

The Pasts of a Fringe Community: Ethno-history and Fluid Identity of the Zou in Manipur

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Abstract

Drawing on the practices of ethno-history and micro-history, this article examines the nature of community-state relation in the borderland between southern Manipur and Upper Burma. Identified by different names, the Zou is a fringe community and a non-state entity that has sustained a fluid identity under changing historical contexts. Within the ‘galactic polities’ of pre-colonial Chin Hills, the confederate Zou chiefs lost out to their agnatic rivals (the Kamhau–Sukte clan) in the battle for local dominance around the 1870s. Thanks to the annexation of Upper Burma in 1885 by Lord Dufferin, the Zou became British subjects who later took part in the anti-colonial ‘Kuki Rising’ or *Zou Gal* (1917–19) in Manipur. From being ‘rebellious’ subjects of the Raj, the Zou community in independent India managed to get itself recognised as a ‘scheduled tribe’ in 1956. The post-colonial era saw the surge of modernising forces like the birth of local church movement, ethnic identity formation and political consciousness; but the ‘cultural metabolism’ of this marginal community allows for both resistance to and acceptance of external challenges.

Keywords

Cultural metabolism, ethnic identity, ethnohistory, kuki, Manipur, raj, scheduled tribe, Zou.

Conventional history writing abounds in narratives told from the vantage point of the state. Half-hidden beneath the stories of empires, eras or regimes remains long-term micro-histories with their own dynamics, not readily visible from the centres of power and influence. Both ethno-history and micro-history adopt reflexive critical methods more concerned with trajectories than states, agency than structure, fluid process than rigid typologies.¹ What micro-history lacks in historical breadth and scale, it makes up for in historical depth and fine detail. This piece is about a marginal ‘hill people’ in Northeast India and Upper Burma who did not themselves form a state, but had both

¹ Levi, ‘On Microhistory’.

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resisted and collaborated with different state building projects in lowland Burma and the Manipur valley. The ‘ethnohistory’² of a fringe group like the small ethnic Zou can throw into relief the nature of community–state relations in an Asian borderland across the colonial and post-colonial periods. In her pioneering study of the Meo community in North India, Shail Mayaram³ claims that ‘the animosity between state and community was a prominent aspect of the historical process.’ Reduced to a religious and linguistic minority, the Zou had been at the imperial edge of the British *Raj* before it got sandwiched between the two modern nation states—India and Burma.

Information about the topic is scanty in the existing ethnographic literature apart from K.S. Singh’s⁴ (1994) cursory comments⁵ in his voluminous ‘People of India’ project. To a degree, the paucity of historical sources for the pre-colonial era is surmounted by a careful combination of a wide variety of documents—colonial record and report, Government census, missionary journal and church minutes. The Zou for the first time entered into historical record as a non-state lineage group in pre-colonial Upper Burma till 1886,⁶ then it was recast into ‘rebellious subjects’ of the *Raj* during the World War I and successfully got itself ‘recognised’ as a post-colonial Indian ‘scheduled tribe’ since 1956. While becoming a lesser-known ‘tribe’ in India, the Zou in Burma simply remains an ethnic (not a ‘tribal’) minority. Another narrative strand parallel to this is the formation of a modern Christian identity following the crisis of the old pagan order and the *Sakhua* religion. Without the aid of foreign missionaries, educated Zou achievers in the 1950s launched a local church movement as part of their modernisation project. Later political consciousness dawned upon the Zou mind in contradictory ways. While the politics of vote bank put clan and tribe identities to new electoral uses, the number game of democracy in the same breath highlights the benefit inherent in the bargaining power of larger solidarities. As distinct from electoral politics, what I called ‘naming disputes’ or ‘nomenclature controversies’ reflect the tensions involved in interpreting the pasts for future aspirations and in forging layers of identities. This article, therefore, reconstructs the pasts of the Zou as a fringe community that had been politically marginalised by dominant politics, but retains its vitality within a cultural domain that allows for both resistance and appropriation under changing historical contexts.

Early References in Literary Sources

In his early account of the hills of Manipur, McCulloh⁷ made a cursory remark on a Khampat chief, which may be taken as a possible reference to the Zou. *Pong Chronicles*

² Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom*.

³ Mayaram, *Against History, Against State: Counterperspectives from the Margins*.

⁴ Singh, ‘Zou’ in *People of India—National Series*.

⁵ A two-page note on the Zou tribe also appears in M.R. Chakravarti and D.P. Mukherjee, ‘Dermatoglyphic Study on the Tribes and Castes of Nagaland and the Manipur States’, pp. 233–34. Also see, Mutum, ‘Zou’, pp. 1075–06.

⁶ After King Thibaw surrendered to the British, Burma was formally annexed on 1 January 1886.

⁷ McCulloh, *Account of the Valley of Munnipore and of the Hill Tribes*.

of the medieval Shan kingdom had regular contacts with the chief of Khampat who kidnapped, in 1475 AD, a Manipuri bride of the Pong king.⁸ Khampat in the Chin Hills was historically associated with the Zou settlement and this might possibly be taken as an early reference to a Zou chief whose act 'brought upon him the united forces of Pong and Munnipore, by whom he was immediately attacked, his fortress reduced, and himself obliged to fly. The territory he had governed was transferred to Munnipore'.⁹

Apart from the *Pong Chronicles*, perhaps one of the earliest recorded references to Zo or Zou as a people is found in the travel account of an Italian missionary called Father Vencentius Sangermano¹⁰ who resided at Ava and Rangoon from 1783 to 1806. In his widely circulated memoir, Sangermano recorded his observation of the Zou people at the beginning of the nineteenth century AD, writing:

To the east of the Chin mountains, between 20° 30' and 21°30' north latitude, is a petty nation called Jo [Yaw]. They are supposed to have been Chien ... These Jò generally pass for necromancers and sorcerers, and are for this reason feared by the Burmese, who dare not ill-treat them for fear of their revenging themselves by some enchantment.¹¹

Sangermano also mentioned the prevailing tendency to assimilate the Zou into the fold of Burmese culture and language. Since it was recognisable to the Italian observer that the Zou 'are supposed to have been Chien [Chin]', the context suggests that Sangermano was referring to the same group of people later known as Chin-Kuki-Lushais, of whom the Zou tribe is a historical component today. Of late, many scholars collectively refer to the Chin-Kuki-Lushai group simply as 'Zo' people;¹² this generic term is justified largely on historical, anthropological and linguistic affinities of the ethnic group.

The Contest of Chiefs for Tedim and Tribute

In the context of Southeast Asia, Stanley Tambiah¹³ calls the nature of state formation a 'galactic polity' or a political galaxy formed by several principalities and dependences since the late thirteenth century. This might be a useful way of understanding feuding

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.6.

¹⁰ Padre Vincentius Sangermano was 'one of the earliest of that type of Christian missionaries who, in order to influence people, set themselves to study their language, literature and institutions'. He became fluent in both spoken and written Burmese. But Sangermano rendered his accounts in Latin, which was translated and published into English by Dr. W. Tandy in 1833, with the support of the Roman Sub-committee of the Oriental Translation Fund. See Sangermano, *A Description of the Burmese Empire*, p. 43.

¹¹ Sangermano, *A Description of the Burmese Empire*, p. 43.

¹² Go, *A Certified Historical Study of Bible Translations among the Zo people in Northeast India*; Kipgen, *Christianity and Mizo Culture*; Khai, *Zo People and their Culture*; Vunsom, *Zo History: With an Introduction to Zo Culture*.

¹³ Tambiah, 'The Galactic Polity in Southeast Asia'.

proto-state or non-state polities of the kin-based Zou chiefdom, the dominant lineage of the Kamhau-Sukte in Upper Burma and the Meitei kingdom of Manipur during the nineteenth century.

Led by hereditary clan chiefs, Zou kinsmen before 1886 had contested against its agnatic rival clan, the Kamhau-Sukte. In this struggle, the Zou emerged with a subdued status. Published since 1911, *Tedim Thu Kizakna Lai* (hereafter *Thu Kizakna*, July 1937, p. 4)¹⁴ throws some light on the contest for control of Northern Chin Hills—especially Tedim—between the Zou chiefs and the Kamhau clan. Though *Thu Kizakna (The Newsletter)* is of little help for chronological dating, it is a highly informative source to understand Zou polity in the second-half of the nineteenth century AD.

The Kamhau-Sukte lineage controlled much of the hill tracts between Manipur and the Chin Hills, at least till British annexation of Upper Burma in 1885 by Lord Dufferin who made King Theebaw a captive. According to *Thu Kizakna*, Kamhau was the son of Khan Thuam whose ancestral village was in Mualbem, but later established—eleven air miles north of it—Tedim village. Father and son (Khan Thuam and Kamhau) launched a series of attacks on Zou villages like Thangkhal, Tungkua and Tawtak.¹⁵ The offended Zou chiefs were then smarting under these raids; so they descended upon the new settlement of Kamhau at Tedim, forcing them to retreat to Lamzang village temporarily. Kamhau resettled at Tedim for the second time with another 35 households this time. On hearing this news, the Zou chiefs raided Tedim again and burnt it down. Kamhau made his escape, hiding himself in the forest. The Zou were supported by the Thadous and the Burmese nationals residing at Bunglung. Against all odds, Kamhau was determined to stay at Tedim, his new settlement, defending it with trenches dug around the village. He approached his father at their ancestral village of Mualbem and rallied friends around him to take revenge of his humiliation twice in the hands of the Zou.¹⁶ With enough support, Kamhau led an offensive systematically against Zou villages and managed to capture the wife of the chief in Kahgen, a Zou village. In a bid to save her life, the lady of Kahgen became a willing diplomat representing Kamhau to persuade Zou villages to submit themselves voluntarily under Kamhau and pay tributes as peaceful subjects. The diplomatic mission achieved the desired effect. Apart from the nine villages conquered by Kamhau, another 18 Zou villages surrendered. Then Kamhau threatened the rest of the reluctant Zou villages—Mongken, Tualmei, Bungzang and Gamngai. Without swinging into action, the threats of Kamhau were enough to persuade the recalcitrant elements.

Since the 1870s or thereabout, Kamhau introduced a complex system of taxation imposed on his own clan as well as the newly subordinated Zou villages.¹⁷ He cleverly

¹⁴ This was a newsletter published by the Baptist missionary J.H. Cope in Tedim (Chin Hills, Burma) since 1911. Photo copies of the journal were procured by Lam Khan Piang (JNU, New Delhi) from Gin Za Tuang Private Collections, Lawibual Veeng, Tedim, Burma, during his field trip in 2003.

¹⁵ Other raided Zou villages includes Vanglai, Tualzang, Theimual, Belbi, Lailui and Khuadai. See *Thu Kizakna*, October 1937, p. 4.

¹⁶ *Thu Kizakna*, October 1937, p. 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

devised a system of extracting all the surplus products as revenue which he administered from his village in Tedim. Kamhau laid a radically new tax base for a tribal state formation and claimed the title of ‘Tedim Innpipa’ (*raja*) for himself as distinct from being merely Chief (*hausu*). This paramount Chief demanded free labour (*tuk tha, khal tha*) from each subject twice in a year, an annual basket of rice (*tangseu*) as land tax per household, meat tax (*sa liang*) from each domestic animal killed or wild animals hunted, a *mithun* or *gayal* tax (*sial siah*) from each subject village after every three years and a sales tax of Re 1 (*dangka*) for every animal sold in the open market.¹⁸ The Chief shall confiscate the house of any subject who chose to migrate beyond the Kamhau domain. Till recent times, the Kamhau tax system remained the model for the Chin-Kuki chiefs in Upper Burma and Manipur. The success of this tributary system was celebrated by a song composed by Kamhau’s younger brother:

Siahtaang kaihna Teimei dong e,
Ka hialna Lamtui hi;
Sakciang Teimei Khang ciang Lamtui,
A lai-ah Kamkei hing e.¹⁹

Free translation:

From Manipur to Falam,
I gather up my tributes;
Manipur northward, Falam southward,
I am the tiger in the centre.

With diplomacy, selective use of force and assured revenue collection, Kamhau succeeded in getting the better of his most formidable rivals—the Zou chiefs—in a bid for regional power in Tedim during the later half of the nineteenth century. He was succeeded by his youngest son Kho Cin, who further consolidated the gains of his father. Based on his field data, the American anthropologist E. Pendleton Banks remarked that, by the late 1880s, Kho Cin (the Chief of Tedim) had grown ‘powerful and cruel [and] ... held sway over two hundred villages and oppressed the poor’.²⁰ A colonial account of Northeast India by Alexander Mackenzie depicted influence of the Kamhau-Sukte clan who dominated the hill tracts between Manipur and Myanmar:

The country inhabited by the Kamhow or Sootie [Sukte]... tribe lies to the south of Manipur and east of the Toorool or Manipur river ... The Manipuris consider the tribe to be a much more formidable one than the Lushai. They are a constant source of trouble to them, and have at times rendered the southern portion of Manipur uninhabitable. They are constantly raiding ... The Lushais hold the Sooties in great dread, and are falling back before them.²¹

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Composed by Za Pau, Kamhau’s brother, being the youngest son of the Sukte chief, Khan Thuam of Mualbem. See Khai, *Zo People and their Culture*, p. 26.

²⁰ Banks, ‘Pau Cin Hau: A Case of Religious Innovations among the Northern Chin’, p. 39.

²¹ Mackenzie, *The Northeast Frontier of India*, p. 163.

Being the principle village of Northern Chin Hills, Kho Cin's Tedim remained defiant till it was sacked in 1889 by the British from their base at Fort White. Three years later, the British made Tedim one of the three headquarters of the Chin Hills under a single Political Officer initially in the person of Bertram Carey.²²

Colonial Record and Rule: Open Borderland and Fixed Boundaries

When the British colonisers suddenly intervened on the historical scene, the process for the formation of paramount chiefs had been set in motion in the Chin Hills and the Lushai Hills. The Zou predominantly led by the Manlun chiefs were also strong contenders for regional power contemporaneous with the Kamhau-Sukte, Sailos, Guites and Thadous. It is only by situating the Zou tribe within this larger regional context that we can have a proper perspective of their ethno-history. The traditional territorial base of the Zou chiefs was in the Northern Chin Hills till large parts of this tract were ceded to the jurisdiction of Manipur by the Boundary Commission of 1894.

In order to understand the territorial distribution and relative political standing of the Zou at the end of the nineteenth century AD, it is necessary to look into the practices of Boundary Survey and administrative arrangement under British colonial rule. On 28 September 1892, the Political Officer of Chin Hills submitted 'a scheme in detail for the future administration of the Chin Hills'²³ (and entered the number of tribes inhabiting the Northern Chin Hills as five in number, namely, Nwite (Guite), Yoe (Zou), Thadou, Kamhow (Kamhau) and Siyin (Sihzang). The first four mentioned are the northern most and the last the southern most. The Zou tribe was placed under the jurisdiction of the Tedim post; but the new scheme of boundary demarcation proposed to 'award' majority of the Zou population to Manipur.

The new scheme of the Political Officer was designed to suit the best interest of colonial governance and its abstract formulations were blind to the marginalising impacts that artificial divisions can create for people of common ethnic stocks like the Zou. The report stated: 'The Manipur border will presumably be fixed at a distance of 80 miles north of Tiddim in the latitude of the Howbi Peak'.²⁴ Official statistics for the year 1893 showed that the Zou tribe consisted of nineteen villages and 630 households, inhabiting a tract lying between 60 and 90 miles north and north-west of Fort White.²⁵ The list of nineteenth Zou villages included: Tuitum, Nabu, Kwunki, Tuidam, Chenglam, Mulam, Vanglai, Loibual, Savum, Yimwell, Buksau, Tunzang, Tunka, Tunvum, Hawbon, Chilpi, Beltung and Narlzan.²⁶ Some of the spellings of village

²² Pau, 'Administrative Rivalries on a Frontier', pp. 193, 197.

²³ National Archives of India, New Delhi [hereafter NAI], Foreign Department, Extl. A, October 1893, Nos. 33–34, dated Camp Falam, 28 September 1892.

²⁴ NAI, Foreign Department, Extl. A, October 1893, Nos. 33–34, dated Camp Falam, 28 September 1892.

²⁵ NAI, Foreign Department, Extl. A, September 1893, Nos. 80–88.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

names are admittedly a problem partly due to the inability to understand the local accent by the colonial recorders. Entry for the same year provides figures of villages and households for all the tribes of Northern Chin Hills (Table 1):

Table 1. Fiscal Statistics of Northern Chin Hills in 1892–94

Sl. No.	Name of Tribe	No. of Villages	No. of Households	Tax Assessment (Rs)
1	Siyin (Sihzang)	4	362	409
2	Sukte	9	492	440
3	Sukte-Gungal	10	714	639
4	Zou	19	630	550
5	Thadou	21	570	495
6	Guite	13	606	530
7	Kamhau	25	470	401
Total		76	3374	3063

Source: NAI, New Delhi, Foreign Dept. Sept 1893, Nos 80–88.

Table 1 indicates that the Zou tribe enjoyed a relatively strong position in terms of numerical size and other resources vis-à-vis other kin Chin-Kuki tribes at the end of the nineteenth century. The tribe had the second largest number of villages, next only to the Thadou tribe. Likewise, it had the second biggest number of households, next to Sukte-Gungal. In terms of the assessment of the tax-paying capacity, the Zou ranked second again, preceded by Sukte-Gungal.

Of the nineteen Zou villages surveyed by the Political Officer of the Chin Hills, sixteen were ceded to Manipur in 1894 and only three were retained under the control of Chin Hills administration, which partially explains the demographic marginalisation of the Zou on both sides of the Manipur and Burma frontier. ‘And although many of these villages were *awarded to Manipur*’ wrote Carey and Tuck, ‘by the Chin-Manipur Boundary Commission in 1894, it appeared advisable not to lose the information gained’.²⁷

The discourse of awarding Zou villages to Manipur like a trophy is understandable only in the context of nineteenth century imperial cartographic gaze that erased the agency of the local polities and people. The insensitivity of colonial policy to local interests often gave birth to the post-colonial miseries of minority peoples. It will be most unfortunate to view such colonial demarcations from the prism of migration in or out of modern Manipur. The hill tracts occupied and contended by the Zou and the Kamhau-Suktes were historically a neutral zone—‘no man’s land’. According to the boundary laid down by Captain Pemberton in the Treaty of 1834, the people of this neutral zone were described as partly in ‘Manipur and partly in Burma or independent territory’.²⁸ In the context of the Somra Tract, Sir Robert Reid once referred to this

²⁷ Carey and Tuck, *The Chin Hills*, p. 140.

²⁸ Mackenzie, *The Northeast Frontier of India*, p. 172.

spatial zone as '[t]he only doubtful point ... a small area, hatched on the map, and in subsequent proceedings known as the "cross hatched area"' in the middle of Manipur and Assam.²⁹ In fact Assam was reported earlier to have claimed some Zou-inhabited areas in 1893.³⁰ The British were anxious to 'award' territories of indigenous hill peoples like the Zou and Kamhau-Sukte to locally dominant rulers in the valley who collaborated with the colonial state.

Animated by paternalistic passions, frontier administrators in Burma and India were eager to state the case for their respective provinces or people. Recent scholarship³¹ has highlighted such 'administrative rivalries' between British administrators in Burma and India. In November 1872, Colonel Mowbray Thomson, the officiating Political Agent, came to a decision that this 'cross-hatched area' should go to Burma, and that 'Manipur has no right to make war in that direction, but that if threatened or injured by the Sooties [Kamhau-Sukte], they should refer their grievances to the Burmese Government through the Government of India'.³² But Alexander Mackenzie totally disagreed with Colonel Thomson's report and recommendation, stating:

So far as our records show, the Burmese Government do not appear to ever have exercised any control over the Sooties to the *south of the Manipur boundary line*. The whole tribe seems to be practically independent, and not to have been affected at all by the Treaty of 1834. Though a line was drawn westward from the source of the Numsaulung to the Kathe Khyoung, there is no mention in the treaty of the territory *south of this line* having been made over to Burma.³³

The truth is Captain Pemberton had not, however, visited this part of the country, for in the same letter he said 'he had not been able to go so far south'.³⁴ In 1856, Colonel McCulloch said that the south-eastern portion of Manipur had never been 'explored, and that the Manipur authorities had never tried to bring the tribes inhabiting it into subjection'.³⁵ Manipur, in fact, made a number of abortive attempts to subjugate the whole cross-hatched area and its inhabitants, chiefly the Kamhau-Suktes, the Thadous and the Zou—collectively and incorrectly called Khongjai by the Meiteis. In the Administrative Report for 1873–74, Dr Brown mentioned that in the event of any real or imagined raid by the Kamhau-Suktes, 'the Burmese invariably make the matter one

²⁹ Reid, *History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam from 1883–1941*, pp. 93–94.

³⁰ The relevant report stated that the Yoe [Zou] tribe inhabited 'a tract lying between 60 and 90 miles north and north-west of Fort White'. It added that '[n]o tribute could be demanded during the year as the administration of the tract by Burma is disputed by Assam and the Boundary Commission which should have met during the open season to delimitate the boundary between Chinland and Manipur was postponed owing to the expedition in the Siyin-Sokte tract' (p. xxxi). Also see, NAI, Foreign Dept., Exlt. 'A' 1893, Nos 80–88.

³¹ Pau, 'Administrative Rivalries on a Frontier'.

³² Mackenzie, *The Northeast Frontier of India*, p. 172.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

of complaint against the Manipur State, assuming that State to be responsible for their good behaviour'. But knowing the case better than the Burmese, Dr Brown made his own middle-path prescription that 'for all practical purposes this tribe should be considered as independent, and liable to punishment from either power it raids upon'.³⁶ Writing later in 1886, E.W. Dun saw little prospect of subjugating the Kamhau-Suktes with the imposition of colonial 'law and order'. Dun helplessly looked at the independence displayed by the inhabitants of this cross-hatched border, where the influence of neither Burma nor Manipur can be felt, stating:

All attempts to subdue them [Kamhaus] whether made by Manipur or Burma, have hitherto been unsuccessful ... Unless Manipur and Burma will combine to subdue them, which, in the present state of their relations, seems highly improbable, there appears very little chance of their altering their ways, but rather they will continue, as now, every year to grow more fearless and more aggressive.³⁷

So what is often called migrations, would appear to be shifting of village sites by these groups in an attempt to cope with ecological constraints like scarcity of suitable *jhum* land, water supply, and so on. Unfortunately such movements have been politically interpreted in some quarters to label the Chin-Kukis as immigrants or intruders into some sacrosanct areas. It would be more helpful and historically sound to see the inclusion or exclusion of the Zou population into either Manipur or Burma within the context of colonial Boundary Survey practices and its arbitrary lines of demarcations and practices of 'awarding' land and even people to its colonial collaborators. Not only the Zou and Kamhau-Suktes, but other tribes like the Nagas, Chins, Lushais and Kukis were also equally victims in varying degrees to such colonial policies and practices. Informed by colonial notions of sovereignty, exclusivist and xenophobic interpretation of the past has done a lot of irreparable harm in Northeast India and more democratic values of peaceful co-existence have often been thrown to the winds in this region. The concept of territorial sovereignty is a by-product of the clash of European imperial interests. National frontiers are the outcomes of arbitrary political or military decision that hardly 'correspond to any economically significant feature of the natural topography'.³⁸ Given the inconsistencies of the sovereignty ideas, it is no surprise that an erstwhile imperial power like Britain radically altered their views. It is difficult to ignore such an 'Irish sea-change' in Northern Ireland. On this issue, cutting-edge scholarship on South Asia offers some valuable insights to sovereignty-crazy Northeast as well as for the Indian state:

South Asians learnt the modern concept of unitary, indivisible sovereignty from their British colonial masters. In 1947 by failing to share sovereignty they ended up dividing the land. Yet it would seem that the British themselves have by now lost faith in the concept of

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

³⁷ Dun, *Gazetteer of Manipur*, p. 34.

³⁸ Leach, 'The Frontiers of Burma', p. 1.

monolithic sovereignty. A drastic redefinition of the idea of sovereignty laid the groundwork for the Good Friday agreement on Northern Ireland and also paved the way for Scottish and Welsh autonomy. An ideational change of this magnitude was not easy to achieve.³⁹

The frontier between adjacent states historically tends to be contact zones for people and products. The birth of new nation-states (India and Burma) in 1947 disrupted ancient raiding and trading routes. The once *open border zones* solidified and got frozen into *fixed boundary lines*. Inspired by visions of ill-informed modernity, the project of nation-building unfortunately attempts to reduce overlapping frontiers areas into sharp boundary lines. But it is time to explore alternative visions of post-national frontier zones of human interaction and economic traffic.

Legacy of Anti-colonial Resistance: Zou Gal (1917–19)

The Zou tribe took part in the so-called ‘Kuki Rising’⁴⁰ in Manipur against the British from 1917 to 1919. It all began when Captain Coote, the officiating Political Agent of Manipur, set out with 100 riflemen in September 1917 to the Kuki village of Mombi, where open hostility greeted them and resulted in a skirmish.⁴¹ Spreading over 7,000 sq. miles, this anti-colonial rising entailed the death of 289 persons and the seizure of 1000 guns by the Government.⁴² Hiangtam and Gotengkot Forts were two main centres of resistance in the Zou inhabited areas. Pu Doungul Taithul was the chief of Gotengkot, which was a fairly big and fortified Zou village.⁴³ Captain Steadman was the man responsible for suppressing Gotengkot with considerable casualties on both sides. The Zou tribe was a non-Thadou tribe to have participated in this abortive, yet bold attempt to oust the white imperialist from Manipur, even as a local folk song composed on the occasion of the revolt runs in the Zou dialect as follows:

Tuizum Mangkang kiil bang hing khang
 Zota kual zil bang liing e
 Pianna ka gamlei hi e! phal sing e!
 Ka naamtem hiam a, i Zogamlei laal kanaw
 Sansii’n zeel e!
 Ngalliam vontawi ka laulou lai e.

[Unpublished compilation of Zou folk songs by the Zomi Saangnaupang Pawlpi (Zomi Students Association), Delhi Branch (Undated mimeograph)].

³⁹ Bose and Jalal, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy*, p. 205.

⁴⁰ S. Haokip argues that what has been called ‘Kuki uprising’ may better be termed ‘Kuki rising’ since the latter is a ‘political terminology symbolising the national status of the Kuki’. See, British Library, London, Political Department, No. 8856 P, 27 September 1920, Burma and Assam Frontier L/PS/10/724.

⁴¹ Shakespeare, *History of the Assam Rifles*.

⁴² Reid, *History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam from 1883–1941*.

⁴³ Haokip, *Zale’n-Gam: The Kuki Nation*.

Free translation:

The seafaring White Imperialist coils like the 'kiil' plant,
Tremors of earthquake do quiver the Zo world,
'Tis the land of my birth: I shall not part with it!
Stain'd with blood is my Sword
That has routed the adversaries of Zoland,
I shall yet fight with the wild Boar, injured.

This folk song of the Zou, reflecting the collective mind of the natives, indicated that the anti-imperial fervour was very high in 1918, and interestingly the British *Raj* was compared by the native mind with the wild Boar or with a native wild creeper-plant called 'kiil'. Today this legacy of anti-colonial resistance continues to inform the popular culture of the Zou community.⁴⁴ Such a 'heroic' past gets reproduced as a 'group attempted to cope with questions of survival and marginality'.⁴⁵

Gautam Bhadra⁴⁶ had published a careful analysis of this 'Kuki (?) Uprising' triggered by the intense war effort to recruit Kuki labour corps to serve in France. Colonial records imputed this anti-colonial protest to the local interpreters called *lambu* whose influence grew at the expense of the tribal chiefs. From this colonial viewpoint,⁴⁷ the blame went to the excessive pressure of the *lambus* on reluctant Kuki chiefs to send in labour recruits. To Bhadra,⁴⁸ this causal explanation in terms of colonial challenge and tribal response seems too simplistic a model. Instead, he convincingly argues that the so-called 'Kuki uprising' or 'Zou Gal' was a pointer to the fact that external colonial stress operated only through internal local structures. There were deeper legal, ecological and fiscal factors behind the Kuki rising. Resentment to British *Raj* was deep rooted due to the imposition of Manipur Durbar laws on the Kukis in 1908, food scarcity caused by the *Mautam* (rat famine) of 1911–12 and the prevalence of *pothang* (labour tax) in spite of its abolition from the valley of Manipur in 1913.

Things Fall Apart: Crisis of Pagan Sakhua Religion

The Zou people resisted the British *Raj* and its colonial culture, including Christian conversion. The Maharajah of Manipur too did not permit Christian missionaries to work in the Imphal valley. However, a missionary called Watkin Roberts arrived at Senvon village in the southern hills of Manipur in 1910. The Zou community did not come directly in contact with any Western missionary. While neighbouring communities

⁴⁴ With little support from the Government of Manipur, the Zou community endeavours to immortalise the memory of their anti-colonial struggle (Zou Gal) through ephemeral comic strips and rap video songs; they also built modest institutions like Zogal Hall at Churachandpur town and Zogal School at Behiang village.

⁴⁵ Mayaram, *Against History, Against State*, p. xii.

⁴⁶ Bhadra, 'The Kuki (?) Uprising 1917–1919: Its Causes and Nature'.

⁴⁷ Reid, *History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam from 1883–1941*.

⁴⁸ Bhadra, 'The Kuki (?) Uprising 1917–1919: Its Causes and Nature'.

converted to Christianity, the Zou clung on to their traditional religion called *Sakhua* (In the Chin Hills of Burma, the *Sakhua* was also called *Lawki* religion). This indigenous religion is loosely labelled 'animism' in the ethnographic literature. The old *Sakhua* used to provide a symbolic universe that aptly explained and justified social reality as the Zou then knew it. The Zou colonial encounter, however, resulted in cracks in the old social and institutional orders. The experience of many young Zous as labour corps in World War I made them more open to missionary education. The North-East India General (NEIG) Mission Compound at Old Churachand (Suangpi) became the centre of literate culture in southern Manipur since 1930. By the time of India's independence, many neo-literates among the Zou were convinced about the power of Western education and medicine: the native mind somehow perceived such objects as synonymous with Judeo-Christianity itself.

The pagan *Sakhua* religion was under direct assault in Southern Manipur with the establishment of NEIG Mission at Old Churachand (Mission Compound) in 1930. The Paite, Hmar and Thadou tribes were among the earliest advocates of the Christian conversion. Along with the Simte, the Zou tribe was slow in responding to new ideas ushered in by the Christian mission. Perhaps due to their anti-colonial legacy, the Zou became the last bastion of pagan '*Sakhua*' in the area. Though cultural rootedness has its own merit, it was a setback from modernisation point of view. By the 1950s, there were a handful of Christian converts among the Zou too. But the Zou converts were disorganised and scattered. The new Zou Christian converts joined different dialectal groups, especially the Paite and Thadou Christian groups. Within the educated section of the Zou, there was a strong desire to stem the tide of this social crisis. Their solution was to embrace the church movement by preserving the unity of the Zou community, ironically, through mass conversion.

Local Church Movement and Ethnic Identity Formation

In the past much attention has been given to the Christian missions in Northeast India from the perspective of the Western missions, or rather from the 'sending' approach rather than the 'coming' approach, as F.S. Downs⁴⁹ has put it. These works were basically 'institutional histories' of foreign missions which sent missionaries to Northeast India and the story of their failure or success in winning 'souls'. But there was an increasing realisation of the need to shift to a new perspective in understanding the missionary movement as a 'social history' of the local Christian communities in India. This development was best reflected in the new six-volume project of social history envisaged by the Church History Association of India (CHAI) in 1973. While Downs' own CHAI volume on Northeast India shifted from the earlier celebratory mode of doing insular 'foreign mission' history to critical studies of tribal Christianity from a 'socio-cultural perspective'.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Downs, *Essays on Christianity in Northeast India*, pp. 17–18.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

However, even the socio-cultural approach has to refine its analytical tools to open up new frontier of indigenous Christianity in the Northeast without any history of direct contact with 'foreign missions'. The Zou community experienced mass conversion into Christianity as a result of a powerful 'local church movement' initiated mainly by its own tribal literati—the educated elite. The local church movement was often conditioned, but not created, by interaction and competition with neighbouring tribal communities who had already converted to Christianity. In this context to convert to Christianity is to jump on the bandwagon of 'Progress' and 'Modernity'. There are substantial cases of such autonomous movements all over Northeast India outside the institutional fold of foreign missions. In Manipur, such local church movements have been identified among the Zeliangrong Nagas, the Zou and the Simte tribes. Ramkhum Pamei, in fact, has done a work on this line among the Zeliangrong Nagas.⁵¹

The mass conversion of the Zou to Christianity in the mid-1950s cannot simply be explained in terms of simple binary oppositions of 'civilised' Christianity emerging victorious over 'barbaric' Zou pagan *Sakhua* or Western religious light overcoming the darkness of the *Sakhua* soul. In fact, the Zou did not come in contact with any Western Christian missions which operated at Aizawl and Kangpokpi centres. Surrounded by a sea of new Christian tribes like the Lushais, Paites, Thadous, Hmars, etc. on all sides, the Zou tribe looked like a fixed island of native culture amidst sweeping social changes. It was mainly as a response to the new challenges of the times that the Zou Christian pioneers strategically charted a new course of action to form the first Christian organisation in 1954. Equipped with nothing but an *evangelical zeal* and an *ecumenical vision* to unite all the Zou, the first Christian converts laboured ceaselessly to redeem and mould all their *Sakhua* brethren into a united Zou church where the doctrinal divisions of Western Christian would be simply irrelevant. This was true at least till 1976 when a new generation of leadership consisting of the first Zou theological graduates lost the earlier ecumenical vision of undivided Zou Christianity while retaining only the evangelical zeal.

Winds of Change: Social Renewal and Reform

A migrant from Mawngawn village, Pu Kam Za Khup became a resident of Daizang village since 1951. His arrival in Daizang made that village a hub of Christian activities in the 1950s. Despite his humble occupation as a peasant, Kam Za Khup appeared to be a born reformer. He was consumed with a zeal to initiate a local church movement among his tribes-people—the Zou dialect community. When he moved into Daizang in 1951, there were reportedly just four Christian villages out of the total sixty-six Zou villages. Enthused with the challenge of initiating a new movement, this layman shared his social vision with his confidant named Thawng Za Khup. Both jointly managed to bring the village elders for a public discussion at Twaitengphai in 1952.

⁵¹ Pamei, *The Zeliangrong Nagas: A Study of Tribal Christianity*.

But nothing concrete came out of the meeting. Still undaunted, Pu Kam Za Khup continued his campaign for a cause close to his heart. The reformist duo (Kam Za Khup and Thawng Za Khup) would excitedly talk about their future project even while working in the wet rice field.

There seemed to be a lot of spade work before the historic JCA Conference could be convened on 20 February 1954. A preliminary meeting was held at Tuaitengphai village on the occasion of 'Haitha' (First Fruit) festival in which the villages of Daizang, Bohlui and Khianglam were scheduled to participate; but the last two did not turn up. The outcome of all those untiring discussions and persuasions was the staging of a partially successful joint meeting between Daizang and Tuaitengphai in 1953. That, in turn, provided a solid foundation for a more spectacular success. It actually became a prelude to the historic JCA meeting at Daizang on 20 February 1954.

Some intelligent Zou youngsters organised on 20 February 1954 the first Zou Conference at Daizang village. The JCA (Jou Christian Association) conference deliberated on issues related to the social and religious life of the community. The JCA agenda was not exclusively religious. Besides Pu Kam Za Khup, the pillars of the JCA in its initial days were the three educated figures of Pu Thawng Hang, Pu Sem Kho Pau and Pu Kai Za Kham. The triple leaders were still students at Imphal at that point of time and they were entrusted with the task of drafting a 'Constitution' for JCA, which was finally adopted at the Daizang assembly. This historic conference accelerated mass conversion to Christian faith into an irreversible social movement within the Zou community. Ironically, such collective conversion did not necessarily lead to de-tribalisation. This strategy rather ensured the viability of 'tribal identity' under changing conditions. Finally, one may wonder: where did Pu Kam Za Khup catch his 'Christian enthusiasm'?⁵² The clue lies in his early residence at Mawngawn village. The social environment of Mawngawn in the 1940s—swept by waves of Christian conversion—must have contributed significantly to the making of this Zou social reformer.

Social Impact of Christian Conversion

Contrary to the charges of de-tribalisation by some scholars, the Zou today preserve the best part of their traditional culture through their indigenous local church. Their customary laws related to marriage practices have been institutionalised by the church. Their tribal musical instrument (*khuang* made of wood and animal skin) is an integral part of church music. The Bible translations and hymnals preserved the best part of their traditional vocabulary harnessed to a different purpose. Recent scholarship, however, pointed out that Bible translations among the tribes of Northeast India have become a victim of dialectal chauvinism.⁵³ Multiplying Bible translations in closely related but slightly different dialects, have 'canonised' and hardened ethnic divisions

⁵² Joshi, 'The Birth of Christian Enthusiasm among the Angami of Nagaland', p. 541.

⁵³ Go, *A Certified Historical Study of Bible Translations among the Zo people in Northeast India*.

within the tribal groups of Manipur. For instance, the Zou language itself constitutes dialectal variants like Haidawi, Khuangnung, Thangkhal, Khodai and Tungkua. All these dialects contribute to Zou language in a process of give and take. Nevertheless, Haidawi is usually promoted as the standard literary language in the vernacular Bible and hymnals. Meanwhile, Khuangnung is popular among urban Zou speakers and Thangkhal heavily influences traditional Zou folk songs. Tungkua and Khodai still remain confined to remote villages. The inclusion of Zou as a Major Indian Language at class X and XII levels by the Government of Manipur⁵⁴ contributed to the evolution of Zou as a standard literary language. The Zou in Burma constitute a distinct Zou dialect influenced primarily by Tedim Chin. Though the Zou in India and Burma had been using a common Bible for decades, the Zou in Burma recently came up with their own Bible translation. At present, it is difficult to assess the social impact of such translation projects.

Patriarchy and Tribal Christianity

Access to modern education since the 1950s and 60s empowered some Zou women in the 'secular' sphere and the job market. But ironically women are still discriminated in the 'sacred' sphere of the church on gender basis. The Zou society, despite Christian conversion, still staunchly maintains its old patriarchal structure. The first generation of educated Zomi women like Ms. Khan Niang and Ms. Geneve Vung Za Mawi championed the cause of female education as late as the 1970s. A handful of Zou women (for example, Ms Dim Kho Chin, Ms Ning Hoih Kim, Ms Ngai Vung, etc.) graduated in theology in the 1980s. There is limited space for women theologians within the formal church structure which is jealously guarded as a privileged male enclave. The church hierarchy still excludes women from any position of authority and 'ordained' offices like that of ministers or elders. Despite the advances made by women in the secular world, a recent study suggests that the status of women has been degraded (not upgraded) within the patriarchal world of the tribal church.⁵⁵ For instance, the tribal church never condemned and always condoned domestic violence (including wife-beating and child abuse) despite all the pious talks about building 'Christian family'. Women's right to use the pulpit is grudgingly granted or sometimes denied. Female employment within the salaried jobs of the two main Zou churches (Presbyterian and Lutheran) is a pathetic 3 per cent or thereabouts.

However, women are encouraged in fundraising projects where they have made excellent contributions through innovative strategies like *antang-pham* (handful of rice collection), *thabituh* (annual labour targets), *veipung* (profitable micro-investment), etc. *Antang-pham* remains the main source of fund raising for ladies. The idea was originally imported from Mizoram where Bible women like Ms Chhingtei of Durtlang

⁵⁴ Board of Secondary Education, Manipur, Order No. TD/TB/2001, dated 16 January 2002; Council of Higher Secondary Education, Manipur, Order No. 3/60/2004-HSC, dated 9 June 2006.

⁵⁵ Cf. Downs, *Essays on Christianity in Northeast India*, pp. 80–81.

and Ms Siniboni (a Khasi lady) were instrumental in introducing the practice sometime in 1913. The money collected by ladies is seldom invested in projects that benefit women as a specific group. Given the inequality of opportunities for men and women, this way of resource allocation is questionable. Recent statistics by the Census of India (2001) shows a significant gender gap between male and female literacy with only 53.0 per cent for female Zou and 70.2 per cent for the male Zou. Likewise, the sex ratio of the Zou in Manipur at 944 is lower than the state average of 978 (according to 2001 census).

Pioneers of Letters and Vernacular Literature

Pu Siahzathang invented an indigenous Zou system of scripts called 'Zolai'. Due to several technical and practical hurdles, 'Zolai' never enjoys much popularity. The Roman script suits the educational needs of the Zou ever since Pu Nengkhogin introduced the Roman characters to reduce Zou to writing for his Sunday school primer, *Jou Simpat Bu*.⁵⁶

Further, Pu Thangkhanlal (1944–98) was a true pioneer of Zou literature. Besides composing songs in Zou vernacular, he wrote a number of booklets in this language. His collection of songs includes *Sannem La* (Folk Songs), *Isa Awle* (Modern Songs) and *Zozampal* (Popular Songs). Though a politician by profession, this man of letter has left an indelible mark on Zou literature during its early formative stages. Thangkhanlal graduated from D.M. College, Imphal, in 1968. His undergraduate days at Imphal appear to be the most creative and productive in terms of literary output. Perhaps *Zou lai Patna* (*Children's Introduction to Zou Alphabets*) is the most influential prose work of Thangkhanlal. This was designed to be a text book for learners of elementary Zou vernacular and the 34-page primer ran into its eighth edition by 1989. Till recently, this primer was not only popular, but was the sole text book for teaching Zou language to beginners. It follows the phonetic *Hunterian system*—which is a modified version of the Roman alphabets—*Zou lai Patna*.

Another book by the same author, *Learners' English Grammar and Composition*⁵⁷ (1967) was interestingly intended to teach the local students in Zou vernacular the principles of English grammar and composition. The book was published by U Tongzapau, chief of Behiang. Of course there is nothing unusual with this publisher until we came to know the irony of the situation that this patron of English learning himself was semi-literate or perhaps purely illiterate. Though completely ignorant of English himself, this publisher-chief clearly knew the advantages of learning the language of the 'sahib' for the young Zou students. Thangkhanlal did not seem to forget his first love for Zou language and literature during his active political career in later life. Being closely involved in developing this largely oral dialect into a language fit and suitable for literary purpose, he acquired not only a taste but a feel for the Zou language.

⁵⁶ Nengkhogin, *Jou Simpat Bu*.

⁵⁷ Thangkhanlal, *Learners' English Grammar and Composition*.

A couple of years before he passed away, Thangkhanlal wrote an article entitled 'Zou kam leh Zou La' (Zou Language and Songs), in which he expressed his admiration for the language rather emotionally:

Like a hidden mine of gold, Zou language and folk literature becomes rich and deep if explored. There are surprisingly numerous vocabularies in Zou language, many of which even English itself lacks ... Though there are certain variants within Zou language, those do not constitute separate languages ... When accurately spoken, Zou language is musical to listen, and it proves to be an adequate medium through which a wide range of ideas can be effectively communicated.⁵⁸

Miroslav Horch⁵⁹ opined that the modern revival of minority languages and suppressed nationalities always begins as a literary movement. He provided a three-stage progression of linguistic revival in 'Phase A', followed by literary movement in 'Phase B' and a final full-blown nationalism in 'Phase C'. This observation may be true in a few exceptional cases. Yet it cannot be considered a general theory. There is not enough historical evidence to support this simplistic typology. On the contrary, historical research shows that Phase A probably never led to Phase B. Why? It is 'simply because it was never meant to be'.⁶⁰ Therefore, we are less sure about the universality of Anderson's thesis today. To be honest, we still don't know the *exact nature* of the relation between literature and ethnic nationalism.

Ethnic Stamp on Scriptural Translation and Evangelical Print

Adrian Hastings has noted that Christianity is 'a religion of translation' and had 'the use of the world's vernaculars inscribed in its origins'.⁶¹ Unlike the scriptural tradition of assimilation in Islam, Christian sacred texts remained equally sacred in translation, so that the culture of scriptural translation was taken for granted.⁶² Almost as an article of faith, Hastings perceived the translation of the Bible or its equivalent as perhaps the single most significant turning point in the development of a collective sense of identity for an entire community.⁶³ However, it is also true that unrestrained Bible translations in maximum number of dialects is not always a healthy policy in the long run though it might serve short term evangelical purposes. The policy of unlimited Bible translations among closely related linguistic families can unfortunately have the effect of canonising their internal differences to arrest the process of ethnic fusion and condemn the concerned linguistic communities to further marginalisation. In the context of the Zo society, Khup Za Go has shown that Bible translation is often a victim of dialectal

⁵⁸ Thangkhanlal, 'Zou kam leh Zou La (Zou Language and Songs)', pp. 56–59.

⁵⁹ Horch, 'From National Movement to the Fully-Formed Nation'.

⁶⁰ Marfany, 'Minority Language and Literary Rivals', p. 167.

⁶¹ Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism*, p. 194.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 195.

⁶³ Cf. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*.

chauvinism that prevented the evolution of a standard Zo language for the Chin-Kuki-Lushai ethnic groups.⁶⁴

The Zou language has a few variants within it—Haidawi, Thangkhal, Khuangnung, Khodai and Tungkua, which were originally names of Zou villages in the Chin Hills of Myanmar. Whereas Haidawi is generally found to be the most suitable candidate for high literary language, the Khuangnung and Thangkhal variants are popularly used for verbal communication. There is a process of give and take between the literary language and its popular variants. While the literary Haidawi is effective for expression of abstract and poetic ideas, the Khuangnung variant is more intelligible to the man in the street. Yet popular variants like Thangkhal and Khuangnung have influenced successive translations of the Zou Bible and hymnals. Rightly did James Clifford remark that ‘a “language” is the interplay and struggle of regional dialects, professional jargons, generic commonplaces, the speech of different age groups, individuals and so forth’.⁶⁵

Since the Khuangnung variant is considered to be the literary language of the Simte tribe, there is always an overlapping linguistic zone between these historically connected tribes. Legend has it that Khuangnung was the ancient name of a Zou village in the Northern Chin Hills, which was devastated by *Singtam* famine in the mid-nineteenth century. Since both the Zou and many clans of the Simte tribe of Manipur once lived together in Khuangnung village, it was understandable that there would be linguistic overlapping between the two tribes. At times, it is rather confusing to observe that the word Simte—which literally means south—was till recently used as a generic term to refer to the Tedim Chins living south of Manipur; some elderly people within the Chin-Kuki community still use the term in this old sense. While there is no tribe by the name of Simte in the Chin Hills, a substantial population of the Zou speakers lives there. In the context of Manipur, the Khuangnung-speaking Simtes have been recognised as a separate tribe by the Government since 1956. Though numerically very small, the Simte tribe is highly zealous of its separate identity today and it had got the entire Bible translated into this dialect in 1993, under the supervision of Bibles International.⁶⁶

Likewise, the New Testament was translated into Zou language as *Thuhun Tha* in 1967 under the supervision of the Bible Society of India, by the trio Semkhopau Samte, T. Tungnung and P. Kaizakham. This translation was based on the King James Version and was well-received by the Zou Christians. In 1981, a new version of the New Testament together with Psalms, translated by Lianchinkhup Taithul, was again published by the Bible Society of India. This was mainly based on the Good News Bible. Though the 1981 NT translation reflected a superior scholarship and accuracy of meaning, the common man generally preferred the earlier 1967 translation due to its literary quality and beauty, perhaps reflecting something of the original literariness of English King James Version (KJV). Later the Zou wanted the Old Testament translated as well.

⁶⁴ Go, *A Critical Historical Study of Bible Translations among the Zo people in Northeast India*, p. viii.

⁶⁵ Clifford, ‘On Ethnographic Authority’, pp. 136–37.

⁶⁶ Go, *A Critical Historical Study of Bible Translations among the Zo people in Northeast India*, p. 85.

So the Bible Society of India sent its representative Mr M.P. John from Shillong to Churachandpur, Manipur, in 1976 to assess the feasibility of the project.⁶⁷ He came to a conclusion that the project was not viable on the ground of the small numerical strength of the Zou population in Manipur. In 1981, the Zou population in Manipur was estimated to be 12,454 persons. But the actual Zou-speaking population is more than this figure if one takes into account the Zou across the Myanmar border,⁶⁸ where their population is estimated to be about 30,000. So the total population of Zou-speakers both in Manipur and Myanmar would add up to around 40,000 persons in 1981.

Disappointed at the decision of the BSI, the Zou Catholics in Manipur approached the Roman Catholic authorities regarding the matter and were told that they would be given assistance to translate the whole Bible including the Apocrypha. A joint inter-confessional translation committee was instituted on 24 October 1974 to this end. Meanwhile some Zou Presbyterian leaders, instigated by some members of their Synod, later opposed the idea of having the Bible translated with the Apocrypha and put their members, who were involved in the translation work, under church discipline. After negotiations for a compromise had failed between the two groups within Zou Presbyterians, one group decided to carry on with the translation work in cooperation with the Catholics. So they left the Presbyterian Church and formed the Zomi Christian Church (ZCC) with headquarters at Zomi Colony, Churachandpur in Manipur. Ultimately the entire Bible along with the Apocrypha appeared in Zou language in 1983 with the assistance of the Roman Catholic authorities in Imphal. The Zou language became the first to have a translation of the whole ancient literature of Apocrypha among the Chin-Kuki-Lushai tribes. Aloysius Nehkhojang Tungdim and Samuel Khamzakhup were instrumental in translating this huge volume of sacred and classic literature. The Apocrypha consists of a rich collection of ancient Hebrew literature which was not accepted as canonised in the Protestant tradition, but the Roman Catholic Church regarded it as 'inspired', that is, as part of the canonised Scriptures. Hardly did these hotly debated issues of publishing the Apocrypha cool down, when the Bible Society of India in 1992 belatedly agreed to publish the entire Bible in Zou language with Lianchinkhup Taithul as its translator.⁶⁹ Though the Zou community gained as many as two translated versions of the entire Bible along with the Apocrypha in the short term, it paid a heavy price in terms of ethnic integrity and unity which was seriously injured in the long term by denominational divide. As if to amend for past mistakes, the Zomi Christian Literature Committee is at present involved in bringing out another common Bible translation in Zou language with English KJV as its base reference.

⁶⁷ Samte, 'Jou Christian Association (JCA)', p. 44.

⁶⁸ Though no official figures are available, it is possible to arrive at a rough estimate of the Zou population in Myanmar who organised themselves as Zo Baptist Association (ZBA) as different from the Zomi Baptist Convention (ZBC) which is dominated by the Tedim Chins whose population is about 100,000 in 1983 according to the Report of United Bible Societies (1994). It is obvious that there will be an overlapping in statistical figures since most of the Zou in the Chin Hills are equally fluent in Tedim language; however this does not apply in case of Manipur Zou-speakers.

⁶⁹ *Sowing Circle*, Bible Society of India, Vol. 8 (2), p. 37.

The Cock Crows: Dawn of Political Consciousness

In India, the Zou was officially recognised in 1956 as one of the 29 ‘Scheduled Tribes’ within the state of Manipur. Prior to that, the Zou was classified as ‘New Kuki’ by the colonial anthropologists. According to the Census of India 2001, the Zou population in Manipur (20,567 persons) is the tenth largest Scheduled Tribe population in Manipur. The bulk of Zou people live in the Chin Hills and Sagaing division of Upper Burma. Like their ethnic Mizo cousins, the Zou is a tribal Christian community undergoing profound social change and modernisation since mid-twentieth century.

It is impossible to draw a linear graph of ‘transition’ from tradition to modernity. For the Zou, the process of modernity predated the intensification of contact with metropolitan ideas, institutions, personnel and commodity since World War I and especially in the 1950s. The local culture ingested modernity by compartmentalising new and old experiences and ritually neutralising their new faith through communal feasts. Modernity provided English loan words to express novel political and legal concepts like the chief’s land right (*hausa dai*), politics (*politiksi*), political factions and parties (*palti*), etc. Such foreign words became household words necessary to understand the modern political interests that differed from the older polity of chiefdom and kinship networks.⁷⁰ In fact, modernity is a layer of indigenous culture and transition and is not simply a prelude to ‘take-off’ for a modernisation project.⁷¹ So, the assumption of a tight dichotomy between tradition and modernity does not always hold water.

English education is a tool for development and the mass conversion of the Zou community through the initiatives of a few English-educated Zou youths in the mid-1950s made education even more accessible to the commoner through the various educational activities of the church. Sunday school was and is one such intervention of the church in the sphere of basic education. One of the first tasks of the nascent Zou church—Jou Christian Organisation—was to publish a Sunday School primer called *Jou Simpat Bu* (1954) authored by Nengkhogin.⁷² The short-lived Zou monthly newsletter *Jou Gam Thusuo* advertised this newly printed Zou primer in its first issue which came in March 1954. This was intended to be an advertisement rather than a ‘book review’ as it was released in the name of one called S.K. Samte, Secretary of the little-known Jou National Union. Since the inception of Zou Christianity, it was enmeshed with a new political consciousness of Zou identity as a tribe which transcends the earlier primacy of clan-based identity. So there was an ecumenical tradition inherent in the formation of JCA which is strange to the present imported Western divisions along the denominational lines. This holistic vision of Zou Christianity was threatened for the first time in 1976 when the split of the Manipur Gam Presbytery and Zomi Christian Church (MGP-ZCC) took place under unfortunate circumstances of doctrinal debate on the Scriptural cannons. Though both MGP and ZCC held the same doctrine on Biblical cannons, the scandal of schism still happened due to personal and disciplinary

⁷⁰ Cf. Hardiman, ‘The Indian “Faction”: A Political Theory Examined’, p. 222.

⁷¹ Singer, ‘Beyond Tradition and Modernity in Madras’.

⁷² Jougamthusuo, March 1954.

rigidities. By balancing historically sound interpretation of Judeo-Christian teachings along with the finest aspects of tribal traditional ethics, there are abundant religious-cultural resources to mould the Zou into an enlightened and dynamic community, ecumenical in vision and evangelical in spirit.

Table 2 is showing the level of higher education among the Zou in 1981 in comparison with other Zo ethnic groups in Manipur. Population of the Zou tribe in Manipur in 1981 was estimated to be 12,576 persons, with only 20.7 per cent of its population living in urban areas; the figure for Paite for the same period was 33.7 per cent of its population in urban area.

Table 2. Education Statistics in 1981

Sl. No.	Name of Tribe	No. of Graduates (Liberal)	Postgraduate	Degree in Teaching
1	Gangte	76	7	2
2	Hmar	236	19	2
3	Paite	361	18	7
4	Simte	25	1	0
5	Thadou	306	18	9
6	Vaiphei	120	7	4
7	Zou	40	4	2

Source: Computed from statistical data of *Census of India*, Series 13, Manipur, Part IX.

The Zou woke up to modern political consciousness in the mid-twentieth century reflected in the formation of United Zomi Organisation (UZO) by T. Gougin, who held a postgraduate degree in Economics from the Guwahati University. Though UZO may not be the first political association formed by the Zou, it is widely recognised as the most visible institution and formal articulation of Zou political consciousness. Though UZO is a cultural organisation (not a political party), the support of UZO increasingly became necessary to mobilise Zou voters in Manipur. Though T. Gougin was the founder of UZO, he soon lost control of the organisation to a younger politician. Therefore, he moved on from clan and tribe-based electoral politics to a more expansive ethnic hill politics by floating Zomi National Congress (ZNC) that includes the Zou and kin groups in Manipur, Mizoram and the Chin Hills of Burma. He owned a printing press and a daily bilingual newspaper called '*Thuthang*' in English and Zou. The dawn of Zou political consciousness was best reflected in Gougin's editorial column, aptly titled 'The Cock Crows'. *Thuthang* proved to be an effective tool for spreading the ideas of modernity, rationality and development among the Zou people. T. Gougin had been elected as a member of the Manipur State Assembly; but his ambition to become a Member of Parliament at Delhi was unfulfilled. T. Goudou (the younger brother of T. Gougin) got elected as MLA twice. Competing against the two brothers, Thangkhanlal had even greater success in mobilising Zou voters to return to the State Assembly again and again. After his death, the political mantle has fallen on

T. Hangkhanpau, who had been the Chief Whip of Manipur State Assembly. Electoral politics is a vital component of the Zou community's experience of modernity. To quote S.K. Mitra:

... the electoral process is no longer an alien and unfamiliar institution, imposed from outside on the intimate and face-to-face society of rural India. Rather, electoral competition for power has become enmeshed with local and regional struggles for power ... elections are used as instruments by various sections of the society to convert their political resources and power into authority.⁷³

The Onomastics⁷⁴ and Politics of Naming

The late-coming of literacy, print culture and different spelling systems adopted by the Zou in India and Burma, resulted in competing spellings to name the 'Zou' community. Firm belief in the correctness of their spelling system by different sections of literate Zou often led to endless squabbles without any compromise. At times, the terms 'Zou' and 'Zo' have been employed interchangeably in academic as well as popular usage. While colonial records referred to the Zou tribe variously as 'Yo' or 'Yaw', the Zou community living in Manipur called themselves 'Jou'. The first Christian church established by the Zou tribe in Manipur was called Jou Christian Association (JCA) on 20 February 1954.⁷⁵ But the Government of India officially recognised the name of this tribe as 'Zou' in 1956. Sometimes, the term Zomi is also used interchangeably with the word Zou, as the apex political organisation of the Zou is called United Zomi Organisation (UZO). To add to this confusion of terms, the Zou in Myanmar called themselves 'Zo',⁷⁶ which is actually a generic term used to replace the hyphenated term, Chin-Kuki-Lushai in current academic and political discourse. The term 'Zomi' is a collective name by which the Tedim Chins of Myanmar, the Paite and Vaiphei of Manipur generally identified themselves. Noting at the very outset, the variations in spelling and usage of the terms Zo, Zou and Zomi to mean the same people—the Zou tribe—in certain geographical contexts on the one hand, and also as a generic term to refer to the larger Chin-Kuki-Lushai ethnic group on the other hand, will save us unnecessary confusion later. Conflicting usages conspired to create slightly different terms and spellings (signifiers) to refer to the same people (signified). This condition has been highlighted by a local scholar, Sing Khaw Khai:

While all clans and families belonging to the tribe who call their chief Topa designated themselves with 'Yo' or 'Zo', they in turn apply their *common name* to a particular clan.

⁷³ Mitra, 'Ballot Box and Local Powers: Elections in an Indian Village', p. 419.

⁷⁴ The scientific study of names, especially of proper nouns.

⁷⁵ *JCA Minute Book: Proceedings and Resolutions of the Jou Christian Association* at Daizang villae, 20 February 1954.

⁷⁶ The Zou community living in Myanmar formed a Christian association of their own called Zo Baptist Association (ZBC) as distinct from Zomi Baptist Convention (ZBC) mainly constituted by the Tedim Chins.

The Yos [The Zou] are most unique in the sense of the name they bear and the culture they practice in reflection of the ancient Zo tradition ... No proper study has yet been made as to why the generic Yo as spelt in former literature was applied to them.⁷⁷

The use of the term Zou can be traced back by comparative linguistic and cultural studies to some Chinese roots or other related Southeast Asian cultural complex. Preliminary enquiry suggests that there is a tribe bearing the name 'Yao' in the Lingnan region (Kwangtung–Kwangsi) of China, which is described as 'a center of dispersal for the Yao of Yunnan and northern Southeast Asia'.⁷⁸ There is also another tribe bearing the name 'Zou' in Alishan, located in the northeastern part of Chiayi, southern Taiwan. But it is beyond the scope of this present study to go into detailed comparative cultural studies though it may be interesting.

Suffice to note here that the term 'Zou' is legally recognised in 1956 by the Indian state to refer to the Zou tribe in Manipur. This tribe itself is a constituent of the larger Zo ethnic group collectively used to refer to the Zomi, the Kuki, the Chin and the Mizo. The British *Raj* invalidated the concept of 'tribe' in the Northeast—it was the favourite sub-unit of imperial governance for Africa and the Pacific islanders. In post-colonial India, the tribe idea was harnessed as a bureaucratic device for determining the award of positive discrimination. While the 'Scheduled Tribe' label yields several benefits from the state, its concomitant ideology of 'tribalism' entails certain crippling effects on the local polity and the 'tribal' intellect. As an analytical tool, tribalism has very weak explanatory power. It tends to over-simplify and obscure power relations between vested interests within the tribal social formation and its links with the local money economy. Tribalism is 'an anachronistic misnomer'⁷⁹ that impedes the transfer of technology and the use of new insights gained by the historical experiences of advanced nations to bear more fruitfully on the transformation of indigenous societies.

Concluding Remarks

This is a case study of how a subaltern group 'sustains its identity over time, which is especially important since the group does not succeed in history but is repeatedly defeated'.⁸⁰ The ambition of hereditary Zou chiefs to become a 'dominant lineage' in the pre-colonial 'galactic polities' of Upper Burma was frustrated by their agnatic Kamhau-Sukte rivals. The participation of the Zou in India during the abortive 'Kuki rising' against the British mirrored the Zou past as a defiant community. Later the aspiration of Zou educated elite to forge social solidarity through the local church movement ensued in mass conversion even as the dream of larger solidarity turned into

⁷⁷ Khai, *Zo People and their Culture: A Historical Study and Critical Analysis of Zo and its Ethnic Tribes*, p. 22.

⁷⁸ Lebar, Hickey and Musgrave, *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia*, p. 82.

⁷⁹ Mafeje, 'The Ideology of Tribalism', p. 261.

⁸⁰ Mayaram, *Against History, Against State*, p. 227.

sectarianism. Writing in a communitarian and fragmentary mode turns the spotlight on the agency of the subaltern within a local culture. Yet this legitimate sensitivity to cultural specificities can easily slide into ‘mindless anti-statism’⁸¹ by ‘uncritical celebration of the fragment’⁸² flowing from a deep scepticism of totalising teleologies, essentialist categories and universal reason. Drawing on the methods of ‘micro-history’ and ‘anthropological history’, this article is a small attempt to fill a gap in the current historical literature by exploring the interpenetration of state and community at the edge of an Asian borderland. Though there are different scales of doing history, the nation-state tends to encompass all the rest. Local and regional histories enable area specialists to see through ‘subtly refracting mirrors’ which may increasingly and profitably be reflected by historical treatments at all-India level.

The article also stresses elements of continuity and change in the ‘cultural metabolism’⁸³ that proved adaptive to new challenges from outside. Like other members of the Zo (Chin-Kuki-Lushai) ethnic group, the Zou community also proved, for so long, fairly resistant to the influences of lowland Buddhist Burma and lowland Hindu Manipur, but later decided strategically to adopt and appropriate the western Judeo-Christian religion in the mid-1950s while abandoning their old *Sakhua* religion. It was a painful but wise adaptive step that opened up the western Christian world-view which, in turn, was translated into local cognitive categories by utilising Zou traditional linguistic and cultural resources. The mass conversion of the Zou to Christianity in the mid-1950s cannot be naively explained as the ‘civilised’ Christian gospel enlightening the ‘uncultured’ Zou pagan *Sakhua*. The conversion is a rational decision to survive, adapt and redefine Zou interests and *tribe-identity*⁸⁴ in the midst of unprecedented social changes. The pioneer converts to Christianity had both an evangelical zeal and ecumenical vision to redeem the Zou community from its old order of *Sakhua* into a modern ethnic community. The Zou polity and tradition has an in-built adaptive mechanism to creatively incorporate historical events and cultural novelties into the living and changing cultural structure.

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⁸¹ Bose and Jalal, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy*, p. 217.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁸³ Singer, ‘Beyond Tradition and Modernity in Madras’, p.163.

⁸⁴ Piang, ‘Clan, Dialect and Tribe Identity: Emergence of Crosscutting Identity among the Zo People in Manipur’.

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