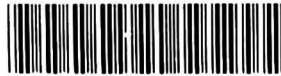




**Library**

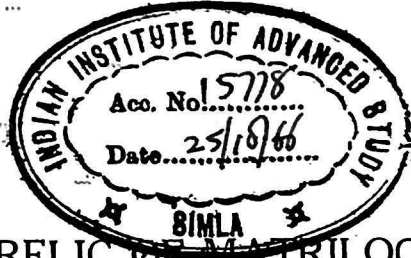
**IAS, Shimla**

**PH 954.541 62 D 26 A**



**00015778**

PH  
954-54162  
D 27/10/63



## A POSSIBLE RELIC OF MATRILocal RESIDENCE AMONG THE OLD KUKI TRIBES OF MANIPUR (ASSAM)

By

TARAK CHANDRA DAS

On the eastern border of India, in Assam, a large number of Tibteo-Burman-speaking tribes inhabit the forest-clad hills which roughly lie north-south and connect the eastern spurs of the Himalayas with the Bay of Bengal. These tribes extend towards the east up to Burma and Arracan and to the west up to the Garo Hills. They are divided on linguistic basis into different groups one of which is the Kuki-Chin group which occupies roughly the Lushai Hills District, part of Chittagong Hill Tracts, Hill Tippera, Cachar and the Chin Hills. The various Kuki tribes included in this division have again been sub-divided into two broad classes, *viz.*, the Old Kukis and the New Kukis. The New Kukis, better known as Thadous, occupy mainly the hills surrounding the Imphal Valley in Manipur. The Old Kuki tribes also occupy approximately the same area and were perhaps the first to move towards Manipur from their former home in the hills between the Tyao and Manipur Rivers. They comprise at least ten small tribes, namely, the Aimol, Anal, Chawte, Chiru, Kolhen, Kom, Lamgang, Purum, Tikhup and Vaiphei—all of which are now settled within the State of Manipur. These tribes show a number of common traits indicating close cultural, and possibly, ethnic relationship, though they do not intermarry. All the Old Kuki tribes practise migratory hoe-cultivation on the slopes of their native hills which is the main source of their food-supply. At present, an insignificant section of them has adopted plough-cultivation in the plains, mostly in imitation of the Meitheis of the plains. Hunting

and fishing may be found here and there, not as means of livelihood, but as sports. They have a few domestic animals of which the pig and the domestic fowl are the most important ones. Cows and buffaloes appear to have been recently introduced though the mithun is of comparatively older date. The more ancient domestic animals supply them with meat in individual and communal feasts and festivals but their more important use is as sacrificial animals to the deities and spirits who guide and control human destiny in this world. Milk or any of its products is not used by them generally; so the cows and buffaloes are possessed by those few families which have fields in the plains. Nowadays, however, milk is slowly coming into use though there is no market for it nor are the animals reared only for this purpose. The religious beliefs and practices of these Old Kuki tribes concentrate round a Supreme Deity—Pathien—and a host of spirits mostly presiding over different diseases and natural objects and phenomena. Animal sacrifice is the most common method of worship. Each of these tribes is divided into a number of exogamous, eponymous clans. At least among three of these tribes, namely, Chiru, Purum and Chawte, there is restricted exogamy of the tripartite type while the Aimols, Anals, Lamgangs and Kolhen have dual grouping or its relics; the rest practise free exogamy.

The above account is a skeleton-picture of the culture of the Old Kuki tribes of Manipur. Among a number of these tribes, *e.g.*, the Chirus, Purums, Koms, and Kolhens, we find the interesting custom which entitles the daughter's husband to take the most prominent part in all the socio-religious rites and festivities of his wife's father's house. Let us take a typical case—that among the Chirus. Among them, the husbands of the daughters of the family irrespective of their generation, are known as *mākshās*. The best type of *mākshā* for a man is his daughter's husband. Next, in order, are the sister's husband, father's sister's husband, the grandfather's sister's husband and so on upwards. When a man has no such

relative living, his place is taken by the husband of a woman of the clan. In any case and under all circumstances, a man must procure a *mākshā*; he cannot do without one. There are generally two *mākshās* for each family—the husband of the eldest daughter is the chief or senior *mākshā* while that of the next daughter is his assistant. The chief *mākshā* is socially regarded as the representative of the house-father and he is responsible for all the merits and demerits of the functions performed under his guidance and control at the house of his father-in-law. People invited on such occasions will praise him for efficiency and good management or blame him for the defects. They will never level any criticism against the householder himself. The latter, generally, on such occasions; moves about in a care-free fashion among his guests, occasionally enlivening himself with *zu* (rice-beer), the national drink, and talking about with the assembled guests. He has no duty towards them and does not concern himself in any way except providing the cost of the function. Such is the anomalous position of the *mākshā* among the Chirus; he acts as the master of the house where he has practically no legal position.

The duties of the *mākshā* are numerous and of varied types. His services are necessary on all important socio-religious occasions. Thus, he must be present in the house of his father-in-law on all occasions of marriage and funeral within the family. In case of illness too, when sacrifices are to be made to the different deities, his services are necessary. In course of religious rites and ceremonies such as the worship of Phaurungbā, performed by individual householders, the *mākshā* must be present to play his part. The day on which the marriage rites are performed among the Chirus, the two *mākshās* go with *zu* (rice-beer) to the house of the bride's father for the ceremony. If the bridegroom is not accompanied by even one *mākshā* the bride's people take note of it and at once realise a fine of a jar of *zu* (rice-beer). On this day the *mākshās* distribute *zu*

(rice-beer) to the assembled guests of the house. Their duties are more onerous on occasions of death. They carry the dead body to the burial ground, dig the burial pit, and fill up the grave with earth. For all these troubles they are given a turban each, by the deceased's family. Such is the nature of the functions of the *mākshā* among the Chirus.

The Purums, another Old Kuki tribe, living on the eastern bank of Lake Logtak, also show many of the traits described above. When a man constructs a new house, the *mākshā* prepares the requisite quantity of *zu* (rice-beer), of course at the expense of the builder, and keeps in the centre of the house to offer it to Nungchugba—one of their deities. This is followed by the ceremonial kindling of fire for the first time in the newly constructed house and this duty falls on the *mākshā*. Formerly they produced fire on this occasion by the sawing method and never brought it from another man's house but nowadays safety match is used. Each Purum village has a number of officers who look after the public affairs of the village. At the installation ceremony of each of these officers a feast is given to the villagers by the officer concerned. The magnitude of the feast, of course, depends on the importance of the office and the purse of the particular officer. At the feast given by a *khullākpa* (village headman) the *mākshās* kill the pigs, cook the meat and prepare *zu* (rice-beer). Their wives, collectively known as *ningans*, bring fuel, cook rice and help in preparing *zu* (rice-beer). It is the duty of the Purum village officers (*foumnāibās*) to worship Sābuhong, the deity concerned with the paddy crop, in the month of Mera, on a particular day previously settled. Though the worship is performed for the benefit of all the villagers, it is held only in the houses of the officers as private concerns. So, on this occasion too, the *mākshā* of the officer comes to his house and prepares *zu* (rice-beer) and distributes it among the invited villagers. Wealthy men among the Purums perform the Thien-hong-bā *genna* in order to attain social rank. A big feast is given and a mithun is sacrificed. The *mākshā* of the man kills the

mithun and takes a prominent part in the proceedings of the ceremony. The *mākshās* and the *ningans* have definite functions too in connection with the first hair-cutting ceremony of boys and girls. Marriage by service is the rule among the Purums and at the end of the service-period, when a man wants to bring back his son and daughter-in-law to his house, he asks his *mākshās* to come to his house. They with their wives, the *ningans*, forthwith repair to his house and prepare *zu* (rice-beer) and a curry called *shinsu* with pork. The *mākshās* and the *ningans* then start for the house of the bride's father carrying *shinsu* and three pots of *zu* (rice-beer) respectively. No other person is allowed to accompany them on this occasion. This curry and *zu* (rice-beer) are consumed only by the parents of the girl and her father's male siblings while it is tabooed to the girl herself and other female members of her father's sib. It is also tabooed to the boy and his siblings. At the end of this feast the bride goes to her husband's father's house in company of the *mākshās* and *ningans* who come to take her. Her husband remains for five days more in his father-in-law's house. In case of a death within the family the *mākshās* virtually perform all the functions connected with the disposal of the body. They wash the body ; four of them carry it on their shoulders to the burial ground ; they dig the grave and place the body within it and cover it up. On their return a feast is given the rice-beer and meat-curry for which had been prepared by the *mākshās* before they departed with the dead body. Thus the *mākshās* carry out all the duties in connection with the disposal of a dead body—the other relatives, friends and neighbours are mere on-lookers at this function among the Purums.

Similar traits may also be traced among other Old Kuki tribes such as the Koms and Kolhens (otherwise known as Koireng). Among the former the *mākshā* is one's daughter's husband and sister's husband. Among the latter *mākcās* (same as *mākshās*) are husbands of daughters, sisters, father's sisters, grandfather's sisters and so on upwards. The father's

sister's husband is among them the *mākshā par excellence*—the husband of the father's eldest sister being the chief *mākshā*. In both these tribes the duty of the *mākshā* is to prepare *zu* (rice-beer), cook meat and distribute both among the guests. He also acts as the representative of the householder on all occasions of feasts and festivities in the house and is responsible for all praises or blames. His duties are almost similar in connection with funerals. Among the Kabuis, a Naga tribe of Manipur, each family has two *mākshās* who are called *loogan* among them. They perform all the functions which are attributed to the *mākshās* among the Chirus with only one exception. Among the Kabuis the *loogan* is not the representative of the householder in the rites and ceremonies—this duty being relegated to two other persons who are known as *cānāunā*.

From the facts mentioned above it is clear that among a number of Old Kuki tribes the following culture-traits stand out clear :

- (a) The husbands of the daughters of a family have a common appellation, *viz.*, *mākshā*, irrespective of their generation-levels, which may be used by any person of the family. Their wives also have a common appellation, *viz.*, *ningan*. It may be mentioned here that each of the relatives included under either of these terms has a separate term of relationship by which he or she is referred to or addressed when individually considered.
- (b) Whenever any function of socio-religious importance is performed in a house the *mākshā* of the house-father must come to the house and take complete charge of it and discharge his duties to the entire satisfaction of all the persons concerned. He is usually helped in the discharge of his duties by his wife who also accompanies him on such occasions.
- (c) On all such occasions the *mākshā* is treated by the society as if he is the master of the house—whereas the real master assumes a minor rôle.

The Old Kuki tribes now trace their descent from father to children and practise patrilocality. Each of them is divided into a number of exogamous clans of eponymous character. Some of these tribes, e.g., the Aimol, Anal and Lamgang, have definite dual organisation (J. K. Bose—Dual Organisation in Assam, *Journal of the Department of Letters*, Calcutta University, Vol. XXV, 1934) while the Kolhens, according to Shakespeare, have traces of it; others have tripartite divisions, e.g., the Chirus, Chawtes and Purums; still others allow free exogamy among the different clans, e.g., Koms. Such is the social organisation of the tribes under consideration. Now, in the midst of this patrilineal, patrilocal and patripotestal society the *mākshā* with his functions as detailed in (b) and (c) appears out of place. What possible reasons would endow him with these functions in the house of his father-in-law where his wife's brother is the natural assistant and successor to the house-father? The present constitution of the family and the household, and the socio-psychological behaviour which subsists between a man and his wife's family do not explain this peculiar position of the *mākshā*. So, we are forced to take recourse to historical reconstruction in order to explain the functions and position of the *mākshā*.

The functions which Old Kuki society now attributes to the *mākshā* essentially pertain to a society which practises matrilocality as the normal type of residence. Under this condition a man goes over to the house of his wife's parents after marriage and becomes a member of that household. He generally joins in all the economic efforts of the household to maintain itself and takes part in the social and religious functions of it too. Gradually with the departure of his wife's brothers by marriage, he assumes the reins of the household and manages it under the general guidance of his parents-in-law.<sup>1</sup> When the latter grow old and incapable he maintains them and steps into the place vacated by the father-in-law in the socio-religious sphere of the

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Khasi custom.



group. He is primarily responsible for the last rites of his parents-in-law as he is to enjoy all the property left by them and as by that time his wife's brothers have perhaps all left the household after marriage. He takes a prominent part at the marriage of his wife's brothers as he has to discharge this duty during the old age of his parents-in-law and more so after their demise. Similarly he acts as the master of the house on all occasions of social feasts and festivities and religious rites and ceremonies. This, of course, went on from generation to generation with the result that these functions came to be indissolubly associated with the son-in-law. Now, under these circumstances, when matrilocal residence was abolished and its place was taken by patrilocal residence, the constitution of the household changed. Instead of being composed of a man, his wife, his son-in-law, his daughter and their children and temporarily his sons, it came to be constituted of himself, his wife, his son and son's wife and their children. The daughter with her husband and their children had no place in this household. The son-in-law thus becomes dissociated from the father-in-law and is released from the duty of maintaining him and at the same time deprived of the property of his father-in-law which he used to enjoy under matrilocal residence. But his position in relation to socio-religious duties is not so easily changed. It had roots deeper in the magico-religious beliefs of the people and so he is allowed or rather required nowadays to act as the master of the house of his wife's father when social and religious rites and ceremonies are performed therein in spite of the change in the constitution of the household.

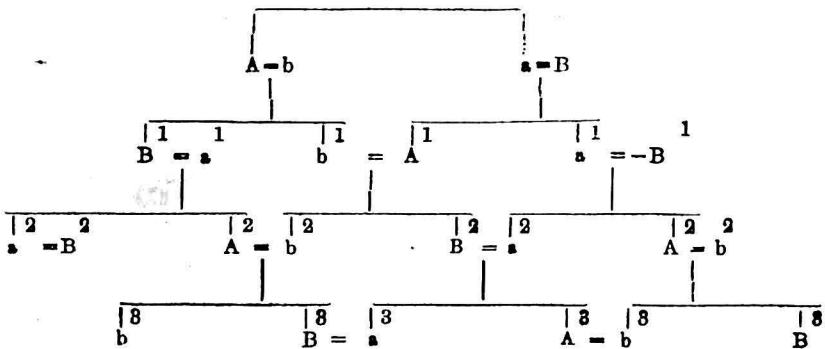
From a consideration of the facts stated above it appears that the *mākshā* of a man was his son-in-law at the first or initial stage; and this is borne out by the evidences from the Chirus among whom the daughter's husband is the *mākshā par excellence* at present. But, nowadays, we find that the term includes the sister's husband, father's sister's husband, grandfather's sister's husband and so on upwards, *i.e.*, the husbands

of the daughters of the family of whatsoever generation. This, however, is not warranted by simple matrilocal residence and we are forced to reconstruct certain other conditions in order to include these persons. Let us take the case of the sister's husband first. It may be mentioned here that he is not regarded as the best type of *mākshā* by any one of the tribes investigated. The duties entrusted to the daughter's husband in simple matrilocal communities might be taken up by the sister's husband when in addition to matrilocal residence two other conditions prevail, namely, (a) matrilineal descent and (b) cross-cousin marriage. Under these two conditions the sister's husband of a man is also his wife's brother. If descent be matrilineal then the wife's brother of a man is the nearest relative of his children (see Table I) and naturally he (the wife's brother) will take the leading part in all the socio-religious ceremonies of the house of his sister of which he is the natural guardian—the husband of the sister plays an unimportant part in such functions.

The father's sister's husband is also included in the list of *mākshās* and among the Kolhen he is the *mākshā par excellence*. In his case matrilocal residence with cross-cousin marriage of both the types explain the functions attributed to him. In a society with cross-cousin marriage of both the types a man's father's sister's husband is also his wife's father (see Table I) and mother's brother. So, with matrilocal residence, he goes to live with his wife's father, *i.e.*, his father's sister's husband; thus the latter, as head of the household, performs all the functions of his own house which is also the house of his daughter and through her, of her husband. Moreover, if the society be matrilineal, then as mother's brother of his daughter's husband, he has all the more reason to exercise the functions associated with the *mākshā*. Under the same conditions the father's father's sister's husband is also the husband of the wife's mother's mother and is thus entitled to exercise the functions of the *mākshā*.

From the above-noted facts it appears that if in a particular society we find that the duties attributed to the *mākshā* among some of the Old Kuki tribes are associated with the daughter's husband, sister's husband, father's sister's husband, father's father's sister's husband, and so on upwards, we may readily conjecture that the institution of *mākshā* originated in an atmosphere of matrilocal residence, matrilineal descent and cross-cousin marriage of both the types. The extension of the institution even up to the husbands of the daughters of the clan among the Chirus under particular circumstances is perhaps a secondary growth. The Old Kuki tribes among whom the institution of *mākshā* is now found do not practise at present matrilocal residence, matrilineal descent and cross-cousin marriage of both the types; they have instead patrilineal descent, patrilocal residence and cross-cousin marriage of one type namely that with the mother's brother's daughter and not with father's sister's daughter. But there are sufficient indications to show, besides the institution of *mākshā*, that all those conditions prevailed among these tribes in the past.<sup>1</sup>

TABLE I



Note.—A & a are brother and sister.

1. T. C. Das, Kinship and Social Organisation of the Purum Kukis of Manipur, Journal of the Department of Letters, Assam University, Vol. XXVIII, 1935.

