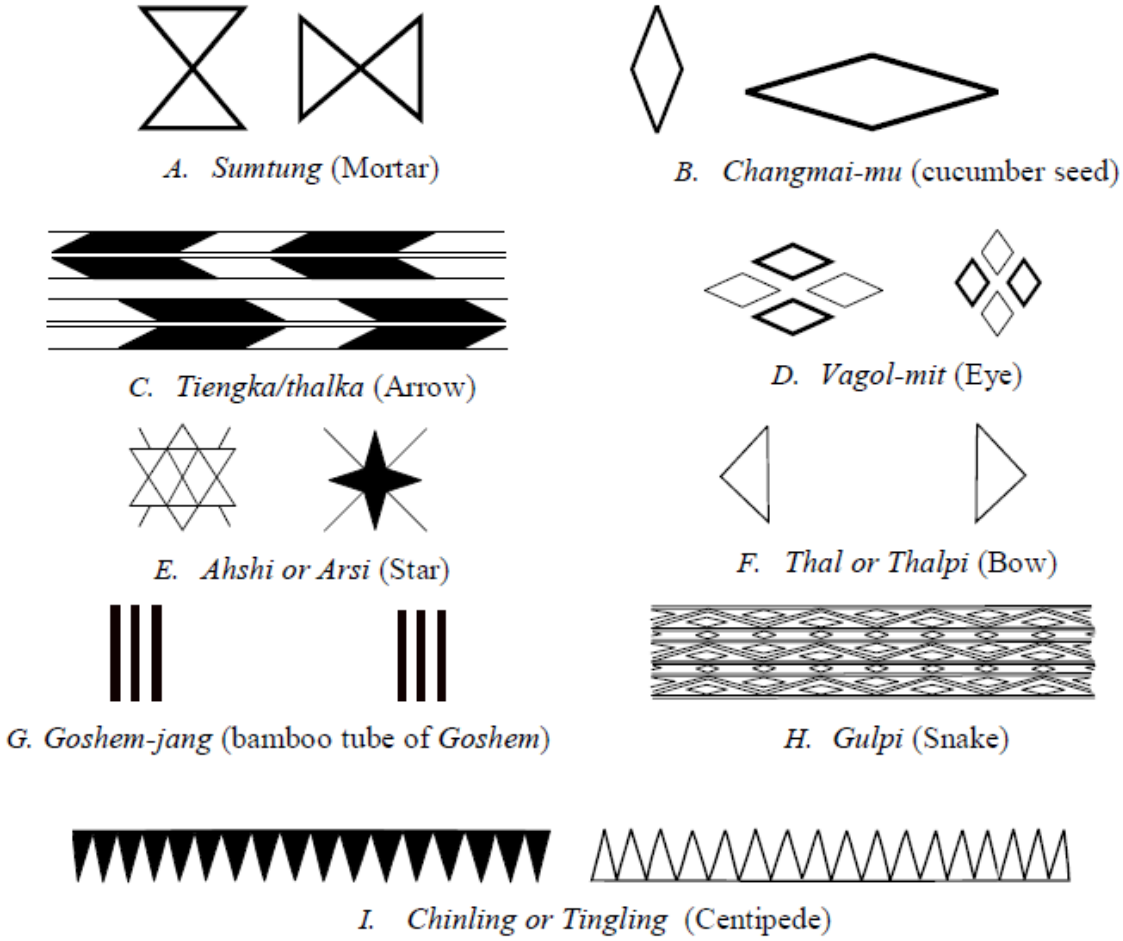
Earthen pots are widely used by the Kukis in the olden days. It was used for cooking of rice and curry, storing of water and holding their traditional rice-beer. Pot for rice beer has four different measuring sizes *Hun-bel, Dangka-bel, Makhai-bel* and *Siki-bel.* The symbolism representation by the rice-beer in Kuki culture was highly valuated. To say sorry and served forgiveness for what they done wrong to others, the Kukis presented a rice-beer of above *Makhai-bel* to the chief. And the chief and his cabinets will grant the forgiveness served and counted that rice-beer as equal to one mother-mithun, they called it *"Sutlai Selpi".* Sutlai Selpi was the higher way of asking forgiveness for what wrong they have done to someone else of the village.

[75] The Kukis belief that seen and unseen evil spirits are exist in their surroundings. *Kaose* is one among that evil spirit. According to their belief, Kaose is men who have some evil power can causes harm to any human being. They were socially excluded from the society, because of their evil power from their fore-for-fathers. While serving a girl, to avoid such person for their daughter-in-law, people said "ki samthi koppi thei hinam?" which means "is she a person whom we can shared a comb with?".

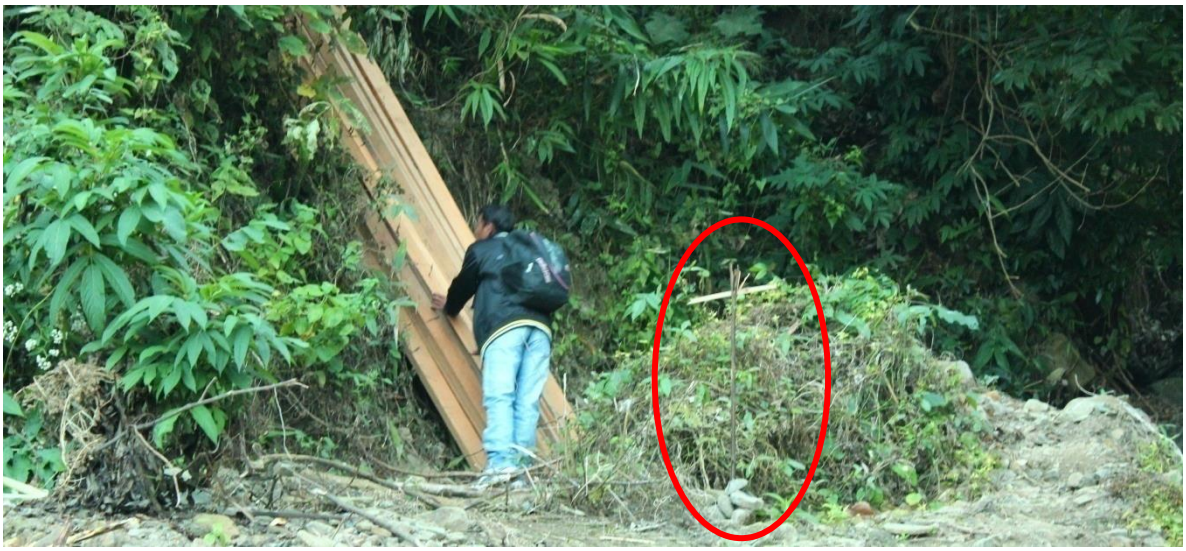
5.4.9. War Equipments

The traditional Kuki war equipments like spear, sword, bow & arrow, cannon, gun, shield and traditional term *Thingkho & Malcha* have generic symbolism of bravery, warrior, hunter and freedom fighter. Besides the generic symbolism, the way how they acquired Pumpi (cannon) and Kuki traditional war declaration symbol *"Thingkho-le-Malcha"* are very unique and typical. It is the symbol of their capability to fight every war by every Kuki village.

Visual 5. 1: Firing of Egg for traditional ritual for selection of Village site. (A) Egg in an erected three post called *Lungthu*, (B) Burning/firing of egg with full furnace, (C) The busted egg after burning with full furnace, (D) The waste flow outs after burning with full furnace and (E) Egg burning/firing in low and uniform furnace and resulted with proper.

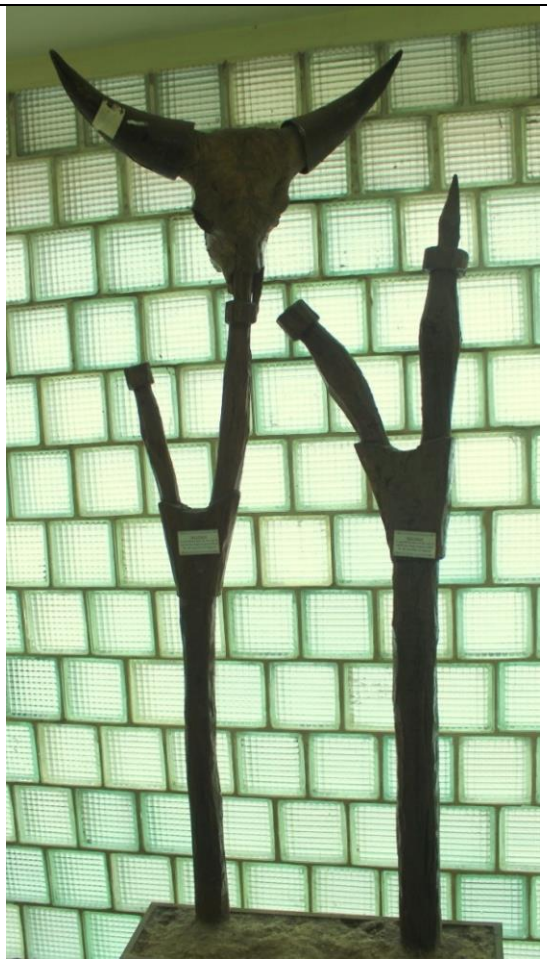


Visual 5. 2: Symbols used in cloths



Visual 5. 3: Cross, a Kuki traditional symbol use to mark ownership of belongings

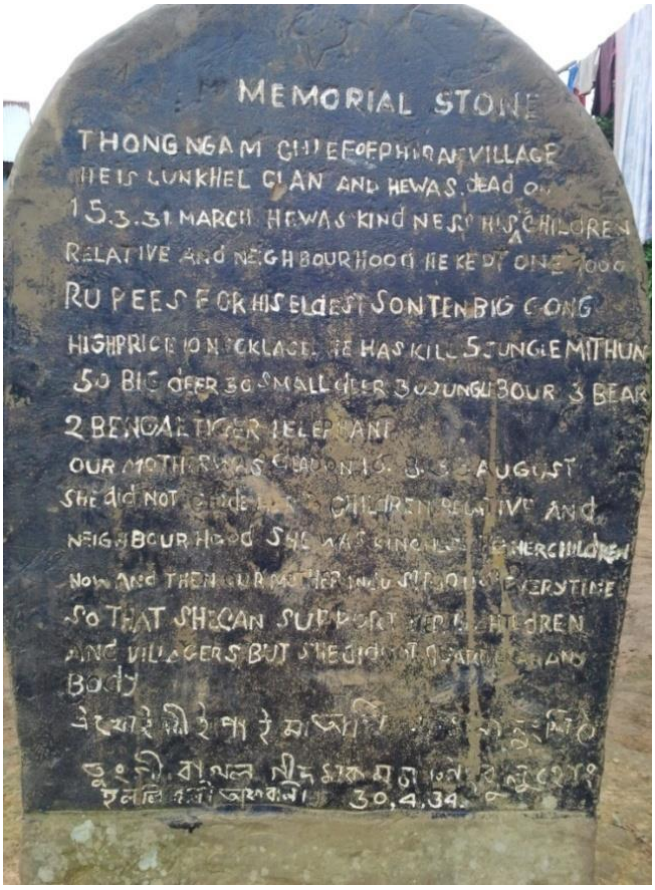
Visual 5. 4: Symbol use to mark the age of the decease person



Visual 5. 5: Selkhom & Mithun's head (Mizoram State Museum, Aizawl)

Visual 5. 6: Front roof, varandah and a storey, the symbol of Kuki house

Visual 5. 7: Displayed animal heads and skulls as a trophy in front wall of a house



Visual 5. 8: Memorial Stone (Engraving of scripts)