

ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT AMONG THE THADOU KUKI TRIBE IN MANIPUR

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INTRODUCTION

Christianity among the Thadou Kuki community in Manipur was brought in by two Missionary Societies. In Northern part, Christianity was brought in by the Arthington Aborigines Mission (AAM). Later the AAM handed over their mission to American Baptist Mission (ABM) in the year 1896 and William Pettigrew was the pioneer missionary. In the Southern part, Christianity was brought in by an Independent Welsh Mission called the Thado Kuki Pioneer Mission (TKPM) through Watkin R. Roberts.

1 FORMATION OF ASSOCIATION

Through the missionary work of the ABM the first Association in Manipur Kuki Baptist Association (KBA)¹ was established at South Changoubung with its office at Motbung in 1950. The Second Association called North East Kuki Baptist Association Manipur (NEKBAM)² was established in 1955, with its office at Phaicham. In the Southern Manipur, the churches founded by the TKPM (later rename as North East India General Mission- NEIGM) were divided according to languages. The people who prefer Kuki were grouped as Kuki Christian Association (KCA)³. Later on, denomination of every kind came into existence.

2 ECUMENICAL EFFORTS AND ITS FAILURE

2.1 Kuki Baptist Convention

The first Ecumenical effort was the formation of Kuki Baptist Convention (KBC). KBC was formed at Tujangwaichong on March 16, 1958 with the amalgamation of KBA and NEKBAM with its headquarters at Motbung and a Bible School at Phaicham Centre. However in 1967 a quarrel broke out within KBC on the issue of land, language, centre office etc. Thus KBA and NEKBAM once again declared KBC dissolved and its constitution abrogated with retrospective effect from the 3rd January, 1967. NEKBAM again continue as NEKBAM and KBA continue as KBA. But there were also a group of people who adhered to KBC, and thus the union of two Associations was divided into three separate Associations.

2.2 Kuki Christian Council

¹ KBA was later renamed Thadou Baptist Association (TBA)

² NEKBAM was later renamed Chongthu Baptist Churches Association (CBCA)

³ KCA was later renamed Evangelical Christian Association (ECA)

The Second Ecumenical effort was the formation of Kuki Christian Council (KCC). KCC was formed for common Christian literature work particularly Bible translation and Hymn book by Kuki Christians of various denominations such as Presbyterian Mission, Halflong, Cachar District, Assam, Baptist Mission, Nagaland, Manipur and Burma, KCA in Association with the NEIGM, Manipur and Methodist Mission, Burma, in 1959. However the 'Council' was transformed into a Church/another denomination called "Kuki Christian Church" on April 8, 1979 at Chalwa Baptist Church.

2.3 Kuki Chin Baptist Union

KCBU was formed as a federal union among the Baptist denominations. It began as a consultation of the Kuki-Chin Baptist leaders. The constituent members were KBC, CHBA, CBA, TBA, VBA and KRBCA. However KCBU also failed in three fronts. Firstly, it was confined only to the Baptist denominations; secondly, the members were too much conscious of their own nomenclature rather than dialogue on unity; also, the end of the conference (February 25-March 1, 1993 at Keithelmanbi village) also heralded the end of further activities.

2.4 Kuki Christian Leaders' Fellowship

The fourth Ecumenical effort was the formation of Kuki Christian Leaders' Fellowship (KCLF). After several years of misunderstanding among the Kuki Christian leaders, Kuki Christian leaders thought about reconciliation, keeping aside their personal differences, and formed KCLF in 1993, a forum for church leaders. During the inceptional period the fellowship was successful not only in reconciliation and working together of the church leaders but was also successful in inducing more love and closeness among the people. However after some years the organisational and personal differences began to loom large again. While other looked from a distance, KCC and CBCA withdrew from the Fellowship. And others moved further away and eventually disappeared from the scene. Now the associational leaders' meetings were mostly regarded as KBC and ECA.

3 REASONS OF ECUMENICAL FAILURE (Reflections)

3.1 Tribal Identity Issue

Normally all the non-Nagas in Manipur hills are collectively known as Kuki or Kuki tribes.⁴ The Schedule Tribe notification order in 1956 recognized all the Thadou speaking people in Manipur as Thadou tribe. However there are people among the Thadou clans⁵ who refuse to be called Thadou, but Kuki (directly). These people try to make the Thadou language as Kuki language, Thadou culture as Kuki culture... they even named the translation of Holy Bible into Thadou as “Kuki Reference Edition.” Moreover the recognition of Kuki (the name of a nation) as a Tribe⁶ in Manipur in 2003 further widened the gap between the Thadou (support group) and Kuki (support group), politically and religiously. Therefore unless the tribal identity is not solved, it’s hard for the Thadou Kuki Churches to be united.

3.2 Clan Centric

Clanism is exclusive and therefore not healthy for any society. It causes division and disunity among the people inside and outside the Churches and Association. It won’t be a mistake to say that the division of the Thadou Kuki society into many Associations is the result of clannism. It is appropriate when some say, “TBA is formed by Sitlhou and Lhouvum clan; Thouthang, DOUNGEL and DIMNGEL clans formed the Chongthu Baptist Churches Association (CBCA); Lunkim, Lenthang, Lhangum, Chongloi and Hangshing KCC; and KBC belongs to Haokip,” (and they are indeed majority in each of the Association). There are people who are willing to die for TBA, KBC, KCC, CBCA, etc. but it’s not sure whether there will be anyone willing to die for Christ. It is because of the attachment people have to their own clan much more powerful than their attachment to the Churches and God, Ecumenical effort is always a failure.

3.3 Denominational Centric

The growth of strong and influential denominational churches is another major factor. By the time KCLF was formed in 1993, most of the churches already had firm administrative channels, possessed property and strengthened their ecclesiastical ties with their respective mother churches in the west or elsewhere. Moreover, the attitude of seeing one’s own faith and institution as the only best way is another factor that adds to the woes.

⁴ Kuki (like Naga) is a name of a nation/nomenclature which owned many tribes like: Lushei, Sukte, Zou, Simte, Thadou, Vaiphei, Paite, Hmar, Gangte, Chothe, Khongsai, Chongthu (Songthu), Lamkang, Anal, Chiru, Kom, Mayon, Monsang, Purum, Ralte, Mate, Thangkhal, Baite, Koireng, Koren, Aimol, etc.

⁵ The Thadou tribe includes the following clans: Guite, DOUNGEL, Sitlhou, Singsit/Singson, Kipgen, Haokip, Chongloi, Hangsing, Lamhao/Touthang, Lotjem, Haolai, Tuboi, Sa’um, Khuolhou, Lupho, Lumpheng, Misao, Mate, Baite, Lhungdim, Ngailut, Kiloung, Insun, Jongbe, Lunkim, Lenthang, Thangngew, Changsan, Lhangum, Khounghang, and Lhanghal/Hanghal, etc.

⁶ Prior to the recognition of Kuki as a tribe, the nation Kuki consisted of the above (footnote 4) tribes. But, after the recognition of Kuki as a Tribe, the clans in the Thadou tribes (footnote 5) were regarded as Kuki tribes.

3.4 Property, Possession and Position

The hard earned property and possession, its transfer and future use with its historical and legal implications were major concern for bigger and established churches. Also, the future of foreign funds received by some churches for their administrative as well as projects becomes uncertain which worries some of them. On top of that the positions that the present leaders held and the amount of salary and the benefits they enjoy are increasingly “threatened” as these were sure to undergo a radical change if such union has to take place.

3.5 Lack of Mass Awareness

The failure of ecumenical/union movement is also mainly due to lack of awareness and education on the part of local congregations. To an average Christian ecumenical or church union was an unheard of concept. Even the local church leaders and some pastors were mostly vernacular theological graduates having less or no idea of the ecumenical movement. Some who even doesn't have a theological training were not even aware of ecumenical movement. The strongest opposition was from these sections.

CONCLUSION

Christianity came to the Thadou Kukis as a dynamic force that spread all over the region with the result all the people have become Christians. However, Christianity that they were exposed to was a divided Christianity, divided in doctrines, belief, theology and practices. Although the pioneers were from the American Baptists and the Independent Welsh Mission in the South, different denominational bodies appeared in course of time whereby almost all the world's denominations can be found among these thinly populated tribes. There were numerous efforts to unify the Churches, yet so far, all the movements had failed.

Union movement among the Thadou Kuki people will be a success, when strongest opposition, the public/mass were made aware of its significance and importance. For that, lots of teaching has to be done through pamphlets, booklet, preaching etc. and Seminars should be conducted in every locality and every churches of every denomination. Moreover, a full term dedicated person who does not involve in any denomination is needed to carry on the work of unification movement. For, till today ecumenical leaders were church leaders of one particular denomination, who doesn't have time for ecumenism; and there used to be misunderstanding from people group of other denominations.