



# **THE ANGLO-KUKI WAR, 1917–1919**

**A FRONTIER UPRISING AGAINST  
IMPERIALISM DURING THE FIRST WORLD  
WAR**

Edited by  
Jangkhomang Guite and  
Thongkholal Haokip



## THE ANGLO-KUKI WAR, 1917–1919

This book explores the Kuki uprising against the British Empire during the First World War in the frontier of Northeast India (then Assam-Burma frontier). It underlines how the three-year war (1917–1919), spanning over 6000 square miles, is crucial to understanding present-day Northeast India. The chapters in the volume examine several aspects of the war, which had far-reaching consequences for the indigenous population, as well as for British attitudes and policies towards the region – including military strategy and tactics, violence, politics, identity, institutions, gender, culture and the frontier dimensions of the First World War itself. The volume also looks at how the conflict affected the larger dynamics of the region within Asia, and its relevance in world politics beyond the Great War.

Drawing on archival sources, extensive fieldwork and oral histories, the volume will be a significant contribution to comprehending the complex geopolitics of the region. It will be of great interest to scholars and researchers of South and Southeast Asian Studies, area studies, modern history, military and strategic studies, insurgency and counterinsurgency studies, tribal warfare and politics.

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A Frontier Uprising against Imperialism  
during the First World War

*Edited by Jangkhomang Guite  
and Thongkholal Haokip*

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ALL THE HEROES AND HEROINES OF THE  
ANGLO-KUKI WAR 1917–1919



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This work would not have been possible without the constant cooperation of the authors of the chapters in the volume. We are indeed thankful to all the authors for their consistent support till the last minute. We will, of course, be fully responsible for the errors and interpretations made in the volume, which we did so purely in our understanding of the sources at our disposal. The views expressed by the authors in the volume do not necessarily represent the view of the Kuki Research Forum and any other Kuki organisations. We are also grateful to the officers and staff of different archives and libraries for their cooperation and necessary support during the consultation of primary sources.

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# INTRODUCTION

## *Jangkhomang Guite and Thongkhohal Haokip*

100 years ago, when other parts of India were busy assembling combatants, non-combatants, labourers, funds and materials for the Great War, the Kukis of the Northeastern frontier of India declared ‘war against the King-Emperor’.<sup>1</sup> Initially provoked by the ‘forcible’ recruitment of a labour corps for France, the opposition turned into an armed resistance, partly because of the intemperate local officers – who were incompetent to handle the situation – and partly because the Kukis were overawed, as intelligence reports acknowledged, by the revolutionary ideas from the valley of Manipur, from Bengal in the west and from the China/Germans from the east.<sup>2</sup> Though such influence cannot be overstated, the fact that it had happened made the Kukis bold in their war against the ‘Sahibs’ and the ‘Sarkaris’ and the local governments becoming extremely careful in dealing with them. Unlike the previous expeditions in the region – when media attention was fully drawn on – the news of operations against the Kukis was kept under cover of darkness throughout, save one ‘press communiqué’ released by the Assam government in February 1918 during the early phase of the war. The report belittled, as Colonel Shakespeare (1929: 235) noted, ‘the hard show carried’ out by the combined Military Police forces of Assam and Burma as the ‘outings of Political Officers and their escorts’. This small report, however, revealed the violent character of colonialism that immediately evoked a series of criticism from Indian nationalists who termed the actions as a ‘tragic inhumanity’ and the ‘brute force in all its hideous nakedness’.<sup>3</sup> This led subsequently to the concealment of ongoing military operations from public scrutiny.

The invisibility of the ‘small war’ carried out in the frontier in the public domain and in the nationalist political discourse need not, however, demean the ‘hard show’ given by the Military Police

as well as the Kukis. The official reports (mostly confidential) were filled with the 'hard show' given in the mountain massif of India's northeastern and Burma's northwestern frontiers. An extract from the proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam was, for instance, lucid in this respect. It described the 'Kuki rising of 1917-1919' as 'the most formidable with which Assam has been faced for at least a generation', covering an area of 'over some 6,000 square miles of rugged hills surrounding the Manipur Valley and extending to the Somra Tract and the Thaungdut State in Burma'.<sup>4</sup> Whereas the opposition started in March 1917, an active warfare and counterinsurgency operation went on for more than one year (December 1917 to May 1919), suspending two agriculture seasons and ending with the systematic destruction of villages, properties and all sources of livelihood. The military operations, carried out with 'continuous active service in mountainous country', was carried out by the combined forces of Assam and the Burma Military Police - 6234 combatants, 696 non-combatants, 7650 transport carriers, etc.<sup>5</sup> It was the 'largest series of military operations' in the eastern frontier of India, eclipsed only by the Second World War in the region in 1944 (Shakespeare 1929: 235-236). It costs the government rupees 28 lakh in total.<sup>6</sup>

Casualties on British troops were 60 dead (including one British Officer), 142 wounded (including 3 British Officers) and 97 dead due to diseases. Interestingly, only seven coolies were killed by the Kukis, the figure which could have been higher had the target of attack been them. Many coolies died but due to diseases; the total figure of dead on this count (mainly the pneumonia epidemic) was 393 people. Official estimates of Kukis killed by the troops were 120 persons (much less from the Kuki's version), and 576 mithuns (a much more conservative estimate from the Kuki estimate, along with large numbers of goats, pigs, fowls, etc.) were destroyed or eaten. A total of 126 Kuki villages were burnt to the ground, 16 villages were permanently declared 'barren' and deserted and 140 villages were coerced to surrender.<sup>7</sup> No official estimate was available on the amount of food-grains (mainly rice) and other food-stocks (such as root crops, vegetable, oilseeds, beans, etc.), which were also systematically destroyed or looted, not only from the village granaries, but also from the 'hidden stores' in the jungle. Food reserves for one year, for an estimated population of 40,000 persons were inarguably high; all were destroyed by the military columns. Kuki villages normally contained large amounts of cotton and other products for their home and trade; the raging fire of colonial violence consumed them all.

After the rising was forcibly suppressed, the Kukis were compelled to pay rupees one lakh 75,000 (the exact amount disbursed was Rs. 1,67,441/-) as war reparations (officially termed 'compensation' to friendly villages destroyed by military authorities to prevent being used by Kukis, along with those destroyed by Kukis).<sup>8</sup> This amount was recovered from them in instalments during the period of about five years, partly in cash (rupees 25,000–30,000), and partly in the form of penal labour in the construction of bridle paths across the hills of Manipur, cutting government roads, construction of government offices and other official establishments, portage and so on.<sup>9</sup> Large numbers of Kuki population (both 'rebels' and 'friendlies') were also uprooted from their ancestral villages and moved to the various grouping centres under the new sedentarisation programme. Manipur, so far unadministered (except by an annual political tour by the Political Agent in Manipur or hill *lambus* collecting house-tax) and the unadministered Somra Tract in Burma, were finally brought under direct administration. Administrative subdivisions, military outposts, construction of communication lines (750 miles of bridle path were constructed during the operations) and so on, were established.<sup>10</sup>

The concern of this volume is how we might understand this 'small war' in India's frontier during the Great War. The collected chapters are not concerned with the connectedness the Anglo-Kuki War has with the wider political and military discourses around the world, but they are in themselves bringing a new understanding to the rising. Based on the existing literature on the subject, which mainly focussed on 'causes' and 'consequences' of the war, or of the flaming romance of the liberation movement, the present chapters go further in exploring other important aspects of the war based on new approaches and fresh source materials at their disposal. With a new conceptual framework and methodology, the subject under study comes under full interdisciplinary scrutiny. The authors in this volume enrich the subject matter at the material grounds as to its conceptual height. In short, the subsequent chapters represent a new genre of researches undertaken by young scholars in the present day. There is a general agreement among the authors that the 'Anglo-Kuki War' was a people's war against elevated discontent under colonialism, ignited by labour recruitment for the Great War. The conflict aimed at achieving a clear objective of freedom from colonial yoke. This dispels the received wisdom of the rising, undoubtedly derived from dominant colonial discourse, that the war was the 'chief's war' and it was fought only by the Thadou-Kukis. The chapters point out the role played by all sections of the Kuki population including the women, aged and so on. It has also become clear



that besides the Thadou-Kukis, many other non-Thadou-Kuki tribes also participated in the war – some directly, some indirectly – assisting them by supplying foods and other materials. People took part in the war not for their chiefs or for any pecuniary gains, but as ‘men of one country’, the patriotism which certainly centres on a territory free from colonial control.

The chapters are thematically arranged and touch upon the less known aspects in the scholarship of anti-colonial movement. The new themes range from the role of traditional institutions such as *sathin-salung-neh* and grand chiefs-in-council (the war conclaves), *som* (bachelor’s dormitory), the war tactics, technology and symbols used by the Kuki hillmen as well as by the British, of the role of women and their conception of the war. The role of these traditional institutions and the war methods and tactics in organising and sustaining the war vis-a-viz the colonial modern military measures is profoundly clear from these chapters. Besides, important additions on the conventional themes like cause, course and consequences of the war are given with fresh insight and new source materials collected from different archives. Two more chapters deal with the section of the rising carried out by the non-Thadou tribes, namely by the ‘Manlun-Manchong Kukis’ (today Zou tribe) of southern Manipur and the Haka tribe of the Chin Hills, adding to our understanding of the war. These two chapters show clearly how the rising was not a Thadou war but had a wider participation across the eastern frontier. While the Zous fought the British side by side with the Thadous, the connection between the Haka uprising and that of their brethrens in Manipur is also clearly visible. These chapters, if not complete, have brought new insights into the frontier war during the First World War.

The chapters broadly take what is understood in academic scholarship as a subaltern approach and a methodology that brings both historical and other like disciplines together so that the views of the subaltern Kukis come to the fore in explaining the subject. The general argument is that the Kukis rose up in arms against the constituted authority ‘on their own, that is, independently of the elite’. Instead of being incited from outside, the chapters look at the way the Kukis understood their situation based on their own consciousness under colonial regime. In this respect, the war was seen as a conscious, pre-meditated, and deliberate action against the shared grievances under the colonial state and directed towards a specific local objective of freeing their territory from such rule. Overall, the volume represents what Mayaram has called the ‘counter-perspectives from the margin’ (Mayaram 2003). They insisted on reading the

colonial sources, as Guha suggested, ‘against the grain’ to the elitist ‘body of evidence’ which took the form of what Sahid Amin has called ‘to interrogate the interrogators’ (Guha 1994: 336–371; Guha 1983: chap. 1; Amin 1995: ‘Prologue’). The obvious method they employed to combat colonial or archival bias was what Guha has called ‘to summon folklore, oral as well as written, to the historian’s aid’ (Guha 1983: 14). Upon this corpus of written materials, the chapters also touch upon a profound position of the Kukis and in many cases by ‘summoning folklores’ or by taking a ‘historical fieldwork’ to excavate historical facts from the ‘bearers of history’. In so doing, the chapters represent an in-depth understanding of the subject quite different from the existing literature. A brief discussion of the existing literature on the Anglo-Kuki War and its broader connection with the wider world and the First World War is given in the following sections.

### Writing on the Anglo-Kuki War

Some serious work has been produced on the subject, although they are relatively little known in the wider scholarship. Thematically, they are however mostly concerned with conventional themes like cause, course and consequence. While some of these studies are coloured by ‘nationalist’ sentiments, others remain clouded by colonial perceptions of the war in their treatment. An exception to these was an in-depth analysis given by some scholars like Gautam Bhadra and Lien Sakhong (both discussed on the cause of war). Bhadra explains that the colonial policy of sedentarisation was central to the dislocation of Kuki polity, economy and social structure, which largely depended on their freedom of migration. Migration not only provided them fresh soil for the *jhum* economy but had also been ‘the political safety-valve’ through which the custom left scope for their own expressions of grievances and thus stabilised the workings of the chieftainship institution. Whenever the chief becomes unpopular, people could freely move to another village or set up a village of their own so that such migration immediately evaporated their sense of protest against the office of chieftains. Thus, the bar against migration and formation of the new villages not only ‘hampered’ the Kuki mode of production, but it also ‘destroyed’ the ‘safety valve’ of their political organisation (Bhadra 1975: 10–56). Therefore, the Kuki’s opposition to colonialism was laid in a deep-seated grievance against the colonial policy of sedenterisation programme, which had charged six rupees against the usual three rupees if any village was below 20 houses.

In his study on *Lai Ral* (Haka uprising), Lien Sakhong locates the cause of what he called ‘Anglo-Chin War 1917–1919’ to their fear of death in going too far from home (France). He laid this fear deep into their cultural worldview of crossing the boundary of their village (*khua-brum*): ‘our Khua-hrum cannot protect us in a foreign country’. The idea of the fading power of their village gods over individuals beyond their *khua-brum* was, to him, central to their opposition to labour recruitment for France. For this reason, they said that ‘they would commit suicide rather than go’ to France (Sakhong 2003: 154–175). Ranju Bezbaruah has also shown how the Anglo-Kuki War has also been caused by their fear of death, the rumours circulated by the Manipuri *lambus* (Bezbaruah 2010: 165–175). However, he could not give any cultural explanation as to why the Kukis feared death in France while they were willing to die at home fighting the British. This crucial point will be explained by Ningmuanching in her chapter in this volume.

The colonial discourse on the war had been taken for granted in general and a much less critical tool was employed to find out the truth, just as the Kuki views on the war have been either left out completely or taken with hesitation. Asok Kumar Ray, for instance, provides a chapter of this war, but his overall analysis was purely based on colonial presumptions of the war. He gives four causes of the rising: labour recruitment, corrupt *lambus*, customary payment to hillmen on *pothang* or foreign service and house-tax (Ray 1990: 63–85). Similarly, John Parratt also felt that there were some genuine grievances behind the rising besides the commonly found labour recruitment. Of these, one serious cause of grievance was the emergence of *lambus* in hill politics. The emerging influence of hill *lambus* as hill advisors and administrators, who were often open to bribery, gradually demeaned the authority of Kuki chiefs and hence caused considerable resentment (Parratt 2005: 43).

S.M.A.W. Chishti also gives the immediate cause of the war with the labour recruitment without giving any explanation on why the Kukis had to oppose labour for France while they never oppose such recruitment earlier (Chishti 2004). Besides, his objective of discolouring the hard show given by the Kukis against colonialism is clear by selecting some instances where the colonial accounts put them as ‘raids on friendly villages’. By completely denying any mention of the two massive operations launched by the British for two consecutive winter seasons and the various fierce resistances given by the Kukis in different parts of the hills, his idea of reducing the Anglo-Kuki War to an act of what he called ‘terrorism’ is incomplete. Such a writing, driving on the

malicious sentiments of present ethnic relations, was not only in bad taste but was completely unhistorical.

A good number of writings also slowly appeared from among the Kukis (Haokip 1984; Gangte 1993; Haokip 1998). While some plainly took the colonial view to explain the subject, some works clearly came out of such hostages only to be engulfed with a present romance with the anti-colonial movement and nationalism. Explanations from Kuki points of view have been coming up slowly; there are a few unpublished theses at different universities (Kipgen 2005; Haokip 2011). While few of these works will appear in this volume, one interesting work was done by a non-academic with a strong, empirical approach. P.S. Haokip brought to light much of the oral versions of the rising by the Kukis. He maintains that the Anglo-Kuki War was fought against the intrusion of colonialism in what he called '*Zale'n-gam*' ('the land of freedom'). Some of the important war conclaves and episodic battles fought by the Kukis have also been discussed in detail (Haokip 2008: 141–269). This is, so far, the most detailed discussion on the Anglo-Kuki War based on both colonial and local accounts. However, while the projection is well understood, it can also be said that the work mainly concerns the political character of the rising, whereas other aspects of the war are given little attention. Overall, the existing literature on the Anglo-Kuki War drew up many crucial points, leaving some unanswered, and drew on some important questions that formed the foundation of the chapters in this volume. Yet, they discuss this frontier event in an isolated and unconnected way that the importance of it hardly becomes significant to scholars. This volume intends to undo this as much as possible. Three points are summarised here.

### On the question of 'small war' or counterinsurgency (COIN)

We have a rich corpus of literature on colonial counterinsurgency 'theory and practices'.<sup>11</sup> Thus, when a regular army engaged with irregular forces, it was not treated as conventional war but described to be 'small war' or 'little war' or 'insurgency'. Across the globe, regular state forces were consistently engaged with irregular forces, ranging from the fluid tribal rebellion to more organised 'communist insurgents'. The core issue in this scholarship was the place of strategy, tactics and violence. As the objective of 'small war' was to restore 'law and order', the question of violence was often relegated to the background. By treating 'small war' outside the 'conventional war' and hence outside the laws of 'civilised warfare', the former is said to

be governed by the doctrine of 'minimum force' aimed at winning the 'hearts and minds' of the people. Thus, we have the dominant narrative of COIN that offered a 'humane' and 'civilised' stance on warfare, whose aim is peace and stability in the insurgency affected region.

What was often considered unimportant, and in most cases taken for granted, in the debate was the question of 'moral effect' and its alter ego: violence. What emerged from the various COIN operations around the world was that the combination of 'minimum force' and 'moral effect' doctrines eventually displaced and defeated the very objective of winning 'peace' and the 'hearts and minds' of the people. Some theorists even granted importance to a 'moral effect' doctrine that calls for violence to end the insurgency. Callwell, for instance, insisted that 'moral effect is often far more important than material success', and COIN operations may be 'limited to committing havoc which the laws of regular warfare do not sanction'. Thus, he felt that 'the regular troops are *forced to resort* to cattle lifting and village burning and that the war assumes an aspect which may shock the humanitarian' (Callwell 1906: 42). Martin van Creveld approved actions like the 'Hama Massacre' of 1982 and advised the government that 'refusing to apply necessary cruelty' when needed 'is a betrayal of the people', and when it decided to strike 'it is better to kill too many than not enough' (van Creveld 2008). Everywhere, we see that the 'moral effect' doctrine, rather than 'minimum force', dominated colonial COIN operations. Be it the 'razzia' in French Algeria, the 'butcher and bolt' in the northwest frontier of India, the 'blockhouse' or 'cordoning and raking' in South Africa and elsewhere, and so on, were the result of the 'moral effect' doctrine that involved so much of violence. Violence was so taken for granted in colonial COIN operations that it became the 'natural order'. This also amounts to racial order. Thomas Mockaitis rightly contended that even when the 'colonials were subjected to excessive force Victorian racial attitudes insured that there was likely to be little outcry over the brutalisation of non-Europeans' (Mockaitis 1990: 17).

If the Victorian racial attitude towards the Orient was unkind, of which humanitarians always accused them of being 'inhuman' and 'barbaric', the case with the 'savage' tribal people was even more unsympathetic. The case of the 'North-East Frontier of India', is instructive. Since the British occupation of Bengal (1765) and Assam (1826), one witnessed a series of 'military expeditions' into the surrounding hills, sometimes annually. The objective of these expeditions was to 'punish' the hillmen who had created trouble – termed savage 'raid' – in the 'civilised' plain. These 'punitive measures', as

they were officially known, followed that the only effective form of punishment was to burn down their villages and destroy their properties, particularly their grains. These measures were considered a 'barbarously expedient' form of punishment, as there was no other way to punish the recalcitrant hillmen, they being untraceable in the wildness of the highland jungles. Hence, to the British government of this eastern region, the 'systematic' burning of villages and the wholesale destruction of properties has become the usual form of 'minimum force' doctrine. Militarily, such rapid escalation over the highland destroyed their properties or lives, and then after withdrawing again in the plain, was normally termed as 'mobile/flying columns' or the 'butcher and bolt' tactics. The idea was, to recall Callwell's famous line: 'If the enemy cannot be touched in his patriotism or his honour, he can be touched through his pocket' (Callwell 1906: 40). Although such policy was often called 'successful', the truth is that such a 'barbarously expedient' form of punishment, instead of stopping 'raids', enhanced them and thus transformed the peaceful frontier into the geography of violence. Only permanent occupation of the hills ended the tribal war of 'raid'.

The highland region of Northeast India was never completely occupied throughout the colonial period; Northeast Frontier Area/Agency (NEFA, today Arunachal Pradesh state of India) and the Tuensang Area of Naga Hills continued to remain 'unadministered'. Until the Anglo-Kuki War 1917–1919, the hills of Manipur state, Thaungdut state and Somra Tract, remain outside the purview of direct colonial administration. The hillmen of Manipur and Thaungdut states, besides paying house-tax and impressed labour, were left to themselves in terms of administration and so on. Somra Tract falls under 'unadministered area'. The Kukis were the dominant tribe in all three hills. If the discontented hearts often burst out into open 'rebellion', they were rapidly rubbed off by force of arms. Already in 1910, a military operation was conducted against the Kukis of the Aishan area in northeastern Manipur, known as 'Aishan rebellion' under the leadership of Cheng-japao, chief of Aishan. Similarly, in 1911–1912 we have the much publicised Abor Expedition in NEFA. In 1915, another major military expedition was carried out against the Kachins of Kachin Hills.

The Anglo-Kuki War 1917–1919 was the last major COIN operation in eastern India and, as noted, was 'the most formidable' and 'largest series of military operations'. What makes this COIN operation different from the earlier military operations was not only its arduousness and extent in time (two years) and space (about 7000 sq. miles), but more importantly the military strategy adopted to quell

the rising. We have noted that the operations went on for two consecutive winter seasons, hence two broad phases of operations with different tactics. In the first phase, we will see that the military tactic employed was the usual one in the region, the 'flying' or 'mobile columns' which come within the infamous 'butcher and bolt' type. Thus, a rapid mobile military column will go around the 'rebel area' and commit 'systematic' destruction of villages, properties and all sources of livelihood. The idea was to enforce 'submission' by cutting out food supplies and settlements. When such usual tactics failed them, a new tactic was introduced in the second phase.

There was no exact equivalent to the tactic employed elsewhere, but it relates closely to the 'blockhouse' tactic employed in Boer War 1899–1902, or the French system of 'cordonning and racking' tactics. Officially known as 'area' or 'section' systems in Assam, it draws largely from the tactical principle laid down by the sixteenth-century military theorist Lazare Hoche for a counter-guerilla operation. T. Haokip (chap. 3) and J. Guite (chap. 1) in this volume will give the details of this tactic. It involved massive amounts of violence and destruction, which would shock humanitarians. Systematic destruction of 'livestock', driving the civilians implicated to be helping the insurgents to 'concentration camps' and punishing the general Kuki population with communal penal labour seems an addition to the general tactical principle. The idea of 'chastising' the whole community or 'collective punishment' was a new addition to the general policy of pacification in the region.

Overall, the 'moral effect' doctrine was so freely used across the colonies that the question of violence had hardly become a question. Yet, violence as a 'natural order' in the colonial COIN operations is clearly visible in all cases; the case of the Kuki rising is just a tip of the colonial violence in its 'hideous nakedness'. In fact, some scholars and humanitarians kept challenging the legitimising idea of 'minimum force', the 'hearts and minds' principle and the claim of 'humanism' in all 'small wars'. For instance, *The Advocate of Peace* (1901) regarded the colonial COIN measures in the colonies as an act of 'civilised barbarism and savagery'.<sup>12</sup> David French, in his recent work, also argues that British justification of their actions under 'minimum force' was just to hide the use of naked force behind a carefully constructed veneer of legality. In reality, they commonly used wholesale coercion, including cordon and search operations, mass detention without trial, forcible population resettlement and the creation of free-fire zones to intimidate and lock-down the civilian population. The British COIN campaigns were generally nasty to the people (French 2011). Similarly, Douglas

Porch also challenges the contemporary mythologising of COIN as a ‘humane’ way of war and argues that the ‘hearts and minds’ doctrine has never achieved a lasting peace and stability but shattered and divided societies and unsettled civil-military relations (Porch 2013). This is the argument clearly visible in the context of the Anglo-Kuki War 1917–1919 as well. We will see that the rising was brutally suppressed with ‘inhuman’ colonial COIN strategies, and the ‘restoration’ process failed to bring real peace in the hills, and discontentment once again burst out during the Second World War, a subject addressed in S. Kipgen’s essay (chap. 11).

### On the question of leadership and tactics of Kuki war

In the colonial civilisational narrative, all other forces are yet-to-be-modern except the modern western imperial army. In this line of thinking, the tribal forces were the least organised forces, lacking leadership and the forces being fluid, defused and erratic. Hence, their ‘war’ never constituted a ‘war’ but was dubbed as a ‘raid’ or ‘rebellion’ and at most ‘guerilla/irregular war’. It was true that the tribal Kukis did not develop an organised and ‘regular’ army just as they did not procure sophisticated modern weapons like the British forces. However, to say that they lacked organisation, leadership, command and discipline is only to swallow the dominant civilisational narrative. The truth is that Kuki forces during the rising were scattered across the hills in small groups, yet they were connected to each other through their respective regional or area central commands. Each of these areas, under the command of the clan head (*pipa*), was in turn connected to each other by a clan network. Thus, for instance, all the Haokip clan members who fought in different areas were first connected to their sub-clan *pipa* in that area, and in turn, connected to their clan *pipa* at Chassad on a wider scale. The organising principle across the hills was therefore the clan network and relationship. Thus, each and every individual Kuki was connected by a clan network through which his/her loyalty and discipline was oriented towards the clan head. Leadership was therefore intrinsic to the clan. D. Letkhojam Haokip’s chapter (chap. 4) in this volume will show this formation clearly. N. Kipgen (chap. 8) traces the role of the Kuki traditional institution *Som-Inn* (bachelor’s dormitory) in shaping the spirit of unity, courage and discipline among the Kuki men, which played a crucial role in the rising. We will come back to this point shortly. The question of leadership draws attention here.



One serious confusion in the existing literature on the Anglo-Kuki War is concerned with leadership. In most historical scholarship on war and movement, one central point of the discourse was who led the war or movement. We develop certain notions that there cannot be a war without a leader. This is what may be understood as the pyramid notion of war and movement, where there is one leader at the top and one central command under his control. It is true that all wars or movements require leadership for organisation and strength, but it hardly crosses the mind that there can also be *leaders* in such wars/movements, not only *a leader*. Thus, in many wars and movements fought around the world in history, there were always leaders on equal footing commanding different command centres. This becomes particularly significant when we deal with tribal warfare. The pyramid notion of war often leads certain scholars to distortion by declaring a certain person as the one leader of the Kuki war when he was not in reality. The Anglo-Kuki War had also been often subject to this notion of war in the existing literature.

One disturbing case among the Kuki students in recent time was that certain study material for competitive examinations put Jadonang as the *leader* of the Anglo-Kuki War. The use of this name was doubly mistaken. First, giving a leader to a war, which has not one but many leaders, is a complete displacement of facts. Second, Jadonang was a Kabui Naga, who led the 'Kabui Raj' movement in Manipur in the 1930s and was completely unrelated to the Anglo-Kuki War. The truth about Kuki war, and for that matter most tribal warfare to the scale one witnessed in the case of the Anglo-Kuki War, is that the war was fought on an egalitarian line – connected, organised and sustained by a clan dynamic and kinship relationship – not on a central leader. Since many clans of the Kukis fought together, each clan member saw each clan head (*pipa*) as their leader. Thus, in each area the *pipa* of the clan that dominated the area emerged as the leader not only over his clan members but also eventually assumed the leadership to all other clan members in that area. He was therefore the leader of that area geographically and politically; his decision was final in that area unless his fellow chieftains in the area disagreed with him.

Therefore, the leader of the war in the eastern hills was Pache, the chief of Chassad, because he was the most powerful chief and *pipa* of the Haokip clan who dominated that area. As the *pipa* of all the Haokip sub-clans, he was also the head of all the Haokip clans in other parts of the hills, but was not necessarily the leader of all in practice. Thus, Ngulbul, chief of Longya, as the *pipa* of the Mangvum Haokip sub-clan, who dominated the southeastern hills, was the

leader of that area under which all the other Kuki clans also came.<sup>13</sup> This was also the case with the Ukha chief (Semchung), the Henglep chief (Pakang) and the Laiyang chief (Tintong) in their respective areas, although they all belonged to Haokip. Jampi chief Khutinthang was also the leader of the Jampi area as the *pipa* of Sitlhou clan who dominated that area and under which all other Kuki clans also fought together. It was also the case with Chengjapao, chief of Aishan, who was the leader of the northeastern hills, and Longjachin, chief of Behiang, in the southern hills. In this way, many leaders emerged in the Anglo-Kuki War, and they all fought in their respective areas and occasionally helped each other when needed. They were not bound together by a single leader and a common central command, as we are often shown with other warfare. They all fought together for clan and country based on an agreement and vow taken at their traditional war council. The Kuki adage '*phung ngailut jalla chang tumbu poh*' (lit. 'carrying paddy-load for the sake of clan') becomes the governing principle in the war.

Thus, what appeared to be fluid and disorganised forces were inherently well connected and deeply organised. The organising principle was, as noted, the dynamic of the clan in which each individual was connected and disciplined to the minutest detail not under a central leadership and command but by centrally ordained clan heads who decided to stand together at the grand Chiefs-in-Council (*upa* or *pipa* council). This aspect is discussed in detail by Sonthang Haokip (chap. 6). We will see that, before any war can take place, the various principal chiefs consulted each other and then came together in a grand Chiefs-in-Council (officially, 'Assembly of Chiefs') which acted as the customary War Council/Conclave. Kukis normally resorted to war councils only when they were preparing for a major war, and the size of this council depended on the strength of the enemy and the area to be covered. This council was democratic in nature, where all the important chiefs came together on equal footing and freely deliberated and decided on issues. Although the elder clan member was normally given the final say in all matters by the younger clan, the former hardly acted as the king or president of the clan. Resolution was normally taken on majority opinion, and if certain chiefs disagreed with it, he has the choice to opt out. Once a common decision was reached and the leadership for each area agreed upon, the meeting was customarily solemnised by a sacred ceremony called *sathin-salung-neh* ('feasting on the liver and heart of animal killed for the occasion'). This ceremony bound all the partakers together with a bond that could not be broken unilaterally. Such war councils and the resolutions taken formed the

bedrock of the war, its connection and its central command. Under the circumstances, one can only talk about the *leaders*, instead of a *leader*.

As the *pipa* of the Thadou-Kuki clans, Chengjapao chief of Aishan assumed the overall leadership role and called himself the 'King of Kuki'. By taking clan precedent, the British government also recognised this and extended his confinement at Sadiya for one more year. This clan connection among them can be gleaned from the statement of Haonek Kuki, chief of Nabil:

I am Lunkhel clan. Our *piba* is Tinthong. His *piba* is Hlupao of Hinglep. His *piba* is Pachei of Chassad. Hlupao is *piba* of all the Songthat clan. Pachei's *piba* is Khuthinthang of Jampi. Khuthinthang's *piba* is Chengjapao of Aishan.<sup>14</sup>

This is the line in which clan network and relationship flows, especially in decision-making process on major issue that concerns the whole community such as the war now fought. Based on this clan precedent, the British were somehow able to form the conclusion that Chengjapao was the leader of the Anglo-Kuki War. This is fine by the Kukis, to the extent that there was at least one recognised leader of the war. Yet, on practical ground, it should be remembered that the Anglo-Kuki War was not fought on this pyramidal notion of organisation.

While clan precedent was undoubtedly an important factor in the decision-making process, the actual control of warfare was co-opted to an immediate clan *pipa* of each clan in different areas. Thus, Chengjapao was no doubt the *pipa* of all, but he did not directly control the areas. Factoring the harsh geography and their capability to control over the area, power to carry out the war was distributed equally to multiple areas under different leadership. With a provision to circulate warriors from one area to another, there was therefore no paramount central command. Thus, each of the war leaders in their respective areas was not under the control of the other leader. While they all had to fight simultaneously, they were independent from each other in terms of command and control. They all fought separately until they could withstand the heat of colonial military forces. This was the strategy adopted at the War Council. Thus, the 'surrender' of one leader did not cause the surrender of another or the collapse of the whole war. For instance, the surrender of Chengjapao on 23 August 1918 and Khuthinthang on 24 September 1918 did not lead to the end of the rising, which went on until March 1919. Pache chief of Chassad surrendered on 5 March 1919, but Ngulkhukhai, his trusted lieutenant, continued to lead the rising in Somra Tract until he also surrendered

on 15 March 1919. This made Kuki war, and for that matter the tribal warfare, most difficult to control and perhaps different from other wars based on central leadership. This reinforced the idea of a fluid regime, but it was to be sure not unorganised and undisciplined or erratic.

The idea that the 'hit and run' or 'guerilla warfare' tactic of the Kukis, or for that matter all other guerilla warfare, as 'primitive', is therefore only to swallow the colonial civilisational narrative on 'war'. Despite the advancement of military technology and war tactics, guerilla tactics continue to remain popular among many state and non-state elements fighting regular forces across the globe. The question is why 'guerilla' tactic remains an evergreen method for 'irregular' forces? The efficacy of guerilla warfare to irregular forces is a familiar case. To the tribal Kukis, this choice was certainly a new tactic, not purely borrowed from outside but a synthesis of old and new. It was certainly not the old tactics of 'rushing' and 'surprise', but the idea had a strong presence in the present 'guerilla' warfare. There was some form of guerilla in the traditional tactic of ambushing the invaders on the way, which found a strong visibility in the new 'hit and run' tactic. Kukis normally choose this tactic in a defensive war against a powerful enemy. The fact that the mighty British forces were not beatable by any offensive war makes guerilla tactics most attractive to the Kukis. The role of few Assam Rifle return Kukis like Enjakhup, one of the tactical leader of the war, is apparent in the choice of such tactic.

Yet, the fact that they also combined the 'guerilla' tactic with fortification of their villages and construction of a series of stockades along the routes, combined with their traditional stone traps, *panjies* and so on, makes their war unique. This is visible in the context of the weapons used, ranging from Western-made firearms (flintlock, muskets, etc), local 'leather cannons' (*pumpi*), bows & arrows, etc. The use of traditional methods of communication to send out different messages across the hills such as *sajam* ('piece of meat'), *thingkho-le-malchapom* ('king chilli bound with burnt wood'), swords, bullets, etc. are also significant. D.L. Haokip (chap. 4) examines these aspects of Kuki war tactics in detail and argues that Kukis chose defensive tactics, waiting for the enemy in their hill stockades and fortresses, harassing them on the way and targeting the British officers leading the march. The difficulties in dealing with such tactics and their demoralising effect on the regular troops were reported from various field diaries. Thus, while the tactic saved casualties on both sides, the guerilla tactic shows its efficacy in dealing

with a powerful enemy. The Kukis did not win, but their tactics remain valid to this day among the various insurgent groups in the region. The harsh geography, such as the Northeast mountain highland, best suits the tactic, and its apparent fluid formation of the forces was at its best. Such choice also made the Kukis receptive to a new idea of war available around them.

### **‘A humble part of the Great War’**

Another important point that draws attention in the existing literature is the idea that the Anglo-Kuki War was an isolated, disconnected and unimportant frontier tribal ‘uprising’ like any other ‘rebellions’. Yet, the connection this war has at the time and the way it was taken seriously by the colonial state is testimony of the war being an important event. Three factors draw our attention in this respect. First, this war was fought in connection with the larger world order, being influenced from the west and east, and also from the valley of Manipur and other hill tribes. Second, the Indian nationalists had well recognised it as one important event; lack of information made the event go unnoticed. Third, and more importantly, the Anglo-Kuki War was directly connected to the First World War, partly, because it has been incited by the labour recruitment in the region for the war, and partly, the military operations to suppress the rising was considered to be part of the war and hence persons connected to the operations were awarded the two war medals. We will briefly discuss the three connections it had.

In May 1918, when a military column was assembling at Tamu (Burma) before breaking up after the first phase of operations against the Kukis, the Medical Officer, going through the sepoys’ huts, found some Sikh soldiers tearing papers which they said ‘they would not want anymore’. The Officer looked at the papers and discovered the photos of ‘one or two white men’ which Shakespear said was ‘obviously Germans, one being in uniform’. On the photo, he said, it was written, in ‘Hindustani’ – ‘If you fall into the rebels hands show these and they will not harm you’. The sepoys said that when they leave Bhamo (a frontier town of Burma with China) for the Kuki operations ‘a sahib had given them these papers’ (Shakespear 1929: 236). At the outbreak of ‘Kuki rebellion’, intelligence was also received that emissaries from Bengal revolutionaries have a hand on the Kuki rising, but no clear discovery was made if strict surveillance was kept to intercept such influence in due course (Shakespear 1929: 210). Col. L.W. Shakespear, the DIG, Assam Rifles, was deeply involved in the suppression of the Kuki rising throughout the operations. He

had become the official historian of Assam Rifles later. To both these evidences, he wrote:

Allusion has been made earlier to the belief that the [Kuki] rebellion had been still further fomented by emissaries from Bengal seditionists, but any idea that the hand of the Hun [Chinese] could possibly have been in it occurred to none.

(Shakespear 1929: 236)

Surely, nobody knows for sure the wider networks and connection the Kukis had created in their 'war against the King-Emperor' and in fact, little expectation was given to them. It is also difficult to reconstruct from oral sources of the Kukis, unlike those from the Second World War.

Yet, seen from the situation across the colonial world, during the First World War, where information about the war reached all the corners of the earth, certainly the people of this frontier knew the name of the Germans as well. We have information from different parts of the hills that even the sleepy hill villages have been thirsty of information about the war. The news of the War have been asked, told and circulated in different formats till it stopped at the corner of the earth. The news they received were dominated by the strange imagery of the weapons of destructions used in the War such as submarine, bombers, tanks, poison gases, cannons and artillery, etc. which have been understood in different registers.<sup>15</sup> The news of these deadly weapons eventually translated into the idea of death. Thus, when labour recruitment started, most hillmen were initially unwilling to send men because the idea of death was so pronounced, and they preferred to die at home. It was through such formats that Germans were also known to them, as the archrival of the British Empire. It was therefore expected that they developed some feelings about the Germans, as enemy, friend or neither. In this context, the response of Haka Chins to British officers is instructive. Laura Carson recorded that: 'They said that their people absolutely refused to go to France; that they said they had no quarrel with Germany and why should they go and fight the Germans? They said they would commit suicide rather than go'. This was the line of thinking the Kukis of Manipur also had when they told the political agent in Manipur that 'they feared to go so far from their homes and that if they had to die they preferred to die in their own country and would be prepared to meet force with force'.<sup>16</sup> It was within this line of assumption that the Kukis support of the Germans and their war against the British should be located.

It was surprising to note that 1,158 guns were confiscated from the Kukis after the suppression of the rising.<sup>17</sup> This is surprising because between 1907 and 1917, colonial authority had already confiscated 1,195 guns from the Kukis.<sup>18</sup> Where have they got all these guns? We have some information that certain Mawson from the Chin Hills had supplied guns to the Kukis during the war.<sup>19</sup> If the information of their connection with the eastern (Chinese) and western (Bengal) worlds was correct, it was also possible that the Kukis got supplies from these areas. Besides, one is also surprised to find that the Kukis were able to offer large amounts of money as a term of surrender (Pache, for instance offered Rs. 3000/-) or able to pay their house-tax or war indemnity after the war, even after their whole properties were destroyed during the war.<sup>20</sup> Where did all this money and guns come from? Nobody knows, and it may perhaps remain a mystery.

If the influence of the wider world, especially from the Bengal revolutionaries, is not clearly definable in the Kuki war, the latter was well recognised as one powerful anti-colonial movement by Indian nationalists. The operations against the Kukis had incited furor among Indian nationalists, especially in the Home Rule Movement group. Its mouth-piece, the *New India*, for instance, makes a frontal attack on the British Empire for its double standard on 'war' and 'civilisation'. It considered the action against the Kuki hillmen 'barbaric', revealing the 'brute force' of colonialism 'in all its hideous nakedness'. It drew similarities to the 'tragic inhumanity' committed by the 'agents of the British Nation' in India on the Kukis to that of what the Germans had done in France and Belgium. All 'civilised' nations, it urged, should condemn the brutality and appealed the Viceroy and the Secretary of State to 'order an immediate cessation of the brutality' and to institute 'a searching enquiry to find out who are actually responsible for initiating them'.<sup>21</sup> Another London based newspaper called *India*, criticised British government for their actions. It argued that instead of 'endeavouring to allay their [Kuki] fears and suspicions', government used force in haste. It ridiculed the government idea of 'pacification' through burning of villages and properties and proclaiming such proceedings as 'satisfactory'. 'Satisfactory' to whom? it bluntly questioned.<sup>22</sup> The sharp reaction from Indian nationalists however led to screening the 'tragic inhumanity' from press after its first appearance. Their spirit of freedom, if not broken at heart, had to be brutally suppressed without being known to the world.

Closer to home, from the valley of Manipur, however, a connection was clearly noticeable. Seeing the boiling political situation in the hills, a Manipuri revolutionary, Chingakhamba Sana Chaoba (whose world of munificent spirituality has very soon attained him a millenarian

reputaion among the large number of hillmen and valley population), took the wind of dissent to revive the Manipur *gaddi* to its old strength, free from colonial control. He told the Kukis that 'the Kingdom of the British is coming about an end' and the Kukis should start fighting against the British from the hills and he, with his three companies of sepoys, will fight from the plain.<sup>23</sup> In fact, the Kukis had helped him in attacking the Manipur State Ithai toll station on 19 December 1919. The Manipuri revolutionaries were immediately arrested and suppressed, and its leader Sana Chaoba Singh was captured later in Burma by the Thaungdut Sawba and sent to Imphal jail. It was also reported that:

The Kukis are in touch with some sections of the Manipuris themselves, and that certain villages of Lois . . . have contributed rice and rice-beer to the Kukis. It seems also that some Kukis in the Naga Hills have been acting in concert with their brethren in Manipur, and the Kukis have even been trying to stir up the Nagas to join them in resistance.<sup>24</sup>

Certain valley traders have also been arrested for sacretly trading with the Kuki 'rebels'. Nothing further come from the valley population apart from what Chingakhamba had promised, but for a time the spelt of a religious man, of the invincibility to bullets, of his flying sword that could cuts people into pieces if they refuse to join the rising, and so on, seems to strike a magical note and a comforting sense among the Kukis.<sup>25</sup>

Besides, in this war against the King-Emperor, the Thadou-Kukis were not alone, as some studies would like to make it known.<sup>26</sup> Instead, we have evidence that shows that all the Kuki tribes were part of it. While it is true that some Thadou-Kukis had abstained from the war for some reason or another, many other Kuki tribes had also joined in the war. For instance, when he was at Sugunu, Higgins was informed that the Anals and Lamgangs of the southeastern hills were also supporting the Mangvum Kukis. He reported:

My informant said that the Anals were supplying rice to the Kukis, but that with the exception of Torjang, Khubung Khulen & Khubung Khunow, which had joined the Kukis, the rest of the Anals were loyal at heart, though they did not dare to come and see me.<sup>27</sup>

An Anal man from this village was moving among the Anal villages and asked them to provide their guns and join the rising, 'saying they



all were men of one country'.<sup>28</sup> The Koms of Langkhong Chongmang, in the western hills, had also demanded licenced guns from Kabui village, 'as they were about to make war with the sahib'.<sup>29</sup> The Vaipheis of Bongbal Kulen areas had also taken an active part during the war, and many of them had been arrested.

Perhaps the clear case that this war was not fought only by the Thadou-Kuki is best illustrated by the case of what was known as Manhlun-Manchong Kukis (today, the Zou tribe). They were in close alliance with the Ukha Kukis on the one hand and the Mombi Kukis on the other. For instance, it was reported that when the military column under Higgins attacked Ukha Kukis, the 'sons of Haokip chiefs in the vicinity of the operations were friendly, the rebels were being reinforced by a large body of Manhlun Manchong Kukis with many guns from near the Chin Hills border'.<sup>30</sup> There was also a large gathering of 'the Haokips and Manhlun Manchong Kuki association' at Tuidam (in Haobi ching) to decide on certain matters about their war against the British such as, besides other, the 'stringent measures' to be taken 'to breakdown the stockades of the British Government' during the rains and to punish the friendly villages.<sup>31</sup> In fact, the Zous were at the forefront of the war is illustrated by their attack on Nepali *gots* of Khuga Valley at the start of the rising, military columns going round their villages with systematic destructions, the fierce battles with them such as near Khailet (Gotenkot), Hengtam, etc., which went on till the Chiefs of Hengtam and Thirgodang were captured on 17 January 1919 in an encounter.<sup>32</sup>

The connection of the Anglo-Kuki War with their brethren in Chin Hills was also clearly established. When war preparation was taken up among the Kukis in different parts of the hills, Higgins reported certain Kuki villages such as Mueltom and Tungjang [Tonjang] 'were endeavouring to stir up the northern Chin villages to join in the armed resistance of the Manipur Kuki'.<sup>33</sup> Reports were also received from Burma that 'a large force of Kukis' was gathering at the border areas on Manipur side, that rations were being collected in villages above the Kabaw valley, and that the Kukis of Manipur 'were in communication with the rebel Chins of Haka'.<sup>34</sup> The DC, Upper Chindwin also reported that:

Sellers from Sandin Chin village Manipur side state word was given them by Kinki Chins to have 8,000 baskets paddy ready as about 8,000 Kukis with arms and equipments are coming shortly. . . . Kukis from Haka also told Chins on Tomu frontier to collect paddy as much as possible.<sup>35</sup>