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## Mim Kut: Festival with enormous zeal and devotion

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### Abstract

Mim Kut Festival is a post-harvest festival celebrated in Nagaland, North East India, and also in other parts of Mizoram. The festival is celebrated and honored by the Kukis. It is one of the many popular festivals in North-East India. The celebration is ostentatious and is of important essence to the Kuki tribe. It expresses exhilaration and triumph over the harvest of Mim (Ancient Grain/Sorghum), which is the last harvest crop for the season. The festival celebrates the harvest of maize in particular. The Mim Kut Festival celebrates the annual harvest of the ancient grain (Mim). The origin of the festival has its ties connected to the Kuki story of "Mim". The original story explores the love and bond of two brothers when they were abandoned by their mother. Lendou and his younger brother shared a piece of Mim when their stomachs were wrought with hunger. It was Mim that got them through these hard times, brought them closer, and taught them, love. Mim is the last harvest of the year in the Kuki society. The Kuki people strongly believe that their deceased ancestors' souls rise from their graves and visit their family homes. The people offer tribute to the dead souls in wine naturally prepped from rice at every home. Kut for the people of Kuki-Chin-Mizo is more than a festival or ritual; it is their way of life reflecting their rich tradition and common identity which at the same time has relations with their socio-economic and political system. Mim-Kut, which is normally held on 17th January each year has the potential to promote unity among the already shattered Kuki-Chin-Mizo community and provide reunification which becomes imperative.

**Method and Objective:** The objective of the current study is to highlight the significance of Mim-Kut in the Chin-Kuki-Mizo community. The current study is a critical analysis of the secondary sources, followed by a semi-structured interview. It is also to acknowledge their presence in the present States of India as old as the history of the land itself through the history of KUT.

**Keywords:** Sorghum-ancient grain, Kut, Chin-Kuki-Mizo, festival, harvest, maize, culture, and tradition

### Introduction

A festival is an event ordinarily celebrated by a community and centering on some characteristic aspect of that community and its festivals or traditions often marked as a local or national holiday. Next to religion and folklore, a significant origin is an agriculture. Food is such a vital resource that many festivals are associated with harvest time. Religious commemoration and thanksgiving for good harvests are blended in events that take place in autumn, such as Halloween in the northern hemisphere and Easter in the southern. Festivals often serve to fulfill specific communal purposes, especially in regard to commemoration or thanksgiving. The celebrations offer a sense of belonging for religious, social, or geographical groups, contributing to group cohesiveness. They may also provide entertainment, which was particularly important to local communities before the advent of mass-produced entertainment. F, but it has hardly any fun and gaietyics also seek to inform community members of their traditions; the involvement of elders sharing stories and experience provides a means for unity among families [1].”

Kut is synonymous with 'festival' or the 'harvesting festival' and represents an important cultural expression of the Chin-Kuki-Mizo group of people. The word 'feast' was derived from the middle French word 'Festivus' and the Latin word 'Festa'. Etymologically, it is similar to a festival. It was first recorded as a noun in 1589. The onset of autumn heralds the arrival of a much-awaited festival- Chavang Kut for the Chin-Kuki-Mizo community (CHIKIM) of Northeast India. Kut, as a festival has different types while it is the most prominent Kut in Manipur, Chapchar Kut is widely celebrated in Mizoram and Mim Kut in Nagaland (among the Chin-Kuki-Mizos). Mim Kut, which is a post-harvest festival of "mim"

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(Ancient grain/Sorghum) crops is celebrated in January. Another post-harvest festival is Chavang-Kut, which is widely celebrated by the Chin-Kuki-Mizos during the month of November. Mim Kut is regarded as the oldest festival of the Kuki People, it was a ceremony organized for the dead. Feasting is a part of it, but it has hardly any fun and gaiety. Mim means job's tears. It is observed during the harvesting season of maize, job tears, and millets. It was held in memory of the deceased.

### Origin and Development

*Kut*, is one of the largest and most popular festivals of the Kuki-Chin-Mizo, the people who were once subjugated and divided by the British in the Anglo-Kuki War of 1917-1919 into different political divisions. Although they are one and the same by blood, by history, and by custom, these people are today divided and known by different names in different countries. They are known as Kuki in Manipur and Nagaland, Chin in Myanmar (Burma), Mizo in Mizoram, and Kuki or Ralong in Tripura, etc. Kut is a cultural heritage which has been enjoyed once a year by the young and old, rich and poor forgetting all their worries. There are different kinds of Kuts:

- Mim Kut (job's tear),
- Pawl Kut (Guava harvest) and
- Chang Kut (Paddy Kut) Chapchar Kut or Chapphou Kut.

The practice of Kut wherever they live symbolizes their cultural unity and their common identity as a nation with the same history and origin. Kut for this community is their culture nothing can replace it on earth. It has also a connection with their religion. Kut is a common feature of their social life but not because of its pomposity, merriment, and gaiety of the celebration but because of its religious aspect. The beginning of the practice of Kut is in oblivion. But if the ancient Israelites' Passover celebration is to be its origin, it is more than 3000 years old. Kut is not a state invention like many festivals of today. On the other hand, the origin of this festival is based on the story of two brothers named Kuki and Chin. This is essentially a story about the undying love and affection that a bond of blood can display. It is believed that in the past, both of them were abandoned by their mother. And once upon a time, during their days of isolation and emotional vulnerability, Kuki felt very hungry. So, Chin gave a piece of Mim (a dish) to Kuki to quench his hunger helping his brother in his time of need. And it is to pay tribute to this love of theirs, and also to thank God, the Chin-Kuki-Mizos people celebrate the Mim

Kut Festival <sup>[2]</sup>.

The Mim Kut is a socio-cultural-spiritual Festival of the Chin-Kuki-Mizos and it is a vivacious and colorful carnival that is celebrated with wonderful enthusiasm and eagerness. The Mim Kut is regularly celebrated throughout December-January after the hard labor of Jhum, amidst wide flourish and amusement. The first day is centered on rituals and customs. The second day involves celebrations. Meals are prepared from bread, and people take a hearty meal from bread items. The festival of Mim kut is celebrated in the month of August-September.

The Mim Kut is a maize festival. It is dedicated to invoking the dead souls and offering tribute to them. Ritual offerings are made to near and dear ones who have passed away in the previous year. During the time of Mim Kut celebration, it is believed that the dead ancestors visit the houses of their children and relatives, and special offerings are made for them. These offerings include fresh vegetables, maize, bread, and necklaces. Often clothes are also dedicated to their memories. The Mim Kut is therefore a blissful ritual that adds a new feather to the spectacular tiara of carnivals <sup>[3]</sup>, the festival is observed in the later part of December after the crop is harvested. It is celebrated every year. The festivities are celebrated for about two consecutive holidays.

### Mim-Kut in Nagaland

The name Mim Kut is derived from a plant called Mim (a grain/sorghum). Mimkut festival is a post-harvest festival of the Kukis, recognized by the Government of Nagaland (17<sup>th</sup> January). The recognition of the festival was made possible due to the efforts and initiatives taken by Lt. Langkam Kuki MLA and Lalkholam Singsong MLA during the first Assembly after the Statehood of Nagaland. 'Mim' is a kind of food grain known as 'jobs tears' and the predominance of 'Mim' could be traced back to the true story of Lendou and his brother which is known within the Kuki society. Lendou and his younger brother shared a piece of Mim to show their brotherhood love in times of hunger and distress when they were abandoned by their mother. Mim is the last harvest crop of all seasons. The sowing of Mim normally starts at the beginning of May and is harvested in the latter part of December therefore, Mimkut is best regarded as a post-harvest festival of the Kukis. As Mimkut 2014 was being organized as part of the 50 years Statehood celebration, Health Mela was also organized by the Department of Health & Family Welfare and the Department of IPR screening documentaries on the Statehood of Nagaland. The festival has received wide recognition from the state and tourism department.





**Fig 1:** Highlights of MimKut and Mim (Ancient Grain/Sorghum)

The tradition handed down orally from generation to generation says that the Kukis originated from a subterranean underworld called “Khul”. They came out from this “khul” in search of better land. They brought with them a number of cereals such as millet, tapioca, beans, yam, etc. After they came over the ground, they found paddy and jobs tears together, which were brought across a river called ‘Jwinanhem’ by a pair of wild rats on a bamboo sheath tucked in their mouths. Gradually they found Mithun from a place called ‘Sisep’, Pig from ‘Bonnol’, and fowl from ‘Molkon’, which they domesticated. They would lavishly use these animals during such festivals. Thus, the cultivation of ‘jobs tears started’ and they found that it was more productive and yielded better harvests. The Kukis have rich traditions and cultural heritage that are distinct, unique, and impressive. The land of the Kukis is blessed with rich customs and traditions and the folklore of the Kukis represents the rich variety of the Kuki culture. The Kukis have several festivals such as Mimkut, Chappjon Kut, and Chavang Kut, etc, and the rich customs, culture, and tradition of the Kukis, a legacy from their forefathers are reflected in the numerous festivals celebrated by the Kukis [4]. Kut for the people of Kuki-Chin-Mizo is more than a festival or ritual; it is their way of life reflecting their rich tradition and common identity which at the same time has relations with their socio-economic and political system. Kut has the potential to promote unity among the already shattered Kuki-Chin-Mizo community and provide reunification which becomes imperative. The followings are some important rituals of the Mim-Kut festival:

- The Kuki people carry out ceremonies to honor age-old traditions of this important Kuki festival.
- They also pay homage to the souls of their deceased ancestors.
- There are extravagant dance performances and signing performed by cultural groups from different villages with a religious edge to them. Large traditional drums, long horns, and other conventional instruments are used to produce harmonized cacophonous music.
- The Mimkut State festival allows people to join in the merriment and celebration of the Kuki society.
- The Kuki people exhibit their ethnic culture through artwork that represents their roots.
- There are numerous games, contests, fashion shows, talent hunts, voice hunts, and other fun competitions and activities along with musical rock concerts, food stalls, fairs, and sports [5].

However, the modern Kut celebration is considered to have less meaning and lost its traditional significance. The main events generally are singing, dancing and a beauty show. Modern Kut celebration lacks both traditional values as well as the need of our society in the new setting. Many have shared their opinions on the need to introspect and retrospect on the nature of Kut celebration. The value has diminished day by day. It has come to be controlled by a few political groups who under their wish organize the festival; no input system takes place and suggestions from the public are not taken into consideration.

### **The Remaking and Re-Presentation of Traditions and Interpretations**

In the past, the Kut festival was primarily important in the religio-cultural sense. Being an agricultural society, agricultural processes and practices were highly ritualized in the Chin-Kuki-Mizo society and this was done under the guidance of the village priest called ‘Thempu’. They had a rite for setting up of a new village, purification of the forest when choosing a site, purification of soil after slashing and burning down the forest, and dedication of seeds just before sowing them and during the weeding season. They also had labor rituals and thanksgiving or the harvesting festival. The underlying principle behind the observance was to give credit to the gods for the abundant harvest. It was a form of communication by the community to supernatural elements and was originally inspired by a socio-religious function. In trying to understand, the effect of the shifting ‘stages’ or changing context on ritual efficacy, social function, and interpretation. However, the performance of staged rituals lacks ‘commitment’ from the side of the performers, producers, and audience. Such performances also lack ritual significance: they may entertain but they cannot be efficacious. When somebody performs on ‘the stage’ in order to earn money, or has monetary gain from performances in other ways, it decreases the cultural value of the performance. The underlying argument is that ritual is more efficacious than staged performance or theatre. It is also presumed that authenticity or even cultural essence in ‘traditional’ rituals is absent in ‘non-traditional’ settings [6]. In line with Hoinelthing [7], we can state that the rituals of the Kukis reflect the tribal worldview of a sense of reciprocity and respect towards the other creations in the cosmos. The local people knew the need for a built-in compensation for human actions or some act of ‘reciprocity’. Rituals facilitate a discourse between humans and spirits to prevent a crossing of their paths. It is a clear

demarcation and marking of each other's separate domains of existence or 'space' and the essence of respect for the other. The ritual for purifying land and selection of sites for cultivation (Lou-Mun-Vet ritual) showed the sensibility and sensitiveness of the people towards the other beings in the cosmos. Permission was sought from the spirits who were believed to be the previous occupants and there was the observance of a day's curfew as a symbolic expression of condolences for all the animals and insects that perished in the jungle fire during the clearing of the field. 'Maintaining harmony and balance requires that even necessary acts of violence be done "in a sacred way"'. Thus, nothing is taken from the earth without prayer and offering.

In both the state of Nagaland and Mizoram Mim-Kut celebration, there were dance performances that dominate the scene: Sa-ai Changai dance, Jou-Lei-Kon, Sagol-Kengkhai, Salu Laap Lam, and Aw Thinghang Gam. As Gadamer rightly says, any festival attains its life form in the community which celebrates it. Though their origin can be traced back to the enactment of events or time, they exist in the present only by being and whenever celebrated and represented. An in-depth study of the historical context and tradition of these dances would reflect the society's cultural lore, orientations, and worldview. The folk dances are not merely a showcasing of art, rituals, or an act of recreation. They reflect the cultural lore, orientation, and worldview of the community practicing them. They show what elements are important to the Kukis, for example, the community life as also the centrality of the wild boar/pig in the customary practices and culture. The land is valued and the agricultural system as a life-giving source is deemed important; therefore, both of these were highly ritualized and celebrated. The Kukis also believed in the concept of a benevolent God who is omnipotent and needs to be propitiated. Their belief in the continuation of life after death is evident from the kind of preparation that is being made for their journey into the world of the dead. The setting stage for folk dances has changed today from the village courtyard to the formal stages either of the state or of a social or political event. In the past, it used to be a jovial community affair, which was inclusive of every willing member of the village. Nowadays, it is performed either by selected volunteers (usually the village youth organizational group) or paid performers who are specially trained and performed only on special occasions even within village settings. It is no longer a spontaneous dance but rather a staged one and not everyone, except for the older populace, knows either the essence of the Kut (either Mim-Kut or Cjvang Kut) celebration or the performances displayed in the celebration <sup>[6]</sup>.

### Discussion and Conclusion

Even before the advent of the missionaries who came in the 1900s, the worldview of the Kukis was a religious one. They believe that god (Pathien) who rules the universe, gives life to everything.<sup>38</sup> For them, Indoi usually kept in one corner of the house is the symbolism that affirms the ever presence of Pathien (God) at all times.<sup>39</sup> 'A slanted mother pig skull, a piece of a he-goat's curved horn, bracelet, dao, a jar made from a gourd, etc., are the various components that constitute an Indoi.' This belief in the existence of one Supreme Being as the creator and sustainer of all called, 'Chung Pathien' or 'Holy Father of above' is the core of the primal religion. This worldview associates nature, humans,

and a supreme being as connected in a system and attributes the existence of the cosmos to the supernatural. The feeling of supremacy over nature, hierarchy, centrality, or anthropocentric attitude, which is so familiar in the modern day, was not evident in the past. Rev. S. Prim Vaiphei said, 'there was a time when there was diminishing importance of Kut from the collective or the individual psyche. With the advent of the Christian gospel, some of the Christian conservatives objected to the observation of Kut or singing of folksongs or traditional songs. It was forbidden to even mention Kut in society. When I was the Youth Secretary in the year 1978-79, some leaders including one by the name of Major Pagin tried to revive the observation of Kut as it was a unifying symbol of the Kuki Chin group. So, it was revived in the year 1979 <sup>[8]</sup>.'

Even in the past, the celebration of Chavang Kut played a very important political function in the village administration. Any member of a village failing to participate in the post-harvesting festival without a proper justification for his or her absence was considered no longer a denizen of the village. It could affect their membership in the village. It was also a time of the year when a meeting would be held under the leadership of the village chief. The post-harvesting festival brings together the Chin-Mizo-Kuki group of people in Manipur on a common stage as brethren with a common origin, history, and culture. It leads to identity affirmation as it offers an opportunity to emphasize values, to announce, define, and re-affirm commitment to sacred aspects of customary practices in an era, which no longer has time for tradition. The integrative functions that such performance aims at revitalizing shared sentiments and beliefs of members of the society. It serves to sustain the vitality of common beliefs to keep them from being effaced from memory and, in sum, to revive the most essential elements of the collective consciousness <sup>[6]</sup>. The celebration also provides a space for negotiation on political matters or even grievances towards the state and addresses ongoing social issues. It has been playing a crucial role in village politics in the past and therefore, its tryst with politics is not a new phenomenon.

The celebration of Kut festival fulfills itself only through their representation and re-enactment in the contemporary time. The celebration is a meeting point for tradition and modernity. It does not entirely replicate the traditional but the traditional is given new meanings and interpretations in another historical context. Consequently, the celebration of Kut is meaningful only because of its association with the past or its historical tradition and explanations. Therefore, though it represents a cultural continuity, it does it in a way allowing, 'The possibilities inherent in the tradition to show themselves through the interpretation and, thereby, to create new possibilities. Therefore, the Kut celebration represent' myriad forms of presentations and representations of different facets of community, history, mythology, politics, economy, and religion, for decades. It is not only a site of cultural representation, but 'Is a site of cultural dialogue, contestations, protests and critiquing of the internal societal imbalances and irregularities, and hegemony of both the internal and external forces. It also serves as a domain of regulation of social differences.'<sup>[6]</sup>

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