

# Re-interpreting the traditional Semiotic Culture of Chin-Kuki-Mizo

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**Abstract:** The Chin-Kuki-Mizos have various symbolisms representing ideas or characters, attributing them to natural objects or facts in their culture. The Chin-Kuki-Mizos are the ethnic group that has traced its origin to a mythological cave and are currently settled in different countries: Bangladesh, Myanmar and India. The rich customs and culture regarding signs, meanings and concepts are bound to their art and crafts. The Chin-Kuki-Mizos have specific customs, symbols, and signs to convey good and bad messages. All the interpretations, beliefs and superstitions are related to their social, economic, cultural, custom and political perspectives. The paper scientifically examines and interprets the traditional symbolism, meanings and concepts based on their socio-economy and custom culture.

**Keywords:** Symbol, sign, meaning, concept, art and craft, Chin-Kuki-Mizo (CKM)

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## 1. Introduction

The Chin-Kuki-Mizos are the ethnic group that has traced its origin to a mythological cave called *Khul/Khur/Chinlung* (Doungel J., 2011). Prof. Lal Dena states, "...ethnically, culturally, and linguistically, the Kuki-Chin-Mizo are the same people, having a common ancestry, common history, and common customary practices" (Dena, 2011). They have established themselves extensively in North-East India, Bangladesh (Chittagong Hill Tract), and Myanmar. The Chin-Kuki-Mizo (from now CKM) were agnostic, theism before becoming Christian. They believe in the existence of *Pathen* (supreme God), who rules the universe and *Thilha* (evil spirit), who causes bad happenings.

The characteristics of the CKM show their attachment to nature, adaptability to different topography and climates, capability to use any available materials for their livelihood and advancement in arts and science. Therefore, their traditional art and craft have diverse symbolic representations. Their culture's symbolism is deeply rooted in their rich, conventional belief system. They have guidelines outlining permissible and impermissible actions. They also have some specific symbols and signs to represent the good and the bad, a typical way of giving messages to others with signs and symbols, and symbolisms representing different meanings of their traditional practices.

The Semiotics of CKM is typical in nature and conventional in concept. Their unique symbols and signs are deeply rooted in their rich cultural heritage, setting them apart from other ethnic groups. The symbols and sign concepts were rooted in their long-standing traditional beliefs. Their profound culture, concepts, and beliefs unequivocally backed their interpretation.

## 2. Aims

The paper will examine the components of ethnology, such as symbols and indicators, and give a scholarly analysis of these traditional cultural features. It will explore the customary beliefs and principles linked to these components and then present an academic viewpoint on their socio-economic and traditional importance.

## 3. Methodology

This investigation relies on two sources of data: primary and secondary sources. The primary sources consist of personal interviews with influential leaders and well-known individuals in the community. The secondary sources are publications authored by local and colonial writers with extensive knowledge and thorough research.

## 4. Monuments and Sculptures

The traditional CKM socio-economy depends on the success of hunting and cultivation. The displayed animal heads on the front wall of a house (Haokip N., 2013) and agricultural products (Singon, 2013) in their

house play the role of trophies and symbolise their excellent hunting and cultivation. The visitors honoured families with several trophies on their front wall and inside the house because only that person can perform *Sa-ai*<sup>1</sup> and *Chang-ai*<sup>2</sup>. Anyone who wishes to know about the class of game played in any particular neighbourhood only has to look at the collection of skulls in the verandahs of the houses (Tuck, 1987). The erection of stone and wooden monuments marked the traditional celebration of success. The traditional CKM wooden monuments are no longer extant today due to their limited durability. A significant monumental stone artefact exists in the ancient village site of *Chassad*<sup>3</sup> King in the Thengbung Range of Churachandpur District, Manipur. The inscriptions on the stones depict various animals, such as elephants, tigers, deer, wild pigs, goats, and human figures, including girls. Analysing the depictions of animals and figures reveals that they primarily represent the socio-cultural aspects of the CKM.

The practice of erecting a memorial slab for the departed person conveys the person's status, like the trophies mentioned above. The CKMs started carving images like men, women, children, animals, gongs, beads, and guns (Tuck, 1987) in their memorial slabs during the late 1800s<sup>4</sup>. The carved images signify the deceased person's status as a sign of his or her profile. The memorial slab, for remembrance, has carved images, signifying several family members, the heads of the enemy he killed, the animals he killed in a lifetime and the valuable treasures he acquired.

The CKMs demarked their lands by natural rivers and mountains, erected pillars of stone or wood and planted trees. The border pillars are erected or planted trees in the presence of the village chiefs, council members and priests by taking a traditional oath called *sathin-salung*<sup>5</sup>. The border pillars are erected artificially where there is no river or mountain range to demark land boundaries between different villages. Any person who went against the decision or dismantled the stone would have a bad fortune. The contemporary monumental sculptures of the CKMs became socio-political and religious signs. The monumental sculptures are constructed primarily from fibreglass, cement, and bronze. The monuments have engraved Roman script on Christian occasions, and portraits or life-round sculptures are related to socio-politics.

## **5. Handloom and Handicraft**

The CKMs have a variety of handlooms and handicrafts, from fabric to cloths and raw materials to craft. Their attire meticulously captures the stunning colours and patterns of snakes, animals, birds, landscapes, flowers, stars, sky, agricultural products, and more. The first cloth they wove was in a pattern and colour of a tiger that obstructed the gateway of Khul<sup>6</sup> (Bhadur, 2000, 132). The woven cloth was now known as *Laijiang* or

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<sup>1</sup>*Sa-ai* is a festival celebration of excellent game hunting. A man who kills all kinds of animals, including big animals like tigers and elephants, can perform this festival.

<sup>2</sup>*Chang-ai* is the festival of Chin-Kuki-Mizo women to celebrate their cultivation success. A woman who could acquire more than one hundred baskets of paddy rice performed this festival.

<sup>3</sup>The Chassads are the eldest of the Haokip clan among the Kukis. They were one of the most influential Kuki chiefs since before the First World War. According to the oral tradition passed on from generation to generation and some written records, it can be calculated as a 100 to 300-year-old sculpture. Around the late 17th Century (C. Haokip), the Chassads ruled south of Manipur Valley and settled at Thiengbung hill range. The Chassads occupied the Chin Hills of Myanmar to the southern part of Manipur Valley for over a Century. At the end of 1877 (Mackenzie, 1884, p. 211), the Chassads, with their tributary off-shoots, once left Manipur valley as the chief was murdered by a high Manipuri official when the then Political Agent Colonel McCulloch invited him. From the above statement, the Chassads settled at Thiengbung Hills from the late 17th Century to 1877. Therefore, the monumental sculptures will be more than 140 years old.

<sup>4</sup>This was the written information and experience of Bertram S. Carey and H.N. Tuck given in their book "The Chin Hills", which commenced from the last week of October 1894 to April 1895. During their two-year expedition (1894-1895), the experience and information they collected may be later than that year. Therefore, the exact time was unknown, and it will be sure that what they experienced will be later by some more years.

<sup>5</sup>*Sathin-salung* (animals' liver and heart) is a Kuki traditional way of taking an oath concerned with the highest decision-making made by two or more chief with their council member to solve a disputed problem or whenever they take an important decision like war. After thoroughly discussing the particular matter, the congregation agrees or concludes followed by taking an oath. A pig or Mithun was killed for the entire congregation, and the liver, heart, lung, intestine and back fleshy were for the decision-making members only. By eating the meat, they pledge to adhere to the judgment. According to their belief, *Sathin-salung*, the inner portion of the animal, symbolises family, unity, secret deals, and the primal body. Anyone who goes against the decision after taking the pledge by eating the *Sathin-salung* will be thrown out of society, or even capital punishment can be given to him.

<sup>6</sup>See, Bhadur, Mutua. *Tribal Hand Woven Fabrics of Manipur*. Imphal: Mutua Museum, 2000, p.132. When the Kukis (Songthu/Chongthu) group came out from Khuric/Khul, a tiger obstructed them at the gateway. One of their leaders wove a cloth in the same pattern and colour as the tiger. With the help of the cloth, the leader crossed the gateway. The tiger considered him one of its fellow tigers and did not kill him. Then, the leader killed the tiger with his spear. Therefore, the whole family came out safely.

*Ponchial*, *Rulpuiyek* by *Aimol*, *Ponthal* by *Koireng* and *Thompui* by *Kharam*. Other popular cloth designs among the CKMs copied from the pattern of the snake (Python) are *Saipikhup*, *Khamtang* and *Thangnang* (Doungel N., 2009) (Lenthang, 2005, p. 125), (Guite, 2010) and (Koroung, 2013). The Kukis consider wearing clothes like *Saipikhup*, *Khamtang*, and *Thangnang* risky when crossing large rivers, as the pattern of the Python inspires the designs. They believe that Python lives in a river. The designs of the cloths mentioned above and their origination show the creativity, skill, and advancement of the Kukis in the weaving of cloths. One of the most common cloth designs is *Saipikhup*. They have several modified and distracted traditional clothes and other designs. The *Aimol*, *Koireng*, *Kom*, *Purum* (*Kom*), and *Thadou* communities cherish and utilise unique designs, reflecting their rich cultural heritage and traditions.

The traditional practices of headdresses before and after Christianity have some contrast in their culture. Before they practised Christian belief, headdresses were for both men and women. The item was constructed using a white Mollusca shell and incorporated traditional fabrics and textiles from other royalty. The clothes of their headdress can identify the social status of the CKMs, and now it's general for all.

The CKMs widely used earthen pots in the olden days. This vessel served multiple important purposes: cooking rice and curry, storing water, and preserving their traditional rice beer. Pot for rice beer has four different measuring sizes: *Hun-bel*, *Dangka-bel*, *Makhai-bel* and *Siki-bel*. The symbolic representation of the rice beer in CKM culture was highly valued. Rice beer of *Makhai-bel* and above is presented to the chief when they seek apology and forgiveness for what they did wrong to others. The chief and his cabinets granted the forgiveness served and counted that rice beer equal to one *Selpi* (mother-Mithun); they called it "*Sutlai Selpi*".

## 6. Philosophy and Worship

The CKMs believe that the omnipotent God is the creator of all things and has the power to bestow blessings upon all living beings. This belief is featured prominently in their philosophical framework and religious practices. According to their philosophy, they believed in the existence of good and bad (God and evil) and used different living things for worship. They worship God for blessing and fortification from bad happenings. One of the excellent symbolic materials they used for such worshipping was *Indoi*<sup>7</sup>. The installation of *Indoi* comprises multiple components, each bearing specific symbolic significance in the worship of God, collectively conveying a profound representation of divine blessing and protection. The above statements can be explicated clearly by the following incantations.

In the incantation word, while chanting in *Indoi*, we found the phrase like...

Take care of me as you have taken care of the mother pig with the slanted forehead,... he-goat with twisted horn,... indispensable sword made from *Gopi*,... useful gourd jar,...beautiful bangle made from *Gopi*,... pointed spear made from *Gopi*,... cord made from a fibre tree called *Khaopi*... (Chongloi H. , 2008) and so on.

The above chanting clearly shows that they prayed for care in the same manner as the mother pig's slanted forehead, the he-goat's twisted horn, the indispensable sword and the useful gourd jar, etc., were taken care of. For instance, in the phrase "*Take care of me as you have*", the performer (priest) was addressing some being [God] (Chongloi H. , 2008, p. 244) and from the phrase "*taken care of the mother pig with the slanted forehead*", they used the slanted skull of a mother pig as a symbol in an invocation to God.

The items utilised in *Indoi* are the finest possessions discovered in their environment, embodying their necessities in their religious practices. All items in *Indoi* utilised are symbols of worship. The components used in *Indoi* are *Vohpi dehkon* (a mother pig with a slanted forehead), *Kelcha kiheh* (he-goat with twisted horn), *Um*(gourd jar), *Chemkol*, *Teng & Chao* (Dao, spear and bangle respectively made from a domestic bamboo called *Gopi*) and *Khaopi*<sup>8</sup>(cord made from a fibre plant called *Khaopi*).

### 6.1 Indoi Symbolisms

**6.1.1 Vohpi dehkon:** *Vohpi dehkon* is a mother pig with a slanted skull. A mother pig and its slanted skull symbolise fertility and long life. The slanted skull effectively conveys the central subject and its symbolic

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<sup>7</sup>*Indoi* is a traditional installation material used for worshipping. There are two versions of the concept of *Indoi*. Some of the writers relate *Indoi* to the Kuki traditional religion and believe that they worship it as a "household god" (Shaw, 1997, p. 73) or main religious deity (Gangte, 2012, p. 209). Scholars like (Chongloi H., 2008), (Chongloi S., 2011, pp. 110-121) and others say that all the components of *Indoi* are the religious symbols of the Kukis used for worshipping God. According to their belief, by using *Indoi* as a religion or as a symbol for worshipping God, they were blessed in numerous aspects.

<sup>8</sup>*Khaopi* is a cord made from a wild fibre tree called *Khaopi*. It has more than 7-10 layers of fiber. This text emphasises the versatility of *Khaopi* in rope making. A nine "laam" two-ply rope made from *Khaopi*, as noted by Chongloi H. in 2008, was explicitly utilised to secure all the components of *Indoi*.

significance. Among the domestic animals, a pig is the most productive<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, they worshipped the slanted skull, symbolising its fertility and long life. They believed that by worshipping a mother pig with a slanted forehead they could live longer and bear many offspring like the mother pig.

**6.1.2 Kelchal kihéh:** Goat has a very typical character in various forms. The twisted horn symbolised long life, and the he-goat represented the male of the family<sup>10</sup>. Only a blessed and cared one could live till the horns become twisted. The horn is their pride for a goat. The statement, “If the female pig represents the female principle of the cosmic force, the male side represents the he-goat” (Chongloi H., 2008, pp. 245-246) is agreeable in presenting gender. The Biblical Commentary gives the male goat, representing strong-mindedness, singleness of purpose, and leadership rather than following (Ritenbaugh). Further, if we observe the status of the goat in CKM society and their patriarchal culture, the statement of Biblical Commentary may be applicable to represent males by a he-goat.

**6.1.3 Um pha:** The CKM used “Um” (gourd) to store water, wine, and seeds for sowing. The use of gourd jars in *Indoi* may be related to the CKM legend “*Ucha Pasal ni leh Tehsepi*”<sup>11</sup>. The gourd jar symbolised good agricultural production. There are two ways of interpreting the symbols. They used the gourd for worship to get blessings, such as the useful gourd, plants and fruits were blessed. Another interpretation is the quality and product of seeds stored in a gourd. Like the quality and product of seeds stored in gourd jars are cared for and blessed, their agricultural products could be cared for and blessed.

**6.1.4 Gopi:** *Gopi* is a kind of bamboo used to craft the components of *Indoi* skillfully. There are two admired idioms related to bamboo; “*Ingo leh gamgo iti kite thei ding ham?*” and “*thing um lou na'a Go kimang*”. The free translation is: “It is unthinkable to compare the cultivated [domestic] bamboo [*Gopi*] with the ones in the forest” (Chongloi H., 2008, p. 197) and “use of bamboo (*Gopi*) in place of wood where there is no wood” It will be convenient for the study to make clear the details of *Gopi* beforehand. The specialities of *Gopi* are:

- i. *Gopi* is a domestic bamboo and the most durable among the bamboo species.
- ii. It has the straightest and smoothest trunk.
- iii. Unlike the other bamboo species, *Gopi* is never extinct due to flowering.
- iv. It is the most helpful bamboo for arts and crafts.
- v. It is suitable for any craft and construction.
- vi. Because of its hardness, spears and knives are also made from it and can be matched with the iron knife.

The handy nature of *Gopi* makes it useful in the day-to-day life of CKM. Thus, it has a great place in CKM society and is even associated with religious rituals. Some of the materials made by *Gopi* are discussed in the following.

**6.1.4.1 Chemkol & Kolteng:** These two components, *Chemkol* (Dao) and *Kolteng* (spear) symbolise security (defensive and offensive) (Chongloi H., 2008). The two components are indispensable implements used daily as

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<sup>9</sup>Mother pigs usually have 5 to 10 piglets per litter and two litters yearly. According to Ask (<https://enviroliteracy.org/how-many-piglets-can-a-wild-pig-have>) some pigs have more than ten piglets per litter and up to three litters per year. It can produce more than 20-30 piglets in a year. The life span of a pig is up to 30 years. Only an old pig has a slanted skull. The average age of a pig with a slanted skull is 20. That means a slanted skull mother pig living for an average of 20 years can produce around 500 pigs in her lifetime.

<sup>10</sup>According to the Biblical Commentary, the male goat represents strong-mindedness, singleness of purpose, and leadership rather than following (Ritenbaugh). Physically, the goat has a specific character: curious and intelligent, willing to eat almost anything, can climb mountains, and will explore new things in their surroundings. Generally, the average life span of the goat is 20 years, and he-goat living till the horn twisted is scarce. Their age counts from the layers of their horn. When the horn becomes twisted, the age of that he-goat may be above 20 years.

<sup>11</sup>There is a legend about the gourd and its sacred uses. The legend was told by Pu Ngulhopao Hangsing of Khengjang Village, Sadar Hills, Manipur and cited by H. Chongloi in his book Chongloi, Hemkhochon. *Indoi: A Study of Primal Kuki Religious Symbolism in the Hermeneutical Framework of Mircea Eliade*. New Delhi: ISPCK, 2008, pp.195-196. “Once upon a time, two orphan brothers were in a village. They hardly have two square meals a day. One day, an old and ugly lady visited the village and was refused hospitality by all except the two orphans. They took her as their guest but apologised that they could not procure anything for her to eat. However, she miraculously produced rice sufficient for the three each morning and evening without the two knowing where it came from, and she stayed on. The old lady urged the two to prepare *jhum* cultivation. They complied, although worried about how and where they would get seed to sow. The lady miraculously procured the right number of seeds by shaking her skirt. The two brothers sowed those seeds, and only gourd vines sprouted from the field. She asked them to collect all the ripe gourds during harvest time. They were to break all these ripe gourds, resulting in a big mound of rice matching the height of the nearby hill. From thence, they became rich.”



weapons, so the symbolic meanings for *chemkol* and *kolteng* are different from other components. The subject of incantation was not the material but its power of protection.

**6.1.4.2 Gopi Chaokol:** The traditional bangle of the CKM people is known as *Chaokol*, crafted initially from brass and later from Gopi for *Indoi*. It symbolised a CKM damsel and her beauty. Beauty includes the physical, character and socio-cultural traits of a girl. They used the article for a life of purity, as exemplified in the virgin damsels (Chongloi H., 2008, pp. 249-250). Chongloi also noted that the CKM's ethical sense of purity got top priority. Thus, the subject was about the purity of CKM girls.

**6.1.4.3 Pocha:** *Pocha*, a traditional basket made from bamboo (*Gopi*) strips, is used for measuring and storing agricultural products and goods. It is also essential for managing household chores. *Pocha* is used to store all the essentials.

**6.1.4.4 Khaopi:** *Khaopi* (a wild fibre) has almost ten layers of fibre and has a symbolic meaning in CKMs' social, cultural, customs, economy, security, politics, and development. The thick layer of *Khaopi* was compared with the chief's reasoning. The chief could have several reasoning layers to administer the village in all aspects. So, the two-ply rope of nine "*laam*" (length measurement unit) symbolised plaiting their social, culture, custom, economy, security, politics and development.

Some items were not included among the core components of *Indoi* but played a primary role in assembling and decorating. Articles like *Ahkang-mul*, *Sekhom*, *Seboh*, *Thinghe*, *Goboh*, *Gopi-tul* and *Vomgui* were collected and used significantly to decorate the *Indoi*. *Ahkang-mul* (a feather of white fowl) was used to give the message of purity, safety, faith, beginning and protection of the family. The erected *Sekhom* (post made from *Se* tree) symbolises the morning<sup>12</sup>. The thick foliage of the *Seboh* (bundle of *Se* leaves) and *Goboh* (bundle of bamboo leaves) make them used for *Indoi* decoration. Other articles like *Thinghe* (a tree of an Oak family), *Vomgui* (wild creeper) and *Gopi-tul* (rope made from Gopi bamboo) are the most commonly valuable articles in their everyday life.

## 7. Chin-Kuki-Mizo Dos and Don'ts Culture

CKM society has some permissible and non-permissible things based on their belief. For instance, during house construction, CKMs ensure that their house faces to the east - to avoid loss of occupants. They used odd numbers in pillars, stilt, and beams – as they think event numbers bear bad omens. They start thatch-roofing from the left and go rightward – for them, moving leftward was the direction of evil. The above version was their belief, but essentially, their house faced the east to get morning sunlight. Pillars and beams are odd in number for extra support and proper mounting. Moving towards the right side is more convenient for right-handed persons in the roofing thatches, which they construed differently.

A small amount of rice is kept in a cleaned-up space to perform the house venue selection rituals. If the rice is not scattered, they select the location to build the house (Doungel N., 2009, p. 4) and proceed with all required tasks. The places where insects and animals dislocated or disturbed the rice at night meant that there were insects and animals which would also be harmful or dreadful for the occupants and the house construction materials.

The CKM traditional hearth keeps burning with firewood continuously throughout the year. A new piece of *Thingkhokhap* (more significant in size) and *Thingkho* (smaller firewood) should be inserted before the total consumption of firewood. They also never burnt a single firewood at the hearth. According to their belief, the total consummation of *Thingkhokhap* foretold the untimely death of both heads of the family. Burning a single firewood might result in the house owner's companionlessness. They believed that burning out all firewood in the hearth was a sign of a bad omen, causing the loss of the family. There is also a saying, "*pasal umna thingkho alhumngai poi*" (Lamkhotin, 2015). In plain translation, it means "where there is a man, firewood cannot burn completely". The interpretations and beliefs might seem superstitious. However, it was known for its high-quality work culture of men who were never insufficient to supply firewood. Traditionally, collecting more considerable firewood called *Thingkhokhap* was the duty of men or male family members, and other firewood was the duty of women. Therefore, the belief or the saying might be an excellent parable to practice in youngsters' work, so they might work harder to fetch firewood. Moreover, in the olden days, the use of matches might have been significantly less. They produced fire from dried fibres, stones and grasses. So, keeping the hearth burning might have saved the trouble of igniting the fire repeatedly.

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<sup>12</sup>According to the Kukis, East is associated with morning. For them, morning means a new day or life, an early age, a longer life to live, hope, and a bright life.

## 8. Conclusion

The above interpretations, beliefs, and superstitions provide an intriguing insight into the CKM people's diverse and prosperous way of life. The art and crafts of the CKM people are rich in symbolism, with each symbol representing profound ideas, qualities, and the natural world. Their customs and traditions intricately intertwine with a complex web of signs, meanings, and concepts seamlessly incorporated into their art and crafts. The study concludes that CKM culture, customs, symbols, and signs communicate positivity and negativity, which are deeply rooted in their social, cultural, economic, and political perspectives.

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