

'Kabui Messiah': The Jadonong Movement in Manipur

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Introduction

No doubt due in part to its ethnic diversity, the northeastern corner of India has since the beginning of the present century been a fruitful area for innovative tribal and ethnic movements. The earliest of these was probably the Kuki Confederacy, which was an outcome of Kuki armed resistance to the British in 1917-1919. The Tangkhul Naga Long (Assembly) came into being soon after, and around independence there arose several ethnic political groupings – the Hmar Congress and National Union, the Mizo Union, the Naga National Council, and so on. This paper focusses on the precursor of two closely allied Naga movements, the Zeliangrong Council and the Manipur Zeliangrong Union, both of which were formed in 1947 and sought to bring together the Semei, Liangmei and Rongmei Nagas¹. In tracing the historical roots of these movements we hope to show how important a role the traditional Naga religion played in early resistance to British rule and in the formation of a cohesive Zeliangrong identity.

The Historical Background to the Jadonong Movement

The state of Manipur came under the facto British control towards the end of 1891². Its central fertile valley, the home of the Manipuris or Meiteis,

1 The nomenclature is confusing. The Zemei and Liangmei Nagas are also known as the Kacha Nagas; the Kabuis are also called the Rongmeis. In 1947 the term Zeliangrong (Zemei + Laiangmei + Rongmei) was coined, partly on the basis of the mythical common ancestry of the three groups, partly as a result of the feeling of unity which the Jadonong-Gaidinlui movement inspired in them. On the Zeliangrong Council and the Manipur Zeliangrong Union, see further Gangumei Kabui: *The Zeliangrong Movements, an historical study*, in: K.S. Singh, *Tribal Movements in India*, vol 1 (New Delhi 1982, pp 53-66).

2 See Parratt, John and Parratt, Saroj: *Queen Empress vs Tikendrajit, the Anglo-Manipuri conflict of 1891*. (Delhi 1992)

was administered by a Political Agent responsible to the Manipur Durbar. The surrounding ranges of hills – comprising some two thirds of the total land area of the state and inhabited by various Naga and Kuki groups – came under direct British administration, each hill tract having its own Sub-Divisional Officer. The Kabui, or Rongmei, Nagas occupied the hills to the north west of the valley around the district headquarters at Tamenglong. The Kabuis formed a homogenous group with the Zemei Nagas of the adjacent North Cachar Hills and the Liangmeis of south west Naga Hills. Interspersed between them were the Kukis, later migrants who had settled in previously unoccupied regions of the hills. When the Kukis rose in revolt against British domination in 1917 the conflict spilled over into inter-tribal warfare between Kukis and Nagas with much bloodshed on both sides³. The hill tracts, some virtually inaccessible, were difficult for the British to control, and resources were seldom adequate for the task. From the beginning of the twentieth century a new factor intruded into the Kubuis' primal world as Christian missions began their work in the Manipur hills⁴. Thus by the 1920s there were in place a number of those elements – resentment of colonial control, inter-ethnic animosities, new religious claims – which act as catalysts to messianic movements.

The cult which Jadonong inspired, then, did not emerge out of a political and religious vacuum. Indeed there is a sense in which it and the complementary movement of Jadonong's more famous follower and successor, Gaidinlui, can be seen as part of a continuum, for north east India had experienced several such messianic movements before.⁵ Jadonong's most immediate predecessor was a Kachari, Sambudan. Beginning his career as a healer Sambudan had attracted a large following. He subsequently claimed that he was inspired by the spirits to lead a rebellion against the British. Sambudan occupied and fortified the old Kachari capital at Maibang and quickly established his authority over the surrounding villages. He claimed that he had been given secret knowledge, and that he had rediscovered the writing which, according to their myths, the Nagas believed they had lost in ancient times. He also promised his followers magical immunity from British bullets. Sambudan's followers eventually challenged a force of British police sent to arrest him and were dispersed

3 For a useful summary of the Kuki rebellion see Sir R. Ried: *History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam from 1883-1941* (Shillong 1942) pp 79ff.

4 For Christianity in Manipur see F. Downs: *The Mighty Works of God* (Gauhati 1971) and Lal Dena: *Christian Missions and Colonialism, a study of the missionary movement in north east India with particular reference to Manipur and the Lushai Hills* (Shillong 1988).

5 See S. Fuchs: *Rebellious Prophets* (London 1965).

with much bloodshed. Sambudan himself subsequently died of his wounds. Though his mission was a failure it gave rise to the hope of a new saviour who would fulfil the task which Sambudan had set himself of liberating the Nagas from foreign rule. Jadonong thus grew up in an atmosphere laden with messianic expectations.

The Religious Background: Kabui Religion

Though Jadonong's religious ideas emerged at a time when the two dominant religions of Hinduism and Christianity were impinging upon the primal soul, they were nonetheless firmly rooted in Kubui traditional culture and religion⁶. This religion centred around the veneration of numerous deities or spirits, who were patrons of villages or places of numinous significance and were often associated with the animal and plant creation. There was also an ancestral deity, Khairao, who seems to have been conceived of as less an individual god than as the sum of the departed souls. Khairao was the bringer of death and punished with misfortune those who violated accepted custom. Khairao also acted as protector of the family group. His special place was the hearth stones, where libations of wine and offerings of rice were made to him. Other offerings were made to the many deities, especially blood sacrifices of pigs, chickens, dogs and – most costly of all – mithuns⁷. As is common in primal systems there was a high god, Ragwang ('the king of the gods'), the eternal and heavenly creator, sustainer of the world and upholder of justice. Ragwang was conceived in anthropomorphic terms and believed to have a consort and seven sons. He had no shrines or special places of worship. The deities were approached through mediators. The most important of these religious functionaries was the *mhu*, in two grades, the *mhu-zung* (superior mhu) and the *reitu-mhu* (junior mhu). These offices were not hereditary. The mhu's primary functions were as diviner and as prescriber of sacrifices. As diviner the mhu either read omens or communicated with the spirits in trance. In his way he discovered the cause of sickness or misfortune, which was usually attributed to breach of custom. He would then prescribe

6 On the traditional Naga religion see T.C. Hodson: *The Naga Tribes of Manipur* (London 1911); Mangthoi Thaimci: *The Kabuis* (in K.B. Singh ed: *An Introduction to the Tribal Language and Culture of Manipur*, Imphal 1976, pp 31-61); C.A. Soppitt: *A Short Account of the Kachcha Naga (Empeo) Tribe in the North Cachar Hills* (Shillong 1885); George Watt: *The Aboriginal Tribes of Manipur* (Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute vol xvi 1887 pp 346-70).

7 The description of sacrifice among the Kacha Nagas given by Soppitt can equally apply to the Kabuis. The mithun seems to have played an important part in Kabui mythology.

the type of sacrifice required to placate the offended spirit. The mhu also offered sacrifice on behalf of the whole community at times of harvest or calamity. At the same time the mhu could also function as a herbalist healer, preparing concoctions of plants. These skills were said to have been imparted to the primeval mhu in mythical times.

The Kabui primal religion linked mankind closely with the natural creation. One aspect of this was the sacredness of certain animals and reptiles, foremost among which was the python.⁸ The python represented the deity. If one were captured it was thought to be especially propitious. The python was then cut up and parts distributed and venerated. The Kabui especially associated the python with Lake Zeilt, off the west bank of the Barak river, which became a sacred place of the Jadonong movement. Kabui mythology (in common with that of other Naga groups) asserted that men first emerged from a primeval cave, the 'womb' of creation. Jadonong's cave temple at Bhuvan drew on this tradition. Observance of *genna* was especially important to the Nagas. These were 'holy days' and could be kept both at family and at village level. During the *genna* all work was suspended and the village was strictly closed to outsiders⁹. *Gennas* were imposed for a multitude of reasons and occasions, some of which were very trivial¹⁰. Breach of a *genna* was a serious matter and resulted in the spirits punishing the violator with sickness or even death.

The Religious Background: Hinduism

Fused with this sub-structure of primal religion in Jadonong's thought there is some evidence of the influence of Hinduism. While the Naga peoples have never been Hindus, by the 1930s they had been in contact with Hindu belief and ritual for over a century for the Meiteis had adopted Vaishnavism under royal patronage during the eighteenth century. There had been frequent contact between the Meiteis and the hill peoples from an early date, and indeed for long periods the Meiteis exercised suzerainty over the hills. Furthermore the birth places of both Jadonong and Gaidinlui lay on the main route from Imphal to Cachar, and they could therefore scarcely have failed to have had some idea, however confused, of aspects of the Hindu religion. The construction of Jadonong's second temple at

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- 8 See Soppitt and Hodson. The python also played an important role in Meitei mythology.
 9 A.W. Davis (*Census of India 1891*, Assam vol 1 p 249) notes that 'outsiders are still by custom not allowed into villages (ie during *gennas*) or if allowed in cannot be entertained'.
 10 See Hodson op cit p 164.

Kambiron had several features which appear to have been borrowed from Hinduism, most obviously an enclosed shrine with male and female clay figures. Jadonong himself claimed that these represented Ragwang and his consort, but at the same time explicitly identified these Kabui deities with Vishnu and his wife¹¹. The representation of the high god and the provision of a temple for him are unknown in Naga religion, and must be an importation from Hinduism. Jadonong claimed that these insights were revealed to him on his 'pilgrimages' to the shrine of Bhishnu at Bhuvan cave. According to Gangumei, Kabui tradition identified the Bhishnu of Bhuvan with Khangrillung. This deity is supposed to have succeeded to the throne of Ragwang and to have expelled his younger brother, who then set himself up away to the west in the Bhuvan Hills¹². However the coincidence of the names, Bhishnu with Vishnu – is so close that we can scarcely avoid the conclusion that by the 1920s the god Khangrillung had become Hinduised and identified with Vishnu. This is a process which is very common in Manipur. It is also significant that Jadonong is said to have appointed a Manipuri brahmin to be in charge of the cave shrine¹³. The fact that it was used as a place of blood sacrifice is quite consonant with Saktism which is wide spread in Assam¹⁴. All this would seem to point to a fair degree of Hindu influence upon the cult¹⁵.

The Religious Background: Christianity

Downs¹⁶ claimed that Jadonong's 'Kampai' movement was pronouncedly anti-Christian and that it violently opposed Christian missions. The Naga

11 Statement in Case no 10, Political Agent of Manipur dated 5.6.1931. All archival sources quoted are held in the Manipur State Archives.

12 However the mythology is confused. A different tradition makes Ragwang (the supreme god of the Zeliangrong) the first son of Bhishnu and the agent of creation. His younger brother is Koubru (also a Meitei deity and the name of a mountain). On the summit of Bhuvan hills there is a shrine of Siva. The fact that Jadonong claimed to be a medium of Ragwang seems to indicate that he made no distinction between Ragwang and Bhishnu. Of the shrine of Bhishnu he said, 'Ragwang first took me there in a dream.'

13 Tour diary of Political Agent Higgins for 19th Feb 1931.

14 On Saktism in Manipur see S.N. Parratt: *The Religion of Manipur* (Calcutta 1980 p 198ff.

15 However the influence of Hinduism on Jadonong's religious ideas has been greatly exaggerated by D.P. Mukherjee, P. Gupta and N.K. Das: *The Zeliangrong or Haomei Movement* (in D.S. Singh op cit pp 67-96).

16 Op cit pp 178-9; see also the careful discussion of Lal Dena op cit 101ff.

writer Asoso Yonuo¹⁷ is in substantial agreement, and argued that Jadonong saw Christianity as destructive of the tribal customs which he wanted to uphold, and identified the Christian missions with the colonial power¹⁸. There is much truth in this view: however it would be wrong to see opposition to Christianity as the primary focus of Jadonong's movement. Christian contact in the north west Manipur hills went back as far as about 1910 with the first attempts at the evangelisation of the Kabuis by Angami Naga converts. The success of this evangelisation was however very limited, and nowhere as great as among the Angamis themselves or the Kukis. Largely as a result of the Manipur revival converted Kuki evangelists had subsequently moved into the region until they reached the Barak valley. The revival entered Manipur from the south, from the Lushai (Mizo) Hills around about 1922, and soon spread to the Kuki churches and to the Tangkhul Naga Christians. During the 1920s there was increased contact between Kuki Christians and the Zeliangrong, as Kuki evangelists moved into the north western hills of Manipur. As it developed the revival not only resulted in several thousand baptisms but also took on characteristically 'Pentecostal' features – prolonged prayer meetings marked by emotional and ecstatic utterances, emphasis on dreams and visions, and strong millennial overtones. The American Baptist missionaries in Manipur condemned the excesses of the revival (Crozier even called it satanic). Some of these charismatic features were not dissimilar to aspects of traditional Kabui shamanism, and while it is probably unlikely that Jadonong consciously borrowed from these enthusiastic manifestations of Christianity it is at the same time not impossible that he saw in them an effective means of stirring up religious fervour and manipulated them for his own ends. That Jadonong was not unfamiliar with Christian worship is clear from the structure of the first temple he built at Kambiron, with its 'pulpit', and its ritual of prayer, singing and lustrations. It is also significant that he was called not only by the Hindu honorific of 'guri' but also by the Christian term 'messiah'.

Jadonong's Rise to the Status of Prophet

Jadonong was born of peasant stock in 1905 in the village of Kabui Kambiron, a staging place on the old Imphal to Cachar road. His father be-

17 *Nagas Struggle against the British Rule under Jadonong and Rani Gaidinlui 1925-1947* (Kohima 1982).

18 Though the colonial officers were not all by any means friendly to missions. In 1922 the SDO had Kabui Christians expelled from Tamenglong.

longed to one of the smaller clans and had two wives. Jadonong was the second son of the senior wife, Chunlunglui, who came from a wealthier and more influential moiety. His father's death while Jadonong was still a child seems to have drawn him very closely to his mother and also to his elder brother, Mudunang. Jadonong was clearly an unusual child, and there are oral traditions which attribute to him miraculous deliverances, long trances, second sight, and ability to predict the future. All this was taken to indicate that he was destined to become a mhu. Tradition has it that when he was about thirteen there occurred one of those periodic flowerings of the bamboos which covered the hills near his home. This event is invariably accompanied by a plague of rats which attack the bamboos and at the same time devour the rice crops. Jadonong is said to have urged the elders of the village that it had been revealed to him that they should sacrifice a mithun to the god of the Bhuvan cave¹⁹. After some hesitation they are said to have done so, and this had the effect of ensuring good harvests, free from vermin, for the remainder of Jadonong's lifetime.

At about the same time, 1917-19, the Kukis broke out in revolt, and though Kambiron does not seem to have been in the front line of the conflict the village must have become all too familiar with troop movements. Gangumei²⁰ suggests that Kambiron preserved friendly relationships with the Kukis during this period, but it is very doubtful whether the conflict which scarred the Tamenglong area can have entirely by-passed Kambiron. In view of the subsequently pronouncedly anti-Kuki stance that Jadonong took, and in particular his repeated references to Kabui girls who were alleged to have been tortured to death by the Kukis, one can only assume that Kambiron must have also suffered to some extent during the Kuki uprising²¹. To this period we must probably assign the beginnings of Jadonong's techning about the god of the Bhuvan cave. He claimed that he first 'visited' the cave in trance, and that there he met the god Bhishnu. In a typical shamanistic seance he saw the gods assembled, conversing over the fates of the souls of men, with the shamans pleading their cases before them. Jadonong was received with honour and allowed into the sanctuary of the god Bhishnu, and there entered into a covenant with the god's first son, Khangrillung²². He subsequently went in search of this cave, which he found in the range of hills between the Barak and Jiri rivers on the borders

19 If this event is based on fact then presumably his initial vision of the cave must have occurred before this and when he was still a boy.

20 Unpublished manuscript: *Jadonong, mystic Nagal Rebel*.

21 There can be no truth in the contention that Jadonong took part as a porter in the 1914-18 war; this is impossible to fit into the chronology of his life.

22 Jadonong's priestess, Gaidinlui, subsequently underwent a similar trance calls, and became convenanted to the daughter of Bhishnu.

of Manipur and Cachar, about twenty miles from Binnekandi. The cave, some fifty feet high and with a sloping roof, resembled the Kabui ritual sacrificial house. It now became for Jadonong a holy shrine,²³ a place where he offered sacrifices and where, he claimed, he 'spoke with god'. Jadonong became recognised as a mhu and was formally appointed as such at Kambiron by the traditional sacrifice of a mithun. He was now a medicine man, an interpreter of dreams and a medium. His reputation as a religious psychic and as a healer spread apace. Within a short time not only the Tamenglong area but also Cachar and even the Manipur valley felt his influence. Like most mhu Jadonong received gifts for his services, both in kind and in rupees. According to his own statement he received four annas for praying for the dead, a bottle of zu (rice beer) for interpreting a dream and three annas for a healing (the latter returnable if the cure was ineffective). Kamibron soon became a place of pilgrimage for those in need and the centre of a rapidly growing cult, and Jadonong himself engaged also in an itinerant ministry. Besides healing he now turned his attention to rites for ensuring success. In trance he claimed he could determine the nature of the sacrifices required to guarantee good crops, and whole villages were now advised to buy mithuns for the appropriate sacrifices. Elaborate rituals were devised, with dances and new hymns and prayers. The cult now began to be institutionalised, with Kambiron as its headquarters, and Jadonong ordered the building of 'temples'. The temples were called by the traditional Kabui term 'High House' (*kao kai*) since they were built on stilts²⁴. Such houses for religious purposes (as opposed to social ones) were not a feature of Zeliangrong culture, and Jadonong justified this innovation by claiming that it had been revealed to him in a dream²⁵ Higgins, the Political Agent of Manipur, who later destroyed the buildings, left a detailed description of them. The first temple was built about 1929, and the second about six months before Jadonong's final arrest. The earlier temple resembled a simple church, with a pulpit from which Jadonong used to preach, some side benches ("like canons stalls in a cathedral") and four chairs ("each containing a dirty felt hat"), as well as a tin bath ("not much used", commented Higgins). Access to this temple was unrestricted. The other temple was more elaborate, and could be entered only by those bringing gifts. The main room also had side benches, but in the middle

23 Mills' report to the PA dated 7.7.32 identified it with the cave of Shiva (Jonidwar) 2000 feet below the summit of the mountain sacred to the Hindu god. Another holy place revealed in a dream was the Lake Zeilad off the west bank of the Barak river. Zeilad features in Naga mythology as the place where paddy originated. The deity of the lake was believed to take the form of a python and required the sacrifice of a femal mithun.

24 Gangumei denies that they were *ahongyum*, decorated houses.

25 Higgins Tour Diary dated 1.3.31.

was a blood-stained block for sacrifices. At the far end was a shrine, with an ornamental stair leading up to it. The shrine contained two heavy clay figures of Nagas, painted black and dressed in miniature Kabui clothes, a clay mithun and several black stones. There was a platform above the shrine in which was another chair, and above the chair, coiled along the roof, a live python²⁶. The colonial records make mention of the gifts brought to Jadonong by his followers. This was frequently money, which the British assumed was being used to finance a Naga rebellion. More often, however, the gifts were animals for sacrifice, among which mithuns featured prominently. Christopher Gimson, the District Commissioner of Cachar, reported that all the Nagas asserted that their contributions to Jadonong were "for the benefit of the crops and the health of the village"²⁷. While it is true that it was a traditional practice for suppliants to bring sacrifices for the mhu to offer to the spirits for prosperity, Jadonong himself claimed that he did not ask for gifts. The British suspected that this was not the whole truth and that in some cases there was an element of coercion intended to increase Jadonong's control over reluctant villages.

By the end of 1927 the movement had become such an irritation to the Administration in Manipur that it was decided to apprehend Jadonong and bring him in for questioning. On 28th November Duncan, the SDO in Tamenglong, issued a warrant against him and a certain Namdichung of Kekru village on the grounds that they had spread false propaganda against the government, and that Jadonong was claiming that British rule would soon come to an end and that he would become king. Probably the intention was to intimidate Jadonong, for he received only a week's sentence and was released from prison after just three days. From the British point of view this proved to be a serious miscalculation, though it is clear that there was insufficient concrete evidence against him and that at this stage the British probably had only a hazy idea of what his teaching really was.

Jadonong's Teaching

To attempt to reconstruct Jadonong's ideas is not easy and indeed one cannot assume that they were even very coherent. Most of the evidence comes from the colonial sources hostile to him, and his own statements were made under some duress and may not represent his true thinking. What does emerge is that his ideas were a mixture of Kabui religion and resentment at colonial dominance. It is clear that Jadonong wanted to

26 Higgins to Mills from Kambiron 2.2.31.

27 Gimson to Higgins 19.3.31.

effect a revival and purification of the primal religion. The name given to the movement – 'heraka' – means 'not impure', and was intended as a reaction against the denigration of heathenism by the Christians and as an affirmation of the value of the traditional ways. Furthermore it is evident that Jadonong saw himself as a reformer. Many of the more trivial justifications for gennas – for example those arising from the birth of domestic animals, as well as some of those arising from natural events (such as earthquakes) – were abandoned. Those which restricted public, agricultural or economic activity were also declared to be no longer binding. The ones which continued to be approved by Jadonong were mainly meant to ensure the positive welfare of crops, people and animals. In other respects he built upon the foundations of Kabui religious experience, shamanism and the sacrificial system. Belief in the spirits was not questioned, but by placing the high god Ragwang firmly in the centre he made a drastic re-orientation of Naga spirituality. There is no doubt that this strong affirmation of the traditional religion caused him to come into conflict with the relatively small number of Kabui Christians. These converts were not permitted by their missionary mentors to observe the 'heathen' gennas. This caused some resentment and the expulsion of Christian Kabuis from some villages²⁸. The Christians among the Kukis were worried on two counts – as Christians they were opposed to primal religious practices and as Kukis they were the traditional enemies of the Kabuis. The Christian Kukis in Cachar approached Gimson for protection because of threats made against them by their Kabui neighbours. This pattern was repeated elsewhere. Indeed the phrase 'Kukis and Christians' recurs in the documentary sources time and again, and in such a way that it appears Jadonong saw them as a common enemy. It is also significant that there were Christians who eventually proffered damaging information about the cult. Religious antagonism therefore, and the real possibility of the persecution of the relatively small number of converts by Heraka, was one cause for the Administration's concern. But the essence of British disquiet was political rather than religious: who or what did Jadonong claim himself to be, and was the movement actively subversive of British control?

We have noted that Jadonong was regarded by his followers, and regarded himself, as a mhu. His initial reputation had been gained on the basis of his supposed healing powers, ability to secure good crop yields, and to placate the spirits by the appropriate sacrifices. Much of the evi-

28 Pettigrew, the veteran missionary to the Tangkhul Nagas at Kongpokpi, informed Higgins in a letter dated 17.2.31 that many of his Christian students – Kuki, Kabui and Kacha Nagas as well as Tangkhuls – were conspicuously absent from the mission school and hints that this may have been due to unrest in the area.

dence later collected by Higgins supported these claims, and those villages which sent – or were constrained to send – mithuns for sacrifice claimed they did so because they believed they would not prosper unless they did. Gimson used the somewhat inappropriate term 'sadhu' of Jadonong, presumably because he was regarded as a holy man. Higgins frequently called him by the Manipuri term for traditional priest, 'maiba'²⁹. All this indicates that Jadonong was seen primarily as a religious functionary. But other reports interpret the veneration given to him, and the sacrificial animals presented to him, as an ascription in some sense of divinity³⁰ and the Kambiron elders told Higgins explicitly that 'Jadonong has been a maiba for more than four years and a god for two years'³¹. Gaidinlui said that he was called 'Ra' (ie Ragwang), though he never used this title of himself. But besides these appellations Jadonong was also given other titles. The most common of these seems to have been 'Kabiraj'. Some of the British officers, it is true, interpreted this also as a religious title³², but in view of the role that the concept of a 'nagaraj' played in Jadonong's teaching it is probable that this title also had political overtones. And indeed it is not possible in primal cultures to make a clear distinction between the religious and the political. Jadonong's understanding of his own status (like that of all 'messiahs') depends fundamentally upon the task which he felt called to perform. This task was unquestionably the establishment of a 'nagaraj', a Naga kingdom. While much of the evidence in the British sources for this was only collected after Jadonong's second arrest it is clear that the substance contained in this evidence goes back much earlier into his career. Indeed it was, of course, only the disquiet which Higgins felt about Jadonong's specifically political activities which necessitated his apprehension. This evidence is really quite formidable. Mills, acting on Higgins' behalf, concentrated on testimonies from Nagas and left aside what might be biased accusations from the Kabuis old enemies the Kukis. Not only Angamis and Tangkhuls but also Kabui and Kacha Nagas gave ample testimony to the fact the Jadonong was making preparations for war and for setting up a Naga kingdom. He claimed that he was fulfilling the old prophecies of the coming of a Naga king and that he was the 'fathers' who had died long ago³³. His disciple, Judi of Saramba, declared publically that

29 On the meaning of maiba see Saroj N. Parratt op cit pp 96ff.

30 Eg Higgins to Cosgrave, Chief Secretary of Assam dated 26.3.31: 'They sent goats to Jadonong because they heard he was a god'.

31 Higgins Tour Diary dated Kambiron 2.3.31.

32 Inspector of Police, Silchar to Superintendent of Police, Silchar dated 27.3.31. It may be Manipuri adaptation of the Bengali word indicating a herbalist.

33 See the statements collected in Mills communication to Higgins dated 24.3.31.

'the king of the Nagas has arisen and the day of the Nagas has come'³⁴. There was also evidence from eye-witnesses that Jadonong had ascended the pulpit in his temple and pretended the read from a piece of paper that the day of the Government of Manipur and the Kukis was over and time of the nagaraj had arrived. Judi stated that this same proclamation originated from Nungkao (Gaidinlui's village) which had also spread the rumour that the Kabuis would be victorious in war against the Kukis. Mills put it succinctly in his report to Political Agent Higgins:

"Jadonong's claim was as follows: His day and that of the Kabui and Kacha Nagas had come at last. In three years all would be fulfilled ... the Kukis were to be exterminated within three years. Nagas were not to strike the first blow, but will be absolutely ready ... this was to be kept an absolute secret from Government. His claims as a healer were probably only a bait to attract adherents, as invalids who went with humble offerings of a rupee were told that their village ought to send in more substantial tribute in the form of a mithun. He is universally spoken of as 'the kind' or 'the spirit king'³⁵.

It was clear that much of the money collected by Jadonong as tribute was being used to purchase weapons, and that at least some villages had contributed only under duress. Higgins³⁶ opined that the movement had grown up gradually with the increasing reputation of Jadonong. He suspected, though without any real hard evidence, that the Kacha Nagas had manipulated Jadonong's original religious movement and transformed it into a political one. He even conjectured that Angami Nagas might also be behind it. However, as he himself admitted with some frustration, 'it will be very difficult to get to the bottom of it'. How far Jadonong lost control of the movement when it took on more militant overtones and how far he was manipulated by more truculent villages bent on resistance and revenge, or indeed how far he may have been carried away by the enthusiasm of his impressionable priestess Gaidinlui – all these factors are impossible to determine with accuracy.

34 Mills to Higgins 24.3.31.

35 Mills to Higgs 17.3.31.

36 Tour Diary 5.3.31.

The Final Phase of the Movement

At any rate the movement moved swiftly to its final phase and took on an increasingly belligerent attitude towards both the Kukis and the British Administration in Manipur. Although it is well documented that the Kabuis did not adopt a 'strike first' strategy towards the Kukis, there can be little doubt that they were ready and eager to pay off old scores and that the prophetic propaganda machine was playing on their traditional animosity. In particular this was encouraged by the frequent references to Naga girls tortured and killed during the Kuki rebellion. The Kukis themselves were clearly frightened. Some villages had stopped working in their fields for fear of attack, and on the 1 March 1931 the President of the Manipur State Durbar received a long petition from a group of Kukis explaining why they felt that an attack on them was imminent. One of the reasons for their disquiet was that in the previous year the DO has been relocated from Tamenglong back to the capital, Imphal, which had left them the more exposed.

Concern at a possible outbreak of Naga-Kuki conflict was a major reason for Jadonong's re-arrest. But a more important one was his perceived challenge to British authority. Jadonong had made no secret to his opposition to 'pothang' – the obligations imposed on villagers to provide food and porters for British officials. It is equally clear that he objected to those little acts of obsequiousness, such as removing head-gear in the presence of a white man, so dear to some in the British Raj. This had early on marked him out as a potential trouble maker. Then the British had received requests from villages to have their tax remitted because they had already given tribute to Jadonong's Nagaraj. By 1930 he was reported to be telling his followers not to pay tax and not to obey the Manipuri officials and interpreters acting for the British. These were challenges no colonial government could afford to ignore. Higgins, probably because of information conveyed to him by his SDO in the North Cachar Hills, also had a suspicion that Jadonong, whether directly or indirectly, was coming under the growing influence of the Indian National Congress³⁷. While this is altogether unlikely³⁸ the rumour of such a dangerous connection cannot have failed to cause the British disquiet. By early 1931 Higgins decided

37 'I have my suspicions that Jadonong has got hte Congress infection from Lakhimpur' 10.3.31.

38 Gimson firmly rejected any Congress connection on the ground that it had no real influence in Lakhimpur. Yonuo greatly overstates this factor, and it seems to us fanciful to regard Jadonong as a Gandhian (op cit pp 63-65). This is a reading back from a later period when the Congress regarded Gaidinlui's movement as an ally.

the matter was getting out of hand. This happened to be a census year, and the enumerators who went to Kambiron³⁹ were sharply treated and refused access to the temples on the grounds that they were not dwellings. The officials thereupon reported this example of non-cooperation and claimed that the buildings were indeed occupied. At the same time Duncan (who had already arrested Jadonong once) reiterated his information that the Naga villages were presenting gifts to Jadonong and that he feared an alliance between the Kabuis and Angami Nagas. Higgins was convinced that Jadonong was actively advocating non-payment of tax for the coming year (1932) since by that time he claimed that the Nagaraj would be established⁴⁰. The Political Agent accordingly sent some Kabuis and a Manipuri official to arrest Jadonong in his home village of Kambiron. When they arrived there they were told that he had already left with a large band of followers on a pilgrimage to the shrine at the Bhuvan caves. Higgins thereupon cabled Gimson, the DC of Cachar, requesting him to apprehend Jadonong as he returned. This was accomplished at Lakhimpur with surprising ease. A constable in the Assamese police, Imtiaz Ali, invited Jadonong into his house for a drink of *zu* and arrested him there without incident on 19th February⁴¹. Gaidinlui was later to claim that Jadonong had been warned by the spirits while at Bhuvan that he would not see another harvest, and that he was consequently too depressed to resist. His followers fled in disorder back to the Tamenglong hills and their leader was placed in Silchar jail. Though relieved at this easy catch Higgins was still concerned about a possible revolt. Consequently, in consultation with Mills, he immediately organised a strong military column under Major Bullfield which marched up through the disaffected villages. Higgins himself followed a few days later. On arrival at Kambiron he had the temples burnt and personally shot one of the sacred pythons⁴². He then proceeded to Nungkao, where he interviewed Gaidinlui, who had by now returned to her home. He was unimpressed at what he called this 'rather surly little Kabui leishabi (unmarried girl)' and decided to take no action against her. It was to be a costly mistake. Though Higgins was personally inclined to think that the Kabuis were more misled than rebellious he was determined on a show of military strength to intimidate them and discourage them from further activity. Having collected Jadonong from Jirighat, on the Cachar-Manipur border, he detoured, marching his prisoner, in

39 These may well have been Christians; Pettigrew's men acted as enumerators in this census.

40 Higgins to Cosgrave 12.1.31.

41 This is well attested, though it seems curious that a Muslim should offer *zu* (rice beer).

42 Higgins to Mills 2.2.31.

chains and shirtless, back to Imphal via Nungkao and Tamenglong and then deposited him in Imphal jail.

The Trial of Jadonong

Having safely apprehended his prisoner Higgins now had the task of proving a case against him. This turned out to be more difficult than he anticipated. In his statement Jadonong was careful to avoid all political pretensions and to claim that he was merely a maiba, communicating with god in dreams, reforming traditional worship, and supervising sacrifices. He had not, he claimed, asked for any tribute, had not received any money, and did not advocate war against the Kukis. He even denied ever having helped to build the temple in Nungkao. Higgins and Mills collected all the evidence they could from Nagas, but the results were inconclusive. Many witnesses denied they had ever heard Jadonong inciting to war or rebellion. Mills believed that there was a conspiracy of silence because (so he had heard it rumoured) Jadonong had threatened that anyone who spoke against him would die of sorcery. To his credit Higgins did not accept evidence against his prisoner from the Kukis, and consequently the investigation was proving tantalisingly inconclusive. But his followers seemed so frightened and demoralised that it appeared the affair might die a natural death.

At this point there occurred an extraordinary coincidence which produced evidence beyond Higgins' wildest expectations. In the March of the previous year four Manipuri betel leaf traders had disappeared while travelling on the Cachar road. Their disappearance had been reported but the authorities had failed to trace them. Then in the January of 1931 a drunken brawl had taken place at one of the villages on the road and the truth had come out. One of the Kabuis, Lulungpo, in a condition of extreme inebriation, had danced about saying that he was wearing the hair of one of the dead Manipuris as a decoration. The news was soon afterwards reported to the British, with the further information that the victims had been murdered in the servant's quarters of the government bungalow at Kambiron itself. As it later transpired at the trials, the four had arrived at Kambiron at a time when a genna was being observed. Gaidinlui had apparently declared the genna in honour of the daughter of the deity Soraren⁴³ and the village had been closed for three days. Gaidinlui had consulted the goddess on what should be done with the Manipuris, who informed her that they should leave immediately or be killed. However they had entered, or

43 Soraren is also a Meitei sky god, see S.N. Parratt *op cit* p 32.

been allowed to enter, and gone to the bungalow. Here they lit a fire, an act strictly forbidden during times of genna, and were at once set upon, shot and then beheaded⁴⁴. The bodies had been buried and the heads sent to four Kabui villages, including Nungkao. The perpetrators of this crime, who included Jadonong's brother Mudunang, were arrested, tried and sentenced to death⁴⁵.

Jadonong's role in the murders was crucial, and gave Higgins the opportunity he needed to cut through the tangled web of confusing evidence about Jadonong's political activities and to put him on trial for a capital civil crime. Under cross-examination, however, Jadonong flatly denied any complicity in the killings and claimed that he was not even in Kambiron at the time. He had, he said, been in Gaidinlui's village of Nungkao and the first he had heard of the murders was when two of the accused arrived at Nungkao with a severed head. He had then waited two weeks before returning to Kambiron, where Gaidinlui had told him that her goddess had sanctioned the killings. He added:

"Last night the Bhuvan god who appeared to me in a dream came: He did not enter the jail, but spoke to me by the winds. He said that the murder was committed by divine order and that if I did not say so the rice would not grow and many men would be drowned."

His statement in court was not corroborated. Witnesses from Nungkao denied that he was there on the night of the murders⁴⁶. The only reason he could give to explain this evidence against him was that 'all the villagers drank zu and took an oath on iron that they would say that I was there' because 'probably they thought it was better I should die'⁴⁷. Jadonong was found guilty of abetment of murder and sentenced to death. He appealed in the June, repeating his assertion that he was not present at the scene of the crime, claiming that he had no influence over the Kabuis, and throwing the

44 There is no evidence to support the contention of N. Rustomji: *Enchanted Frontiers* (London 1971) and repeated by Mukherjee et al (op cit p 71) that the cult engaged in human sacrifice and that this was the significance of beheading. On the contrary the taking of heads was a matter of varfare, not of religious ritual.

45 On appeal the sentences on the four were reduced to deportation for life on the grounds that, though they pleaded guilty, the darkness and confusion of the night made certain identification impossible. Mudungang claimed that he was not present at the killings. The British failed to arrest Gaidinlui who was not brought to trial for abetment of murder until December 1932.

46 This evidence was later reiterated at the trial of Gaidinlui. Gaidinlui openly incriminated Jadonong while denying her own complicity in the killing. She apparently changed her mind later (personal interview with Gangumei November 1969).

47 Case 10 of the Political Agent of Manipur dated 5.6.31.

whole blame for the murders upon Gaidinlui⁴⁸. His appeal was rejected and he was hanged at Imphal jail on 29th August 1931.

The Continuing Influence of the Movement

The Manipur Administration believed they had crushed the Kabui messianic movement. In reality it was only just beginning. Within a few months new prophets had sprung up all over the Manipur and Naga hills and in the plains of Cachar. One Rangtui gave himself out to be a prophet and offered resistance to a company of sepoy, and after his arrest Name-thing stepped into his shoes. A Kacha Naga, Rangkomba, announced he was a new messiah and commanded that all government taxes were henceforth to be paid to him. In 1931 another Kacha Naga, Jinongpuri, proclaimed himself chief and offered a human head as a sacrifice to back his claims. Others impersonated Jadonong or claimed that they were him risen from the dead. As late as 1940 Gomtei was still trying to revive the movement. But most troublesome of all was the 'little Kabui leishabi', the priestess Gaidinlui. She evaded arrest for two years, served a long period in detention, eventually founded a freedom movement which quite eclipsed that of Jadonong, and gained the enthusiastic admiration of Jawaharlal Nehru himself⁴⁹.

How can we assess Jadonong? Mukherjee portrays him as a skilful organiser and as an acute politician, inspired in part by the example of Gandhi. Asoso Yonuo sees him as great patriot moved by his vision of a renewed and purified Naga religion to liberate his people from the colonial yoke. Even the careful and balanced Gangumei argues that he was a martyr, innocent of the charge of complicity in murder for which he was condemned. But all such judgments appear to be anachronisms resulting from the mythology which quickly surrounded the memory of Jadonong after his death. Jadonong's personal tragedy was that his own unshakable conviction – even to the last when he was in prison – that he was controlled by the gods, led him ever deeper into the increasingly dangerous waters of the ethnic and political antagonisms of his little world which ultimately destroyed him. His movement does however stand as a striking example of the way in the primal worldview, during a period of acute political and religious change, acted as a focus point for resistance to colonial rule. The

48 'The prime mover of the murder Gaidinlui absconded immediately before the beginning of the inquiry so the villagers put the whole responsibility on the petitioner' (Appeal of Petition of Jadonong to the Governor of Assam dated 24.6.31).

49 *The Unity of India* (London 148 pp 187-8).

real importance of Jadonong perhaps lies in that his cause was taken up by his charismatic young priestess and assistant Gaidinlui, under whom the movement became more pronouncedly political and whose voice was still to be heard demanding a Zeliangrong 'raj' or homeland in the 1980s⁵⁰. Her full story, and that of her impact upon the tortured politics of north east India, remains to be written.

Jadonong left a continuing legacy both for the state of Manipur and also for north-east India as a whole. The search for a distinct Naga identity led to the Zeliangrong political associations of the 1940's; these, in their turn, were after independence a contributory factor in the struggle for a separate Naga nationhood and its suppression by successive Indian governments. As such Jadonong's legacy is still very much with us today.

50 See her introduction to Singh op cit p 1.