

ON INTERPRETING MUSIC: THE PERFORMATIVE TRADITIONS OF THE KUKIS

A Thesis Submitted to
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In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Communication

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DECLARATION

I, *Zamminlien*, hereby declare that this doctoral thesis, titled “**On Interpreting Music: The Performative Traditions of the Kukis**” submitted by me to the Department of Communication, University of Hyderabad, India, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of *Doctor of Philosophy in Communication*, is a record of research done by me under the supervision of Prof. P. Thirumal. This is a bona fide research work and has not been submitted in part or in full for the award of any degree or diploma at this or any other University or Institution.

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CERTIFICATE

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In addition, the student has the following publication/s and conference presentation/s:

1. Construction of Identity Through Songs: A Study on the Kukis of Northeast India, Published in the “International Journal of Research and Analytical Review” Vol. 6, No. 2. June, 2019. ISSN 2348-1269. UGC Approved (Journal No. 43602).
2. Presented a paper titled “Interpreting the Performative Traditions of the Kuki People: The Play of Art in the Lawm Sielneh Festival” at the International Conference ‘Locating Northeast India: Human Mobility, Resources Flows and Spatial Linkages’ organized by the Department of Sociology, Tezpur University from 9th to 12th January, 2018
3. Presented a paper titled “The Continuity of Ju-ne laa: A Communication Approach” at the International Conference on Mass Communication, Journalism & Social Sciences jointly organized by International Multidisciplinary Research Foundation (IMRF) and Confederation of Indian Universities (CIU) New Delhi, at Mysore, Karnataka from 2nd to 3rd November, 2018.

Further, the student has passed the following courses towards fulfilment of the coursework requirement for Ph.D.:

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Chapter 1

The Hermeneutics of Performance: A Study of Kuki Performative Traditions

1.1 Introduction

The tribes of North Eastern India have largely been studied through the lens of outsiders who have had the advantage of using the written scripts to record the cultural practices of their subjects. The tribes were ascribed an identity based on their physical appearance, geographical location and lifestyle which is very different from their own identification of themselves¹. They were considered as ‘savage’, ‘uncivilized’ ethnic groups with ‘bizarre’ cultural practices, markedly different from the ‘sophisticated’ mainstream. The academia contributed to the objectification of tribal subjects, often dehumanizing them and reducing them to mere objects of academic interest, rendering their history and culture invisible. Stereotypes on tribal subjects abound in academic discourse as well as in popular culture, which consequently lead to the subordination of the tribes and their systematic marginalization, often leading to their dependence on the mainstream in order to attain

¹ The Kukis of the Northeast identified themselves with their Chief. In the pre-colonial period, every village was ruled by a Chief and his council, who he himself appointed to assist him in the village administration. Chieftainship within the Kuki society is hereditary. Only the eldest son could inherit this right, while the younger sons too had the privilege of becoming a Chief only by the will of his father and his eldest brother. In such cases, a new village would be set up by his elder brother to be ruled by his younger brother. Villagers of the pre-colonial do not identified themselves by their villages, but by the name of their Chiefs by saying ‘Lonpi pa mi kahi’ (I belong to Lonpi Chief). Their village system could be compared to the Greek city states with each village functioning independently on their own, but in the circumstances of major threats they would report to their elder brother(s) who is also a Chief of another village.

‘sophistication’. This, in turn leads to the perception of tribal cultures as ‘static’ and in need of ‘transformation’.

Colonial and postcolonial writers writes about the Northeastern tribes from their own perspectives and observations, and categorized them as a ‘primitive’ or ‘tribe’. These terms are highly contestable in the present for Colonial and Post-Colonial anthropology see these identity as a representation for people isolated from the positive traits of modern society that is comprised of illiterate and backward society which is no longer applicable to most of the groups that comes under it in the present scenario of technological developments and modernity (Xaxa, 1919). However, because of their inabilities to present themselves based on their understanding of their selves to the outside world, only the representations by outsiders armed with the knowledge of writing becomes visible. Hoineilhing Sitlhou (2017) argued that “the natives often have their own interpretations of social phenomena which are markedly different from colonial versions; even so it is always the colonial account that stands out because of the wider platform and command over a universal language” (p.67). Unable to speak for themselves, tribal subjects accepted the identity imposed on them by the colonizers and thus locates them in the periphery of the wider social spectrum—as a tribe belonging to the underprivileged ‘minority’ groups. Even the term ‘indigenous,’ widely used to replace ‘tribe’ becomes suspicious for scholars like Virginius Xaxa (1999) for whom identification with the term is not a self-description of the people, but descriptions by people outside the culture. He also points out that “aspects of marginalization are built into the definition of indigenous people” (Xaxa, 1919, p. 3590). According to Xaxa, only people who are under domination and subjugation to someone

more powerful than their own constitute the indigenous people. Constituting only the weaker society in a group could give rise to the binary of *us* and *them*, creating a hegemony over the less powerful society. Representations, for Edward Said (1979) also, is mostly in the context of power, to subordinate, and to subjugate. Another scholar from the region, Joy Pachuau (2014), also argued that the study of ‘tribes’ in India is definitely the study of an ‘other’ where the tribes are seen as an ‘object’ denied of social processes, and their culture seen as static representing their pre-Christian culture while neglecting their changes after Christianity. It could be argued that they are molded according to the preferences of the dominant group. To be free from an imposed identity, she argued for the idea of ethnicity where an identity can frames itself.

The thesis attempts to comprehend the modes in which the subjects perceive of and represent themselves in terms of their inscribed and ascribed identities through the emic perspective. Scholars from various branches of social sciences have explored the arena through the historical, political, religious and anthropological lenses. This thesis departs from earlier studies in that it attempts to engage with the phenomena from the vantage point of aesthetics that has been hitherto neglected in studies of tribes in Northeast India. It attempts to move away from the static approach to culture by looking at certain practices amidst the ever-changing, but continuing traditions from their pre-Christian period to the contemporary period. It becomes imperative to engage with the colonial and missionary interventions in the community which shaped its subjectivity by recording the lifestyle and culture of the tribes in written form. The transformations the cultural practices of the tribes underwent over time also needs to be scrutinized in order to arrive at a clearer

understanding of the tribes and also to steer clear of faulty interpretations that could provide a distorted version of the history and culture of the community.

Pachau (2014) also emphasizes on historical studies to expel the notion that the tribes developed a history only after the colonial rule, for history cannot be simply “created virtually out of nothing”. While acknowledging the works of the colonials and the post-colonials in fixing physical and cultural boundaries, and in the construction of the self, she argued that it is necessary to revisit how identity is continuously reconstructed through its relationship with history. The colonials’ approach in objectifying the tribes based on their observation to justify their preferences do not ends with them. This method of writing the tribes is being carried on by the post-colonial anthropologists too. The tribes were seen as a product brought into existence by the dominant groups reducing their historical existence, and portraying them exactly the way they want to see them. Historical trajectories thus become important sites to counter the dominant narratives and also in tracing the continuities and transformations of the community’s cultural practices.

The objective of this thesis is to engage with the modes in which the Kukis of Northeast India comprehend themselves without reference to the body of knowledge created by outsiders². The Kukis, who mainly reside in Northeast India, Burma and Bangladesh, are often considered ‘wild races’ full of hatred for any culture other than their own. The performative traditions of the Kukis, which have evolved over time, are explored in order to unveil how they engage with meanings derived from their performances. The meaning-

² ‘Outsiders’ here refers to colonial and postcolonial writers and missionaries.

making process utilized by the people is analyzed to comprehend their experiences through their performances.

The thesis also examines how the Kukis construct and understand meanings from their performative traditions each time a performance takes place – an endeavor which is necessary to understand the dynamics of their cultural practices that continuously produce meanings across time. Cultural practices that do not produce meanings are eliminated and are no longer included in the performances, while those that produce meanings are continuously performed, and, for Fischer (2009), are experienced and understood with references to their particular quality. Fischer argues that every performance reveals a reality over which neither the performer nor the audience have any control. This is possible because in performances, the participating subjects allow for an “unforeseen and unplanned phenomena to emerge” (Fischer, 2009, p. 4). The reality brought forth through these performances could not be experienced or understood by the colonial and postcolonial writers, and hence, such performances appeared to them to be mere repetitions of past performances. Their inability to experience the ‘reality’ brought forth in such performances limited their understanding of the native people, which in turn (mis)led them to perceive of the Kukis’ culture as a product and not as a production. In order to engage with culture as production, that is, as an act of creation or a process, it becomes necessary to comprehend how meanings are attributed to cultural patterns.

The thesis also intends to study the society in transition, the evolution of new cultures and the modes in which they are accommodated. A significant event that transformed the Kuki socio-cultural scenario was the arrival of Christianity, a religion that altered the

tribe's worldview and lifestyle. Christianity, in its early period in the North East, divided the Kukis' world into the 'sacred' and the 'secular', two spheres which coexisted even in the pre-Christian period. The Kukis' identification with the new religion problematized many cultural practices that yielded no meaningful reality for the Kuki Christians, thus marking an end to the performance of several traditions. The *Juneh*³ culture is one such practices the Kuki Christians abandoned. They have a musical tradition called the *Ju-ne laa*⁴ which they used to performed after consuming the *Ju*. Their rejection for the *Ju* puts an end to the production of the *Ju-ne laa*, leaving them to rely on the translated Western hymn songs. The thesis attempts to understand how the Kukis have interpreted the *Ju-ne laa* during three historical moments – The Pre-Christian Period, The Early Christian Period, and The Contemporary Period.

At this juncture, I explore their songs composed during the pre-Christian and early Christian periods as a site for locating their historical transition from a phenomenological perspective. I attempt to scrutinize this phenomenon by tracing their experiences through the performance of songs during celebrations from the pre-Christian period to the early Christian periods.

An inquiry into the historical trajectories of cultural changes involves an interrogation of the contemporary Kuki society to better understand their past. The past cannot be comprehended without an awareness of the present. The performative traditions of the

³ Juneh would literally mean consuming the traditional rice beer, the *Ju*. *Ju* plays an important role in the pre-Christian Kuki society. But it was later on abandoned as the missionaries finds it problematic to see the new converts attending the worship services in an inebriated state, making it difficult for them to preach the gospel.

⁴ Discussed in detail in Chapter 2.

Kukis that gives them the experience of reality “exists only at a time and place of their realization” (Fischer, 2009, p.6), thus confirming the temporality of their performances. The reality experienced from a particular performance does not create a lasting artifact, nor does it exist beyond the time of their fleeting performances. Despite repetition, a performance does not give the same experiences; rather, it gives new experiences every time it is performed. It is also argued that despite the non-existence of experience beyond fleeting performances, the participants return as a transformed being. The thesis also attempts to understand the continuity of experiences from the past to the present by analyzing the contemporary songs of the Kuki people.

The study will essentially deal with their songs and performances across space and time. Arguing against the identity given in writing, the study makes an effort to trace the Kukis’ understanding of their selves and how this understanding is achieved through their performative traditions. Ethnographic fieldwork among the Kukis of Manipur, supplemented by archival research, has been carried out for the purpose of this inquiry. The work, being a study from within, understands and interprets the performative traditions as they are lived through from an insider’s perspective. It interprets ethnographic materials collected from within the framework of the natives’ cultural categories and meanings. Performance studies demand the understanding of experiences, since the reactions of the spectators, according to Fischer, “are not predictable, let alone controllable” (p.4) and vary from performance to performance.

Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney (1984) claims that native anthropologists have access to the emotive and sensory dimension of one’s behavior and her/his relationship to culture and

Tierney considers this one of the weakest areas of anthropological endeavor. As we shall observe in the subsequent chapters, the emotive and sensory dimensions have a major role to play in the understanding of performative cultures and the vitality of the being of the subjects involved. For Ohnuki-Tierney, “native anthropologists are in a position to offer intimate knowledge of these dimensions of human behavior” (p. 585). However, researching on one’s own culture is not free from challenges, as there are dangers of being swayed by local subjectivities, especially when it involves ‘emotions’. In order to be free of bias, native anthropologists often need to adopt the role of outsiders to distance oneself from emotivity. The questions of an insider posing as an outsider, according to Pachau (2014), is sometimes perceived as “sheer stupidity”, especially “when asking questions considered obvious, which an informant may have been more willing to divulge to a foreigner” (p. 26). The study, therefore, attempts to address the objective stated above by posing both as an insider and an outsider, as and when needed. With these in mind, the thesis looks into the performance of songs from the pre-Christian Kuki period to the present.

1.2 Conceptualizing Culture: From Text to Performance

The body of literature on the tribes of the Northeast Indian states has grown in strength and proportion in recent years. These studies begin with the works of colonial writers and Christian missionaries who contributed immensely to the corpus of literature on the people and their cultural practices. Although Colonial and post-colonial writers ascribed identities to the tribes based on their interactions, these ascribed identities could not bring out the true mobile essence of the people. The colonisers studied the North East and its people

mainly in order to ensure smooth governance. Everything that existed before their arrival was excoriated and the colonies were what Turkmen (2003) calls “virgin land” (p. 189) and they spared no efforts in reconstructing it. Turkmen also wrote that except for “the roads, the institutions, the schools, administrations, languages and the inhabitants of the land” (p.189), the colonisers erased everything else. In this process of reconstruction, the colonized were “forced to become something else” (p. 189). To justify colonialism, the colonized were labelled and classified in a degrading and offensive manner and the colonisers proclaimed themselves to be the agents of change who could liberate the colonized from what they deemed the ‘dark world’.

Northeast India, being a colonized region, was often the target of such condemning attacks. The tribes were divested of their past identities and they were attributed new identities, sometimes without their knowledge⁵. Postcolonial writers, despite their criticism of this colonial practice, followed in the footsteps of the colonisers and their tools and techniques of writing on the tribe are the same as those of the latter. ‘Naming’ the tribes was an act of establishing colonial hegemony over them.

Prior to the colonials, the region had been more or less unexplored and clear data as to who first attempted to study the region and when cannot be ascertained. However, formal contact between the colonials and the north-eastern region is marked by the signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 between the British and the Burmese. Writings about the region began with colonization and as such knowledge of the region emerges from the

⁵Shakespeare in his book ‘The Lushai Kuki Clan’ (1912) wrote that the colonisers gave the name ‘Kuki’ to a group of people, but the Kukis themselves were unaware of them being called ‘Kukis’.

colonial vantage point. Wouters writes: “Colonial administrators, travelers, missionaries and early anthropologists attempted to understand, categorize and classify the castes and tribes in such a way that their information would be useful for governmental purposes and comprehensive to their Western audiences” (p.101). He also wrote that “much of the colonial ethnography was written in a dominant paradigm of ‘unilineal evolutionism’ in which leading anthropologists believed in the psychic unity of humanity” (p. 101). Their works, being guided by a set of rules which the earlier anthropologists had laid out needs a serious reconsideration if they are still valid.

To the colonial imagination, “any deviation from what was considered the norms of Oriental behavior was believed to be unnatural” (Said, 1979; 2001, p. 40), and it is this same belief that branded indigenous settlers as wild, savages, and head hunters. The instilled sense of the colonizer’s superiority led to the ‘othering’ of the indigenous community and its cultures and traditions which later became areas of interest for officials such as J. Shakespeare (*The Lushai Kuki Clan*, 1912), William Shaw (*Notes on The Thadou Kukis*, 1929), J.H. Hutton (*The Angami Nagas* 1921) among other books written by the colonial rulers. The colonial writers lived among the target groups for long periods and were well acquainted with the customs and cultural practices of the indigenous people. In this respect, they satisfy Malinowski’s recommendation for an anthropologist to conduct a real time study while living among the subjects and observing their everyday life. The scholars were mostly officials, missionaries, and travelers keeping records in their diaries, letters and official documents. However, their main objective in writing about the people was not to understand them for who they were, but to help their empire in the region,

knowing their subjects better to ensure smooth governance. Diane Lewis (1973) maintains that the anthropologist, being a member of the dominant group are often unable to work outside the framework of the government that grants them the license to work. Some anthropologists, however much they disapproved of the relationship between the subjects and the colonials, they still needs to directly or indirectly adopts the exploitation of 'differences' between the colonials and the colonized. This approach was necessary for them to subjugate the lesser privileged groups, that for Memmi (as cited in Lewis, 1973) is, to present these 'differences' as facts.

The colonizers, who believed that all Mongoloid races had the same culture, tradition and customs, were surprised by the land occupied by multiple ethnic communities with their own unique lifestyles. Most of these communities rejected colonial power, leading to clashes between the tribes and the colonizers, claiming hundreds of lives on both sides.⁶ The local groups were identified and categorized, based on their response to colonial rule. According to Wouters (2012), "If the group was easy to govern and cooperative in British commercial activities they were likely to be defined as relatively more cultured than groups who actively resisted colonial rule" (p. 101). The resisting "groups often came under the spell of labels as 'warlike', 'treacherous' and 'barbarous'" (p.101). He wrote:

. . . most of them have highlighted the positive role played by Christian missionaries and most of the authors were of the opinion that it was only a collective conversion to Christianity that could uplift the people, both materially and mentally.

⁶ One example of this ugly standoff between the locals and the colonizers could is the Anglo-Kuki war, 1917-1919. The war broke out as a result of the latter's attempt to recruit the Kukis as Labor Corp to serve in France during World War I.

Most of the monographs clearly distinguish between Christians and non-Christians in the tribe they studied and they, for example, find the Christian houses cleaner and better than the non-Christian ones. (p.118)

It is evident that the representation of the region was based solely on colonial knowledge and of the northeast tribe, who were perceived of as ‘others’. Since the culture and customs of the region were consciously represented as abhorrent to the colonizers, the people were labelled as wild and barbaric savages. Anthropologists framed the identity of the groups in such a way that the difference between the dominant groups and the subjects they ‘othered’ were made conspicuous. These differences were orchestrated to suit the political interests of the colonizers and to subjugate the tribes.⁷

Evaluating indigenous people and their lifestyle from the European perspective, the colonizers found their rituals, customs, dresses and food habits ‘abnormal’. An old woman in my village recollected her childhood days over the course of my conversation with her and said she still wonders why European women would dress differently from the women of her village. In a similar vein, the indigenous people might have seen the European culture as a system that deviated from the ‘normal’. The sole difference was that the colonizer’s interpretation of the ‘other’ was written down and hence preserved, while the perspective of the indigenous people were forgotten owing to the absence of a writing system that could record their observations. Colonial anthropology could thus be described as a tool for developing and sustaining hegemony by formulating the binary of ‘us’ and ‘them’, thereby reducing the subjects being studied to the level of ‘others’.

⁷ See Diane Lewis “Anthropology and Colonialism” for more details.

These works of the colonial writers, according to Clifford Geertz (1973) could be viewed as an anthropological research based on ‘observation’, and for him “there is nothing particularly wrong with this, and it is in any case inevitable” (p. 9) while studying an undocumented society. However, he cautions readers against the limitations of this approach, as there is the risk of neglecting the information required to understand the people, while giving too much importance to observable cultural patterns. The risk of considering scripted or acted performances as ‘truth’ could be misleading. For him, the hidden meanings could be reached and disclosed not through observation alone but through ‘interpretation’. Following Geertz (1973), it is strongly argued that conclusions cannot be drawn from mere observation of people’s behavior, for one needs to understand the underlying reason that motivates them to behave thus. Labeling people as ‘savages’ and ‘head hunters’ by virtue of their appearance or patterns of behavior is misleading and unjustifiable. Marshall McLuhan (2002), in his study of media technologies argues that the “content of any medium is always another medium” (p. 19). He wrote:

. . . whether the light is being used for brain surgery or night baseball is a matter of indifference. It could be argued that these activities are in some way the ‘content’ of the electric light, since they could not exist without the electric light. This fact merely underlines the point that ‘the medium is the message’ because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action. (McLuhan, 2002, p.19).

According to him, people tend to focus excessively on the ‘content’ of the medium at the cost of its characteristic features. Although McLuhan’s studies concentrate on media and

technologies, his observations are relevant to the current inquiry in that the ‘content’, or here, the reality that leads to the emergence of cultural practices risks being overlooked. The cultural practices performed do not appear on their own; rather, they are brought into existence for a certain underlying reason that cannot be understood through a mere observation of performances.

Positivists construct the culture of the tribal community on the basis of their limited comprehension and knowledge, which stands in contrast to the people’s understanding of themselves. The culture of a community or society manifests itself through various kinds of performances, reflected through their rituals, festivals, or even their everyday behavior. Fischer (2009) posits that performative processes become conceivable through the notion of ‘emergence’. According to him, no matter how many times a performance is staged, it leads to the emergence of new meanings not experienced during previous performances. Spectators always obtain new experience, making repetition of experience impossible even when the same event is performed. Littlejohn and Foss (2009) opine that the “nature of performance is that of revelation” (p. 736). They also argue that in performing “... not only do we reveal ourselves, but we also make ourselves in the process – both as individuals and as communities” (p. 736).

Performance theorists depart from the static approach which predominantly considered culture as a text. In *The Future of Performance Studies* (1995), Dwight Conquergood’s paper titled “Beyond the Text: Toward a Performative Cultural Politics” asserts that distance, detachment, and disclosure, which the textual paradigm privileges, are modes of knowing and do not require “involvement, immediacy, intimacy as modes of

understanding” (p.26). He presumes that a mere knowing does not lead to a comprehensive understanding of one’s culture. One needs to involve and be intimate with the culture through real-life experience that involves ‘immediacy’ – primordial means of understanding the subjects under study. Moving away from the textual paradigm, Paul Gilroy, in his studies of black music, argues that the ideology of the text and textuality fails to see how cultural performances developed (Conquergood, 1995). For these performance theorists, the dynamics of culture needs to be understood through interactions with the community enabling a comprehension of the ground reality, and following Geertz, cultural performances must be interpreted.

Culture, for Geertz (1973), is an action that is performed in public, which is evident from human behavior. In *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture* (1973), he wrote: “culture is public because meaning is” (p. 12). For him, it is the duty of the anthropologist to interpret the publicly performed cultural practices and a good interpretation “takes us into the heart of that which it is the interpretation” (p. 18). Emphasizing the importance of interpretation for a comprehensive understanding of the performance (or the meanings embedded in the performance), Geertz uses the metaphor ‘culture as text’ in his description of the Balinese cockfight: “the culture of a people is an ensemble of text, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologists strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong” (p. 452). Geertz could be seen to be advocating for the readings of a static text, however he proposed for a more practical readings of cultural behavior. He also asserts: “doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of ‘construct a reading of’) a manuscript – foreign, faded, full of ellipses,

incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sounds but in transient examples of shaped behavior” (p. 10). In his endeavor to move away from the positivist approach to studying culture, Geertz argued for the importance of comprehending meanings placed within cultural patterns, advocating a ‘thick description’ in order to get to the heart of the performance. A misreading of Geertz’s metaphor of ‘culture as text’ could lead one to believe culture to be static rather than dynamic.

Within the performative tradition, the concept of ‘culture as text’ was not received well, for it was accused of diminishing culture to a product rather than a production. However, Bachmann (2016) claims that the perception of ‘culture as text’ stems from the understanding that cultural meanings are continually translated into signs. For him, agreeing with Geertz’s metaphor does not reduce the meaning of culture to a reading text “removed from actual practice” (p.103). In other words, Geertz’s ‘culture as text’ refers to the temporary human behavior that was shaped by his/her culture, but neither as written nor canonical text. Geertz himself does not limit his metaphor to a fixed textual meaning. Bachmann proposed a reading of culture that transcends the text, considering the concept of textuality as *passé*; he agrees with Moritz Babler et.al. (as cited in Bachman, 2016) in recognizing the contemporary “questions of media, rituals, communication or memory than of textuality”(p.105). The static approach to text, for Bachmann (2016), is no longer valid, and is to be replaced by a more practical approach that should be read as ‘cultural performances’ which represents not only a reality but also constitutes it.

Reading culture as text involves technical interpretation that cannot be ignored. For instance, a grammatical error could lead to changes in the interpretation of a text, often resulting in misinterpretations. Focusing on the notion of technical interpretation, Hans Georg Gadamer (2013) claims that “a text is not to be understood in terms of its subject matter but as an aesthetic construct, as a work of art” (p. 193). According to him, if a text is considered as a work of art, one could “understand why what is at issue is not a relation to the subject matter” (p.193). This leads us to realize that the meanings or the experience we seek from performances is not static. It would thus be fallacious to suggest that performative culture remains unchanged. The same performance does not yield the same meaning every time it is performed; it provides different and even multiple meanings.

1.3 Phenomenological Approach as Method

Existentialism asserts that the mobile essence or ‘being’ cannot be understood through an inscribed identity. The inscribed and self-inscribed identities lack authenticity in describing their being. Gadamer (2013) claims that truth can be experienced in the work of art, a process which is not possible through the scientific process. He criticized the aesthetic theory for restricting itself to the scientific concept of truth. ‘Truth’ cannot be fully grasped without understanding the self-knowledge of the people or how they comprehend themselves. Their being-in-the-world presented through their inscribed and self-inscribed identities devalue their existence, degrading them to the level of mere objects whose existence was defined based on the observation of the dominant group adopting the methods of positivism. Their being-in-the-world was moulded to depend on a set of rules dictated by a dominant group based on whose power and knowledge they were scrutinized.

This method puts in doubt the authenticity of the Kuki being that was largely understood from the perspective of outsiders. It is imperative to engage with their own understanding of themselves to bring forth the hidden reality or truth that positivism could not unravel.

To make sense of one's understanding of oneself, it is essential to interpret her/his mode of attaining self-knowledge which has its own rationality that cannot be reduced to any set of rules. This mode of self-knowledge, which Aristotle explains as *Phronesis* (practical wisdom) (Gadamer, 1975) cannot be taught or learned, but it is acquired over time. Since *Phronesis* is based on experiences it distances itself from abstract reasoning, but instead it becomes the virtue of the people who acquired it. The departure from scientific reasoning allows for the presentation of one's own being through his/her lived experiences that goes beyond the colonial and post-colonial representation of the people based on the rules and methods laid out in advance for the study. It is the intention of this thesis to disclose the hidden 'truth' that positivism failed to explain. In my attempt unravel this 'truth', I turn to hermeneutics to in order to locate the Kuki being within the human sciences. Hermeneutics here must not be confused with the exegetical practice of interpreting literary texts. It is used in the Gadamerian method of philosophical hermeneutics that provides a solid ground for understanding what that is sought to be understood. The thesis argues that phenomenological interpretation could free the Kuki subjects from the burden of identities imposed by colonial and post-colonial writings. It

also allows them to break free from these representations⁸ of their being, providing them the opportunity to present themselves based on their own engagements with their selves.

Heidegger (1962) departs from traditional hermeneutics and uses it as a tool to investigate the underlying structures that pursue the factual existence of being by allowing the self-disclosure of the structure of understanding. For him, the hermeneutic circle is a method that favours a pre-understanding of the entity to be comprehended. In other words, in order for one to really understand a particular situation, one must be in a position to have a connection with that which is sought to be understood. In his “Origin of the Work of Art” (1971), Heidegger argues that artwork has the capacity to disclose a world and refers to this event of disclosure as the event of ‘truth’. However, the disclosure of truth cannot unravel all the meanings embedded in art. Heidegger maintains that in this event of disclosure, there is a play between that which is disclosed and which is concealed, thus allowing only for a partial disclosure, concealing multiple layers of signification.

From this point, Gadamer took the hermeneutic circle to a new level where he argued against the traditional Kantian approach to art that highly valued subjectivity. He distanced himself from Kant by ignoring subjectivism while directing hermeneutics towards practical wisdom. He does not reject Heidegger’s hermeneutical situatedness, instead drawing his views from the concept, he argues that our prejudices are what opens us up to what that is to be understood. He believes that ‘what is to be understood’ possesses a feature

⁸ Here, ‘representation’ refers to writings about Kuki identity by outsiders and also those writings based on their mythology. The thesis however does not negate the Kukis’ mythic belief of their origin and their inscribed identities, but suggests that a more comprehensive understanding of the tribe could be achieved through phenomenological traditions.

that is understandable, and in this process of understanding the understandable, one can comprehend a meaningful reality from what is sought to be understood. That is, the whole knowledge of understanding the understandable in time contains an element that is ‘real’ and ‘phenomenal’, playing a significant role in the reconstruction or transformation of the past in the present. Throughout the thesis, Gadamer’s concepts of play, festival, and ritual are utilized extensively in order to perceive the peoples’ presentation of their own identity. As mentioned earlier, a work of art involves a community for its presentation and interpretation. The meaning(s) are communicated to the community upon its presentation, where their shared *sensus communis* allows them to interpret and understand the performance. Gadamer, in his engagement with the concept of ‘play’ suggests that the purpose of the game is not to end the game, but to enable the to-and-fro movement of the game where it “renews itself in constant repetition” (Gadamer, 2013, p.108) without any differences as to “who or what plays the game” (p.108). The thesis, agreeing with this concept of play, argues that the flexibility of the work of art or songs for re-interpretation maintains its continuity throughout different historical periods.

1.4 The Kuki Being and the Kuki Subject

That the colonials were the first to record the existence of the Kukis is uncontested, but to claim the Kuki identity to be a colonial construct is misleading. The Kukis have had well-structured customs and traditions since time immemorial. Deprived of modern education, they lacked the ability to record in writing the events that were instrumental to the formation of their identity. However, they used different methods to record important

events in the form of songs⁹, through which the undocumented lives of Kukis could be explored. Their love for songs and singing is evident through the presence of numerous songs from the pre-Christian period, when recording technologies or even the art of writing was absent, till today. A very different view of the Kuki tribe emerges from their songs, with some even contradicting the data available in written documents.

Though labelled by colonizers as head hunters or wild races (Lewin, 1870), thick descriptions of the Kukis tells a different story. They could be described as *Lunghel he mi* or *Mi Lungleng* – sentimental people. *Lunghel* or *lunglen* could be translated as ‘emotional’ or ‘sentimental’, but these words could not rightly explained the word *lunghel*. It is a feeling of deeply longing for someone or someplace. In their work on Puma Zai (2019), Thirumal et.al. explain that *lunglen* refers to an aspiration toward states of being that provide conditions necessary to draw inspiration to either sing or compose a song. This emotional longing or sentimentality necessitated an outlet to vent their emotions in order to set themselves free, which they achieved through their songs. Their *Lunghel*-ness is argued throughout the thesis from their traditional musical tradition, the *Ju-ne laa*. The Kukis’ *Lunghel* is experienced when an individual deeply misses someone, something, or a place.. It must also be mentioned that the pre-Christian Kukis do not consider art or poetry as belonging to any professional group, since anyone who is *lunghel* can compose a song.

⁹Mention should be made of the Anglo-Kuki War 1917-1919. Except for the colonial records, no document could be found from the Kukis, except for their songs. There are numerous songs that recorded the great Anglo-Kuki war fought between the Kukis and the mighty British Empire. The Kukis opposed the colonizers’ attempt to recruit them as a Labor Corp to serve in France during World War I, which led to a battle lasting two winters between the groups.

Thirumal et al. (2019) in their studies on the Lushai community bifurcates the Lushais' identity, locating them from two different aspects—the Lushai being, and the Lushai subject. The Lushai being, for them, “refers to an awareness or a rationality that exceeds the colonially inscribed historical rationality” (p.63) and the Lushai subject is “the making of the willing and thinking Lushai individual” (p.63). They attempted to understand the qualitatively different forms of life the Lushais lived before and after colonization. Following Thirumal's differentiation of the ‘being’ and the ‘subject’, this thesis also makes an attempt to understand the tribe beyond colonial and post-colonial narratives to identify diverse modes of engaging with the Kuki identity. Their inscribed identity, mostly defined by their ethnicity, religion and language, are the product achieved through explicitly stated principles, and is based solely on the observer's interpretation of the people. This is not to mean that these inscribed identities are based on false assumptions, but rather, to inform that there are unexplored areas of Kuki identity that are qualitatively different from their inscribed identities. Changes within the society in every sphere are perceptible throughout their history, sparing nothing, including their songs. The differences between the pre-Christian songs and the contemporary ones reveal the nuances of this transformation, which is a product of the Kuki subject's attempts to adapt to the changing times. The Kukis who wished to change their lifestyles and patterns of living, subjected themselves to the colonial and post-colonial mediated modernity, unconsciously leaving their aesthetic sensibilities to their own fate. The Kuki being, on the other hand, is closely linked to the community's *sensus communis* or practical wisdom, and becomes an important site for disclosing the concealed meanings in cultural works. To understand the Kuki community based solely on its face value is equivalent to perceiving only the Kuki subject, devoid of the Kuki being.

Academic writings on Kuki identity predominantly concentrate on their history, politics, religion, culture and traditions from the vantage point of the disciplines of the social sciences, anthropology, and theological studies. This thesis attempts to understand the Kukis' experience of their work of art or songs in time to fully comprehend the truth of the Kuki community. How their songs are implicated in the making, the marking, and the maintenance of Kuki identity shall be investigated. It departs from earlier studies of the Kuki identity by transcending the Kuki subject to unravel the undisclosed Kuki being, which can be explored through their performative traditions. Neither the Kuki being nor the Kuki subject can be studied in isolation from each other, as the latter holds the key to understanding the former. This compels us to explore the changes the social order underwent in the course of their history. The thesis also engages with the question as to whether the Kuki being undergoes transformations when there are changes in the Kuki subject.

Existing literatures have utilized the songs and performances of the Kuki tribe extensively since they are inevitable if one is to comprehend the nuances of their identity. But till now, academic explorations of their songs and their performative traditions with relation to art or aesthetics have not been undertaken. The arena has remained concealed for years and a serious deliberation on the issue is essential as it is an important site where the essence of Kuki identity could be presented.

Artwork or composition of songs for the Kuki people involve a community, since the work demands a receiver to whom it is to be communicated. The artworks or songs are received and interpreted by the community, allowing them to recreate it. According to

Thirumal et.al., the Mizos' *Puma Zai* postulates the interpretative gift of the community as its *sensus communis*. According to Gadamer (2013), *sensus communis* could not be restricted to the general faculty in wo/men alone, but it is also the sense that founds the community. This intellectual virtue is not a barrier for an illiterate person to perceive practical wisdom, though they are deprived of theoretical knowledge. Their ability to successfully interpret the work of art lays the foundations for the work of art to be recreated. The original meaning may be altered, but the traditions remain alive.

The aesthetic sensibilities of the community reveal a different narrative that portrays how the subjects understand themselves. Agreeing with Thirumal et.al. (2019), the Kuki being is revealed and brought to light in the performance of the *Ju-ne laa*, which is freely communicated amongst the Kuki people and not based on the interpretations of any external agency, but their own interpretative powers. This power is strongly linked to their *sensus communis*, which is continuously shaped by their engagements with their traditions and customs.

From the pre-Christian period to the present, the Kuki community has witnessed several transformations. Their interaction with the colonials who considered them a 'primitive' tribe ushered in several traditions that had previously been alien to them. These led to the discontinuation of a number of traditions that they practiced from time immemorial. The introduction of Christianity itself brought in major changes in their cultures, as the missionaries undermined several practices of the tribe. The propagation of education also enabled novel modes of thinking and experiencing. It is argued that the Kukis, despite these changes, were able to recreate and restructure their traditions through

their *sensus communis*, which enables them to understand themselves and experience the trueness of their reality. Their experience of truth or reality is beyond the comprehension of outsiders who do not share the *sensus communis* and so, it exists in contrast to the identity and ‘truth’ imposed upon them. It is hence proposed that the changes the community underwent after its encounter with other cultures led to transformations in their Kuki subjectivity, while the Kuki being remained unaffected. The thesis explores the veracity of this argument.

1.5 The Communicative Approach: The Disciplinary Domain

As mentioned before, one must refrain from mere observation of performances, but must interpret them for a complete understanding of the truth they reveal. Vladutescu et al. (2017), in their work on Gadamer’s communication hermeneutics, claimed that ‘interpretation’ is an intrinsic part of ‘communication’ without which the latter does not exist. Put differently, communication means interpretation, hermeneutics, and thus, locates us within an interpretive paradigm. The thesis argues that communication hermeneutics allows us to understand how the Kuki being is generated, structured, understood, and interpreted through their performances. It also allows us to comprehend how their being remains alive despite transformations in the social order. It is also imperative to engage with the issue of how ‘meaning’ is communicated or shared and the role of communication in the aesthetic performances of the Kuki people across different time periods.

For Gadamer (2013), every work of art requires understanding, and this ‘understanding’ becomes possible when the work is situated within the hermeneutical framework. He states: “aesthetics has to be absorbed into hermeneutics” (p.164).

‘Understanding’ needs to be placed within performances where meanings are structured and showcased. He also claims that the most important thing for understanding is “understanding the subject matter, the substantive insight” (p.190). One needs to comprehend the interpretations of the subject to grasp the interpreted meanings. This makes it clear that a discourse on the subject is essential for ‘understanding’ to take place. In such a discourse, one must locate oneself in the place of the other to fully comprehend the subject. Vladutescu et al. (2017) also maintains that to be in dialogue means to-be-beyond-onself, where one needs to think like the other in order to understand how the other thinks, after which one must return to her/his own self. Such a discourse provides novel experiences to the subject. Communication could thus be argued to create possibilities for a successful comprehension of the subject, especially when there is a commonality that allows for one to see oneself in the other and vice versa.

In his magnum opus, *Truth and Method* (1975), Gadamer draws heavily on the ideas of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics to claim that understanding between two individuals in communication is possible because of the pre-existing bond between the said individuals. The Kukis’ possession of a shared *sensus communis* indicates an individual’s realization of her/his belonging to a particular community, where different people who have the same understanding as her/him exists. Communication becomes central for them to realize their shared knowledge and understanding of their surroundings, and again, it is these commonalities they possess that draws them together. James W. Carey (2009), drawing inspiration from Dewey, claims that what people have in common or their common understanding cannot be passed physically from one to another, but can be shared only through communication. This led him to argue for the ‘ritual view of communication’ in

his work 'Communication as Culture' (2009) at a time when the 'transmission view of communication' was the dominant theme in Communication Studies. According to him, the transmission view is "defined by terms such as 'imparting', 'sending', 'transmitting', or 'giving information to others'" (p. 12). He asserts that this view of communication, the act of sending a message across space, serves the purpose of gaining control over others.

Though Carey did not reject the transmission view, he proposed an alternate view – the ritual view of communication, which he considered equally important alongside the transmission view. In his definition, the ritual view of communication is linked to terms such as 'sharing', 'participation', 'association', 'fellowship', and 'communication'. This view, for him, is directed more towards the maintenance of society throughout different historical period and not towards the dominant view of the extension or transmission of messages across space. For Carey, the ritual view is the "sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality" (p.15). Communication is manifested here "not in the transmission of intelligent information but in the construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful cultural world that can serve as a control and container for human action" (p. 15).

Perceiving the phenomena from the communication perspective, the thesis argues that their shared understanding of traditions draws the Kukis together in fellowship, allowing them to reconstruct their traditions over different historical periods. Throughout the thesis it is argued that although the meanings derived from their songs keep changing, their pre-understanding of their traditions comes to their rescue, giving spaces to argue against their inscribed identity. It is not the intention of the thesis to ponder upon the meanings of the lyrics, but rather, to concentrate on the larger themes that remain hidden

beneath the songs. What is it that remains hidden? What sort of pre-understanding makes them comprehend their past in the present when the community has undergone drastic transformations? How does the pre-understanding help in the reconstruction and existence of the community? These are some of the questions the thesis grapples with.

1.6 Chapterization

The thesis comprises five chapters including the introduction and the conclusion. The introductory chapter provides an overview of the study and the methodological issues involved. It elaborates upon the significance of the work of art that has hitherto been neglected in the study of the Kuki community. Acknowledging the need to subvert colonial and postcolonial interpretations of the Kukis for a better understanding of the community, the chapter emphasizes on the necessity for subjects to comprehend themselves through their unique vantage points. A brief account of the Kuki people, their myths of origin and their representation in academic and non-academic writings in the colonial and postcolonial periods are provided. It also highlights the centrality of songs in the daily life of the community, which is largely motivated by their sentimental being. Songs serve as records for their undocumented lives, revealing the truth about their existence. Relying on hermeneutics, the chapter proposes to study the Kuki being through Gadamer's concepts of play, festival, and ritual.

The second chapter scrutinizes the styles of singing in the pre-Christian Kuki society, the *Ju-ne laa*. Prioritizing their experience of the *Ju-ne laa*, the chapter explores two of their most important festivals – the *Lawm sielneh* and the *Ai* festival – in order to understand their lived experience in its totality, as festivals are sites where the community

participates collectively in the presentation of their beings. Gadamer argues that when a spectator fully submits herself/himself to the play, s/he is no longer a mere member of the audience, but a player. In this full submission, Gadamer claims that ‘truth’ can be experienced, giving rise to another experience inspired from one’s past experience in their performances.

All Kuki festivals involve *Lengkhawm* – singing and dancing. But all songs cannot be performed in the *Lenkhawm*, as some have specific rituals attached to them. The *Ju-nelaa* is categorized based on their performances into two groups—social songs and ritual songs. Social songs are those that can be performed in the *Lenkhawm*, while ritual songs cannot be sung during social gatherings. Within the social and ritual songs, there are several styles that the chapter classifies, based on the nature of composition and performance. The chapter argues that the transformation of being is possible when one is completely submissive to the performance of songs in the *Lenkhawm*. There are certain criteria that one needs to fulfil in order for her/him to be able to fully submit herself/himself to the performance of songs. Without understanding the meaning presented, the songs could merely be a combination of words of no import. A pre-understanding of the context is required for one to understand the meanings presented and this is again shaped by the *sensus communis* that one possesses in common with her/his fellow performers. The chapter attempts to scrutinize the experiences attained by the Kukis through practical wisdom, enabling community formation and sustenance. The Kukis’ possession of a common experience, notwithstanding their subjectivity, allows them to maintain and strengthen their society.

The third chapter looks into the styles of Kuki songs in the early Christian period, beginning with an exploration of the centrality of songs in Christianity and also in the Kuki society during the early Christian period. The chapter analyzes the growth of Christianity in the Kuki hills in order to comprehend the pre-Christian religion that existed in the community before the advent of Christianity. After the *Ju-ne laa* was demonized, the Kuki Christians were left with no songs to sing. Realizing the significance accorded to songs in the pre-Christian Kuki society, the missionaries translated Western hymns; however, this did not possess the power to enchant the Kukis as their previous songs had done. The *Lushai* songs were more acceptable to the Kukis owing to their cultural proximity to the Chin-Kuki-Mizos who belonged to the same cultural group, with the same beliefs regarding their origin. In due course of time, the Kukis produced their own songs, fusing Western and pre-Christian styles. The different types of Christian songs and their experiences are also discussed. The chapter argues that songs played an important role in indigenizing Christianity to suit the demands of the early Kuki Christians. Contrary to popular belief, the Kukis succeeded in changing the systems of Christian worship and contributed to Christianity by forming a new form of worship borrowed from their past traditions. The *Lenkhawm*, which many believe is a product of Christianity, is argued to be in continuation of their pre-Christian traditions.

The fourth chapter engages with contemporary Kuki society which is divided between the sacred and the secular. Christianity and modern education led to large-scale transformations in the social order, altering the modes of living of the community. The chapter scrutinizes such changes which led to the erasure of pre-Christian traditions and

systems. The chapter is divided into three sections: the first part engages with the emergence of a new style of singing - the *Lunglen laa*, which is argued to be a product of the community's understanding of the sacred and the secular; the second section focuses on the Kukis' attempts to revive the almost-lost traditions of their poetic language and their attempt to incorporate them in contemporary music; the third section is on the sacralization of the *Ju-ne laa* in Christian worship and in churches.

The fifth chapter outlines the findings of the study. The Kukis presentation of their self from their *Ju-ne laa*, their earliest known musical traditions, and its interpretation in the Early Christian Period and the Contemporary Period argue against the popular belief that Christianity and Modernity had changed them to a different community. The continuity of their pre-Christian musical tradition could still be traced out from their Christian songs and contemporary songs. Their performative traditions becomes vital for understanding their lived experiences from three historical moments, allowing us to draw out the continuity of their pre-Christian musical tradition, the *Ju-ne laa*, in a transformed structure and styles.

Chapter 2

An Account of Pre-Christian Musical Traditions of the Kukis: The Significance of *Ju-ne laa*

2.1 Introduction

The earliest known musical tradition of the Kuki community is the *Ju-ne laa*, a technique of singing and dancing which developed much before they could distinguish themselves as Kukis.¹⁰ Their rich cultural heritage and the customs and traditions embedded in their songs/poems are quite revealing and the *Ju-ne laa* is an artwork pregnant with values and meanings which cannot be understood from mere observation of its performances. The Kukis employed their poems or songs as modes of presenting meanings, even while keeping some works enigmatic through their indeterminacy. The chapter explores how meanings are presented through language, and interrogates if the manifest meanings can be fully understood in a context where language itself is indeterminate. This chapter attempts to analyze the Kukis' earliest styles of composing and rendering songs and seeks to understand how they present themselves through their performance of the *Ju-ne laa* in their festivals, celebrations, religious rites, and everyday lives.

The history of the tribe is predominantly perceived through the lens of the colonial narratives about the Kukis, aided by accounts of Christian missionaries. Their cultural

¹⁰ Before the arrival of the colonizers, the Kukis had no single identity that they affiliated themselves to. The term 'Kuki' indeed is a colonial term, while their cultures and traditions tell a story much older than that projected by the colonizers accounts of Kuki identity.

existence precedes the identity ascribed to them by the colonizers. The nomenclature ‘Kuki’ is no doubt a colonially inscribed identity, but to completely rely on the colonial perspective could be misleading. Their system of governance under their chiefs, their customs and traditions were well-established before their interaction with the colonizers. The lack of modern education, and economic backwardness made them vulnerable to the powerful colonial empire, consequently transforming them into colonial subjects with very limited or no agency. However, the identity ascribed to them by the colonizers could not deliver the truth or the meaning of the Kuki being, making it imperative to look past the colonial delineation of Kuki society. In the absence of written records to trace the mobile essence of the people, studying their performative traditions—their experiences of the work of art, i.e. their performance of their songs, the *Ju-ne laa* in the *lenkhawm*¹¹, which is largely neglected in academia — becomes necessary to understand their colonially ‘inscribed’ and ‘ascribed’ identity.

Songs may not narrate socio-cultural realities directly; however, they provide us clues about the lives of the subjects and helps us trace their history and evolution. Waterman (as cited in Nettl, 1964), writing on the musical life of the natives of Yirkalla, mentions that the aborigines, surrounded by musical events throughout their lives, shaped the aborigines’ worldview and system of values. Given the importance of songs/poems in the Kukis’ everyday lives, and following Waterman, it is evident that their songs and poems mold their worldviews, and enable them to pursue the Kuki way of life. Being a nonliterate cultural group, their existence prior to colonial records remains inaccessible and hence

¹¹*Lenkhawm* is the act of gathering at a place to sing and dance together.

unexplored. However, their songs or poems allow us a glimpse into their culture and identity. According to Merriam (1964), the “culture inventory of a people in time contains certain items that could tell us something about the people and their way of life’ (p. 277). Songs, for Herskovits (as cited in Merriam, p. 280) also act as sites where one’s history could be unearthed. Merriam maintains that music also is human behavior which is shared with the social sciences and the humanities allowing us to comprehend why (wo)men behave as they do. The everyday life of the Kukis is also presented in their songs, and an engagement with their songs could provide us further insights into their being. The different themes presented through their *Ju-ne laa* cover all aspects of their social, cultural, and religious life. Given the importance of songs in their socio-cultural life, we analyze these aspects in order to comprehend how the Kukis presented and represented their life and experiences through songs. Since the pre-Christian Kukis did not possess an idea of any clear distinction between religion and culture, their traditional religion overlapped the social and cultural life of the tribe. Thus, it is evident that the religious life of the pre-Christian Kukis cannot be studied in isolation from their socio-cultural life.

Earlier studies that involved the *Ju-ne laa* had been studied in relation to their cultural festivals such as *Chon*, *Sa-Ai*, *Chang-Ai*, where attention is given to the rituals and not their performative traditions. This study, however, intends to focus on the experience of the songs, the *Ju-ne laa*, that comes into play, compelling us to engage with their experiences of the *Ju-ne laa* during festivals, celebrations and their everyday lives. Following Gadamer (2013), celebrations or festivals are common experiences that represent the whole community in its perfect form, for they are meant for everyone (p. 39). These events are an intention that unites the whole community and gives them space for

participation, not as an individual but as a collective whole, enabling them to experience the festival through singing and dancing. According to Gadamer, “the celebration of a festival is, in technical terms, an intentional activity” (p. 40) where people gather for a purpose with no space for subjectivity. The performance of the *Ju-ne laa* is one such intentional activity, for which they gather during festivals and rituals. This temporal and collective experience freed them from the pressures of everyday concerns, thus enabling them to present themselves in unison. The performance of the *Ju-ne laa* has its own particular temporality, for every performances is not a repetition of previous performances, but a re-presentation of their past experiences. It is the intention of this chapter to understand how the Kukis present and represent themselves through the *Ju-ne laa*. Their performance as a site for the presentation of their being shall be studied through an emphasis on the performance of the *Ju-ne laa*. The songs/poems to be considered would be explored in relation to their performances in celebrations or festivals like the *Lawm Sielneh*, *Chon*, and other religious rituals. They have also been recorded for archival purposes. This chapter attempts to scrutinize these phenomena through the lens of Hans Georg Gadamer’s concepts of ‘play’ and ‘festivals’.

According to Gadamer, art can transform an individual from being an autonomous subject with free will to being a subject of the play of art. When a spectator to a game or play submits himself fully to the play, he is no longer a mere audience, but a player himself. This, he calls the experience of the ‘truth’ which cannot be comprehended by the natural sciences. The experience of the ‘truth’ leads to the emergence of a new experience, which this chapter attempts to understand from their performances during celebrations or festivals. Experiencing a new experience influenced by past ones confirms the continuity

of the latter. P. Thirumal et al. (2019) in their study of the Lushais' Puma Zai¹² argue that the reproduction of the Puma Zai festival confirms the self-constitution of the Lushai community (p. 66). In the same vein, the festivals of the Kukis also re-affirm the existence of the *Ju-ne laa*, and the reproduction of the *Ju-ne laa* again confirms the self-constitution of the Kuki community. The *Ju-ne laa* as an art could transform the Kukis to experience the 'truth' that is beyond their personal subjectivity. For Gadamer, subjectivity has no place in this transformation through art, thus leading to a collective experience. To understand the collective experience of the Kukis through their performance of art or *Ju-ne laa*, we first scrutinize their celebrations and festivals that provide spaces for their creativity, not at the individual level, but from a collective one.

2.2 Understanding the Kuki People and their Festivals

The Kuki community have strict traditions and customs that govern their lives from birth to death (Haokip, 2008), and their customary practices demand the performance of certain rituals. Being an agrarian community, the lives of the subjects revolve around their agricultural work. They have *Jungnol-nit*¹³, *Muchi-thoi*¹⁴ and *Chang-nungah*¹⁵ to appease the *Chung Pathien*, the benevolent god, whom they believed could shower them with blessings in return for the specific rite(s) they performed. This chapter engages with two

¹² Puma Zai is a cultural event of the early colonial Lushai society.

¹³ Jungnol-nit is a ritual performed to celebrate the first rainfall of the year seeking god's blessing to drench the agricultural field for the roots to grow.

¹⁴ Muchi-thoi is a ritual performed at the beginning of agricultural season seeking god's blessing for the seed to reproduce in great multitudes.

¹⁵ Chang-nungah is a ritual performed to appease the *Chang-nungah* (rice-maiden), a stalk that refuse to be pregnant with grain to bless the harvest and the farmer. This 'rice-maiden' is compared to an unmarried woman, and is believed to be the harbinger of good fortune and harvest.

important celebrations—*Lawm Sielneh* and *Ai*, which are of vital significance in understanding the performative traditions of the subjects.

2.2.1 *Lawm Sielneh*

Every village has *Lawmpi*, which is a social organization established within a village to ensure that every household has the opportunity for development.¹⁶ Development in this respect could mean possessing enough agricultural products (mostly rice) for a year. The *Lawmpi* comprises youth from the village, and every household has a *Lawmpi* member who could take part in the activities of the *Lawmpi*. NCy DOUNGEL (2009) claims that even newborns were included as a *Lawmpi* member for new households with no youngsters, so that no families are excluded in the journey towards economic development. Any villager could hire the *Lawmpi* to help her/him with work, but must return the favor by contributing a day's labor to the group as and when required (Gangte, 2012). The *Lawmpi* focuses on economic development and also ensures discipline among the younger members through training in social etiquette and the imparting of moral values.

There are several *Lawm*¹⁷ apart from the *Lawmpi* within the village, but they form these among peers. A Kuki chief, Haokhojang Haokip, explained that a handful of friends could also form a *Lawm* of their own. Among these smaller groups, there is another group of groups called *Sawm*, which is instrumental in the functioning of the village. It is an ancient institution where the young boys of the village gather in a certain place to spend the night

¹⁶Haokhojang Haokip, Chief of D. Phailien. Interviewed on 17th July 2018.

¹⁷NCy DOUNGEL categorized the *Lawm* into four different categories – *Lawmpi*, *Lawmcha*, *Lawmguol*, and *Sawm guol*. *Lawmpi* is the main organization, while *Lawmcha* and *Lawmguol* are formed among friends of the same group. *Sawm guol* comprises boys above the age of 13 and they are members of the boys' dormitory.

together. In every Kuki village, *Sawm-ge*¹⁸ is practiced, not out of obligation but as a way of life. It is a bachelors' or village youth's dormitory in which all the young boys of the village sleep at night. According to Gangte (2012), it is a youth organization that comprises only able-bodied young boys of the village. This is almost similar to the Lushais' "*Zawlbuk* or bachelors' dormitory, in which the young men were trained to act as warriors and be relevant contributors to the social fabric" (Pachau, 2014, p.167). However, my informants, who themselves had been members of the *Sawm*, had not been trained as warriors. These informants were *Sawm* members during the 1950s–60s when the society had already undergone drastic transformations in the wake of Christianity and education. The winds of changes from the beginning of the 20th century must have affected traditional *Sawm* practices, which explains why *Sawm* members of the last stages were not trained to be warriors, as many young boys had begun to shift their attention towards modern education.

Unlike the Lushais' *Zawlbuk*, where one *Zawlbuk* is established for one village, the Kukis' *Sawm* could be organized in more than one group within a single village, with no separate dormitories. The youth or a group of friends could choose their dormitory within the village. A *Sawm* could be so small as to have only two or three members or as large as to accommodate ten members. More than two groups of *Sawm* could also exist within a single village. The young boys in a village could choose any house in their village which had a young girl who could tend to them, and this girl becomes their *Sawm-nu*. It is the duty of the *Sawm-nu* to comb the hairs of all her *Sawm*, wash their clothes, prepare food

¹⁸ *Sawm-ge* means 'to sleep in the boys' dormitory'.

and drinks for them at night. A *Sawm-nu* could not retire to bed before she tended to all her *Sawm*, who would sleep together on the *khangphei*¹⁹ where the *Sawm-nu* would make their beds. The following song is about a *Sawm* asking her *Sawm-nu* to wake him up in early in the morning, portraying the importance of the *Sawm-nu* to her *Sawm*:

Bu-al khuon in neithou'o kasawmnu

Tuivei gamlei jingvai changpuo'n chiete

Nigel sumkawn baja ginna hin ngai'o

Free translation:

“Wake me up in the morning when the rooster crows, my friend.

To gather rice in the forest/woods, where water gathers like the oasis in the desert

Let us listen to the sound of sumkawn and baja”²⁰

Ngamjahao Kipgen (2019), writing on the *Sawm* institution, mentioned that in the past, the Kukis also had a single bachelors' dormitory like the Lushais. But since this made their identification easier for the enemies, they were scattered in different places within the village later on to prevent surprise attacks on the *Sawm-inn*. Each *Sawm* was supervised by the *Tollaipao* who was elected from among the senior members of the respective *Sawms*. The scattered *Sawms* were under the command of a *Sawm-upa*, whose responsibility was to maintain the *Sawm* code of conduct and he was granted the authority to punish offenders (Kipgen, p. 220). It would thus be fallacious to argue that the Kuki youth or *Sawm* stayed with their peers for leisurely activities. The *Sawm* connects the individual to the community

¹⁹*Khangphei* is a raised platform, usually constructed on the side of the house to accommodate *Sawms*, visitors, etc.

²⁰*Sumkawn* and *Baja* are two different musical instruments which are played as signals to go to the fields.

and shapes relationships within and to the community by placing the community before the individual. However, despite the heavy responsibilities placed on them, the *Sawm* members are also provided the freedom to engage in activities for entertainment.

After harvest, the preparation for the *Lawm Sielneh* festival begins with the *Lawm* leaders seeking the approval of the Chief for this celebration, which is inevitably granted. According to Tarun Goswami (1985), the *Lawm* acquires a Mithun-the *Lawm Siel*²¹, for the festival from either the forest or their neighboring villages. The bringing of the *Lawm Siel* to the village involves several rituals. It is also decorated to signify its importance in the festival. The *Lawm* members sing the following song while taking the *Lawm Siel* for a round inside the village:

Siel ka-kaiye changsiel lien lien ka-kaiye.

Changsiel lien guikhao vo tang'e,

Guoltoh nit in ka-nuom'e.

Siel patchon ka-baa pieh'e,

Sejol lam'a pah (vel le) beng'e.

Sejol lam'a phunchongpah'e.

Adongmatmo teng on'e.

Free translation

I bring a large male Mithun; I tie the big Mithun with a rope

I dance with my friend exhilaratingly.

I decorate the Mithun with earrings made of cotton

²¹ Sacrificial animal (Mithun) for the festival

The cotton bloom in the road of Sejol (name of a place).

Phunchong bloom in the road of Sejol

It is dazzling and pleasing, but none can capture its beauty.²²

It is not the feast alone that is significant here; rather, the festive spirit that envelops the community from the day they begin preparations for the celebration, makes the Lawm Sielneh significant to the community. The whole village participates in this festival with enthusiasm and vigor. Entertainment in the form of physical activities such as *kibot* (wrestling), *siel-kal* (high jump over the *Mithun*), and other activities contribute to the carnivalesque atmosphere, where people of all ages and status mingle. The nights are reserved for singing, dancing and drinking *Ju*. One of the most popular songs sung during the dances runs thus:

Kagal'a eihin vekhun koiham alaam eiti'n te

Koiham alaam eiti'n te

Thimu kalaam ding deng'e. (Doungel, p. 23)

Free translation

The one across me might ask who is this dancing

He might ask who is this dancing

I dance freely like the eagle.

Sometimes, the celebrations last for a week, depending on the number of people who can offer feasts to the *Lawm*. The *Lawm*, along with the *Lawm Siel*, visits the wealthy families in the village, gathering in the yard before entering the house. According to Goswami

²² Translated by Boigin Lhouvum

(1985), the *Lawm* recites a line outside the house, and the owner replies by singing from inside. The song is:

Lawm *Kot neihon 'o kot neihon in neichongchapa 'n kotneihon in*

Inn neite *Honlouve honlouve neichong chapa 'n honlouve*

Lawm *Kahung 'e kahung 'e sum toh siel toh kahung 'e*

Inn neite *Hunghud in hunghud in sum toh siel toh hunghud in*

Free Translation

Lawm: Open the door, please, open the door for us, O son of the wealthy person,
please open the door for us

House owner: Will not open, will not open; the son of the wealthy man will not open

Lawm: We have come, we have come with silver and *Mithun*

House owner: Come in, come in with the silver and the *Mithun* (Goswami, 1985)

After welcoming the guests, the owner of the house gives them a feast and also requests them to stay in his house as part of the ritual – a request which the *Lawm* does not turn down. *Lenkhawm* with singing and dancing continues every night until the *Lawm-Upa* declares the time to retire. Sometimes the *Lawm* would sing till the break of dawn and then visit another wealthy person in the village, continuing the process till all the prosperous families are paid visits. Thus, the duration of the *Lawm* visit depends to a great extent on the number of affluent families in the locale. On the last day of the celebrations, they visit the Chief's residence, where they are welcomed with a big jar of *Ju*. The *Ju* brought by the *Lawm* is kept near the jar given by the Chief and the whole gathering drinks the wine; they

sing and dance throughout the night. The farewell songs are reserved for the last night, one such song being,

Kikhen taute gol'o kikhen taute

Lawmguol'a kiguol changing kikhen taute

Changang kikhenna ding bou lung in gulchun

Jang lung ni-nuoi chonpat in kanem'e

Free translation

We, all the friends, bid farewell, bid farewell.

We, all the friends, of the *Lawm* would be separated from each other after our departure.

Thinking of our breaking away from each other, my heart turns soft in agony like cotton-wool under sunlight

2.2.2 *Ai*

Another important festival of the Kuki community is the *Ai*, which is a ceremonial ritual that one performs to celebrate her/his outstanding achievement in the field of her/his work. A hunter could perform *Sa-Ai* ritual, a woman could perform *Chang-Ai*, a warrior, *Gaallu-Ai* and a poet, *Zaila-Ai*. Among these rituals, *Sa-Ai* and *Chang-Ai* are the most popular ones.

Sa-Ai is celebrated when a man has hunted over one hundred animals in his lifetime. It is also an act of proclaiming that the performer is mightier than the animals he killed. NCy DOUNGEL, in her book 'Puchon Pachon: Customary Practices of Thadou-Kuki' (2009) asserts that this ritual is of utmost importance to the Kukis, as they believe that failure to

perform the *Sa-Ai* ritual provides the slain spirits²³ the upper hand over the hunter and causes him misfortune. If a man performs the *Sa-Ai* three times in his life, the third performance is called *Chon*. Since the *Chon* is not a simple feat achieved by many, *Chongs*²⁴ are highly regarded. They are honored not only during their lifetime but also in the afterlife. Even before Christianity made its presence felt in the community, the Kukis believed in life after death and also believe in a mythical village where the spirits of the dead resides—the *Mithi khuo*.²⁵ Dongkhothang Singson elaborates upon the idea in *Kukiho hung konna thusim* (1994), where he writes that according to Kuki belief, when a person dies, her/his spirit goes to the *Mithi khuo*. Before reaching the Village of the Dead, however, the spirit is waylaid and tortured by a witch called Kulsamnu. But the spirits of those who performed *Chon* in their lifetime and those of his relatives are treated with respect by the witch and she provides them free access to the *Mithi khuo* (162-64) – a belief that propels the Kukis to work ceaselessly to gain fame and honor in their lifetime. Colonial writers also wrote about the Kukis desire for fame and honor for which they would hunt the heads of their enemies. This practice of head-hunting was represented as a barbaric act to prove one's might by cutting the head of the enemy, and also the act of displaying the slain head(s) at one's household walls as decoration was considered to be an act of primitivity (Shakespeare, 1912; Shaw, 1929). But to limit their desire for enemies' head simply to gain honor or just to decorate their household or village with their enemies' heads alone could be misleading. Their strong desire to perform *Chon* and *Ai* can be attributed to

²³ The Kukis believe that animals also have a spirit.

²⁴ A person who performs the *Chon* in his lifetime is called a *Chong*.

²⁵ *Mithi khuo* is translated literally as 'the village of the dead'.

their belief that it would provide them unhindered access to *Mithi khuo*. The significance attached to rituals such as the *Sa-ai*, *chang-ai*, *gaallu-ai*, and *zaila-ai* arose not just from the Kukis' desire for fame and respect; they were also attempts at gaining honor in the afterlife.

During the *Ai*, after the completion of rituals, singing and dancing or the *Lenkhawm* ensues – a performance which, in a way, best showcases Kuki identity. The next section explores how the *Ju-ne laa* enables the manifestation of the true Kuki being during the *Lenkhawm*.

2.3 Performing the Ju-ne laa

The *Ju-ne laa*, though no longer practiced like in the olden days, is still remembered in the present-day Kuki society, albeit by different names such as *Pulaa-Palaa*, *Guollui laa*, and *Lakawi laa*, with each name having unique connotations. *Ju-ne laa* could be translated as 'songs sung when intoxicated with *Ju*. *Ju* refers to 'wine' or 'beer', but here, it indicates the traditional rice beer; although the direct translation of *ne* from Thadou-Kuki to English is 'eat', in this case, it would be preferable to use the term 'consume' as *Ju* is not only drunk but also eaten; and *laa* translates as 'song'. To this day, the pre-Christian era of the Kukis is described and known as *Ju-neh khanglai* or *Ju-neh phadlai*, which means the period when *Ju* was consumed by people of all ages²⁶. Rev. Paul Rostad (as

²⁶ Though *Ju* is for adults, children are also allowed to drink it during a ritual called *Hun*. This involves village rites where the *Thiempu* would gather all the villagers at the Chief's residence and allow them to drink *Ju* to ward off evil powers that could harm them.

cited in Rev. Dr. Lalmuoklien, 2009, p. 121) writes that the non-Christian Kukis enjoyed watching their babies and children act funny when intoxicated.

Pulaa-Palaa refers to the songs of the forefathers, and *Guollui laa*, songs of the ‘primal’ Kuki society. Both these names have been coined by the present generation, influenced by modern music, and these songs/poetry were projected as having connections only to the pre-Christian era. After Christianity introduced a formalized chord using tonic sol-fa, these songs came to be considered outdated and were replaced by modern music. However, they are displayed or performed during cultural festivals such as *Chavang Kut*²⁷ and other traditional events. Owing to the tune and the free singing style, these songs are called *Lakawi laa*. In pre-colonial Kuki society, the *Ju* played a very important role in the daily life of the subjects and its use was not confined to special days. During my interview with a member of the community, Upa Lunkhojang, Chief of N. Phaisat village, I was informed that: “It is unimaginable to sing without consuming the *Ju*”.²⁸ When drunk, the subjects slur their words and the tunes often deviate from the real ones, with the words becoming indistinct, and hence songs sung thus are referred to as *Lakawi laa*, pointing to the free style utilized for singing them. All these names indicate the same musical tradition unique to the Kukis. The All India Radio Thadou Program referred to such songs as *Pulaa-Palaa* when they were aired in the weekly programmes on Tuesday and Thursday. *Pulaa-Palaa* refers to songs of the forefathers. An informant, Seikholien Khongsai, who is revered within the Kuki community for his profound knowledge of Kuki culture provided a broader

²⁷ *Chavang Kut* is a post-harvest festival which is celebrated every year on the 1st of November. *Chavang* means ‘spring’ and *kut* means ‘festival’.

²⁸ Interview with Upa Lunkhojang on the 17th October, 2016

narrative of the musical tradition and claimed that it should be called *Nam laa* – a national musical tradition. My investigation revealed that his proposal found favor among the youth, as is evident from their responses to my queries: they considered it a fading national treasure that should be protected and revived. HT Lamkhojang stated that the older generation called these songs simply as ‘*laa*’, and different names such as *Ju-ne laa*, *Lakawi laa*, and *Pulaa-Palaa*, were used after their conversion to Christianity.²⁹ The different names attributed to this musical tradition in no way altered the fact that it was the only musical tradition that the Kukis possessed. It also bears no geographical identification nor does it signify any difference in the style or meaning of the musical tradition. The respondents I interacted with used these names according to their convenience, often interchangeably. My use of the word *Ju-ne laa* does not demean the other names by which it is known, but manifests the possible identification of an entity with different names, and also divulges the importance accorded to *Ju* during the pre-Christian period.

The thesis engages with two significant elements which are vital for the production of *Ju-ne laa* – mood and language. According to Heidegger (1962), mood is the state-of-mind that connects one with the outer world that in turn, is thrown back into the world of the individual. The world in which we live comprises many worlds depending on how our sense makes meaning with and of them. Wittgenstein claims that “the world of the happy man is different from that of the unhappy man” (Earnshaw, 2017, p. 1700). The state-of-mind, which Heidegger claims to disclose the existence of one’s being is the mood opening up for oneself the way the world really is. Each individual experiences the world

²⁹ Interviewed on 2 January, 2019.

differently and this unique experience is brought forth through art by the Kuki community. Through the *Ju-ne laa*, they express their experience of the world in its multifarious aspects, revealing themselves and sharing their world (experience) through communication with their fellow tribesmen. Heidegger asserts in *Being and Time* (1962):

In this more general kind of communication, the Articulation of Being with one another understandingly is constituted. Through it a co-state-of-mind [*Mitbefindlichkeit*] gets ‘shared’, and so does the understanding of Being-with. Communication is never anything like a conveying of experiences, such as opinions or wishes, from the interior of one subject into the interior of another. (p. 205)

Language is again the medium through which these experiences are shared. It should be noted that the Kukis have a special kind of language called the *Laa-pao* that differs from their everyday language. They used the *Laa-pao* to express their deepest emotions, that could then be sung. All my informants agreed that their everyday language was sometimes not sufficient to express their emotions that the Kukis have to rely on the *laa-pao* when composing their songs. While responding to the questions on the significance of the *Laa-pao*, NCy DOUNGEL claimed that the *Ju-ne laa* has no significances if not composed or sung in the language that the Kukis call *Laa-pao*.³⁰

The *Ju-ne laa* to be analyzed in this chapter have been collected from elders who witnessed and experienced the performance of the *Ju-ne laa* in its original form once in their lifetime. I have also collected songs from books published by other scholars who studied the history of the Kuki community. I used the term performance because the *Ju-ne*

³⁰ *Laa-pao* is the poetic language of the Kukis.

laa comprises not just a song for singing, but also a dance attached to it, making it a performance. The largest collection of *Ju-ne laa* consists of songs which were composed merely for entertainment. As such, they were sung more frequently than those composed for a specific ritual, and they are easily remembered and recollected. This chapter, however, explores all the different genres of *Ju-ne laa* and does not limit itself to songs for entertainment which, after they were passed on over generations, were later identified as the original *Ju-ne laa* in the present day. This is clear from the fact that songs which did not have any place in the pre-Christian Kuki culture are now sung during festivals. Most of my informants said that they were disappointed to see the *Ju-ne laa* being misused thus by the new generation and expressed their concern to preserve the *Ju-ne laa* in its original form. This made it easier for me to converse with them, as the preservation and proper use of the *Ju-ne laa* interested them.

These songs are commonly performed during the *Lenkhawm*. The villagers would gathered in an open space in a circle while a young boy and a girl dance in the center keeping pace with the beat of the traditional drum made from animal skin. The dancers in the center should be a pair and could also be more than two couples. The others would sing and sometimes dance around the paired dancers. During these activities, *Ju* brewed by the women of the village would be consumed by those taking part in such activities. *Lenkhawm* is the manner in which they perform these activities and it is the most popular form of performing the *Ju-ne laa* apart from other traditions of singing. It is the act of singing songs together in a particular place for a specific purpose. The *lenkhawm* has many purposes, and cannot be reduced to a particular ritual or ceremony. The Kukis organize *lenkhawm* throughout their lives, for all rituals including celebrations and

mourning. Apart from its religious significance, it also finds a place in the Kuki society for various reasons. Belonging to a society where people share each other's grief and joy, the villagers are obliged to support each other. In the pre-Christian period, the *lenkhawm* was the most important musical performance as it allowed the Kuki people to break free from their emotive confinement and instilled in them the spirit and eagerness to immerse themselves in their songs and dances. *Lenkhawm* is a path for the Kukis to enter an alternate world where one is liberated from the pressures of everyday life.

The songs of the pre-colonial period are composed and sung in manners discussed above, and the style of singing and dancing was more or less the same in every Kuki village. The participants would form a circle or a semi-circle, depending on the members taking part in the performance. To make room for anyone willing to join them in the dance, a semi-circle would be formed with the end open. The boys would stand with a girl between them, joining their hands behind the girl. In the same manner, the female members would also join their hands with the men between them. In this way, they form a chain and encircling the paired dancers in their midst, they dance. The movement depended on the song and the beat of the drum, for different songs required specific movements corresponding to the theme of the song. Another pair of dancers – a boy and a girl – would dance in the middle while the other dancers move in a circle encompassing them. Depending on the size of the performers, the dancers in the middle whose moves differed from those of the larger group could be more than two couples. This practice of dancing during the *Lenkhawm* is known as *Laamkuol*, where the performers would dance while moving in a circular path. But it should be noted that they could not sing all songs during the *Lenkhawm*, for there are songs that have specific rituals attached to them and hence can

be sung only during specified events. To understand these differences, we now scrutinize the types of the *Ju-ne laa*.

2.4 Typologies of the *Ju-ne laa*

Even though all pre-Christian songs were commonly referred to as *Ju-ne laa*, it should be understood that different types of *Ju-ne laa* existed. Although the composition was more or less the same, they differed in their mode of presentation, style, and tune. There are two elements that become instrumental in composing a *Ju-ne laa* – mood and language. A different language called *Laa-pao*, meaning ‘the language of songs’ or ‘poetic language’ or idiom is used for the *Ju-ne laa*. The uses of *laa-pao* in all the songs makes it difficult for one to identify which song belongs to which style of the *Ju-ne laa*. Ngamlhun Lhungdim, a respondent, told me that failure to identify the genres and styles of the pre-Christian musical traditions is the reason why the younger generation finds it problematic to differentiate between these songs, owing to which all of them are branded as *Ju-ne laa*.³¹ Some songs, as mentioned before, are attached to a ritual and cannot be performed at any other place or time or for any other ritual. Such songs are *Laapi*, *Gaal laa*, and *Sielpang lap laa*. All these songs were transmitted orally with gradual changes depending upon the geographical location. It is interesting to observe that my informants disagreed on the styles and patterns of some songs, sometimes classifying the same song under different genres. This discrepancy largely depends on the geographical area where s/he grew up in. However, it is not the intention of this chapter to analyze the logical and standardized

³¹ Interviewed on 31 December, 2018.

musical notes, tones or the structural principles of the songs; instead, I would focus on the interpretation and performance of the songs and its presentation and re-presentation of the Kuki people. Therefore, it would be appropriate to categorize the songs based on the genres or styles that the informants suggest, and not go further into the modalities of styles and notes.

Based on their composition, the Ju-ne laa could be identified as having the following typologies—1. ritual songs, 2. love songs, 3. funeral songs, 4. war songs, 5. agricultural songs, 6. children's songs, 7. festive songs, 8. songs of insult, 9. songs of praise, 10. religious songs, 11. patriotic songs, and 12. birth songs. This categorization is based purely on my observation of the songs I collected from various sources and these were not the only types that existed. However, for this chapter, I limit the typology only to the songs I have a record of. The Ju-ne laa encapsulates all the above categories irrespective of the genre or style.

The categorization gives us a very clear picture of its significance in the Kuki community. It plays an important role in presenting their everyday experiences from the cradle to the grave. As mentioned above, all *Ju-ne laa* could not be performed everywhere. Each song has its own specific time and place, which is also generally based on their social and cultural functions. Except for the songs with rituals attached to them, the *Ju-ne laa* can be sung during celebrations or *lenkhawm*. I also associate all such songs to their social life and all ritual songs to their cultural life. To be specific, the only known music or song of the Kukis is the *Ju-ne laa*, which is of two types—*Lenkhawm laa* and *Kin-laa*. For a better understanding of this classification, I explain the two types of *Ju-ne laa*.

2.4.1 *Lenkhawm laa*

No festival of the Kukis is complete without the *Lenkhawm*. People gather from near and far to take part in a festival, and they highly value this act of coming together. Although the Kukis enjoy being together as a community, they are often unable to do so since most of their time is spent doing agricultural activities. Their practice of slash and burn agricultural practices requires a huge area of cultivable lands far away from their villages. To save time walking to and from the fields, they construct a hut in a choice place within their agriculture field and spend the night there. This practice demanded that most of their time be spent in the fields. It should also be mentioned that the distance between two farms is measured by shouting – if one could hear his fellow villager shouting from his field, it is called '*kikou phahna chan*'. Since work kept them from socializing, they placed high value on their festivals and rarely missed them. The *Lenkhawm* attracts the Kukis by giving them the time and opportunity to express their feelings.

The Kukis' *lunghel*-ness in its own way showed that 'outpouring of emotions' is not restricted to a few talented artists, but open to anyone who experiences *lunghel*. As Gadamer has pointed out, a play is always presented for somebody, the songs composed by individuals were also meant for someone, something, or someplace that was deeply missed and later on presented to others during festivals. The festival becomes the theatre where the work of art is presented in the play, thereby attracting the audience to play along. The Kukis achieved emotional catharsis through a language "capable of transcending the reality of everyday life" (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 40) which allowed them to achieve a transcendental experience, enabling them to forget their pain and suffering. Gadamer's

play does not refer to the intended meaning of the author, nor to the audience's perception, but to "the mode of being of the work of art" (Gadamer, 1975; Amini & Safian, 2013, p. 771).

The *lenkhawm* is viewed not only as entertainment material but also as a site for the presentation of their *lunghel*-ness. Most of the songs are meant for someone other than the composer. The *lenkhawm* gave the Kukis an opportunity to express their hidden feelings, as the songs could be presented to the person/s for whom they were composed. Sometimes, a boy and a girl would be paired during the *lenkhawm* to respond spontaneously to each other – a practice called the *ki-lang le*. Young lovers makes use of such opportunities to express their love to their partners. Here, either the boy or the girl would start singing and the other would respond immediately through another song. Here is an example:

Boy *Athu jatam kalelma 'n ngaigenu kei kaphungte 'n lhangse tam eilo inte*

(Before I express our love my darling, I am scared my family will rebuke me for our love)

Girl *Nang naphungte 'n lhangse tam nalo le kei kaphungte 'n chem ang eichoi inte*

(If you family rebukes you, mine will hail me glorious)

The boy is scared to ask his family to seek the girl's hand in marriage fearing that they might not accept the girl. But the girl's sarcastic replies tells us that it is not only the boy's family that should decide upon their marriage, for both the families need to come into agreement. This song reflects the importance of parents' decision for their children's marriage.

The *lawm* considered the *lenkhawm* as an opportunity to pour out their hearts while entertaining themselves with the dances. The night is reserved for them while the elders retire early or perform another set of *lenkhawm* inside the host's house. The nature of these *lenkhawm* are very different from each other as will be explained in detail in the next section. Sometimes, those on the outside sing and dance the entire night.

2.4.1.1 *Toumun laa*

Toumun laa can be translated literally as songs sung while sitting. As the name suggests, this performance is mostly identified with elderly people who no longer have the strength to dance and sing. They would sit in a circle and sing together while sipping the *Ju*. During such gatherings, a woman from the host's family takes special care of the elderly members and ensure that they never run out of *Ju*. A large earthen pot containing the drink would be placed in the middle, with the woman occupying her place to fill the pot with water until the tastes fade. It is also her duty to replace the *Jubel* with new ones so that there is no shortage of *Ju*, as it would be shameful for the performer to be unable to provide the drink during the celebration in his house. Besides, she supervises the *lenkhawm* so that the members can sing without any hinderance. She would call them to sip the liquid, beginning with the eldest member present. The elders would sing different *toumun laa* while sipping the *Ju*.

The *lenkhawm* where *toumun laa* could be sung is organized in celebration of *sa-ai*, *chang-ai* or other celebrations such as those glorifying a war hero. On such occasions, a feast is arranged, followed by singing and dancing. The following is a *toumun laa* which elderly people sing during the *lenkhawm*:

Chang tam'e, Chang tam'e, Changsi vang in changtam'e

Simbeng chol chan chang hinpuo 'n

Changluong nuoi 'ah khuonglo 'e

Khuotam 'e khuotam 'e, thiem peng vang in khuotam 'e.

Free translation

There is plenty of rice, there is plenty of rice, the weed complement the rice

The mice bring the rice and heap up the rice in a place and celebrate it

The village is populous; the village is populous

The widows make the village populous.³²

It is mostly sung during the *chaang-ai* ritual, which is performed in honour of a woman who cultivates an enormous amount of rice from her field during a year. Not all women can perform this rite, for there is a required amount of rice which is usually measured in a container made for this purpose. An extraordinarily higher yield of rice as compared to that cultivated by other women in the village is necessary if a woman is to perform the *chaang-ai*

Here is another *toumun laa* which is sung to glorify a war hero:

Tolsung minthang Pu CHALHEM Gaal minthang

Laaitha lojang...nathanna Phung guollaai

Phungguol namtin jalaaija...Thang son-son.

Minthang son-son boudehta kumsot chaan

Naam chem kaangthol choi dang bon...guolchungchon.

Laaitha lojang thang laaija...Pu CHALHEM

³² Translated by Bogin Lhouvum.

Sangmaang jatam Kai lah bon lojang thang.
Pengthah khangnou namtin chaan lhaang naante.
Sang tha laaitha..kop a min..thang laaija
Jaila tongkaai heithem bon...lojangthang.
Jaila tongkaai heithem na lojang thang...
Kumsot namtin phungguol laaija aleng jing
Chullou minthang guol jaila..kitinte.

Free translation

The great Pu Chalthem, the man of war
Your name is glorified within the clan.
May your name be glorified throughout the nation
I know they will glorify you for generations.
People of all ages talked about your exploit in hunting and battle.
The younger generation will emulate your deeds.
You are popular for a reason that the young and old rely on you.
If they well know a singer within the clan,
If a singer could have a name for himself within the clan and the nation
Your bravery/deeds would be a legacy that never ends³³

They also sing the *toumun laa* for *mithi lenkhawm*, a condolence meeting held in honor of the deceased in the village. After they lay the body to rest, the elders of the village gather

³³ Tranlated by Boigin Lhouvum.

at the house of the deceased and sing songs to comfort her/his relatives. The following is a song sung in honor of the elder of a clan who passed away:

Phungmang laikam nuoi zumtuol'ah ajaotai
 U-le-nao zong lainem lou umpuonte
 Lainem lou umpuonte,
 Chonlim Chontuol nuoi zumtuol gave uvo

Free translation

The eldest in the clan is no more. Nobody is untouched by sorrow and grief.
 Nobody is untouched by sorrow and grief with the death of the eldest in the clan.
 See for yourself the yard where rites are performed.³⁴

2.4.1.2 *Jangte laa* or *Jangcha laa*

The *Jangte laa* or *Jangcha la* refers to songs that could be sung leisurely among friends and is commonly sung by *Sawm* members. Like the *toumun laa*, the *jangte laa* also has a pre-defined tune with end rhymes. They are classified on the basis of rhyme and rhythm. Even when the lines do not rhyme, the song could be called a *jangte laa* if the rhythm or tone fits the pattern of the genre. The *jangte laa* could be sung anywhere anytime, depending upon the mood of the performers and it is not attached to any rituals. However, during the *chon* rituals, the *jangte laa* can be performed during the *lenkhawm*, as they are common songs and are popular. The following is a *jangte laa* which is sung during the *lenkhawm* as a part of *chon* rituals:

³⁴ Translated by Boigin Lhouvum.

Ni hung suoh val leu'e.

Kawlni hung suoh val leu'e.

Kawljang'a nisuoh abang'e.

Vangkhuo hinsal masante.

Bu-al khuongtei khuongtei o-e.

Lainu jaaltei jaaltei o-e.

Tu'a lainu thou loulai.

Lanu lungmol hitante.

Free translation

The rays of the sun shine brightly

The sun shines dazzlingly and brightens the horizon.

The sun shines brightly and the rays shine first on the village.

Let the rooster crow early in the morning.

And the young lady still in bed

The young woman who is still in bed even after the rooster crow may be
mad/incompetent.³⁵

2.4.1.3 *Laamkuol laa*

Laamkuol laa, as the name suggests, is a way of singing and dancing, performed by the youth in an open space while the elders sing the *toumun laa* inside the house of the person performing the rite. Though the *laamkuol laa* is popularly considered to be a performance by youngsters, married men and children who can move according to the beats

³⁵ Translated by Boigin Lhouvum

of the drum participate in it. All members of the *lawm* are involved in the *laamkuol*, singing and dancing the whole night. The *lenkhawm lamkaipu*³⁶ takes great care in selecting songs; since the event involves almost the entire village and sometimes the neighboring villages too, popular songs are chosen. This is where the *jangte laa* appears, as they are more common and popular compared to other songs.

The following is a song that could be performed during the *laamkuol lengkhawm*:

Chung'a Jangkolva laam'e.
 Nuoi'a kakhan nouguol laam'e.
 Jangkolva'n laam'a ngeipah'e.
 Tongdonlou in amuol tam kallouvo e.

Free translation

Birds dance in the air
 Young men and women dance on the ground
 The birds shared my joy
 But went out of sight across the horizon without talking to me.³⁷

Another *laamkuol laa*:

Kei kalam'e alai ah, kalam pi ding tuoidonlai neipe uvo
 Touidonlai napenge alaiya changna bang kihei'o

Free translation

I am dancing in your midst, give me a maiden to dance with.

³⁶The person who leads the *lenkhawm*.

³⁷ Translated by Boigin Lhouvum.

I will give you a maiden, dance in our midst like a nimble and weightless leave.³⁸

Athing mange mohna mang hiloupi.

Guikhao chan kainan neije.

Thing mange thing lunlai.

Ami mange mohna mang hiloupi.

Namtin chan kainan neije.

Mimang'e milunlai.

Free translation

The wood is big and beautiful but for a reason

Fiber/hard rope creep on it

The wood is big; the popular wood

He is popular for a reason that the young and old rely on him.

He is big; he is popular³⁹

2.4.1.4 *Japulen laa*

Japulen laa refers to the songs popular in the south-eastern part of Manipur among the Mangvung clans. The *japulen* genre was so popular in the region that it soon spread to all the Kuki hills and gained popularity. The tune of this genre can be used to sing songs composed in other tunes too. *Japulen laa* is sung mostly during the *lenkhawm*, while dancing.

³⁸ Translated by Boigin Lhouvum

³⁹ Translated by Boigin Lhouvum

2.4.1.5 *Jamdou laa*

Jamdou laa are songs sung in the tune composed by Jamdou, a well-known singer and composer whose songs are quite popular by virtue of their uniqueness. None of my informants could tell me to which exact region of the Kuki hills he belonged. The *Jamdou laa* is also sung during the *lenkhawm* event. *Jamdou laa* does not refer to any specific song; rather, it indicates the tune. As in the case of the *japulen laa*, the *jamdou laa* could also be used for songs composed in other tunes.

2.4.2 *Kin laa*

As has already been mentioned, all songs cannot be sung during the *lenkhawm*, as some have specific rituals associated with them and can be sung only when the said rituals are performed. I call the latter set of songs the *kin-laa*, songs with a purpose. This does not mean that the *lenkhawm laa* have no purpose other than serving as a channel or medium for the Kukis to express their emotions, but their flexibility for its usage beyond the purpose for which they were composed serve not only one, but many purposes. Unlike these songs, which could be sung in the *lenkhawm* or even with friends for leisure, the *kin-laa* are composed for specific purposes and hence cannot be sung elsewhere as part of any other ritual. The Kukis have several *kin-laa*, of which the *laapi*, the *han laa* and the *sielpang lap laa* come under scrutiny here.

2.4.2.1 *Laapi*

The *laapi* is a burial song which is sung only when a man of great honor passes away, as the singing of *laapi* is allowed only for people who could perform the *ai* rituals during their lifetime. Individuals who could perform *ai* were honored and respected and as such, they

were given a special burial, very different from that of laymen. The *laapi* needs to be sung with a sonorous voice while drumming on the floor with firewood, dao, or an axe. The following is an example of a *laapi*:

Peo le Loh in bon luongthing sajang alam'e

Josa ahei lem-lem'e

Khum lhan thongte kalhung leh

Kavon sajang kalam'e

Lamtuol'a kahei lem-lem'e

Naopa ngente'n athat'e

Keima'n ngente kathat'e

Ngente somsiel kasomsiel

Ngente kumpon kadumpon

Free Translation

Even the two streams, Peo and Loh float the animal called Sajo in their currents
carrying it round and round, so do I, the corpse of my son, whom I found dead on
my arrival from the field

My younger brother was killed by the Ngente's

So did I kill the Ngente

Thus, the wealth and properties of Ngente were mine.

Even the clothes of Ngente were mine. (Gangte, 2012, Pp. 117-118)

This is a song for the funeral rites of those who do not have their own clan *laapi*.⁴⁰ The special burial accorded to honorable individuals is called ‘*lang lap’a kivui*’. Split bamboos are used to prepare a litter on which the dead body is laid. One end of the litter rests on the rafter of the house and the other end on the floor, allowing for the dead body to be placed in a reclining position. The litter is split at the upper end, where a live chicken is hung by its neck to gradually die while chirping. In the words of T.S. Gangte:

The litter was constructed in such a way that the deceased might be kept on it without touching any other household articles and avoid defilement. The material used for constructing such a palanquin was a kind of bamboo called ‘Gopi’. No other material was used. The main props of the palanquin were three solid bamboo poles laid lengthwise. These bamboos were bound together and joined breadthwise with bamboo splits, so that it became a kind of make-shift platform on which the deceased could be laid. On top of it were placed bamboo splits called ‘Chipeh’, which were made of solid bamboos that were not cut into pieces. One end of the bamboo remained solid, while the whole length of it was cut into several splits, so that when it was spread it served as a plank. The difference in construction of the palanquin called ‘Lang’ with that of ‘Khunsum’ is that the main bamboo supports are three in number in the former, while they are only two in the case of the later. The construction of ‘Lang’ is made in such a way that whenever the deceased is carried on it for the burial it can move to-and-fro, which is called ‘Lap’, and an

⁴⁰ Although several Kuki clans such as the Doungels, the Haokips and the Lhungdins have their own respective clan *laapi*, there are clans that do not have their own *laapi*. This particular song could be sung by such clans who do not have *laapi* of their own.

elderly man can take care of the corpse, and the priest, who keeps on brandishing a sword over the body of the deceased in his right hand, can also do his job unhindered. The ends of the solid bamboo are left undisturbed for carrying the palanquin. Thus, while on both sides of the ends of bamboos many young man and elderly people can take positions carrying the deceased, the elderly man and the priest also carry on their jobs. (2012, p.114)

After the performance of the rituals, the elders from the village and the elderly relatives of the deceased from other villages gather around the corpse to sing the *laapi*. The performance of this song marks the farewell to the deceased, and the dead body is then carried in the *lang* prepared for the purpose. The movement of the *lang* resembles the floating of the *Sajo* animal, with the bearers lifting it up and down while singing the *khunsum laa*⁴¹:

Khul'a khul'a kalud
 Dimkhul'a khul'a kalud
 Timta meila'e
 Kawlni nousuo masang'a
 Ngarpa kakap,
 Phungguol ngoili bang katin
 Timta meila'e

Free Translation

As my coffin was lowered into the grave

⁴¹*Khunsum laa* is also a *laapi* that is sung for men of great honor, who performed the *chon* rituals during his lifetime.

The grave that had to be filled up,
The pitch-dark grave was brightened
By the floodlight of the firefly
Before sunrise, as I went to the field
I met a wild-bore which I killed
So, stopped all others who also went for the field.
Preparing themselves to carry the game that I hunted
Thus, the darkness was brightened by the firefly. (Gangte, 2012, Pp. 118-119)

The village *thiempu* (priest) then appeases the spirits by taking a mouthful of *ju* which he
sprays on the burial site, and then chants thus:

Nuoiya nuoimangpa kadoh le
Chung'a Pathien kidohta'n eiti'e
Chung'a Pathien kadoh le
Naju lhit lhahna laitah a
Chun vuita'n eiti

Free Translation

When I asked the king of the underworld Nuoimangpa
The king told me to ask God, Pathien, who is in heaven
When Pathien was asked, he instructed me
To bury at the spot where the drops of wine have fallen (Gangte, 2012, p. 117)

These were the burial rituals among the pre-Christian Kukis. In the case of people who
do not have the privileges to perform the *chon* rituals, the *laapi* is not sung during burials.
The restriction of the performance of *laapi* to specific death rituals for specific groups of

people is proof that a hierarchical class structure exists within the Kuki society. The Chief of the tribe is the most respected person and holds the highest position in the community. Chieftainship is obtained by inheritance and it cannot be challenged, further pointing to how class hierarchies are reinforced.

Apart from acquiring merit and respect as birthright, individuals could also gain honor through might. Men who hunted animals kept a record of their game and performed the *sa-ai* for every hundred animals they killed. Only specific animals such as the bear, tiger, wild boar or other big animals could be counted among the hundred. As mentioned above, the third *sa-ai* ritual is called *chon*. Those who perform the *chon* rituals enjoy the second highest social status, after the Chiefs. Below them are several ranks of cabinets in the village council, but none except those who perform the *chon* can share the privileges accorded to Chiefs, during their death rituals.

2.4.2.2 *Han laa*

The primal Kukis had occasional conflicts with other tribes and they engaged in head-hunting with the intention of displaying the power and might of the tribe. The warriors who brought back the head of an enemy from the battle field were accorded a warm welcome. However, the head of the slain enemy could not be brought into the village; it had to be hung at the *khuo-muol* after the warrior was welcomed with pride and honor. During the reception of the warrior at the *khuo-muol*, the warrior would sing a *han-la*⁴², i.e., a song of bravery:

⁴² *Han-laa* cannot be termed a *toumun laa*. It can be categorized under the *gaal-laa*, i.e. war songs. The *han-laa* is mentioned here to provide a better understanding of the head-hunting rituals which leads to the singing of a *toumun laa* during the *lenkhawm* ceremony.

Ka-thang'e, Khul'a kapien nin'o, chun le ka-jo tumin'o
 Lhang namchem bang eichoiye, phaithi hung langsilsel'e
 Kanamchem choi lhanghui phaithi'n abel'e
 Ami namang'e, hammol veicha nangbou namang'e;
 Ami kathan'g'e, Hi suoncha keibou kathan'g'e
 Lamsah'a kapang khin khen'e, lamlhang kungbul kasat'e
 He! Kateiyo, kungbul ham kati'n, nang nahim'o!
 Kathan'g'e namtin khuovaipei lai keibou lo'ang kathan'g'e
 Tahchapa!, napu'n kapu zoulou, napa'n kapa zoulou, nang in kei nei zoulou
 Tahchapa! chapa tupa,
 Nadung kakal kakalzou, navai kakal kakalzou
 Tahchapa! chapa tupa,
 Katha nuoinung, keima chungnung.

After the warrior sings the *han-laa*, he is given a boiled egg⁴³ along with *ju* by the Chief's wife, while the others beat the traditional gong and drums made from animal skin. The warrior should enter the village only after completion of the ritual and he can also perform the *gaal-ai* ritual later to glorify himself and to appease the spirit of the enemy he slew. To perform the *gaal-ai*, he has to fix a post somewhere in his garden and a cock should be hung there (no other animals can be used). The daughters who are married would bring him *ju* and *tuhpah*,⁴⁴ and in return, they can take a shawl of their choice from their

⁴³ Egg is used as it can be boiled quickly.

⁴⁴ Tuhpah is a head gear usually worn during celebrations

brother.⁴⁵ The village *thiempu* then performs the rituals. Feasting and merrymaking ensues, with the members sitting in a circle and singing songs to glorify the warrior.

2.4.2.3 *Sielpang lap laa*

Sielpang lap laa is sung during the *ai* ceremony. The *ai* performer should perform the rituals by killing a Mithun and afterwards, “the priest leads the performer and his wife to the spot where the Mithun has been kept tied to the post. As they come out, the Priest and the performer are adorned with the feather of eagle called ‘Muvanlai ving’ (the longest of the eagle wing, which is usually the topmost of the feather). As they come down, the performer speaks to the Mithun saying–‘Do not regret or be grieved, it is for the fame of both of us’” (Gangte, 2012, p.188). It is then killed and all the boys and girls present would perform a *siel pang lap* dance while singing:

Siellha hung’o e, Vungsuonte siellha hung’o e
Changlha hung’o e, Telngohte hung’o e
Siel’o hung loi’o, kapu’n khul’a napienpi
Huongjoi phan abawl pieh nang’e siel’o hungloi’o
Changlet’o, jouloi’a lawm tang kaina le chang’o let’o
Sielpang lam’e, kajoujang somsiel kaloleh siel’o laam’e

Free translation

Come, Mithun’s soul, Vungson’s Mithun soul, come
 Come, the soul of paddy, come, the Telngohs

⁴⁵ ‘Brother’ here does not refer necessarily to blood brothers. Being members of the same clan, the married women of that clan consider the male members as their brothers.

Come soon oh Mithun, you came along with my ancestors from Khul

I will prepare a good place for your living. Come soon, oh Mithun

May paddy overflow granary, in the field the Lawm works for you

May paddy overflow granary, so that dancing beside the Mithun may be performed again

The best of my Mithun may perform the dancing (Gangte, 2012, Pp. 188-189)

2.5 Experience of the (True) Being

Art can transform an individual from being an autonomous subject with a free will to a transformed person who has been subjected to the play of art. Their aesthetic sensibilities allow them to comprehend the meaning embedded in their songs, which is not necessarily that intended by the composer. The coming into play of their aesthetic sensibilities is driven by their practical knowledge or *sensus communis* that, according to Vico, directs the human will towards the way of living of the community (Gadamer, 2013, p.125).

The performance of the songs mentioned above presents the socio-cultural peculiarities of the pre-Christian Kukis, functioning as sites for learning the Kuki way of life. It cannot be claimed that one is born a Kuki; rather, it is her/his way of living that makes her/him a Kuki. The Kuki being is cultivated in the subject by the social environment in which s/he grows up and this is where her/his *sensus communis* towards community living is shaped. Songs and poems, which are a significant part of the everyday life of Kuki subjects, teaches them about the worldview of the community and enable them to develop a uniquely Kuki identity. Living the Kuki way makes them understand their world (socio-

cultural) that they easily submerged themselves into the play of art which is beyond the understanding of the outsiders like the Colonials and the missionaries who inscribe an identity based on their abstract reasoning. The colonially inscribed identity is highly contested, as it fails to give a true narrative of the Kuki self and being.

Total submission to the play of art transforms an individual into the subject of the play, remaining fully immersed in it. Their complete submission to the *ju-ne laa* and the *lengkhawm* enables them to experience their true being, the existence of which is confirmed in this case through their performative traditions, without which this experience would never be possible. This possibility is, in turn, inspired by their culture and traditions, which remain the most significant factors deciding the trajectories of their true being.

This chapter presented a brief account of the Kukis, the centrality of songs to their lives, and their (re)presentation of themselves. The uniquely Kuki socio-cultural realm cannot be comprehended well without their songs. The aesthetic sensibilities of the tribe, which developed through its *sensus communis* or practical knowledge, orients the members towards community life. The *sensus communis* also creates a bond between individuals who have common knowledge about the specific art form presented. The Kukis' common knowledge of their songs and festivals provides an opportunity for them to present themselves as a community. It is not the intended meaning of their songs that interests us, but the coming into appearance of the meanings of their art.

In the pre-Christian Kuki society, performances in festivals and rituals presented their true meaning and were not independent of the work that summoned it. The festivals and rituals of the tribe were incomplete without the artwork, as the two were closely interrelated. This is where the meanings of the art surface, providing the Kukis a true,

transcendental experience of reality. Following Gadamer, it is argued that the aesthetic experiences of the Kukis become the medium through which the truth presents itself. In other words, it is not their songs, drums, dances, or even the *lenkhawm*, but they themselves who serve as the medium through which their being is presented.

Gadamer also argues that every artwork has its own temporality and that the artwork never reveals itself completely at any given point of time. That is, the reception of any work of art depends on the time-period. The chapter concludes that the *Ju-ne laa* and the *lenkhawm* are temporal, and that their reception in the pre-Christian period provided the Kukis an experience of a truth that transcended their everyday reality. However, it becomes interesting to interrogate whether this experience of ‘trueness’ is limited to the pre-Christian period. The next chapter engages with this problem to comprehend the reception and experience of Kuki art in the early Christian period.

Chapter 3

Pre-empting Enchantment and Sanctuous Disengagement

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter examined the presentation of the Kuki experience of reality through the performance of songs. The coming into appearances of the meanings of artwork is apprehensible to the Kukis, who share a common knowledge of the language spoken by their art. This simply mean that the Kukis could understand the meanings of their performances which for someone outside their community may appear indistinct and could be misinterpreted as gibberish acts performed in their inebriated state. Language refer to in the above does not allude to the spoken language with words and meanings, but as a concept that Gadamer describes as the coming into appearances or a “presentation”⁴⁶. For the Kuki society, artwork serves both as ‘models of’ and ‘models for’ reality, as it serves as a medium through which the subjects comprehend themselves by focusing on significant factors shaping and articulating identity. In other words, the artwork reveals which values matter and which do not. The shared common sense that the subjects acquire from their social environment equips them with the knowledge to comprehend the meanings presented, which enables them to submit completely to the art. In this act of submission, they shed their conscious-free will and are in control of the art, thus becoming a subject of the play of art, which, in turn, enables them to present themselves to their selves. Songs

⁴⁶ Hans Georg Gadamer use the German term “*Derstellung*” which implies that something is immediately presented. According to him, people do not express themselves in a game or play, but the game itself “presents itself”.

and dances enchanted the Kukis of the pre-Christian period and they spent whole nights celebrating the *lenkhawm*. As Gadamer asserts, artwork has its own temporality and thus gives different experiences on different occasions. If so, how do the Kukis engage with these differences?

The early Christian period began with the conversion of a few Kuki individuals in 1910; the missionaries steadily gained the trusts of the locals and have better relationships than the British government. Upa Lunkhojang, responding to the queries on the actions of the missionaries told me that the locals trusted the missionaries for they have healing power (medicines) more effective than the local treatments. Their teachings were also acceptable to the people for Christianity was introduced in a way the Kukis could relate to their own traditional belief system. The missionaries were seen as good white men very different from the British officials whom the Kukis chose to fight. Although colonialism had an immense impact on the Kukis, the British refrained from direct rule over the tribe. They appointed *Lambus*⁴⁷ as intermediaries to settle issues. The colonizers' attempt to recruit Kukis as Labor Corp to serve the British army in France was vehemently opposed, as the community perceived it as an attempt to usurp their independence. The Kuki chiefs declared war against British imperialism and fought them for two winters. To break their spirits, the British soldiers took their wives and children as hostages while the men were fighting in the jungles. They also blazed their granaries and stalled food supplies, eventually forcing the chiefs to surrender. This war is remembered as the Great Anglo-Kuki war, 1917-1919. Apart from this war, there were no direct British interference in the

⁴⁷ Lambus is a government appointed official who acts in various capacities as messenger, interpreter, peon for and on behalf of the British Raj to maintain contacts with the hill people.

Kuki community. However, the Christian missionaries gained free access to the Kuki hills, staying amongst the tribal subjects and spreading the message of the Gospel. For the fear of converts returning to their age-old *june* culture, the missionaries implored them from drinking wine. In their attempt to protect the new converts, they also adopted several laws for the Kuki Christians. The teaching of the missionaries was not limited to the message of Christianity; the tribal subjects were introduced not only to a new religion but to a new way of life. They were persuaded to adopt the imported culture that was alien to them and the missionaries achieved this by projecting the new culture as ‘holy’ and by convincing them that it was the ‘Christian’ way of life. In the process, they also demonized indigenous Indian traditions and rituals. Even Kuki songs were interdicted and the community was forced to rely on translated Western hymns.

Songs that existed prior to their interaction with the Christian missionaries came to be labeled as ‘traditional’ songs. After the influx of Christianity, traditional songs and cultures were viewed with disdain and thus new song styles, performative traditions, and lifestyles developed. This new movement, propelled by modernity, opened the door for the Kuki youth to step into the realm of the age of education and English medium schools provided them the opportunity to look beyond their inherited traditions and culture. Using religion as a tool, Christian missionaries weaned the Kukis from cultural beliefs and practices which had been a part of their lives since time immemorial and introduced a new lifestyle that (the missionaries believed) would draw them closer to Christianity and modernize the hitherto ‘savage’ subjects.

Existing literature on the Kukis locate Christianity as one reason for the tribe's abandonment of their traditional cultures and traditions. Scholars from different disciplines widely argue along this line, lamenting over the loss of past traditions. Although the transformations the Kuki society underwent in the wake of Christianity had been under academic scrutiny since the past many years, the continuity amidst these changes has gone unnoticed. This chapter attempts to bridge this lacuna through an exploration of the Kuki Christian traditions of music and performances with an attempt to link this tradition to the past. The chapter also argues that despite the drastic transformations the Kuki social order experienced in the wake of colonialism and the advent of Christianity, the true Kuki tradition continues to exist. The performative traditions are proof that the Kuki being, which the current chapter attempts to delineate through their musical performances, is still alive. This however does not mean that the songs/poetry directly speaks about the cultures and traditions of the Kuki society, nor does it claim that their true being could be understood by listening to their songs. But, it is argued that their musical traditions have the capacity to transform the essence of the people and that the present generation Kuki society could choose those traditions that matter most and preserve their cultures and traditions most valuable to them. The enchantment of the *Ju-ne laa* is missing from the translated hymns. Their desire for enchantment inspired them to come up with a new musical tradition by amalgamating the *Ju-ne laa* and the translated hymns. The most cherished elements of the *Ju-ne laa* are preserved to meet their needs in the present. The Christian songs of the Kukis, commonly known as the Gospel songs, shall be analyzed to locate the continuity of traditions from the past to the present. Therefore, it becomes imperative to examine the centrality of songs in the Kuki Christian society.

3.2 Centrality of songs in Christianity and Reflections in the Kuki Social Order

The current section deals with the importance of songs to the Christian society at large. It gives a brief description of the importance of songs in worship from the pre-Christian era and seeks to understand how it is continued in the Christian period. The centrality of songs during the pre-Christian period of the Kukis has been discussed in the previous chapter; this section begins with an exploration of the significance of songs in the early Christian period and how the Kukis engaged with them. Their pre-Christian religion is also scrutinized in order to understand the shift in their religious identity.

Gospel songs among the Kuki society is a product of Christianity, for without songs its existence has no meaning. In Christianity, worship with only words and sermons is not possible as both knowledge and emotion are involved in prayer. Its importance could be traced back to the days of King David, who himself had been a poet and a musician. The book of Psalms in the Old Testament of the Holy Bible comprises songs written by David, along with some songs from Asaph. These songs were given to the Chief Musician of King David's choir for the worship service in church. Matthew Henry, in his commentary on the Holy Bible, writes that by singing David's psalms, the singers praise God using the same words he had used. Christians were encouraged to continuously sing songs of praises to God. In the book of The New Testament Apostle Paul says: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord" (Colossians 3:16, *The New King James Version*). This verse tells us the importance of singing which is a path to

worship the Lord in spirit. It is also a way of remembering God's gracious love for which Christians must be thankful.

The missionaries were not the only sources of Christian songs in the Kuki society. Although they played an important role in translating hymns from English to the indigenous language, the foundation for Christian songs (including those in the Kuki society) could be traced back to generations much older than Christianity itself. The tradition of worshipping God through praise, using songs, had been practised even before Christianity emerged and it continued to persist in the early Christian society as the New Testament reveals. For instance, Acts 16: 25-26 describes Paul and Silas (who were apprehended and imprisoned with their hands and legs chained, for preaching the word of Gospel) singing songs of praise and praying continually until the prison gates were broken open by the Holy Ghost (*The New King James Version*), pointing to the significance of songs of praise in the Christian system of worship.

The deep connection between the Kuki psyche and songs could be located from the pre-Christian period. It would not be an exaggeration to say that their passion for songs and poetry is inherent. Their physical and emotional proximity to nature also propelled them to rely on songs/poems to express their innermost feelings. Their love for singing and poetry is evident from their social, cultural and religious lives, which were inseparable during the pre-Christian era when there was no distinction between the sacred and the secular, making it difficult to differentiate religious songs from non-religious ones. The *Ju-ne laa* was used as a medium to express their experiences in the socio-cultural and religious realms. To understand the centrality of songs in Kuki Christianity, it would be worthwhile

to engage with their ‘traditional religion’ and locate its differences from and similarity with Christianity.

The Kukis, most of whom were religious, believed in a supernatural being called the *Chung Pathien* (*chung*, meaning ‘above’, *pathien*, God), who is considered as the most benevolent of all gods (Gangte, 2012, p. 161). According to Gangte, *Chung Pathien* is so powerful that his devotees consider prosperity, growth, and strength in life as a gift from him. He argues that the god does not want appeasement through sacrifices and offerings, and relates the religious rites performed by the Kukis as a way of appeasement not to *Chung Pathien*, but to *Nuoimangpa* – the devil who lives in the underworld and is believed to be responsible for the calamities that befall the Kukis (p. 161). Gangte’s concept of *Chung Pathien* and *Nuoimangpa* is similar to that of Col. J Shakespeare (1912) who claims that they worshipped the devil for appeasement. However, Shakespeare fails to perceive the significance accorded to ‘Chung Pathien’, and argues that the Kukis predominantly tried to appease the *Nuoimangpa* (who was not worshipped, but rather, feared owing to his vileness). Gangte departs from Shakespeare’s view of worshipping the devil and argue that the devil was not worshipped but was only appeased through sacrifices and rituals, so that he let them live undisturbed. According to him, *Chung Pathien* was the benevolent god, while *Nuoimangpa* was the malevolent god.

Hemkhochon Chongloi (2008), a Kuki theologian, argues that *Chung Pathien* occupied a central place in the life of the Kukis and was worshipped and appeased, as proven by the presence of *Indoi*⁴⁸ in all Kuki households. It is customary for the Kukis to

⁴⁸ *Indoi* is a household deity, a symbolic representation of *Chung Pathien*.

install *Indoi* before setting up a new home. In the Kuki society, the elder brother has the responsibility to establish a new home for his married younger brother(s). When he is convinced that the latter can take care of his own family, he has to find a place where the younger brother can live independently. Before the occupants of the new house move in, *Indoi* has to be installed. The new family can begin staying in the house only after the installation of the deity. The significance accorded to *Indoi* reveals the Kukis' reverence for *Chung Pathien*, whom they have been worshipping from the pre-Christian period. Besides, it also points to the religiosity of the tribe, as *Indoi* indicates the presence of their god on earth, even though He is believed to be in heaven.

Another Kuki theologian, Jangkhoham Haokip (2014), asserts that the Kukis had only one god, *Chung Pathien*, whom they worshipped. According to him, incantations serve as sources of information about the Kuki religion because of the absence of script, scripture and sacred books. Along with the incantations, the *Ju-ne laa* also becomes a significant source in the absence of written materials, as the songs portray the experiences of a Kuki subject in their individual, social and religious lives. Haokip highlights how *Chung Pathien* features in their incantations, referred to by different names such as *Nungzai*, *Nuoimangpa*, and *Thiennu-Thienpa*, which sometimes creates the impression that there are multiple gods. He remarks:

In the incantations, there are other names mentioned besides *Pathien* as if the people believed in many gods: *Nungzai*, believed to be a consort of *Pathien*, *Nuoimangpa*, one who rules the underworld and *Thiennu*, the mother god. They are mentioned in the beginning of incantation as *Pathien nalhaiyin*, *Nungzai nalhaiyin* meaning, 'May *Pathien* and *Nungzai* be propitiated', or *chung'a Pathien nalhaiyin*,

nuoiya Nuoimangpa, ‘May you (wine) be pleasing to *Pathien* above and *Nuoimangpa* below’. Incantation also mentions *thiennu-thienpa*, meaning Mother *Pathien* and father *Pathien*. (p. 137)

Haokip argues that the Kukis often use a pair of words to describe something in its totality. He gave examples like *thi-le-man*, meaning ‘death and loss’ or *van-le-lei*, meaning ‘heaven and earth’ to refer to the ‘universe’. Observing how the Kukis referred to their god (*Chung Mangpa – Nuoimangpa*) during the pre-Christian period, it is evident that though they referred to a single god using a pair of words, it is still meant to describe the *Chung Pathien* whose abode is in heaven. Since the colonial writers failed to understand this mode of describing something in its totality using a pair of words, they could not grasp the truth of the Kukis’ concept of god and misinterpreted their appeasement of the devil to be a kind of worship. To appease the devils, the Kukis performed different kinds of sacrifices according to the circumstances. They believe that different kinds of *thilha*⁴⁹ exists and that not all *thilha* are malevolent. They make friends with the good *thilha*, while the malevolent *thilha* need to be appeased, so that they can escape the vicious assault that emanates as revenge or malice or fun. TS Gangte gives a list of *thilha* (p. 161-162) that the Kukis believed existed in their world, and whom they tried to appease. Haokip argues that sacrifices might have been offered to these *thilha*, and not to *Nuoimangpa*. The name *Nuoimangpa*, ‘the god who rules the world below’, was commonly used with *Chungmangpa*, ‘the god who rules the world above’, as *Chungmangpa-Nuoimangpa*, “in

⁴⁹ Gangte describes *thilha* as ‘evil spirit’ (Gangte, 2012, p. 161); but the belief in the existence of good *thilha* indicates that all *thilha* are not evil. There exists good *thilha* with whom, the Kukis believe, a friendly relationship is possible.

a pair to refer to the only one god” (p. 137) that the Kukis believed ruled the universe comprising the worlds above and below. Thus, to equate *Nuoimangpa* with *thilha* could be misleading. The tribe feared evil spirits - the *thilha* – as they could harm them in different ways, the most common one being through sickness. In order to appease the *thilha*, sacrifices had to be performed by the *thiempu* (priest), who possessed the unique knowledge to cure the sick by performing rituals to please the spirits. The *thiempu*’s role was to treat the sick and to protect the village from harm spawned by the *thilha*.

The worship of the benevolent god, *Chung Pathien* involves several rituals with the *thiempu* functioning as an intermediary between the people and God. As proclaimed by the priest, rituals and celebrations centered on the social and cultural lives of the Kukis were celebrated. Poetry/songs being one of the most significant elements in celebrations, the villagers organized the *lenkhawm* with songs and dances. Although the social, cultural and religious lives of Kukis was incomplete without the *Ju-ne laa*, which was very significant to Kuki identity, it was abandoned after their conversion to Christianity. The early Christian converts were, in a way, deprived of their social and cultural life as the missionaries dictated that they not look back to their past. This raises several questions: How could this be possible when their daily lives were still closely intertwined with their past? The non-converts around them still practiced their customs and traditions, accusing them of being opportunistic and materialistic. Was it possible for the converts to have no emotional longing for their past lives? What about the *Ju-ne laa* that they had been singing all their lives? Did they still sing it without the *Ju*? Did they have the same experience they used to derive from their performances and singing of the *Ju-ne laa*, from the Western hymns translated by the missionaries? How did they cope with these changes? Was there a longing

for their pre-Christian life? The answer to most of these questions would be evident from an investigation into the present day Kuki society, which proclaims Christianity as its religion. The growth of the religion among the subjects over the past hundred years indicates that they had no regrets about adopting it. Christian songs, which function not only as modes of worship but as a factor promoting the growth of Christianity in the Kuki society, have replaced the *Ju-ne laa*. The deeply intertwined histories of the growth of Christianity and that of hymns makes it imperative to study the latter in relation to the traditional songs of the community. This compels us to analyze the history of the religion among the Kukis from the pre-Christian epoch, their perception of Christianity in relation to their traditional religion, and the growth of the former in the society, in order to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the Christina musical tradition among the subjects.

3.3 The Spread of Christianity among Kukis

The conversion to Christianity among the Kuki society occurred in two modes – 1) by American Baptist missionaries in Northern Manipur and 2) by Welsh missionaries with Presbyterian doctrines in the south. In the southern parts of Manipur, the Gospel was received in secret from the Lushai Hills (present day Mizoram), as the entry to the region was opposed by the Baptists working in the north (Vaiphei, 1997, p. 98) who accused Welsh missionaries of working against the convention – ‘one mission, one region’. Watkin Roberts, while assisting Dr. Fraser in his clinic at Aizawl, saw a young Thadou-Kuki man from a village whose chief was Kamkholun Singson, an ex-pupil of Rev. D.E. Jones (p. 95). Roberts sent copies of the Gospel of John through the man to his chief, Kamkholun Singson, a Thadou-Kuki, who later on invited Roberts to teach them the Gospel.

Identifying that the missionaries had not yet reached the southern part of Manipur, Roberts considered it as a ‘Macedonian call’ to reach out to the Kukis across the Lushai Hills and left immediately for Senvon with Thangkai and Lungpao as his porter. They arrived in Senvon on May 7, 1910, where he proclaimed the Gospel with zeal (Singson, 2015, p. 6). On this day, three Bible students from the Lushai Hills arrived in Senvon, founded a mission school and evangelized at the same time. Robert was a self-proclaimed, unpaid, and untrained missionary with no affiliation to any mission, which prompted him to found an independent mission called the “Thado-Kuki Pioneer Mission "(TKPM), which became the gateway to Christianity in the region (Haokip, 2014).

The establishment of a Kuki church in the northern area can be traced back to the first two converts of the Kuki Baptists – Nehseh Chongloi from Makui, the first convert who accepted Christ with the help of Angami (Naga) Christians while in Nagaland, and Ngulhao Thomsong who was also from Nagaland. Both came to Manipur in 1910 to assist the mission work at Ukhrul center. The next group of converts was comprised by the Kukis who attended Pettigrew’s school at Ukhrul, namely Teba Kilong, Longkhobel Kilong, Seilet Singson, Jamkithang Sitlhou, Tongngul Gangte, and Helkhup, Pakho Sitlhou. (KBC, 1987)

The mission expanded to the Kuki areas and Tujang Vaichong became the first Christian village among the Kuki Baptists in 1914, owing to the work of Ngulhao Thomsong. U.M. Fox conducted the first baptisms in December 1914 while on his way from Imphal to Kohima for furlough. 26 people were baptized then. Rev. U.M. Fox also pronounced the establishment of the Church among the Kuki Baptists on 12 December 1914. The Church was formally organized by Pettigrew in 1916 to become the third Baptist

church in Manipur, after those in Ukhrul and Keishamthong near Imphal, and the first Baptist church among the Kukis. New Kuki churches were established in Tongkoi and Chaljang in 1919, Karakhun, Songphel Khulen, Gelnel and Kachai Kuki in 1920, and Lhongchin in 1922. (*Haokip*, 2008)

3.3.1 *Culture, Identity and Christianity: From Ju-ne laa to Christian Songs*

The missionaries were aware of the importance of songs in Christianity and were concerned about the Kukis' emotional attachment with the age-old tradition of the *Ju-ne laa*. To meet the demands of Christianity and the new converts, they translated Western hymns and encouraged the new believers to compose songs. In the first instance, there were no Christian songs⁵⁰ in Thadou-Kuki language and hence, they were introduced to Lushai Christian songs. The Lushais had accepted Christianity much before the Kukis – as early as 1899 when two young Lushai men Khuma and Khara were baptized (Sitlhou, 2017, p. 23), five years after Christianity arrived in the Lushai hills. The first missionaries in the Lushai hills, Messer J. Herbert Lorrain and Frederick W. Savidge, reached on 11 January 1894 and this day marks the arrival of the Gospel in Mizoram and is commemorated as Missionary Day in Mizoram. Within four years, Lorrain and Savidge produced scripts for the Lushai language and translated the Gospels of Luke and John, and the Acts of the Apostles (Thirumal & Lalrozami, 2010). The Lushais were fortunate enough to have had the Bible and hymns translated into their language even before their conversion to Christianity. The hymnal was published for the first time in the Lushai dialect in 1899

⁵⁰'Christian songs' here includes all kinds of songs related to Christianity – hymns, gospel songs, psalms and lengkhawm songs.

(Heathe, 2012). The early converts among the Lushais had no problem in singing compared to the new converts in the Kuki hills, as they were introduced to the already translated songs in their own dialect and could rely on these hymns till they produced indigenous Christian songs.

Along with the Christian songs, the missionaries also introduced the Holy Bible to the Kuki converts in Lushai dialect. Modernity and education among the Kukis, for which many scholars give credit to Christian missionaries, elevated their position, enabling them to translate the entire Bible from Greek and English to their language. The Gospel of John was first translated by Ngulhao Thomsong and the translated version was published in 1924 by the Bible Society with the help of William Pettigrew. Thomsong's translation of the New Testament was published in 1942. Tongkhojang Lunkim, a theologian, translated the Old Testament and published the translated work in 1971, along with a revised edition of the New Testament – the first Holy Bible identified as being a 'Kuki version' (Go, 1996, p. 81; Sitlhou, 2017, p. 129). Before the publication of the Holy Book in their language, the Kukis had been dependent on the Lushais' Bible. Elder people from present-day Churachandpur, a southern district where most of my fieldwork was conducted, are still accustomed to using the Lushai language for names from the Bible. Names such as Marka, Luka, and Paula are used by members of the older generation. The Mizo language has grammatical gender, with male names ending with '-a' (read as 'ah'), and female names with '-i' (read as 'e').

Christianity in the northern Kuki hills could be said to have come from the Naga hills through an English missionary. The first Thadou-Kuki missionary, Ngulhao Thomsong, a convert from Nagaland who was baptized by a western missionary (Vaiphei,

1997), also played an important role in establishing the first Kuki church at Tujang Vaichong in 1914 (KBC, 1987). However, the day-to-day life of the Kuki Christians bears little or no resemblance with that of the Naga tribes or the western traditions, apart from the Baptist doctrine. Perhaps this can be attributed to the fact that the northern Kukis, despite adhering to the doctrinal conventions of the Baptists, had more elements in common with their Kuki brethren in the southern Kuki hills than with their Baptist fellows among the Naga tribes in the northern districts of Manipur. One of my informants described how men from the Tangkhul tribe speak with awe of the *lengkhawm* that the Kukis perform during important celebrations in the Church.⁵¹ Even though the Kukis are geographically scattered across the hills of Manipur (Northern and Southern Manipur), they have common features – they practice the same traditions, use the same hymn books and gospel songs and same traditions of worship services and *lenkhawm*. This similarities arise not due to a privileging of the Presbyterian doctrine over that of the Baptists, but due to the shared cultural scenario. Christian doctrines or geographical boundaries could not obliterate their cultural proximity, indicating that Christianity did not efface their systems and traditions completely, as is further evident from the survival of the pre-Christian tradition of the *lenkhawm*, albeit in varying forms.

Although the Chins, Kukis, and Mizos (who are believed to have originated from the same mythical Khul⁵²) are now dispersed and speak different languages, the cultural similarity is often conspicuous from their everyday lives. In their attempt to trace the origin

⁵¹Interview with Upa Lunkhojang, Chief of New Phaisat, Churachandpur. Before shifting to Churachandpur, he had been living in Ukhrul district among the Tangkhuls.

⁵²The Chin-Kuki-Mizo groups have a mythological story that explains their origin from *Khul*, a mythical cave.

of the *Khul*, many scholars proposed theories which did not yield factual conclusions and the origin and exact location of the *Khul* remains unknown. While this chapter does not engage with the origin of the *Khul*, the concept is brought under scrutiny in order to highlight the shared belief systems, cultural practices and traditions of the various tribes. This commonality could act as a point of integration to unify the politically dispersed groups of people, and the *lenkhawm* tradition, which had been in existence from the pre-colonial period, serves as one such common cultural factor.

The cultural closeness among the Chin-Kuki-Mizo tribes is reflected in their songs, both past and present. A song composed by an individual belonging to any of these tribes could be translated in all their dialects. One of the most popular *lenkhawm* songs, '*Nilhum ngailou Zion khopi*', was composed in 1927 by Pastor Lienrum Hmar, an evangelist who toured the Lushai and the Kuki Hills to preach the Gospel to the non-believers during the early Christian period. He was a resident of Suongsang village in the Southern part of Manipur, whose chief was a non-believer. Through the work of Pastor Lienrum, an increasing number of villagers converted to Christianity, an event which alarmed the chief who, fearing that he would lose control over the village and the people, exiled Pastor Lienrum from the village.⁵³ Christianity in its early period was abhorrent to many, especially the elders. The young members who converted without the knowledge of their parents would be beaten, harassed, and like Pastor Lienrum, even expelled from their family and their village. In such a scenario, with no permanent place to stay, the missionary

⁵³According to Kuki custom, a chief had the right to expel any of his villagers according to his wishes, and no one had the right to question his decision. He 'owned' the land and the villagers had to provide him game and crops from their earnings as tribute. The Chief had absolute authority over his village.

roamed around the hills. Another Chief, who was also a non-believer, pitied him and took him to his village, Muntha. Pastor Lienrum continued preaching devotedly and during a tour, he was forced to leave a village in the evening when he informed the people that he had come to preach the Gospel. He took shelter under a tree as the next village was a day's journey away, and walking through the hills full of wild animals and beasts at night was impossible. Mosquitoes and flies prevented him from sleeping, while the thoughts of wild animals devouring him gripped him with fear. It was during this hardship that the thoughts of heaven came to him. He imagined that the sun will never set in the heavenly Zion, the place that he longed to be in, and he will be greeted by near and dear ones with whom he will praise the Holy God. The yearning for such a place and the hope of being saved from the troubles and hardships he faced in this world, moved him to tears. With all these thoughts in mind, he composed the following song: Nilhumngailou Zion khopi (Lathah No. 203, 2013, p. 173)

1. Nilhum ngailou Zion khopi
 Ngaiyin kamao kakap sun nitin in
 Puon loupi sil in leng in lhatsate
 Keidi'a zong mun umna chu gam'a chun
 Kangaitave, Kangaitave
 Amun loupi hoina zouse sang in
 Lungsietpa Lal Christa meldei um chu
 Mu kanuom ka lungkham banna ding in
2. A hoina sei zoulou gam chu
 Thisan in ahongtai jalenna gam

Ka lhagao chu gamnuom chu hol in lang

3. Leisiet gam hi chul kittei ding ahi

Lungdei lhadamte lenna mun

Lhun theilou kadip dam'e Lhandampu

Nei silthieng in Lhagao in neipuiyin

Lal lungnem gamhoi chu ka-ngaingeiye

Free Translation

1. There is a place for me up there, City of Zion.

Where there's no setting sun

My heart is groaning, longing to be there.

The saints are dwelling in glory shine

I long for him, my joy, my all

Sweeter is He, the God of love, who cares

I want Him more than that city of gold

He's for my weary soul a home of rest.

2. Blessed City, God's home, sweet home

Those who are saved, dear ones are dwelling there

Wash me with blood, lest the wayside I fall

Lead me by spirit, Lord, till I am home.

3. Kingdoms of earth will pass away

Kingdom of God, seek ye for thee, my soul

The blood of God opened the door for all

Beauty beyond compare, where all be free⁵⁴

An analysis of this song would reveal the differences between the *Ju-ne laa* and the Gospel songs. Unlike the *Ju-ne laa*, the latter has three verses and a chorus. The pre-Christian genre, which was composed and sung freestyle, is replaced by a formalized structure with complete verses and chorus. The Gospel song is also different from hymns. Hymns are composed of a structure that follows the tonic sol-fa⁵⁵, but the Gospel song has no such structure. Indigenous Gospel songs were composed following the pattern of the hymns, but without the sol-fa. A harmonization of this song and other indigenous songs using the tonic sol-fa would lead to tonal crush—the apparent loss of tonal variation. Even though the composers of *lenkhawm* songs attempted to compose numbers to resemble hymns, they failed owing to their lack of knowledge in the tonic sol-fa and the emotional attachment they had with the *Ju-ne laa* which was composed and sung freestyle. In a way, the *lenkhawm* songs could also be said to have been composed freestyle; however, the enthusiasm of the community led to the emergence of a new form of singing. The Kukis' attachment to their culture shaped a new form of singing that was hitherto unknown to the Christian community across the world. Contrary to what many scholars argue about Christianity and the changes it brought in the Kuki community, the Kukis contributed *lenkhawm* songs and associated performances to Christianity, transforming the Christian way of praise and worship.

⁵⁴Translated by KL Biakchungnunga.

⁵⁵ Tonic sol-fa is a system of naming the musical scale using the syllables 'Doh', 'Reh', 'Mih', 'Fah', 'Soh', 'Lah', 'Tih', 'Doh'.

Although doctrinal difference exist among the Kuki Christians, their shared ownership of songs speaks about their identity. The Baptists in the north and the Presbyterians or Evangelicals in the south can share their cultural selves through their songs. The same applies to other denominations such as the Pentecostal and Catholic sects and even Judaism. The small number of Jews who coexist with the majority – i.e., the Christian community – also sing the *lenkhawm* songs, albeit not in their synagogue, but during the *mithi lenkhawm*⁵⁶, which is a kind of social gathering when a member of a community passes away. From my observation of death rituals at D. Phailien of Churachandpur District, a village which has over 900 houses, among which 20 are Jewish, excluding the 16 families which migrated to Israel⁵⁷ (with the first migration being in 1993⁵⁸) it is perceptible that the Kuki Jewish community also sang the *lenkhawm* songs. In this village, after the burial of the deceased, the village unit of Kuki Khanglai Lawmpi⁵⁹ (KKL) conducts a *lenkhawm*, irrespective of the member's religion for two nights. They sing *lenkhawm* songs from the indigenous hymn book, which is possible because they perceive the songs as belonging to all the Kukis and not solely to the Christian community, acting as cultural markers confirming their essence or being, inscribed in the Kuki identity.

3.3.2 *Popular Genres: Experiences of Christian Songs*

The Kuki community utilizes songs/poetry as modes of conveying their grief and happiness. From the pre-Christian period, they acted as mediums through which the

⁵⁶ Funeral wakes

⁵⁷ Interview with the former Chairman of the Ohel Shavei Israel Synagogue, D. Phailien.

⁵⁸ Telephonic conversation with the family of the first migrant.

⁵⁹ Kuki Khanglai Lawmpi (KKL) is a non-profit, philanthropic organisation of the Kukis, working to achieve its motto, 'Helping the Helpless'. It was founded in 1988 and the General Headquarters functions through district, block and village units. Hereafter mentioned as KKL.

subjects could communicate their sentiments to others or even to themselves. These songs circulated orally, gradually becoming popular and soon entering the *lenkhawm*. Being a people whose hearts were close to nature, the Kukis easily transform their ideas into songs – a common practice, especially when they are under the influence of *ju*. Their inherent creativity allows the subjects to express themselves through songs/poetry, enabling them to compose songs spontaneously during the *lenkhawm*. The composer would recite a few lines that the others would sing in pre-decided tunes, as already discussed in the previous chapter. Their creativity could not be relinquished even when the missionaries forbade them to sing or perform the *Ju-ne laa*, leading to the emergence of different genres of indigenous Christian songs. This chapter classifies and categorizes Christian musical traditions into four categories, which will be discussed accordingly. I would like to clarify that although the style of these songs could overlap and there could be more genres based on the musical style, the following categories are based on the Kukis' categorization of their songs. Because of constraints of space, the types of songs chosen are limited to the four most popular categories.

3.3.2.1 *Houbung Laa*

The *houbung laa* is a collection of songs translated from Western hymnals composed using the tonic-solfa which has a four pattern structure, and the beating is guided by a set of patterns of rhythms. To comprehend these songs, one needs to know the tonic sol-fa or be guided by one who has knowledge of it. The early Kuki Christians encouraged the knowledge of tonic sol-fa, with Churches organizing seminars and workshops to teach the youth its pattern and rhythm. For people who were used to singing songs freestyle, the introduction of the tonic sol-fa was a new experience that they embraced with enthusiasm.

In spite of these efforts, Western hymns translated into indigenous dialects could not penetrate the heart and soul of the early Christians. However, with the arrival of modern education, when the Kukis began to read and write English, the original versions of the hymnals became accessible and comprehensible. During my fieldwork, an informant Upa Lunkhojang told me that he preferred the indigenous songs to the translated hymns, as the latter lacked the element of emotion possessed by the *Ju-ne laa*, which he had been exposed to since childhood. Another informant, Doukholun, asserted that the early Christian did not have songs to sing. He narrated an incident that took place in Samukhong during the 1940s⁶⁰:

There was a man called Tongkhokhai, a Christian, with the zeal to build a church in Samukhong village. When he approached the Chief, who was a non-Christian, to seek approval for the establishment of the Church, the Chief made him follow the traditions of the Kukis by bringing *ju* and even asked him to take a sip. The Chief granted him permission and a small church was built. However, the members did not have songs to sing. We learnt a few lines from a particular *houbung laa* and kept on singing them each time we gathered. After the adoption of Christian practices, everything became different from what they used to be. We sang those few lines for Christmas, burials and worship; so our leaders eventually sent two young boys from our congregation to go to Kangpokpi to learn more songs from the Christians there.

⁶⁰ Being an elderly person, he could not remember the exact year in which this incident happened; but he was confident that it occurred between 1943-46, before India obtained independence.

It is evident from this narrative that the early converts were deprived of all the enchantment they once derived from their songs. Even the *houbung laa* was not immediately available for many early Christians, who had to struggle to find a way to incorporate songs into their Christian life. All these led to the birth of *lenkhawm laa*, indigenous Christian songs that were composed without the tonic-sol-fa, but following its structures and patterns. The Christian community thus came to possess two genres of songs—the hymnal commonly known as *houbung laa*, and the indigenous hymns called *lathah* (new songs'), which later came to be known as *lenkhawm laa*. These songs are deemed new as they differ significantly from the existing *Ju-ne laa* in terms of style and tune, and from the hymn songs in terms of the language⁶¹ void of tonic-sol-fa.

3.3.2.2 *Lathah or Lenkhawm Laa*

The joy the subjects experience while singing *lathah* songs could be perceived during their *lenkhawm*, which is filled with dances and sometimes, tears. Tears being a part of the performance of the *lenkhawm* songs might be surprising; but when one relates the song(s) to her/his personal life, the meaning received makes the person feel as if an invisible force is speaking, consoling and encouraging her/him to face the world.⁶² The Kukis believe that the invisible speaker here is God or His angels who protect the individual. Given below is a narrative of the experience of a woman who becomes so emotionally attached to a song that she cries on the stage during the Christmas *lenkhawm*:

1. *Kama'a luigal'a khopi nuom chu*

⁶¹ *Lathah* have more poetic elements than hymns.

⁶² Christians do not consider the mortal world their home; they long for their heavenly abode where, they believe, God and other believers who passed away are waiting for them.

Lhun ka-ngahlel khopi hoi chu

Lungdei zouse akimna'u mun

Mu kanuom galdot chimpuong'e

Aw chielai ihi'u cholnga lou in

Pakai hadna gingcha'n khopi hoi juon ute

2. *Chung khopi nuom lam chu juon zing ute*

Lhasam lou in chie zing ute

Gaal muonna ding mun umlou hiel

Pakai hieng i-lhun masangse'n

3. *Hechien hileng aw vahchoi chimlou ding*

Gaal ginna'a leng hizong leng

Van mun loupi ka-lhun tieng le

Vahchoina laa dai ngailou ding

4. *Aw van lhagao thiengpen hung leng in lang*

Lung'a sietkot hong kit in lang

Nagam nuom'a nei puilud in

Kipana kiem louna'a chun⁶³

Free translation

1. The blessed city ahead of me

I'm filled with desire to reach that city.

Where all beloved sing blissfully

⁶³Lathah Bu. (No. 188, Page No. 162, 1949)

A day will come. I'll be with them there.

We're moving on without a pause.

Trusting Christ, let's move on towards the city.

2. Let's move towards the city.

Without losing an ounce of strength;

A war is raging on

Until we're in His blessed bosom.

3. My lips will always praise Him,

Although I live in a world surrounded by enemies;

When I reach that famed city,

Songs will never fade away.

4. O heaven's most adored angel, come visit us,

And open the heart's evil door;

Lead me to your holy place.

Where there is bliss and only bliss. ⁶⁴

“For almost 35 years, my husband had been serving the Lord. During these years, we had to face different problems in the Church and in our family.

One day we went to Jacob Prayer Mount; while climbing up the hills, this song came to me. I was reminded that this world is not our home; we just pass through this world on our journey. The problems we face in this world are temporary and will last only for a short while. This song encouraged me

⁶⁴Translated by Boigin Lhouvum.

to move on physically and spiritually. Like the song says, even though I face many problems I shall forget all those when I reach my heavenly abode. Everlasting happiness does not exist in this world, except for the Lord. So in a time of crisis, trouble, I prayed to God, for His love for me is too great. Now, when I sing this song, I remember the day I went to Jacob Prayer Mount with my husband, who has now left this world for our heavenly abode. As a mortal being, I do long for those days when he was alive and we served the Lord together. But even after he left me, I gained strength from the Lord to move on, for all these problems arising from our life in this world are just temporary. My hope is renewed every time I hear or sing this song.”⁶⁵

How the woman experiences and interprets this song at different points in her life suggests that the work (the song) is open to innumerable interpretations. Before her husband’s death, the song seemed to encourage her to march on through the difficulties that she and her husband faced in the Church and in her family. But after her husband’s death, the same song encouraged her to rely on God in the absence of her husband. She recalled the days she worked together with her husband for the Lord, and the hope of meeting her husband in heaven gives her renewed hope and strength. Through this conversation, the woman reveals her interpretation of the song in relation to two instances; but it is possible that the same song could have communicated with her in more ways. Subjectivity comes into play here, for the woman’s interpretation of the song is based on her personal understanding and

⁶⁵ Interview with Mrs. Lamjanei Lhungdim, on the 4th January, 2017.

interpretation. But to rely on subjectivity could be misleading, for multiple subjectivities may arise owing to varying individual experiences with regard to the song. Carey's two way approach to communication becomes important here. The experience of the woman fulfills his transmission view of communication, i.e., to achieve control over the mind of the woman. But the ritual view of communication would suggest otherwise, a continuity of her experiences of the song and also belief that was strengthened across time. What is important here is not the woman's interpretations of the song, but her experiences that draws her in commonality with other subjects who could have different experiences of the song. The moods of the performers become significant here. Their own experiences of the song makes them understand the meaning of the song (not literal meaning or composer's intended meaning) in different ways that they could fully submit themselves to the song. Their abilities to draw out different experiences from the same song is how they understood the song in different ways. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the lyricist shares his experience of the world through his song and the woman relates to it. Their co-state-of-mind is shared in the festival or the *lenkhawm*, where their commonality comes into understanding. It is through this sharing that their experience is renewed and transformed.

3.3.2.3 *Lapawl (Choral)*

The use of the tonic sol-fa in Kuki Churches led to the emergence of a new form of singing called the choral – songs composed for choirs. The congregations or presbyters hold annual conferences to trace the progress of their churches and also to make plans for the coming years. During these conferences, cells of the Church such as the Women's Mission and Youth Cell send delegates representing their churches or dioceses based on the nature of the event. Slots were allotted to competitions in order to enhance youth

participation, with a popular event being the choir competition. Youth from a different congregation, representing their local church or area church⁶⁶ form a choir and take part in the competition where songs, mostly from the *Houbung Labu*, would be sung. Songs which use the tonic sol-fa are given priority in order to encourage youngsters to obtain training in the style and to use it in songs.

In 1975, a group of young wo/men from various denominations formed a band called Kuki Gospel Voices⁶⁷ under the leadership of D. Angel, who was a man gifted with musical knowledge and adept in the use of the tonic sol-fa. When I spoke with him, he claimed that he did not undergo any training for music or tonic-sol-fa, and his talent was God's gift so that he could spread the Gospel through songs. Under his leadership, the KGV recorded ten audio cassettes and nine visual music albums. Choir groups began gaining popularity through this band, as the members toured the hills of Manipur, visiting churches irrespective of denominational differences. They also recorded songs in the Imphal station of All India Radio and Doordarshan.⁶⁸ The emergence of CD recorders and players that could be purchased at cheap rates from the neighboring country of Myanmar provided impetus for the proliferation of choir groups, and visual albums could be recorded at a minimal cost. The growth of music softwares used by recording studios, which enabled the recording of vocals at reduced rates, also facilitated the growth of choir groups in the Kuki hills.

⁶⁶'Area Churches' refers to the congregation of different Churches situated within a particular area or district. The Area Church committee formed by select members from local churches would send delegates on behalf of the whole area to central conferences. The Area Churches also organise annual conferences in places that come under their jurisdiction.

⁶⁷Hereafter referred to as KGV.

⁶⁸ Interview with D. Angel on the 7 October, 2018.

3.3.2.4 *Khutsut laa*

The *khutsut laa* ⁶⁹ - a specific style of singing and writing songs – is yet another genre which is popular among Kuki Christians. These songs do not satisfy the criteria to be labeled as *houbung laa* or *lathah*, as they are not sung during *lenkhawm* or during hymn-singing. The *khutsut laa* are popularly sung solo or in groups during church service as special numbers. These songs are sung mostly by individuals and they are encouraged to practice and sing on their own. The numerous music videos available on YouTube and the number of solo presentations during Sunday service in Kuki churches point to the popularity of the genre. Pastors and evangelists who organize retreat camps emphasise on Christian songs, especially the *khutsut laa*, in order to convince backsliders to adhere to Christian practices. A pastor whom I interviewed recalls how he was touched by the song *Vo Gospel khuoljin hoilam'a chie ding nahim?* written by Rev. Doujapao Haokip:

1. *Vo Gospel khuoljin hoilam'a chie ding nahim?*

Nangma ngaiya dangchah sang tampi aum'e

Muzing'a mulou le jazing'a jalouho

Nathil bawlthei lhatdamna angai uve

Muol le lhang sang zong le chie ding kahi

Pakai thupieh zuilou thei kahipoi

A-ngailudna'n eisol kacham lou in

Pakai natoah ka-kin ahi

2. *Sietna suoh in mi sang-ja thim nuoi'ah aum*

⁶⁹Hand-written songs.

Calvary sochadna nisuo lam helou in
Godmun'a ding in lhem lungmuong in Satan in
A chie zing'ui; Vo Gospel kouloiyn

3. *Gospel kouna sang nuom loute ho zouse chu*

Kaa le hagienna thuoh unte tuonsot geiyn
Chu'a kisah zong le'u ngaidam um talou ding
Achung uva tuonsot thiemmo chuta

4. *Aw sopite Gospel kouna sang loi uvin*

Gospel lahtouna ding rapture ni anai tai
Tahsan chate zouse chugam'a cheng unte
Cholduo unte Halleluiyah ti in (Lathah No. 330, 2013, p. 273)

Free translation

1. O Gospel where are you going,
 Millions thirst for you,
 Seeing, yet blind and hearing, yet deaf,
 They are in need of your salvation
 Through the hills and the vales I will go
 The Lord's command I have to obey,
 The love of Christ compels me
 The Lord's work is mine
2. Millions are shackled by evil's bondage
 Unknown to the Calvary's salvation
 Satan's lullaby has doomed them

O Gospel, call them fast

3. Those indifferent to the call of the Gospel

Will taste the dreadful cry and gnashing teeth forever

No repentance will be accepted

Everlasting condemnation befall them

4. Brethren embrace the Gospel without delay,

Lest Rapture takes Gospel to heaven

Children of faith sing blissfully in heaven,

Will rest and shout Hallelujah.⁷⁰

The song inspired many people who are faced with different problems encouraging them to march on with the hope of God's intervention in their lives. Lalneo Khongsai narrates his experience of the song, and how this particular song motivates him to work for the Lord:

“It was in 2004 that the Kuki militants fought among themselves, killing each other because of the difference in ideologies that led to factional clashes among them. Shootouts between them in the hills was everyday news; villagers in the interior hills were tortured by one group accusing them of being sympathizers of the other group. They faced atrocities and accusations from both sides. The militants governed life in the hills, and the government seemed to ignore such problems while the sufferings of the villagers continued. It was during such a crisis that I got the call of God to

⁷⁰Translated by Boigin Lhouvum.

go to the hills to preach the words of His gospel amongst the warring groups. The intention was to go there as a peace-maker. Unable to resist the call, I went to the hills along with a local evangelist. The journey was unpredictable, you can't tell what circumstances could befall you. Being a mere human, it also scared me that I might get killed, but the thoughts of those people thirsty for Gospel motivates us to overcome our fear, and we could carry on with our peace-making mission. I can't say it's because of me and my evangelist friend that the factional war subsided, but the motivation that I got from this song during such a critical time was truly from God. This makes me content that I had played my part in spreading the Gospel, the duty assigned to me.”⁷¹

Pastors, evangelists and mission workers who face difficulties in their line of work deliver Sunday sermons on this song. Considering that mission work pays less than most other areas, it can be tempting for educated mission workers to give up and look for other ways of livelihood where they can feed their family and give their children a better life. Although many have chosen to leave, there are committed missionaries who continue in the field despite hurdles. Testimonial sermons by the latter about how they overcome such issues utilize this song, as they can relate to the experience of the composer and the song itself is open to multiple interpretations.

⁷¹ Interview with Lalneo Khongsai on the 17th May, 2017

3.4 The Indigenization of Christianity through Songs

As mentioned earlier, the Kukis believed in a benevolent god prior to their conversion to Christianity. Their pre-Christian religion and Christianity possess many elements in common – an aspect which would be scrutinized in order to understand how a continuity of essence is possible, contrary to the argument that Christianity transformed the Kuki culture so drastically that nothing remained of their earlier cultural mosaic. This section also argues that despite changes, Christianity in the present day could be seen as a custodian of the Kuki cultural essence. An engagement with Kuki songs and performances would enable us to trace the cultural continuity that was possible because of Christianity.

The god of their pre-Christian religion was very different from that of their neighbors, the Meiteis, in the valley. They had been worshipping *Chung pathien*, whom they believed, could not be represented in any other form unlike the Hindu Meiteis' gods who could be represented through tangible objects. The Kukis believed that *Chung pathien* exists in spirit, as a formless entity and cannot not be seen with the human eye. On the other hand, they also believed in the existence of *Nuoimangpa*, the devil responsible for all calamities and destruction, represented in the form of snakes, wild animals and ghosts which could be seen with the human eye and through dreams. The presence of *Nuoimangpa* could also be felt through illness, death and ill-luck. To avoid misfortunes, the devil was appeased but not worshipped. Their concept of god was similar to that of Christianity although the practices were very different. The parallelism made it easier for the Kukis to accept Christianity from Western missionaries rather than from the Meiteis who inhabited the valley with them.

The Christian missionaries, who understood the challenge involved in persuading the Kukis to change their mode of worship, utilized a clever approach. They convinced the community that *Chung pathien* was the Almighty God who punished the *Nuoimangpa* (Satan) after he attempted to rebel against God, as written in the book of Genesis. Christianity attributed all evil to Satan, including attempts to detract believers from following God. However, God could protect believers from Satan and hence He should be worshipped and appeased through praise and worship. The Kukis, who constantly performed rituals involving the sacrifice of animals to appease *Nuoimangpa*, could easily understand and accept the Christian belief that God performed the rituals necessary to protect humankind by sacrificing His only son Jesus at the cross to redeem the world of their sins and hence, human beings could live in peace by following His commands. The concept of God in Christianity as a spirit, formless and invisible to the human eye, protecting His people was acceptable to the Kukis. As such, they could relate to Christianity and many converted to the new religion.

Christianity did not grow at an accelerated pace among the Kukis. It took over 60 years for the people to adopt it as the community religion. The missionaries invested a huge amount of time and effort in changing the peoples' religion, along with their cultures and traditions for fear of them reverting to the traditional practices. This very fact led the Kukis to believe that they should shun their traditional cultures to become a Christian. Considering the similarities between the Kuki concept of religion and Christian teachings, it is evident that if the missionaries had limited their teaching to Christian concepts and abstained from introducing an alien culture, the community might have been able to accept Christianity at a faster pace. The missionaries' attempt to demonize local cultures made

many Kukis suspicious and they accused the converts of brazenly betraying their own culture for material gain. The converts, on the other hand, embraced the new way of life imposed upon them by the missionaries, thus unconsciously denouncing their own cultures and traditions. Despite these factors, a certain essence of the Kuki community entered the new religious tradition and remained an inseparable part of it thereafter. In order to understand these phenomena, it is necessary to revisit the *houbung laa* and *lathah* to trace how the Kukis responded to the two traditions.

Courtney E Fritz (2017) categorized Christian songs into two categories – one comprising songs that directly glorify God and the other, songs about Christian experiences that do not directly refer to God, but engages with one's everyday life as a Christian. The former is directed to God or about God, while the latter need not praise God, but focuses on the life of a Christian with a godly worldview. Hymns are formal and traditional songs sung by the whole congregation, while spiritual songs are spontaneous and inspired by the Holy Spirit. It should be noted that hymns belong to the first category and hence comprise lines addressing God. They are fundamentally songs which praise God for His greatness, loves, and blessings. Unlike the translated hymn songs, the *Ju-ne laa* were not addressed to their god, *Chung pathien*, but a pouring out of their heart and their sentiments – praise about a warrior, love for their land and family, grief and happiness. Even when *Chung pathien* is mentioned, it is not as the object of praise, but rather as a source of help or blessings. This element of praise to *Chung pathien* is often missing from the *Ju-ne laa*. The missionaries' translated hymnals, which praised God's Holiness and called out to Him for His abundant love, when introduced to the new converts, must have been accepted since the songs were attached to the religion. The songs might have been perceived as an element

which could not be separated from Christianity. It should be remembered that it was only in 1924 that a printed version of the Holy Bible, the book of John, appeared in the Kuki language. Even though the Lushai Bible had been available to them, the number of people who could read and understand it might have been very low⁷². Even though we cannot provide the exact numbers, it is evident that most of the Christian converts were illiterate and would have cared very little for the text and the book. They depended on the missionaries, the pastors, and the evangelists at that time and the Bible was more or less neglected. When they were taught to sing, they might have accepted it, believing that it is compulsory for Christians to sing praises to God. However, despite attempting to embrace the new religion completely, the converts gradually realized that the Christian hymns lacked an element that was an integral part of their identity. Marva J Dawn's commentary, as quoted by Courtney E. Fritz (2017) becomes significant here:

I worry about congregations that focus on having 'exciting' worship services because this merely fosters our society's self-gratification and does not welcome believers into the discipline of the alternative lifestyle of Church being. We might attract lots of consumers if our worship services are merely entertaining, but, unless we continually increase the emotional hype, we cannot expect consumers to not turn away to other diversions, when the difficulties of being a Christian surface—or else we merely continue contributing to their shallowness. (Dawn, A Royal Waste of Time, 131).(p.22-23)

⁷² Watkin Roberts himself was invited by Kamkholun Singson to read and teach him about the Gospel of John which Roberts had sent to him. It was only after Roberts came to Senvon that a school was established for the first time in the Southern Manipur. Prior to which education was unheard of.

The passage mentions the necessity of an emotional attunement for the members of the Church to adhere to the religion without falling prey to diversions. However, the western hymnals failed to establish or evoke the necessary emotional attunement among the new Kuki converts. There are three reasons for this. First, the musical traditions of the hymnals were alien to the Kuki people who were confined to their territory all their lives. Their lack of interaction with outsiders apart from those communities living close to them, limited their imagination and hence they could not accept the hymnals or cultural elements outside their native cultures and traditions. Everything foreign was viewed as a threat and hence eliminated, even at the cost of their lives (as is evident from their struggle against the British empire for two winters, from 1917 to 1919, when the latter sought to exercise control over the tribe). The use of the tonic sol-fa in hymns made it even more unacceptable to the subjects. However, as mentioned above, even though the hymnals could not appeal to their musical sensibilities, the Kukis accepted the new songs as an integral part of Christianity.

Second, although the missionaries translated hymns using local poetic words generously in order to appeal to the Kukis, they failed in arousing the musical sensibilities of the subjects. This can be attributed to the lack of originality, as the translated hymns were so different from the *Ju-ne laa* that the mere use of poetic words did not suffice to fulfill the needs of their sensibilities firmly rooted in the older tradition. As such, they perceived hymns as artificial and hence could not submit themselves fully to the Christian songs. The importance of poetic language and its difference from the standard language will be discussed in the next chapter.

The third reason was the failure of the Christian songs to satiate their thirst for *lenkhawm*, as they could not sing and dance to the tunes of the hymns like they did during the *lenkhawm*. The four-part harmony of the hymns makes them unsuitable for the older tradition. However, with the passage of time and the constant use of Christian songs, the present generation of Kuki Christians have become well-acquainted with hymns.

It becomes clear now that the new converts were in danger of backsliding, reverting from Christianity to their traditional religion, as the missionaries prohibited them from performing their age-old *Ju-ne laa*, and simultaneously could not appeal to their emotions through the hymnals. This placed the new religion in danger of losing its new converts and posed a threat to the efforts of the missionaries, as the newly ‘enlightened’ souls could be in peril. The early Kuki converts, already faithful to the new religion, discovered a solution to this problem by indigenizing Christianity. They realized that the translated western hymnals could not arouse their emotions for the reason mentioned above and hence, they used their creativity to balance their musical needs between the *Ju-ne laa* and the western hymns. This led to the birth of the *lathah*, their indigenous songs. Since the *houbung laa* could not bridge the gap initially, the new converts desperately needed songs that could draw them closer to God and farther from their old religious beliefs.

The failure for the hymns to attract the early Kuki converts, and their instantaneous reliance on the *lathah* that they heartily accepted, could be explained through the philosophical hermeneutics following Gadamer’s (2013) argument that an interpreter’s consciousness is grounded in pre-understanding. According to him, there is always a concealed meaning that can be reflected through documents or text. The author’s intended meaning cannot be known in its original sense. However, hermeneutics allows us to see

much more than the intended meaning. Gadamer writes that “the task of understanding is concerned above all with the meaning of the text itself” (2013, p. 380). It is important to understand that even an “ideal chronicler could only duplicatively list contemporaneous events, whereas consequences, effects and more distantly related events would remain close off” (Kogler, 1960, p. 22). Gadamer further argues that the recorded or symbolic materials reveal events from the past. They cannot be separated altogether from the text or actions. The meanings concealed in the text can be comprehended only when we have a pre-understanding of the situation which, in the case of the Kukis, is absent in the hymns and the *houbung laa*. One can also be said to have a pre-understanding when he can extract the meaning of the text and its relevance to his everyday experience that for the early Kuki converts was absent in the *houbung laa*, but present in the *lathah*.

To be fully submissive to a song, one needs to really understand and relate to it and/or it should evoke his emotions. To love a song just for its beautiful music or the sweet melody cannot not be described as submitting oneself to it. But when one understands the context of the song, the content can appeal to him and allow him to be fully submissive to it. To grasp the meaning of a song and to relate it to one’s life, a pre-understanding of the context is necessary. In the case of the woman mentioned above (p. 22-23), she might not have comprehended the meaning intended by the composer, but since she could relate the song to her life, she might have felt the world of the lyricist that was expressed in the song much before her encounter with the particular song. Her pre-understanding of the lyricist’s world comes into consciousness, moving her to tears when she performs the song in the *lenkhawm*. Her pre-understanding, that enters consciousness after she encounters the

hymn, allows her to relate her sufferings to the sufferings of the composer, which further enables her to present herself through the song.

The Kuki style of composition came to be reflected in the *Lathah* i.e. the *lenkhawm* songs, which are composed in a way to express their deepest emotions when they longed for God's love, guidance, care, prayer or with 'Nilhum ngailou Zion khopi' mentioned above, the longing for heaven, in the hope of leaving the miseries and sufferings of this world. Even though the language is not very poetic, the capability of the songs to arouse emotions provides the Kukis an opportunity to present themselves. A respondent informed me that the early churches do not sing the *lenkhawm* songs during worship services, as they are meant to be sung only during the *lenkhawm*. Even today, the older generations lament the blending of songs from the *houbung labu* and *lathah bu* during worship services. The idea of singing the songs separately must have been propagated by the missionaries among the early converts. It was only in 2001 that a compilation of select songs from the *houbung labu* and *lathah bu* came to be printed together in the same book.⁷³ I observed that the present generation is more accommodative of using both the translated and the indigenous songs during Church services. Most churches I visited for the purpose of the study use the '*Houbung La & Ladeilhen*', which contains both types of songs. Owing to the strong influence of the indigenous way of singing, even translated hymns are sung in the *lenkhawm* style, with a double beat of the drum. Singing with a single beat of the drum is rare, except in the large Central Churches. It could thus be argued that the Kukis no longer

⁷³ This book was first published by Maranatha Offset Printers in 2001.

rely solely on the Christianity given to them; rather, they have constructed their own Christianity, an indigenous Kuki Christianity.

Using songs during sermons is again a common phenomenon amongst the indigenous Church leaders. The song '*Vo Gospel khuoljin hoilam'a chie ding nahim?*' by Rev Doujapao Haokip, as mentioned above, is a popular *khutsut laa* that touched the lives of many Christians even outside the Kuki community. Rev Haokip was an educated youth, who attained his theological degree – Bachelor of Divinity (BD) – from Union Biblical Seminary at Yavatmal (shifted to Pune in 1975), and was ordained a Pastor in 1977. During his pastoral service, he was on a mission to go to the interior hill areas that involve a stay of three months. While he was trekking the hills on his way to a village tired and exhausted, he took a rest at a spot which has a good view of the town that was in the valley. He began to regret joining the mission and was tempted to leave his work with the Church and to set off looking for a greener pasture on the government sector. However, his conscience did not allow him to quit, but to keep marching on. It was during this critical point of life that he composed this song. The song had been widely preached about, encouraging believers to hold on to their belief when they are waylaid by Satan's temptation. Preachers preached that this song was given to Rev. Doujapao Haokip encouraging him to move on with the Gospel. Even after his demise, his song lives on in the hearts and lives of many Christians. A similarity can be drawn between Rev. Haokip's experience and the work of Lassiter (2001), who studied the Kiowa tribes of Oklahoma. He argued that the Kiowa tribe believed that their songs were given to them by the spirit, much like in the case of Haokip.

Another factor that enables the longevity of these songs is their status as artworks open to multiple interpretations rather than as a mere assembling of words with meanings.

Gadamer argues that art is not a carrier of meanings, but an entity that is essentially enigmatic. In his magnum opus, *Truth and Method* (1975), he asserts that artwork provides the opportunity for the audience to re-create the work through interpretation and thus holds the identity and continuity of the work of art open towards its future. The interpretation of the said song by another individual might differ completely from the interpretation of the composer. It could thus be argued that artworks, while opening up spaces for further interpretation in the future, connects itself to the past. This, according to Gadamer, is the “fusion of horizon” (Gadamer, 1975, 305).

The continuity of *lenkhawm* became possible in the Christian era because of the availability of songs suitable for the performance. The *lenkhawm* could not be performed with the western hymns which were sung using a single beat of the drum. The *lenkhawm* style of singing requires a double beat of the drum, and the *lathah* becomes suitable for such beats. Without the *lathah*, the *lenkhawm* might have become extinct like other traditional cultural practices. Christianity provided spaces for the continuation of the *lenkhawm*, and along with it, the preservation of Kuki musical instruments like their traditional drum (made from animal skin) and *siel-ki* (the horn of a *Mithun*). The *lenkhawm* is performed the same way as in the pre-Christian era. The members of the audience sit in a circle leaving the central space empty for dancing. Among the Evangelicals in the southern district, people of all ages who want to dance occupy this space; but among the Baptists in the northern district, two pairs of boys and girls (sometimes more or less, depending on the number of members present, although two is the ideal number) would dance in the centre like in the pre-Christian *lenkhawm*. After every song, they would request other pairs to enter the central space.

A word that is frequently used in indigenous Kuki songs is '*Chung pathien*', the name of their pre-Christian god, pointing to the continuity of older traditions. The Kukis have indigenized Christianity to suit their requirements and as such, their systems are different from those of other Christians around the world. The continuity of the Kuki essence is visible here. The pre-Christian culture of the Kuki society made no distinction between the sacred and the secular, and their socio-cultural and religious practices were closely intertwined. Even today, no aspect of their everyday life can be classified as solely sacred or solely secular. The sacred and the secular intermingle in their social and religious lives. TS Gangte (2012) claims that the Kuki people, while migrating from their homeland, lost their 'primitive' cultures and adopted new ones. Changes in lifestyle led to old traditions making way for new ones. The influx of modernity and Christianity played a great role in ushering in new traditions which, nevertheless, involved and enabled the continuity of old practices.

As Gadamer argues, artwork has its own temporality and its reception varies with time. The experience of the artwork by the pre-Christian generation might not be the same as that by the early Christians. This does not prevent the Kukis from being drawn into the play of their artwork. They can still submit themselves completely to the game and experience the reality that transcends everyday reality. The materialization of their artwork also manifests the possibility of their songs in the Christian period to allow for the presentation of the reality or truth. This confirms Gadamer's argument that artwork provides the opportunity for the audience to re-create the work through interpretation. The emergence of the *lathah* could be argued to be the sole reason for the survival of the *lenkhawm*, which, like in the pre-Christian period enables the emergence of new songs.

Though the nature of the songs might differ from the *ju-ne laa*, the feelings it invoked are generated by the *lathah* as well. As mentioned above, its poetic nature and ability to make conscious the unconscious pre-understanding in the listener – a task the translated hymnals failed to accomplish – justify our argument that the *lathah* is a continuity and survival of the *Ju-ne laa*, albeit in a different avatar. The experience of reality does not end with the *Ju-ne laa*; it continues, providing the subjects more opportunities to relish it through the *lathah*. The Kuki experience of reality was recreated through songs portraying the identity and the continuity of the work of art, and opening up more spaces for its recreation. The next chapter examines how the experience is reinvented in contemporary Kuki society.

Chapter 4

Appropriating its Many Pasts: The Afterlife of *Ju-ne laa*

4.1 Introduction

The centrality of songs or poems in both the pre-Christian and the early Christian periods has been deliberated upon in detail in the previous chapters. The performative traditions of the Kukis, located within the ambits of their social, cultural, and religious lives, were interrogated in order to understand how their songs or poems function as sites for learning the tribe's way of life. It cannot be claimed that one is born a Kuki; rather, it is her/his way of living that makes her/him one. The Kuki being and the Kuki way of life is cultivated in subjects by the surrounding social environment where they grow up, and their *sensus communis* is cultivated here. This sense of attachment one has towards her/his own society is similar to Clifford Geertz's (1996) concept of primordial attachment which stems from the 'givens' of belonging to a particular cultural society that have the same belief of origin, customs, and traditions. However, the present day Kuki society is very different from that of earlier periods. Modernity re-structured the Kuki social order drastically. Therefore, it becomes interesting to explore how the present day Kukis identify themselves and how historical experiences become important. The chapter attempts to engage with the pre-understandings of the present day Kukis making an attempt to understand how they connect themselves back to their pasts.

Radical changes within the Kuki society are observable today in different aspects of their lives, at the level of the individual as well as the community. The pre-Christian

systems and traditions have undergone drastic alterations. Existing literatures on the Kukis claim that colonialism and Christianity ushered in sweeping changes in the community and transformed their cultural outlook, along with the social systems, politics, economics, religion, education, and significantly, their songs. The imprints left by the colonisers and the Christian missionaries can be traced in almost every sphere of Kuki existence. It is an unarguable fact that the community underwent tremendous changes, as all colonized societies are believed to either repel or mingle with new cultures, or in most cases, both. Even social orders which choose to repel foreign influence experience changes, not necessarily by adopting the colonials' behaviours, but through the transformation or reformation of their own cultural behaviour. The previous chapters have portrayed how the social, cultural and religious lives of the Kukis underwent transformations under the influence of the colonizers and missionaries. Religion, until their conversion, was embedded in their culture and was part and parcel of their way of life. Christianity introduced to them a religious aspect of life that was hitherto attached to their cultural life. Mircea Eliade (1968) claims that human beings become aware of the sacred as it manifests itself as an element totally different from the profane, something that does not belong to one's world. For the Kukis, the sacred, although it seems to be from a different realm, exists amidst them in the natural, profane world. The sacred and the secular that co-existed in the pre-Christian period, were now divided in the socio-cultural life of the Kukis, as Christianity failed to perceive the manifestation of the sacred in their cultures and traditions. Their subconscious acceptance of the Western way of life as 'holy', blinded them to their own cultures which they now perceived as 'heathen'. With the manifestation of this division, the early converts shunned their traditional ethos in their attempt to fit in

with the new way of life. However, they could not erase their pre-Christian cultural practices totally; instead, they fluctuated between the old and the new ways of life. As argued in the previous chapter, their true self underwent transformation, thus indigenizing the new religion and westernizing everyday life, including cultural practices. They chose the middle path that accommodated both their pre-Christian traditions and the newly founded systems. It becomes interesting here to scrutinize how this division affected their songs and performances.

The present-day Kuki society is completely different from that of the pre-Christian period. The priority accorded to education led to the discontinuation of traditions like *Sawm* and *Lawm* among others. English medium schools gave them better opportunities to learn the English language, which further propelled them to look up to Western traditions and cultures as yardsticks to measure development. Their admiration for Western traditions and cultures stem from their belief of the Western society being a developed society. Western influences are visible in their everyday life in various ways, most noticeably from their fashion and lifestyles. Educated people earned respect within their society and were consulted for advice – a privilege once monopolized by the *thiempu* and the Chief prior to conversion. This changed the role of the *thiempu* in different ways. Their role of conducting religious rituals are now being replaced by educated pastors and elders in the Church. People no longer visit them to cure sicknesses or for other purposes which had earlier endowed them with power and prestige. They are now almost completely stripped of their privileges and importance, and have also lost the traditional religion. Changes occurred in every sphere of their life, often pushing them down the social ladder.

The musical traditions of the Kukis were also not spared. The *Ju-ne laa*, which was once the only musical tradition they possessed, has now become a symbol of the pre-Christian era. The current generation often seeks the help of elderly people to understand and interpret the *Ju-ne laa*, while the elderly people lament over the misuse and incorrect interpretations of the *Ju-ne laa*. The proliferation of western popular musical styles such as pop, country, hip-hop and rock among the Kuki youth gives a very clear picture about the great changes in their musical traditions. The Waltz genre⁷⁴, popular among the early Christians, paved the way for the Kukis to experience diverse musical genres and laid the foundations for the mushrooming of different styles of music. The previous chapter discussed the emergence of indigenous Christian musical styles from the traditional Waltz genres during the early Christian period. The emergence of indigenous Christian songs is a result of their rejection of the *Ju-ne laa*, which was demonised along with their cultures and traditions. However, in the contemporary Kuki society, the revival of the *Ju-ne laa* is observable. What was once discarded is now being accepted and held in esteem by the contemporary Kuki Christian society. How did the once rejected musical tradition become acceptable? What led to the transformation in the attitudes of the Kukis? Are these pre-Christian songs performed the same way as during the pre-Christian period? While pondering on these questions, the chapter also gives a description of another form of musical tradition – the *Lunglen laa*, which exists in the contemporary Kuki society. The chapter also investigates the role of technology in order to understand the changes and continuities in the musical traditions of the Kukis.

⁷⁴ The musical genre in which the translated Western hymns were composed

Since they sang Christian songs only within their churches, performances became limited to the religious world. The Christian songs could not provide a sense of enchantment in their everyday lives. Without their knowledge, their world had already been divided into two – the sacred and the secular. We shall discuss this division in the following section. I argue here that the identification of Christian songs solely with the Church generated the need for other songs that could be sung for everyday purposes outside the Church. With the passing of time, such songs emerged, giving rise to a new style of songs called *joldei laa* or *Lunglen laa*. When the Kuki world is divided into the sacred and the secular, and both these worlds possess their own musical traditions, where does the *Ju-ne laa* fit in? To understand this phenomenon, let us first trace the emergence of secular songs propelled by cultural transformations.

4.2 The Sacred versus the Secular: The Emergence of *Lunglen laa*

In order to understand the continuity of a culture, it is necessary to understand the changes it underwent, as it is through changes that continuity becomes perceptible. Transformations within a society become possible when the people of a community interact with subjects from different cultures and traditions. Interaction between two culturally distinct groups sets the stage for the less privileged group to experience more noticeable changes, including alterations in their economic, social, political, religious lives. Changes in the individual's perception and worldviews initiate such changes in the social realm. This section attempts to study transformations within the Kuki society as vantage points from which to understand the continuity of their cultural and traditional values, which are reflected in their contemporary popular music.

The Kukis' interaction with the Europeans, who were armed with education and modern technology, led them to perceive the colonizers as a highly advanced group, thereby unconsciously enabling the colonial rulers to transform the indigenous society from what they perceived to be 'primitivism' to 'modernity'. The colonisers considered the behaviour and cultural traditions of the Kukis 'primitive', as they were different from what the former deemed 'normal'. The missionaries, who worked closely with the local people, played a significant role in bringing about changes in the Kuki society. When the religious Kuki people were introduced to the doctrinal teachings of Christianity, they did not have reservations about adopting it. The joy of receiving salvation to gain access to eternal life after death strengthened the trust they had on the messengers—the Christian mission workers. This led them to accept the missionaries' perception of them as a heathen community, failing to notice the adverse impact it had on their traditional practices and culture. Rev. Dr. T. Lunkim, a Kuki theologian, lamented that had he known that he could practice Christianity without betraying his traditional culture, he would not have chopped off his *tuhcha* (Haokip, 2001)⁷⁵.

The new converts were so engrossed in the missionaries' preaching that they accepted whatever was taught to them as divine guidance. This behaviour of placing unconditional trust in religious teaching could be argued to have its foundations in the Kukis' devotion and faithfulness to their pre-Christian *thiempu*. Before the conversion of Kukis to Christianity, the Chief of the village had been the supreme authority and the

⁷⁵ In the pre-Christian era, Kuki men grew their and braided it. The braided hair was called *tuhcha*, and it was a marker of their identity, instilling in them a sense of pride about their culture. After conversion, the *tuhcha* was cut off as a symbol of their total submission to Christianity.

thiempu enjoyed parallel powers. The centrality of the *thiempu*'s office in the functioning of the Kuki society is apparent from the presence of a priest in every Kuki village. The common people believed that the *thiempu* possessed unique knowledge that prevented evil spirits from bringing misfortune to the people. According to Gangte (2012), the *thiempu* occupies an important position in the Kuki society and he officiates all social and religious functions, and an outsider might find the prestige he enjoys to be the same as that of the Chief (p. 131). Gangte also mentions that on social and religious occasions, the *thiempu* was served *Ju* even before the Chief. The primacy he was accorded not only during religious occasions, but also during social occasions, indicates the co-existence of the sacred and the secular in the Kuki social order. For the agrarian Kuki society, 'misfortune' was mostly in the form of ill-health in their personal lives and in the agricultural arena. Since it was believed that the *thiempu* could prevent such malaises, he could be said to be equivalent to modern day medical practitioners. Gangte (2012) also claims that their role was to cure and prevent diseases. As mentioned in the previous chapter, it was believed that illnesses and misfortune are caused by the evil spirits called *thilha* and as such, the Kukis sought to appease them. The unique knowledge possessed by the *thiempu* was not a tactic to dodge the power of the evil spirits, but a very rare kind of language and action that could overpower them. Sometimes, the *thiempu* would also be compelled to make a request to the *thilha* using a kind of language, requesting them to leave the villagers by performing a specific set of actions during the rituals conducted for such purposes. This knowledge, according to Gangte, was rarely passed on to people outside the *thiempu*'s lineage, thereby maintaining it as a hereditary post (Gangte, 2012, P. 131) in order to retain power. The Kukis believed strongly that the *thiempu*'s knowledge was divine and that it was bestowed

upon him by the benevolent god, *Chung pathien*, to whom was attributed all the good events in their lives. Though a formal system of worship as in the Christian period does not exist in the pre-Christian period, the Kukis regard the *thiempu* as a person who acts as an intermediary between them and *Chung pathien*. In this way, the Kukis established a link between the sacred religion and the secular life, thereby enabling the coexistence of the two realms during the pre-Christian period.

With the innumerable transformations the Kuki social order underwent after conversion, the boundary between the sacred and the secular became all the more visible. The Christian missionaries were quite successful in presenting their own culture as the most appropriate culture for the new converts to practice. This led many to believe that their own cultures and traditions were abhorrent to Christianity. In this process of evangelization, the local cultures were demonised while the missionaries' culture was made holy through its association with the new religion. The Kukis, who accepted the teachings of the colonizers, dismissed their traditions as 'primitive', and embraced the European culture and religion brought by the missionaries. This was possible because of the Kukis' high regard for religious leaders. It would be wrong to say that the Kukis considered European missionaries respectable because of their reverence for the foreigners. The Kukis had fought the British government for two winters (1917-1919) and considered the colonizers their enemies. However, the missionaries were held in esteem unlike the government officials because the Kukis had always venerated their priests – the *thiempu* – during their pre-Christian past and the tradition continued into the Christian period. The Pastors and Upas would visit the sick and pray for their well-being. Thangkholal Singson

(2015) wrote that some sick people were healed when the Church leaders prayed for them before the *thiempu* could perform any rituals, thus facilitating proselytization.

The hill-dwelling tribes, influenced by the teaching and guidance of Europeans, felt the winds of change blowing across the hills. Later on, their aspiration for development grew, with the European model as their yardstick. Perhaps this can be attributed to the modern education they received from the Europeans. The educated few adopted western culture, which was evident from the way they thought, behaved, dressed and talked. Their ability to think independently emboldened them to label age-old Kuki traditions as ridiculous and nonsensical. Christian teachings, along with modern education, propelled them forward and gave them the strength and courage to speak against the *Ju-neh* culture. Soon after the converts denounced it, the respect and honour the *thiempu* enjoyed also vanished. The privileges, respect and honour accorded to him were transferred onto the Christian pastors, elders, missionaries and reverends. The growing number of Christian converts, for whom the *Ju-neh* culture was anathema, placed the pre-Christian cultural traditions at risk. The blooming of the Church in a number of villages in the Kuki area provided impetus to the invention of a new tradition for the imagined Christian communities across the hills.

It must be remembered that conversion of the Kukis was not a mass conversion. It spread gradually in the beginning, only to gain momentum from the latter part of 1930s. Rev. LB Angam, the Executive Director of the Evangelical Churches Association⁷⁶ (ECA) says that it took close to one hundred years for Christianity to penetrate the entire Kuki

⁷⁶ Henceforth ECA.

society.⁷⁷ According to him, the Kukis are still in a period of transition from their old tradition to the new systems inspired by modernity brought from the West. In a church service I attended at D. Phailien ECA Church, the speaker professed that he was converted in 1976⁷⁸. Like him, there are many people who converted to Christianity as late as the 1980s, accepting Jesus Christ by burning their *Indoi*. Even though the former religion was denounced, there were several cultural practices that could not be ignored or abandoned.

The slow growth of Christianity among the Kukis could be attributed to the missionaries' zeal to denounce and destroy all aspects of traditional Kuki culture, which prevented the Kukis, who loved their customs and traditions and took pride in being Kukis, from accepting the new religion that posed a threat to their indigenous traditions. Early Christians were tortured, punished, and even expelled from their families and villages. Interestingly, the new religion could penetrate the minds of the younger generation, and education played a major role in this. The youngsters who went to study were considered lazy and they were accused of attending school to escape agricultural work. They were treated with contempt for shunning their traditions and cultures for Western systems. The differences between Christians and non-Christians were visible in multiple aspects of their lives. The new religion began to affect their society from the level of the individual to that of the community. A respondent, who is a chief and a church elder, narrated his experience during his childhood:

“Our village was divided into two groups: Christians and non-Christians. I was just a child, so nobody took me seriously when it came to religious matters; so I could

⁷⁷ Interviewed on 20 December, 2018.

⁷⁸ Interviewed on 8 December 2018

sneak in to the meetings of both groups. On most occasions, I listened to the meetings of the non-Christians, and would report their discussions to the Christians. Sometimes they make plans to abolish Christianity using physical force to attack them during their worship services or religious meetings. The non-Christian parents also agreed to send their Christian children on a sabbatical to prevent them from meeting each other. When I passed on such information to the Christians, they would make plans to prevent them from falling into their traps. Some Church leaders whom the non-Christians planned to assault would leave the village for some days before the other group carried out their plans”.⁷⁹

The narrative reveals how Christianity affected even their social relationships and the functioning of the village system. Influenced by the teachings of missionaries, the animosity of the Christians towards their traditional systems deepened, enabling the acceptance of European cultures at the cost of their own. For fear of having to abandon Christianity, they remained aloof from the non-Christians. This affected the traditional chieftainship and threatened the power of village chiefs. Parallel to the authority of the village administrative councils, the Church body became so powerful that the Church leaders, under some circumstances, dared to oppose the decisions of the village chief, incidents that had hitherto been unheard of.

Christianity also introduced a new form of worship to the Kukis. As explained in Chapter 3, traditional animal sacrifices to appease the spirits for good health and material benefits were abandoned and replaced with praise and worship to the ‘Heavenly Father’.

⁷⁹As narrated by Upa Lunkhojang Haokip, Chief of New Phaisat.

The Christians were taught to obey the commands of the Lord and to worship Him through hymnals and other songs of praise. To praise God, they sang different songs and performed *lenkhawm* in a way very similar to the pre-Christian *lenkhawm*, but with a new ingredient, thus building new traditions from old ones. Employing creativity in their worship, the Kuki Christians found a new way of indigenizing the western musical tradition⁸⁰ used actively in their worship services. The indigenous Christian songs produced by the Kukis were sung and performed not only in the Church, but on all social and religious occasions by Christians, while the *Ju-ne laa* was used for the same purposes by non-Christians. But the latter slowly faded after conversions to Christianity accelerated. The *Ju-ne laa* that was sung on both social and religious gatherings were condemned and were strictly prohibited in religious gatherings. Though the elderly people sing such songs even today, its popularity and use has become negligible, and the youth consider such songs as belonging to the older generation and identify the age-old *Ju-ne laa* as *Pulaa-palaa* or *Guollui laa*. During my fieldwork in Churachandpur district of Manipur, I asked several youngsters, most of them college students, if they listened to the *Ju-ne laa* aired in All India Radio–Thadou programme. All of them answered in the negative. It should be noted that it took over 90 years for the whole community to be converted to Christianity. During this transition from the traditional religion to Christianity, the use of *Ju-ne laa* decreased gradually, providing enough time for the second generation Christians to perceive it as a non-Christian musical tradition, for they had grown up with Christian music.

⁸⁰The western musical tradition that was introduced to the Kukis in their early Christian period was the traditional Waltz genre. Even after years, the Waltz and the Country songs remain the most popular western musical traditions in the Kuki hills.

With time, the Christians became more liberal compared to the early days when Christianity was established in their society. Around the latter part of 1960s, a new style of music, largely driven by the need to express their emotions and sentiments outside the religious life, emerged. This new musical tradition, which has an ethnic appeal, is sung in the modern musical style. The content of these songs is similar to that of the *Ju-ne laa*, expressing emotions, but the tune is that of the traditional Waltz genre. They also fit into the genre of Country music. Through constant modifications across time and due to lack of knowledge of *laa-pao*, these songs have lost the poetic element in language. However, the themes are still derived from the *Ju-ne laa*. These songs, popularly known today as ‘love songs’ or *Lunglen laa*, are performed on social occasions, but not in religious gatherings.

During the pre-Christian period, the Kukis were allowed to sing all kinds of songs at any gathering, irrespective of whether it was a social or religious occasion. But Christianity did not allow the performance of non-Christian traditions; the Kukis were allowed to sing only Christian songs. The social order had to reconstruct its systems of functioning in order to cope with the changes brought by Christianity. The Kukis felt the need for a world outside churches where they could express their thoughts through songs other than Christian ones. Love songs or patriotic songs could not be sung in the church; but they could not abandon such verses. Evangelists and church leaders preached against these songs, terming them ‘worldly’ verses through which humans praised themselves, ignoring the Glory of God. They believed that human beings should honour God in every act of theirs and that His glory should be seen in the daily life of all Christians. They stood firm on the division between the sacred and the secular, preaching that anything which is

not sacred belongs to the world.⁸¹ The religious view on contemporary popular songs shall be analysed in the later part of this chapter.

The continuity of the *Ju-ne laa* in the Christian period is evident from contemporary popular songs, which were inspired by Christian verses. Though the styles may differ, the content of the songs was borrowed from both the pre-Christian and the Christian musical traditions. It was after Christianity that these styles of music, popularly known as *Lunglen laa*, came into being. Without Christianity, the *Lunglen laa* or the contemporary popular songs might not have surfaced, as there would not have been any element that differentiated it from other styles. The Christian musical tradition brought into being a new world and a new musical tradition, the *Lunglen laa*. This bringing forth of a new musical tradition can be related to Gadamer's concept of 'play' where he argues that "the movement of playing has no goal that brings it to an end; rather, it renews itself in constant repetition" (Gadamer, 2013, p. 108). Music becomes the 'game' that the Kukis 'play' with no intention of ending the game, but to continue playing. This to-and-fro movement of the game allows for its continuity. This is apparent from the thematic presentation and representation of both the early musical tradition and the Christian musical tradition in the *Lunglen laa*. Temporal distances, however much it seems to separate these musical traditions, philosophical hermeneutics allows us to understand the to-and-fro movement of the game or the music that exists in these three musical traditions, viz. *Ju-ne laa*, *Lenkhawm laa*, and *Lunglen laa*. The following section investigates the nature of contemporary popular songs, also referred to as *Lunglen laa* or *Joldei laa*.

⁸¹ 'World' here points to the Christian division of the world into the heavenly and the worldly, where the former belongs to God, and the latter to Satan.

4.2.1 *Nature of Lunglen laa and the Role of the All India Radio:*

Technology, Creation, and Musical Culture

This section engages with the nature of contemporary popular songs, their performance and relationship to the *Ju-ne laa* and sacred songs, i.e., the Christian songs. The early musical traditions—the *Ju-ne laa*, and the sacred songs – have been discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 respectively. As discussed above, the first two musical traditions led to the emergence of the third, i.e., the *Lunglen laa*. This compels us to explore its relationship with and differences from the other two musical traditions. This section will attempt to understand which elements of the *Ju-ne laa* and Christian music motivated Kukis to develop the *Lunglen laa* and how it differs from its parent genres.

Using the terminology ‘contemporary popular songs’ for *Lunglen laa* might contrast with its use in theoretical studies of music. But for this chapter, it is used in a much broader sense than the theoretical or standardized use of the word, to denote all non-gospel songs or music that the Kukis produced after Christianity. The exact date of its emergence could not be located; but for the sake of convenience, we consider 1964, when Jimmy Lamboi recorded his first single in the All India Radio (Imphal), as the approximate time at which it appeared. Jimmy was the first Kuki singer to have recorded his songs in AIR, Imphal.⁸² He was born in a family of poetry lovers and his father himself had been a song writer. But most of his father’s songs were *Ju-ne laa* with a few *khutsut laa*. Jimmy was also inspired by another individual, Mangkhohen , who published a song book *Lenchonghoi Labu* in 1956. All songs in the *Lenchonghoi Labu* compiled by Mangkhohen

⁸² Interviewed on 26 July 2019.

were inspired by the *lenkhawm* songs or *Lathah* which is evident from the tune, words, and style employed. The centrality of God in the Kuki society is conspicuous in these songs. In my interview with Jimmy, he claimed that all songs from the *Lenchonghoi Labu* mentions God in one way or the other. This shows that love songs were also linked to God in a Christian manner. Some of the popular lines include “Are we not destined for each other by our heavenly God?”, “God makes us to love each other”, and “Let’s get married to start a good Christian family”. Here, the themes are similar to those in the *Lathah bu*, for in both types, the importance the tribe accords to God is evident. Though the lines are not addressed directly to God, as mentioned in Chapter 3, they do long for God’s presence in their everyday lives. This indicates that the songs from *Lenchonghoi Labu* were composed along the same line as the *Lenkhawm laa*.

Jimmy raised the Kuki songs to another level by composing a song titled ‘Jorhat Tuolpi’ (1958), which was solely based on his love for his girlfriend who was residing in Jorhat, Assam, at the time. He had never been to Jorhat; yet he dreamt of the town, expressing his wish to visit his girlfriend. Here the song is exclusively about his love for the girl. This can be linked to the songs of the pre-Christian period when diverse themes other than those centered on God, such as love, romance and the glorification of the object of love, appeared in songs. Jimmy’s song was popularized only after it was aired on radio and people began inviting him to perform in various places. Such songs of love, which could be performed solo, had never been composed before. Here, mention should be made of his contemporaries, L Hoinu Khongsai, Seilien Kilong, who also recorded few songs in AIR. Radio technology played a commendable role in introducing new musical traditions

and providing more opportunities for singers and song writers to make their presence felt in public places. *Lunglen laa* gained momentum after the introduction of Thadou Programme in AIR, Imphal.

Technology plays a great role in the dissemination of *Lunglen laa*, and has contributed greatly to the shift from the traditional to the modern. Earlier, although a few affluent families owned gramophones and records, these expensive items were limited to the rich. D. Angel, a choir leader, informed me that he was among the few who owned the gramophone. His team had recorded choir songs, becoming the first such choir to have their own recorded numbers. After the gramophone, the radio was introduced and it had a much greater impact, revolutionizing the musical sensibilities of the people. The *Lunglen laa*/love songs were popularized through the introduction of six different tribal linguistic programmes, viz, Thadou, Tangkhul, Paite, Hmar, Kabui, and Mao, in All India Radio, Imphal, in 1972. The *Lunglen laa* aired by AIR Imphal was received with great excitement, especially by the Thadou-Kukis. Among the early singers on radio, mention has already been made of L Hoinu Khongsai and Jimmy Lamboi Haokip. Due to the non-availability of recording machines, the radio station served as the only studio where songs could be recorded. Except for some Christian songs recorded by D. Angel and his choir—the Kuki Gospel Voice –, there were no other recorded songs.⁸³

An informant, Doukholun Touthang, told me that the songs of L Hoinu Khongsai and Jimmy Lamboi Haokip broadcasted by the AIR Imphal were highly valued. In those

⁸³There are no written records on the musical tradition of the Kuki society. These dates are based on evidence from two separate interviews – one, with D. Angel and the other with Benny Khongsai, two noted Kuki singers. Both the singers claimed that only Kuki Gospel Voices had recorded a music album prior to the advent of the tribal programme in All India Radio, Imphal.

days, there had hardly been one or two radio sets in a village and they were owned mostly by the Chief or affluent families. People used to throng to their houses to listen to the Thadou Programme. Crowds would fill the yard, especially on days when Jimmy's songs were aired. Another informant, Haokhojang Haokip, narrated how he, along with his friends, travelled on foot to another village where Jimmy had been invited to perform at a wedding ceremony. They travelled miles not just to listen, but to watch his performance, as seeing someone singing *Lunglen laa* or love songs was a novel experience for them. The *Ju-ne laa* was performed as a group and mostly in the *lenkhawm* style. Christian songs were also performed in groups in worship services and *lenkhawm* during festivals. A solo performance was new and hence attracted the attention of the locals. Besides, the lyrics differed totally from those of the *Ju-ne laa* and the Christian songs. Their encounter with technological development seems to have altered their musical sensibilities that were previously confined to the age-old *Ju-ne laa*. The mushrooming of *Lunglen laa* and its popularity among the youth from the 1960s, ushered in a new wave of musical interests. Some elders I interacted with still referred to them as 'modern songs'. Western music, aired on weekdays at noon, also inspired youngsters to compose songs that could be sung using western tunes⁸⁴.

It was not until the early part of the 1980s that tape recorders reached the Kuki hills, before which AIR Imphal and social gatherings were the only spaces where *Lunglen laa* was performed for the public. The success of radio singers like Jimmy and Hoinu inspired others to record their songs. Aneh Chongloi and his friends recorded their first audio album

⁸⁴ 'Western tunes' here refers to country and pop music, the two common genres aired by AIR, Imphal.

in the early 1980s, followed by Janglet and Thangmawi, Thangcha, Lalneu Gangte, and Benny Khongsai among others. Popular songs from these singers and others of the same period were later converted to MP3 format and are still available today. The acoustic guitar was mostly used for recording songs when tape recorders appeared in the hills.

It is important to investigate how popular singers attracted audiences from the same radio channel that broadcasted the *Ju-ne laa* once a week. Haokhojang Haokip identified that the audiences of the later period lacked interest in listening to the *Ju-ne laa*, as the low turnout revealed. He had owned a radio set in the 1980s and people used to gather at his house to listen to the Thadou Programme in the AIR. He had also led a troupe to record the *Ju-ne laa* when he was young. When asked if the turnout for the *Lunglen laa* and that for his performance of the *Ju-ne laa* were the same, he laughed and replied: “many people did turn up to listen to our performance; but it was not for the love of *Ju-ne laa*, but rather to listen to our singing being broadcasted.” The villagers who listened to their recordings felt proud that someone they knew had featured in AIR. They listened to the radio not because of their love for *Ju-ne laa*, but to acknowledge and appreciate their friends featuring in AIR. It should not be forgotten that only a few people had the luxury of owning a radio set, and it must have been really enchanting for them to listen to the voice of someone they knew in person, emanating from the box.

The poetic elements of the first two musical traditions are still discernible in the *Lunglen laa*, which are commonly described as love songs. All the three traditions qualify as melancholic and nostalgic in tone and theme. Here, Christian music differs from the *Ju-ne laa* and contemporary popular songs, as it is limited to religious songs alone while the other two can be described as secular songs. McLuhan (1969) locates the media as an

extension of men which causes lasting changes and also at the same time transforms their environment. Technological developments in the Kuki hills had changed the lived environment of the subjects without their knowledge. As McLuhan argues, they were unaware of the alterations brought in by new technology “like the fish that was unaware of the water it swims in” (1969, p. 4). Their sensory balance was transformed, allowing for modifications in their musical sensibilities. For McLuhan, awareness about social changes brought in by a new medium are usually perceived first by artists. Their creativity allows them to read the language of the outside world, which they further relate to their inner world. This remains true for Kuki song writers as well. The musical styles and genres that they intercepted from the new media were employed to suit their musical sensibilities. Much before the general public could detect the changes, they were bombarded with hundreds of new musical genres which were very different from the *Ju-ne laa*. As McLuhan asserts, the medium that introduced alterations was not the songs, but the medium itself. The composers’ ability to read the language of the outside world and their attempt to relate it to their world brings transformations not only in the musical traditions, but in their performances as well. As mentioned above, the *Ju-ne laa* that was performed in groups now became solo performances – a totally novel phenomenon. Apart from western music aired in AIR, audio cassettes also entered the artistic realm of the Kukis. It is hence natural that the youth of the 70s admired Boney M, Abba as well as Bollywood singers. The role of the media, especially the radio and tape recorder, cannot be ignored in any study of the Kukis’ musical realm. This compels us to look deeper into the theme of ‘continuity’ after the changes that occurred in their musical traditions and sensibilities.

Accepting alterations in their musical traditions did not mean that the Kukis abandoned their traditional musical genres completely. It should also be remembered that the changes in their society were not abrupt, but gradual. The thesis concedes that colonialism and Christianity overhauled their society, transforming all spheres of life, including their music. As mentioned above, the media also had a great role in ushering in modifications in the Kuki social order. It is the intention of the thesis to trace the continuity of several traditions amidst these great waves of change. Our interest is to locate the continuities of their musical sensibilities despite the alterations in musical traditions, through an analysis of the emotional element in their songs which the Kukis could not discard completely.

The Kuki society was predominantly an oral one, which allowed them to express their thoughts through songs. Their emotional being allowed them to compose songs, as music was the only medium through which they could present themselves. The pre-literate Kuki society passed on their thoughts through songs which, in most cases, were emotional and sentimental, setting the themes for contemporary popular music. Looking at the styles of the *Ju-ne laa* and contemporary popular songs, it should not come as a surprise that the Kukis perceive the two musical traditions differently. But most listeners fail to notice a significant aspect – the contemporary songs are, in a way, continuations of the *Ju-ne laa*. This continuity can be comprehended only when one observes the context and content of the songs. Like the Kukis of the pre-Christian period, the contemporary community also composes the *Ju-ne laa* during specific contexts – when they are happy/grieving, when they feel betrayed by a love one, when they are nostalgic and so on. Both the *Ju-ne laa* and the *Lunglen laa* possess many themes in common. Composed by an oral society, much of

the poetic language survives and this provides space for the *Ju-ne laa* to continue even in the modern Kuki community. Here is a song written by Jimmy Lamboi for his girlfriend, Niengboi, who was many miles away from him:

Galdot ing'e ngai selung toh
 Lenna Jorhat tuolpi sung chu
 Chung lengthei va bang lengthei leng
 Galeng ing ting gavelha ing'e

Niengboi lenna Jorhat tuolpi
 Aw Kaden keizong lengthei leng
 Galeng ing ting ngai selung tuoh
 Niengboi kom'a gatou tang'e

Chavang khal ninou suoh em sil-sel
 Nuoia selung leng in kamao
 Toinu ting'a deilhen Niengboi
 Nang ngaiyin Lamboi kamao'e

Kom'a laituel leng hile chun
 Sen naobang kipom tading ken
 Saheinu Niengboi lungtup muolsuo
 Zou le Lamboi neimu kit in

Free translation

I will descry/ view from afar,
 Jorhat town where my love is,
 If I had wings,
 I'll fly to Jorhat to have a bird's-eye view

Niengboi is far away in Jorhat town,
 Oh! If I could fly I will fly to Jorhat
 And sit beside Niengboi

The autumn dawn breaks in,
 Inducing me in singing a melancholic strain,
 Niengboi the chosen one,
 Lamboi yearns for you

If you would have accept my love
 We will dwell in unity,
 My unfading Niengboi
 Allow me to catch hold of your beauty after you have a man

While most of the *Lunglen laa* comprises emotional lines, the genre distances itself from emotions through sarcastic songs. Although such songs can be termed 'anti-love

songs', the Kukis still categorize them as *Lunglen laa*. Here is a song from Jimmy Lamboi, titled "Tulai Nungahho":

Tulai nungahho hi atamjo
 Lungthim thiem le michingte jieng adei un
 Amai uva powder alu'a thao namtuiho'a
 Laituol lenna ding jieng agel'ui

Ei tobang mingol le mimoldi'n
 Solam laituol lenna ding jieng zong umlou
 Khatvei he'o ti'a eihin koutei ding
 Chutieng keima'n nungheilou veisan katho ding

Nungah kilelahho atamjo
 Film star nungahho umchan chu athouvin
 Kaose mine bang in achalsam'u atan'un
 Asamkhao'u innko khat puonsil jad ahi

ABC bon helou'a lekhathiem bang in
 Kengkoh tosang kise'n handbag kichoi in
 Cinema hall lang'a chie'n film avele'n
 Vetding atha anuom in paisa aneipoi

Tulai nungah guollhang atamjo'n

Hitobang nungah bou chu mi in agel un
 Kengkoh tosang kise'a handbag kichoi sang in
 Keivang khamtang kive'a longkai po kadeijoi

Free translation

Many women today,
 Prefer deceptive and wise men,
 Powder paste on their face and scented oil on the hair
 They tend to be flirtatious

I have no place for courtship
 Since I'm rustic and coarse,
 Surely she will called me love,
 Then my back will greet her

Many overdress women,
 Imitate the actresses,
 Trimming their forehead-hair resembling an alien,
 Their hair-band strands alone would be adequate for a family

Professing to be literate,
 Wearing high heels and holding a handbag,
 Strolling towards the cinema halls,
 Passionate to watch but no money

Such women have caught the admiration of many,
 I would rather go for a traditional woman
 Wearing a *Khamtang* and a carrying conical bamboo basket

This song, which was quite popular in the 1970s, is a sarcastic one about youngsters who admires and imitates Western cultures. It would be wrong to categorize this song as a ‘love song’. It condemns the young (wo)men of the time for looking upon traditions other than their own as yardsticks to measure progress. Through music, he vilifies the endorsement of other traditions at the cost of Kuki culture, giving examples of girls parroting western fashion through the use of high heels, cosmetics, and handbags. Through the lines, he conveys the message that people who value others’ traditions over their own are culturally illiterate. In the last verse, he proclaims that he would choose as his wife or lover, girls who wear the traditional attire and carry the conical bamboo basket and not those wearing high heels and holding handbags.⁸⁵ He challenges Kuki youngsters, who were bombarded with western and Indian traditions (especially in the realms of fashion and lifestyle) by popular media, specifically cinema, to take pride in their own culture. Music is used as a tool to communicate the message. He asserts that the endorsement and practice of other cultures in order to appear ‘developed’ and ‘modern’ is not advancement, but a denigration of one’s own culture, which for him indicates a lack of cultural development.

The difference of the *Lunglen laa* from the *Ju-ne laa* and Christian music provided them an alternate source of enchantment and hence they gradually lured them away from

⁸⁵The life of Kuki women and the importance the conical bamboo basket holds for them has been discussed in Chapter 2.

the two older musical traditions. From the song given above, it is evident that the people did not take pride in their culture and traditions, which they considered old-fashioned. Christianity alone could not be blamed for the discontinuation of the *Ju-ne laa*, for modernity also played a role in the dismissal of the age-old musical tradition. However, both Christianity and modernity could not obliterate the *Ju-ne laa*, as it is still sung and performed during festivals such as the *Chavang Kut* and other social gatherings. However, the uses differed totally from those during the pre-Christian period. It is now being performed as a cultural display or representation of their past life. The modernised contemporary popular songs have replaced the functions of the *Ju-ne laa* to an extent, by presenting the being of the Kuki people in the modern era. The theme of presentation through this musical tradition will be discussed in the later part of this chapter.

Sacred songs are now used mainly in the church and in religious gatherings and occasionally, in social events. Being a Christian society, they still consider these songs valuable and sing them during social gatherings as a mode of (re)presenting Christianity. Hence, in most social events, they organise two different sessions to accommodate both the sacred and the secular songs. The daytime is dedicated to the singing of sacred songs⁸⁶ as most of the sessions in the day are conducted formally on a religious note, usually followed by the display of indigenous songs and dances. The night session, on the other hand, is meant for the *Lunglen laa*.

⁸⁶The Kukis hold several social gatherings during the year. But these events do not necessarily involve the whole tribe. From the early period, they have had a village structure, functioning like the Greek city states, where every village is ruled by its own Chief and the administration varies from village to village. So most of these social gatherings are organised for and by a particular village. In the case of *Chavang Kut*, a state festival, the Kukis celebrate it collectively.

4.3 Modernizing the *Ju-ne laa*

The transformations in Kuki musical tradition were also largely shaped by the changes in their musical instruments. After Christianity, the guitar became the most popular musical instrument in the Kuki hills. Those who could not afford to buy one could easily make their own guitar from accessible resources, producing a replica of the acoustic guitar by carving wood, which was available abundantly in the forests. They could produce the musical instrument, but the lack of theoretical knowledge of music prevented them from producing songs other than those in the traditional Waltz genre. The Kukis could play the guitar on their own with no formal training, and most of the songs produced were those that could be sung using three basic chords. D. Angel, who led the Kuki Gospel Voice to record ten audio cassettes and nine visual albums, told me that he had not attended even a single music class in his entire life. Another composer, NCy DOUNGEL, also claimed that she has no theoretical knowledge of music. Though she could barely play the basic guitar chords, she wrote over 500 songs. In recognition of her great work, the ‘Zaila-Ai’ was performed in her honour in March 2013. As in the two instances mentioned above, almost all the Kuki songs were produced by people who did not possess theoretical knowledge of music.

The emergence of modern music in the Kuki hills can be traced back to the late 1990s. It was only during this period that formal training in playing the guitar began, prior to which it was not paid any significant amount of attention. The importance given to playing the guitar is evident from the fact that every Kuki boy could play at least a few chords and strum some songs even without training. Inability to play the guitar was

considered shameful in a man and such men were considered emasculated. All the churches had their own musical instruments consisting of the traditional drums, guitar, and sometimes, a keyboard and acoustic drums.

They believed that playing the keyboard and acoustic drums required skill, while the guitar was an instrument that belonged to the men. A Kuki man was expected to be good at playing the guitar even without any formal training. This can be attributed to their emotional and sentimental nature and their love for songs. A boy going out with his friends, holding his guitar, to court a girl is common practice. They would sing songs together and the boys would take turns at playing the guitar. In the early period, songs could be heard from several houses (mostly those with a girl) at night, sung by different groups of young boys. Unmarried Kuki boys roam around the village streets in a group at night playing the guitar and singing songs. Young men engage in these leisure activities after retiring from a whole day's work in the agricultural field. The importance accorded to songs is evident from the above instances, and the young men were encouraged to write their own songs to sing with friends and also for their lovers.

Recording studios in the hills opened avenues for new singers. During the early stages, these studios charged very high, making it difficult for the singers to record on their own. The Kukis' love for songs becomes perceptible here once again. Expecting no profit, affluent Kukis donated huge amounts of money and helped the singers record their songs. A note of thanks was printed in audio cassette covers, mentioning the name of the person who sponsored that cassette. In most cases, people dedicated their audio cassettes to a deceased family member. Many cassette covers carried the phrase 'In Loving Memory of.

. .’. This was another way of sponsoring a cassette, as the sponsors wanted to make known their love for the deceased person.

Writing a song is not a herculean task for those who can play the guitar, as it can be written using simple words and language. The use of poetic language in modern songs decreased with the passage of time. The use of colloquial and everyday language makes it easier for composers to produce more songs. From my observations and interviews, it becomes clear that the audience listens to a song depending on the tune, and the lyrics are secondary. Song writers, who realized that the audience prefers melodies, attempted to compose new tunes that appealed to the listeners. In this venture, the tunes of popular western and Hindustani songs were refurbished and re-produced with differences from the original version. The popular Maneithangja’s ‘*Jorhat Khopi*’ is a remix of Guns and Roses’ ‘November Rain’. Another singer popular for his Hindustani musical style is Kakai Kipgen, popularly known as K3G. He has recorded over 100 songs, most of which are sung in the Hindustani genre. This trend of remixing Western and Hindustani genres with traditional music has become a common practice among Thadou-Kuki singers.

The increase in the number of young composers and singers led to a decline in the use of poetic language in songs. But some noted folk song writers such as NCy Dounghel, Lienchung Haokip and Maneithangja are exceptional in that they employ poetic language while composing songs. Even though there are a few who prioritize the *laa-pao*, most songs are still composed in the popular pop, country, or rock genres. This is necessary considering the audiences who are often completely devoted to Western musical traditions. Folk song writers found a way to keep the *laa-pao* alive by opening it to popular western genres. This is a visible attempt at keeping the traditions alive by modernizing the *Ju-ne laa*, which,

even though no longer performed in its original form, is being transformed and made available for the future.

4.4 Sacralizing the *Ju-ne la*

The Kukis' rejection of their pre-Christian musical tradition has been discussed in detail earlier in the thesis. Observing their own culture through the eyes of Christian missionaries led them to perceive their own culture as heathen, shame-inducing and inferior to Western cultures. As already mentioned, the rejection of their own culture prevented many elderly people from converting to Christianity. However, the enthusiastic and energetic converts could not be prevented from spreading the Gospel. It could be argued that the missionaries contextualized Christianity within their own cultural system, and as a result, demonized the Kuki cultural ecosystem. Carl F Starkloff (1994) argues that in the history of Christianity, syncretism had been practiced, but unfortunately, as a surreptitious activity that stems from the missionaries' hostility to indigenous traditions. But their rejection of traditional cultural practices can be analysed from a different perspective. There was a danger of the locals adopting elements from Christianity, while bypassing the main ideas – the birth, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ in whose body, God is believed to have manifested Himself as the Father, the Son, and the Holy spirit. So it might not have been the antipathy to indigenous traditions that led the missionaries to reject local cultures, presenting them as abhorrent and unacceptable to Christianity; rather, the fear of false syncretism might have been the reason.

Interestingly, among the Kukis, Christianity was largely accepted by the youngsters who were influenced by western cultures, while the elderly members preferred to remain

loyal to their old traditions. Missionary schools were partly responsible for the rapid conversion of the youth. For the converts, abandoning the culture and religion in which they were firmly rooted and adopting an alien system with an alien religion might have been traumatic. But with time, Christianity established itself so strongly among the Kukis that, today, the community can be termed a predominantly Christian one. However, even after over a hundred years of Christianity, the Kuki society has not been able to reject their pre-Christian cultures completely and they still strive to accommodate forgotten indigenous systems in their religion, providing space for once-rejected traditions. These attempts made by the present-day Kuki Christians can be considered as a process that theological studies term ‘inculturation’.⁸⁷ According to Arruppe (1990),

‘Inculturation is the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that his experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question, but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming it and remaking it so as to bring about a new creation’.⁸⁸

The failure of the missionaries to prevent the disintegration of the cultural practices of the Kukis in their attempt to propagate Christianity led to the tribe developing a dual identity – one manifesting in their cultural life and the other in their religious life.

We have already discussed how the Kukis indigenized Christianity to suit their culture by producing a new mode of singing. It should be noted here that the early

⁸⁷ ‘Inculturation’ is a term coined by the Pan African Congress of Third World Theologians held in Accra in 1977.

⁸⁸ As cited in “Inculturation and the Christian Faith in Africa” (2012) by Kanu Ikechukwu Anthony.

Christians were born non-Christian, but were converted later. The pre-Christian life had instilled many cultural, social and religious elements that could not be obliterated totally. The enchantment they derived from their songs could not be accessed anymore, and hence, they sought alternate sources of enchantment, which they found in the *Lathah*. The case is different for contemporary Kukis who, unlike the early Christians, do not have any experience of the pre-Christian life. They are born and raised in Christian families and hence adapt easily to the Christian way of life. They do not yearn for the enchantment of the *Ju-ne laa*, as they have never experienced it. Nevertheless, the current generation considers the *Ju-ne laa* as a fading national treasure that needs preservation and makes attempts to revive it.

The Church has become more flexible and does not object to performing the *Ju-ne laa* in the church and in religious gatherings⁸⁹. In a funeral service I attended during my fieldwork, the deceased was a woman in her late 70s. There, I noticed that a group of old people were allotted a special session to perform the *Ju-ne laa*. They stood around the deceased who was laid in a coffin. The oldest among them had a small, traditional drum in his hand. From time to time he would recite a line that the others sing. After the funeral service,⁹⁰ I asked for his address, and went to meet him at his residence to enquire about their performance that day. I asked him if the song had any significance and also if their performance was the same as that in the olden days. I also made a request for the lyrics of

⁸⁹ Christian performance of the *Ju-ne laa* does not permit the use of *ju*. Only the tunes and words, or the poetic language remains.

⁹⁰ For burial services, condolence meetings are conducted first at the residence of the deceased, under the leadership of the Church. After a Pastor recites the last prayer for the departed soul, the people gathered march behind the dead body laid in a coffin carried by the young men of the village, to the cemetery.

the song. His replies were surprising. He told me that he did not remember the words he recited that day, but their performance had been intended to bid farewell to their friend. I was informed that the song was a *Toumun laa*, (already described in Chapter 2), but its performance did not carry similarities with the art form as practised in the past. Nowadays, condolence meetings are conducted by the parent church of the deceased. Although these are not worship services, the consent of the Church is required for such performances. Unlike the situation in the early Christian period, the contemporary Kuki Church does not object to the performance of the *Ju-ne laa*. Today, these performances have become part of celebrations in the church too.

The Kuki Christian Church (KCC)⁹¹ invests a significant amount of effort during their annual conferences to enlighten the younger generation about the culture and traditions of the past. Dr. T. Lunkim, the Administrative Secretary and founder of the Church, told me that the youngsters are so fascinated by modern developments and education that they fail to understand their past and its significance. He opined that a person who does not know about her/his own culture and roots is a lost human being, and that it was disheartening to see the younger generation imitating western culture at the cost of their own. The KCC, to re-cultivate lost traditions,⁹² organizes competitions on pre-Christian traditions of dancing, singing, and other physical activities like long jump, high jump as in the olden days at their annual conferences. They organize competitions to

⁹¹ Referred to as KCC hereafter.

⁹² From 1910 to the present, many traditions and cultural practices have been lost in the name of religion and modernity.

encourage members to actively engage with past traditions. The diocese participates in such competitions where they perform the *Ju-ne laa* along with the dances.

The narratives mentioned above portray how the *Ju-ne laa* that were once considered as songs of the demon, are now being sacralised. This sacralisation rejects the *ju*, but accepts the singing style and the language, along with the performances. The acceptance of the style indicates that the Kukis can worship God and be ‘good’ Christians without having to mimic the western culture and traditions. Instead of negotiating with the ever-increasing modernity, they fought acculturation using the *Ju-ne laa*. Sacralization can be explained thus through the words of April Stace Vega (2014): “Subjective-life aims and goals (self-actualization and self-discovery) are re-interpreted so they are no longer antithetical to a conformist approach to spirituality, but are instead incorporated into the traditional approach” (p. 10). The Kukis’ *Ju-ne laa*, having confronted several setbacks, are now being re-interpreted and incorporated into their Christian life.

4.5 Renegotiating the Kuki Understanding of the *Ju-ne laa*

The contemporary Kuki community re-connects with their past through their age-old practice of the *Ju-ne laa*. We have explained how they attempt to revive it by popularising their poetic language and the *Ju-ne laa* in its original form. The performance as it appears in the contemporary Kuki community could be said to be reconstructed from its original form and merely used for representational purposes. The present day performances are a representation of their past traditions. Employing the poetic language once used in the *Ju-ne laa* in contemporary popular songs is a representation of the *Ju-ne laa*. Even their performances in church-related gatherings or celebrations are also

representations of past traditions. But a reading of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics tells us a different story. The return of the *Ju-ne laa* in the present denotes its existence in time. Every work of art has its own temporality and its reception depends upon the contemporaneous event, differing from one event to the other. In the Kukis' experience of the *Ju-ne laa* in the present (even though in a different avatar) attunement of the presence of celebration occurs. Their past tradition is brought back in the present in their very experience of the *Ju-ne laa*. For Gadamer, celebration fulfils itself only through this representation where the horizons of the past and the present fuse. This fusion of the horizons of the past and the present brings time to a standstill. The subjects can return to the past from the present in this time that Gadamer calls "empty time" (Gadamer, 1986, p. 41). The work of art makes it possible for them to revisit their past. Hermeneutics tells us that the performance of *Ju-ne laa* in the present day is not a mere representation, but a presentation of the artwork with different meanings. The meanings embodied in a piece of art is never understood completely, as it is always open to multiple interpretations. The Kukis' understanding of the *Ju-ne laa* in the past and the present offers diverse meanings at different points of time. The present day Kuki subjects, through their performance of the *Ju-ne laa*, revisit and renegotiate their understanding of the art form, making it possible for them to grasp the age-old tradition, which lives on through their social, religious and cultural practices. Religion and modernity could not obliterate the essence of their earliest

known musical tradition, which persists and remains open to further interpretations for the future.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The thesis has essentially been about the Kuki people, their culture, and transformations over time. Colonial and post-colonial writers inscribed on them an identity distinct from their own understanding of themselves. Deprived of the privileges of writing, the Kukis could not articulate their own history and hence written accounts by outsiders have had a far reaching impact on the shaping and projection of Kuki culture to the mainstream. As has been mentioned in the introductory chapter, the main objective of the thesis has been to comprehend how the Kuki people understood themselves, not from the knowledge constructed by outsiders, but through their own perspective. Arguing against the authenticity of colonially inscribed identity, the thesis strives for a novel mode of understanding the tribe. Emphasizing on the subjects' perception of themselves, their performative traditions are studied across three different periods – the pre-Christian period, the early Christian period, and the contemporary period. Each period witnessed transformations owing largely to the changes in the religion, affecting their culture, traditions, and even everyday living. Nevertheless, the continuity of their performative traditions, which is evident from the performances of their songs, also comes under scrutiny.

Chapter 2 traced the pre-Christian musical performances through an analysis of the *Ju-ne laa*, the pre-Christian musical tradition of the Kukis. The performance of the *Ju-ne laa* varies, leading us to categorize these songs into *lenkhawm laa* and *kin-laa*. *Lenkhawm laa* are songs that emerge as a result of their sentimental being, their *lunghel*-ness, while

kin-laa are songs with specific purposes and rituals for their performance. The centrality of songs in the Kuki community is discernible from their performances, as rituals or ceremonies could not be performed without the *Ju-ne laa*. For the Kukis, although the composition of songs is a product of their *lunghel*-ness, it could not be restricted to *lunghel* alone. They presented not only emotions, but their reality which could be experienced during the performances. In other words, their reality manifests itself through works of art, especially songs, as the embedded meanings can be comprehended easily. It can also be argued that their musical performances are not merely sets of songs and dance, but also discourses centered on the meanings of their existence.

The Kuki *sensus communis* comes into play to enable the subjects to comprehend the meanings communicated during their performance, in their *lenkhawm*. Often they are so submerged in the performances that they sing and dance the whole night. Their ability to communicate and understand the meanings of their existence through these songs is conspicuous from their *lenkhawm*. It is not the content of the song(s), but the reality experienced that binds the Kukis to the performances. They are enchanted and transformed into beings subjected to the play of art, returning to their self – a being with free will after the performances. Following Gadamer, it is argued that they present their own reality or truth to themselves – a presentation of one's own being to oneself. This is possible because of the unique experiences of the Kukis. Their performative traditions bestow on them experiences that transcend everyday reality, after which they return to their normal selves as transformed beings.

With the Kukis' conversion to Christianity, there were apprehensions regarding whether they could obtain the same experiences from the newly translated Christian hymns. Chapter 3 traced the translated Western hymns to understand how the Kukis respond to it. We found that the musical traditions of the pre-Christian period seemed to decline as more people converted to Christianity. The early Christians were in a quandary after their attempt to break away from their traditional culture, as the missionaries successfully persuaded the new converts to embrace not only Christianity, but also their (Western) cultures and traditions projected as 'holy' by virtue of being a part of the 'Christian way of life'. This in turn led the new converts to view their own culture with disdain and contempt. Here, we should remember that during the early Christian period, the non-Christian Kukis still practiced their pre-Christian cultures; however this is beyond the scope of the current study which focus on the lives of the converts.

The everyday reality of the Kukis was affected by the missionaries' persuasions, resulting in gradual transformations in their culture and traditions. These changes are quite conspicuous and is believed to have misled many to believe that Christianity is responsible for all these changes. Their musical performance now experienced a shift from the traditional *Ju-ne laa* to *Houbung laa*. When the new converts were forbidden to consume the *ju*, the performance and the production of the *Ju-ne laa* ceased, leading to an increased reliance on translated Western hymns during services.

As already mentioned in Chapter 1, the Kuki subjects were willing to change and adapt to the changing environment brought in by the missionaries. They consciously accepted the newly translated songs, ushering a novel reality and meaning to their everyday

lives. However, the Kuki being, which was closely connected to their *sensus communis*, unconsciously awoke their aesthetic sensibilities, making them reluctant to submit completely to the newly introduced art. This disinclination prevented them from full submission to the work of art, as a result of which they could not receive the same experiences they once enjoyed through their musical performances. The failure of the translated songs to draw participants into the performance kindled their desire for the enchantment of the *Ju-ne laa*. This set their creativity to action, encouraging them to seek a way to maintain the balance between their socio-cultural and religious lives. The pre-Christian Kukis did not possess a clear sense of distinction between the sacred and the secular, and hence, their religious life was embedded in their socio-cultural life. Even though the Kuki subject consciously embraced the changes, the Kuki being unconsciously adhered to the pre-Christian mode of life, enabling the tribe to discover novel means to keep themselves involved in the cultural performances. This is how *Lathah*, a replacement for the pre-Christian *lenkhawm laa* came into being. The forms of presentation might differ from that of the pre-Christian era, but the experience of reality remains the same and the meanings of their existence could still be understood through this discourse, like in the case of the pre-Christian performances. The *Lathah* allows the subjects to remain immersed in the performance, allowing them to experience a reality that transcends their everyday reality, as it did in the *Ju-ne laa*.

The changes believed to have been ushered in by Christianity could not alter their being; however, it provided them with the opportunity to ensure its continuity amidst observable cultural changes. Thus, contrary to the belief that the early Christians

themselves abandoned their pre-Christian musical performances, the songs and dances gradually became an important element for Christian worship among the Kukis. This musical tradition bridged the gap between their pre-Christian culture and Christianity (new culture), a task which the translated hymns failed to accomplish. The thesis argues that, with the incorporation of the *lenkhawm* in Christian worship, the Kukis, besides accepting Christianity as a religion imposed on them, transformed and maintained the new religion to suit their culture, giving it a new demeanor, a new form of praise and worship. The *lenkhawm* transformed the religious outlook of the tribe. While the Christian concepts of the trinity and salvation are retained, local ingredients are evident from several practices which are distinct from those of other Christian communities. The *lenkhawm* performance itself is an example of the local cultures embedded to Christianity which no other Christian communities have.

Chapter 4 engages with the contemporary Kuki society, which is markedly distinct in terms of the social, political, cultural and religious scenario, from the Kukis of both the pre-Christian and the early Christian periods. The differences could best be understood through a scrutiny of the vividly differentiated spheres of the sacred and the secular, through an exploration of their musical traditions. Sacred songs were popularized and were used not only in religious services, but for all church related events. The Christians' abandonment of their traditional rice beer, the *Ju*, prevented them from singing and composing *Ju-ne laa*. The need for songs outside the church brought the *lunglen laa* into the picture, with radio technology providing impetus to its growth. As mentioned before, the emergence of *lunglen laa* was inspired by the need for the enchantment the *ju-ne laa*

had over them in the pre-Christian period and the *Lathah* in the early Christian period. The segregation of their world into the sacred and the secular demanded the emergence of a new musical tradition called the *lunglen laa*.

A preliminary analysis of the *lunglen laa* reveals its similarities to the themes and language of the *Ju-ne laa* and the *Lathah*. As Christianity provided the path for the continuity of their age-old performance of the *Ju-ne laa* through *Lathah*, the *lunglen laa* of the contemporary period becomes the path for the continuity of both the past musical traditions. While the *lunglen laa* dominates the secular world, the *Ju-ne laa*, that had once been rejected by the early Christians, becomes more favorable yet again within their sacred world. Its value being realized, contemporary Kuki Christians find modes of sacralizing the almost-extinct *Ju-ne laa* in order to preserve it. The importance given to *Ju-ne laa* is however not for the enchantment, but for the preservation of their pre-Christian musical traditions, which is equated with the preservation of their culture and tradition. Observing the *Ju-ne laa* from this perspective in contemporary Kuki Christian society, it is evident that they not only preserve the songs, but all the practices and traditions attached with them.

Considering the observable changes in their musical traditions, the *lunglen laa* could be perceived as a shift from their *lenkhawm laa*, which itself had been a shift from their traditional *Ju-ne laa*. As argued above, if the shift from *Ju-ne laa* to *lenkhawm laa* can be understood as a product of cultural changes (the observable changes brought in by Christianity), the *lunglen laa* could also be comprehended thus (as a result of the development of the division between the sacred and the secular aspects of life). Culture is never static, it keeps on undergoing transformations; it is not a product, but a process. Every

time a social order is introduced to a new culture, the environment changes and it could be said to shift from the existing culture to another one. It is our aim to locate the continuities amidst these changes, and as has been already mentioned, the changes in the content or the intended meanings of the composers could not change the phenomenon of the Kukis still experiencing the ‘truth’ or the ‘reality’ of their existence through musical traditions.

Harold Innis (as cited in Carey, 2009) argued that transformations in communication technology brought changes in the ‘structure of interest’, by remoulding their mind-sets, eventually reshaping the nature of the community (p. 122). The shift from orality to print, and then to electronic media, exposed the Kuki people to drastically transformed scenarios. Every time a new technology was encountered, the community experienced changes which could be observed from the modifications in the styles and structures of their musical traditions from the pre-Christian to the contemporary periods. However, they could still make sense of their experiences from these musical traditions presented to them through different mediums of communication inspired by technology. Songs became symbols with meaning that had a huge impact upon their lives. Although the meanings acquired from their songs vary from time to time, the Kukis possess the capability to incorporate the novel meanings in their lives. Meanings here should not be restricted to the literal meanings of the songs, but, following Gadamer, the subject matter, that can be understood in a discourse through interpretation. This subject matter is too vast for one to comprehend it in its totality. Despite changes in the nature and styles of their music over time, the reality or the truth of their songs remains unchanged. Gadamer explains this phenomena of understanding through his concept of play, where he argues

that in every play, it is not the intention of the creator of the work (the composer) or the audience's perception and subjectivity that matters, but the participation in the work of art where one is drawn in to the work itself, made possible by some level of congeniality that exists between the creator and the audience. Therefore, for Gadamer, the play or the song becomes the mode of being of the work of art. From the pre-Christian period to the contemporary period, their songs have had the capacity to draw audiences and provide spaces for them to be fully submissive to it. The hidden truth of their songs is now disclosed when it is performed. The true meanings manifest themselves through the presentation of the songs, with the subjects' understanding being reflected upon their actions once they are drawn into the performance. Despite the observable changes their musical traditions underwent, their *sensus communis* comes to their rescue by allowing for the fusion of their horizons of the past and those of the present. It can therefore be argued that the true meanings of their musical traditions remained unchanged in spite of it adopting different forms.

James W Carey's (2009) 'ritual view of communication' perceived communication as a ceremony where participants construct or reconstruct meanings as shared experiences. For him, communication is the representation of shared beliefs and common experiences (Bastos, 2009, p. 245). This is not to say that the contents of the songs have no significance; rather, their view of who they are, or, their identity is being portrayed and confirmed. The commonalities that bind them together is thus strengthened and renewed in such performances. As mentioned above, the work of art for them is a symbol through which they produce their reality. Carey opines that these symbolic forms have a dual capacity –

as “symbols of” and “symbols for”. For him, “as ‘symbols of’, they present reality and as ‘symbols for’ they create the very reality they present” (Carey, 2009, p. 23). Through these works of art, they are able to choose between values that are significant for them and those which are not. After Christianity divided their world into the sacred and the secular, the existence of both the spheres in harmony in their pre-Christian world was threatened. However, their necessity for songs outside the church allowed them to compose works to fulfil their aesthetic needs. Thick descriptions of their songs reveal that though they make attempts to draw a line between the sacred and the secular, the *sensus communis* comes into play, enabling the sacralization of their pre-Christian musical traditions. Irrespective of the extent of change, their works of art allow them to experience a uniquely Kuki reality which cannot be ignored. Since the work of art is presented through communication, their shared experiences are renewed each time they are presented. Agreeing with Carey, the study argues that their musical performances is a communication, a discourse, where the Kukis participate to share and create or recreate a reality, a meaning, about their existence. Their shared knowledge and beliefs draw them together to participate in such a discourse. This thesis maintains that communication helps in the maintenance of the Kuki society, which is renewed and reconstructed over time.

Northeast India in general, and the Kukis in particular, have been widely scrutinized from the vantage point of various disciplines including History, Sociology, Anthropology, Political Science, and also from theological perspectives. The themes for these studies have mostly been related to the political, cultural, and historical aspects, broadly projecting the Kukis as a group of tribes whose political and cultural identity

requires serious construction, reconstruction and recognition. While acknowledging the importance of these areas, the present study approaches the Kukis through the lens of aesthetics, which has largely been neglected by the academia. The aesthetic performance of a group is believed to reveal the unexplored dimensions of the subjects, which could help in understanding them better, rather than through mere observations. Emphasizing on the subjective perspectives of the Kuki people, the thesis also helps us comprehend them from beyond disciplinary boundaries. The interpretation of their behavior based on their knowledge systems and performance, rather than mere observation, which is the most common method utilized by scholars writing about tribes, could provide us with a better comprehension of the people. However, interpretations cannot always lead to solid conclusions, as the result varies from interpreter to interpreter, and it is therefore suggested that more works on the aesthetic performance of the Kukis be carried out for further understanding.

On the whole, the thesis aims to contribute to a broader understanding of Northeastern aesthetic traditions and performances that have remained neglected for centuries, so that a unique Kuki identity, distinct from that imposed on them by the colonizers, could be unveiled and scrutinized. Drawing from the historical past to the present, the thesis argued for the continuity of the Kuki identity, contrary to the popular belief that the propagation of Christianity led the Kuki subjects to depart radically from their traditions. It has been argued from the beginning that culture is never static and it keeps on changing even as it borrows elements of the traditions from the past. Communication plays a great role in merging the past and the present, to enable a holistic

comprehension of Kuki culture, allowing for the continuity of the Kuki being, unaffected by changes in religion and everyday life. A notion of identity that is centered solely on political, anthropological, sociological, or historical factors is not sufficient for a mature understanding of the being of a community.

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