

# An Overview of the Origin of Kom Tribe of Manipur

LAIRENMAYUM ROMEO SINGH † & KSHETRIMAYUM SUNITA DEVI \*

*Department of Anthropology, Liberal College, Imphal East 795002*

E-mail: romeolairen@gmail.com

**KEYWORDS:** Kom Tribe. Sagang Khopui. Kom. Cave man. Manipur.

**ABSTRACT:** The paper has envisaged to delineate the origin of the Kom tribe of Manipur through an epistemological perspective. Field works for the primary data have been conducted during the period 2000-01. Historical information has been drawn from the selected renowned Kom members from four districts of Manipur. Secondary data from the natives and British writers are also taken into account. The Kom tribe is one of the 33 Scheduled Tribes of Manipur and they were distributed in 59 villages and covering four districts of Manipur i.e. the Churachandpur district, Senapati district, Chandel district and the Imphal-East district. The Sagang Khopui village under the jurisdiction of Churachandpur district is considered to be the biggest Kom village in the state. The Kom population in Manipur accounts to be 15,988 souls as on 2000-2001 survey records. Trace of the origin of the Kom tribe is still obscure. British administrators like Brown (1873) and Shakespear (1912) mentioned their settlements. Emic view from local Kom members such as Teba K. Christian (1977) believed to have emerged from the caves which etymologically support with their dialect- Kom means cave and Rem means people or tribe, meaning thereby, the cave man which also reflected in their traditional folk song.

## INTRODUCTION

The origin of a tribe holds great importance among tribal communities because it provides a shared sense of history, unity, and identity. Origin myths, ancestral narratives, and migration traditions explain where the tribe came from and how it came into existence, strengthening bonds among members. These beliefs guide social organization, clan systems, marriage rules, and ritual practices, helping maintain social order within the community. Knowledge of origin also distinguishes one tribe from another, promoting respect for inter-tribal diversity. Most importantly, the sense of common origin fosters solidarity, pride, and continuity, enabling tribal communities to preserve their cultural heritage and transmit their values, traditions, and collective memory from one generation to the next. The identity of tribal populations is vital for

strengthening unity, continuity, and mutual respect among different tribes. A strong sense of identity empowers tribal communities to assert their rights, protect their cultural heritage, and participate confidently in social, political, and developmental processes without losing their distinctiveness. Most of the present human populations have emerged from isolation, selection, migration and hybridization involving different components which have influenced at least part of the human gene pool (Singh K.S. 1993). Man, often makes adjustments to adapt themselves to these natural and social environments and as such produced a new environment. Thus, it becomes an ongoing process of new stress and new adaptation. Adaptation, therefore, usually refers to a response which appears to enhance the ability of the human society to utilize its natural habitat (Baker, 1990). He pointed out that adaptation involves biological responses which include biochemical, physiological and behavioural components which

† Assistant Professor, corresponding author

may be present in a population as a consequence of populations' specific and /or species – universal genetic adaptation. Normally, a small population is subject to pressures from various stress and strain constraints of the surrounding environment and or from the influence of the culture of the large populations. Under such circumstances the dynamics of changes to a population may be assumed to be faster. Very often, it has been the subject matter of the anthropologists, population geneticists and social scientists for making observations and assessments of mode of changes in a population (Cavalli-Sforza and Cavalli-Sforza *et al.* 1964; Howells 1966, Levine-1958 etc.).

### OBJECTIVES

The objective of a tribe in studying its origin is to understand and preserve its ancestral history, cultural roots, and collective identity. Such a study helps the community trace its lineage, migration patterns, and traditional beliefs, strengthening unity and a sense of belonging among members. It also aims to safeguard oral traditions, myths, and historical memories from being lost over time. By studying their origin, tribes seek to affirm their distinctiveness, reinforce social norms and values, and pass on cultural knowledge to younger generations. Additionally, this understanding supports the protection of tribal rights, heritage, and recognition in wider social and academic contexts.

### MATERIAL & METHODS

The study is carried out using both qualitative and quantitative materials and methods to obtain a comprehensive understanding. The materials include primary sources such as oral traditions, myths, folklore, genealogies, songs, rituals, and narratives collected from elders and knowledgeable members of the tribe. Secondary materials include ethnographic records, historical documents, census reports, anthropological literature, archival materials, maps, and previous research studies following ethical guidelines and informed consent.

The methods involve fieldwork-based ethnographic techniques such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and case studies to document oral

histories and cultural practices related to origin. Genealogical methods are used to trace descent, clan structure, and kinship patterns. Historical and comparative methods help correlate tribal traditions with regional history and migration events. All data are analyzed through cross-verification of cultural, historical, and biological evidence to arrive at a scientifically grounded interpretation of the Kom origin.

### RESULTS

The Koms-a review: Few reports on Kom tribe of Manipur have been made earlier by the British administrators (Grierson, 1904, Brown, 1873, Shakespear, 1912, McCulloch, 1859) and recently by some Kom writers such as Teba Karong -1976, Benjamin Kom -1990, Mangpu Kilong -2000 etc. Although, these reports have provided some important information related with their origin, and aspects of their social organization, it has neither fulfilled the needful in-depth details on the socio-cultural aspects nor did gave any information related with their demography and population genetics of the tribe. A brief review of the available reports are given here.

The Kom tribe is one of the 33 scheduled tribes of Manipur under the Constitution (Scheduled tribes) Order 1950 Article 342 Clause (I) of India. Their habitations are found in both the hills and the plains of Manipur.

Brown (1873) said that the Kom tribe originally belonged to the hills lying south of the Manipur valley and the only remaining Kuki tribes of importance. He classified the sub divisions of the tribe as Keirup, Aimol, Chiru, Purum, Quoireng (Koireng), Mundung, Karam (Kharam) and Laikot. During the reign of Gambhir Singh, it is also referred that the Koms suffered from the aggressions of the Khongjai and Lushai tribes and that they sought refuge in other parts of the hills belonging to Manipur. They are now scattered about the hills near the Manipur valley. It is relevant to point out that small tribes like the Chiru, Koireng, Kom have spread from necessity into the valley of Manipur in a scattered pattern because of the limitations set by resources (Das, 1985).

According to Lt. Colonel J. Shakespear (1912), the Koms had come from Sharikpung hills of the Chin Hills. A belief that most of the southern tribes of Manipur have been migrated from the Chin Hills of Burma, has also been referred by Das (1985). Shakespear (1912) classified the Koms along with the Aimol, Anal, Chawte, Kolhen, Langang, Purum, Tikhup and Vaiphei..... etc. under the Old Kuki clans of Manipur and said to sharing resemblance to each other in many respects, although they live in separate villages and never intermarry.

Teba Karong (1976), opined that the present Kom tribe is the descendant of *Kakom* the first issue of a couple called *Mipa leh Minu*. They believed that the ancestors lived in the caves, the mountains and in the forest. Presumably due to different inter-tribal feuds in the earlier days. They had to move from place to place for their livelihood and security. They were hunters and gatherers. There is also a belief that the person who had special *mana*, and gifted qualities of leadership began to dominate the villages and places.

Recently, Benjamin Kom (1990), reported that the Kom tribe had entered into Manipur during the reign of Maharaja Gambhir Singh and that the Kom people were well acquainted with the Maharajas of Manipur. And as such, the Maharaja of Manipur used to engage only some trusted Meiteis and Koms to be their palanquin bearers. There is a Kom folk song describing the palanquin bearing instances of Manipur Maharajas. It is said that the Kom tribe probably entered into Manipur sometime in the year 1600 A.D. from the east of Manipur (Benjamin Kom, 1990).

Brown (1873), estimated the total population of the Kom to be about 2000 only. In 1991 the Directorate of Census Operation Manipur has given the number of Koms as 9,830 souls.

While examining the above statements, as well as the folklore and folk songs, there is no satisfactory evidence to locate about the original land or the place, where the Kom tribe came from and the exact period of their entry into Manipur. Both the above two theories leads to China as the source of origin of the Koms who took their migrating routes to Chin hills now at Myanmar, and Lushai hills (border of

Manipur and Mizoram) then afterwards reach to the hills of Churachandpur at Churachandpur district, Manipur. However, these theories aim to have based more on speculation. But, still then it appears to be certain that they come through the Chin and Lushai hills.

The state, however small it may be, had been for centuries the meeting place of several peoples (Brown, 1873; Dun, 1886 and R.K. J. Singh, 1965). The population of Manipur can broadly be divided into four major groups - a) the Meiteis, b) the Manipuri Muslims, c) the Nagas, and d) the Kukis. The broad division of the tribes of Manipur into Nagas and Kukis is based particularly on the language and culture. These major two groups occupy definite areas in the hill ranges. The Nagas occupy mostly in the northern hills of about 24.75°N latitude and the Kukis on the south ranges. Among the Kukis, they have been grouped into two a) the Old Kuki and b) the New Kuki group and in which the Koms are belonged to one of the Old Kuki groups (Dun 1886, Shakespear 1912). Contradictingly, however Benjamin Kom (1990) who suggested the Koms to have entered from the east of Manipur, also referred that the Koms were known as a Naga group by the Manipur State Darbar.

Further, McCulloch (1859) remarked that the Koms at one time, were a powerful tribe, and their village was consisted of six hundred houses. According to Grierson (1904), Kom dialect has affinities with the Old Kukis and he classified it under the Kuki-Chin sub-group of the Tibeto-Burman family of languages.

On the basis of a more or less similar characteristics in the language, cultural and traditional practices etc. they have formed an association for those similar tribes under the nomenclature Kom-Rem. Those sub-tribes are i) the Aimol, ii) the Chiru, iii) the Koireng iv) the Kom and v) and the Purum. Each of them constitute a minor group among the tribal communities of Manipur. But these tribes are recognized as separate units by the government (Scheduled tribes, Order 1950, Article 342, Clause I of India).

It is claimed that the Kom-Rem tribes neither joined nor allied with the major two leading

communities of Manipur viz, the Nagas and the Kukis (Benjamin Kom, 1990). They have been having a common organization and association in their religious and political activities under the names of *The Kom-Rem Baptist Churches Association Manipur* and *The Kom-Rem Union Manipur* in 1927 and 1947 respectively. The first one deals with the basic upliftment of the community. The second one deals with the political activities of the community. Benjamin (1990) also claimed that the Kom-Rem people have a common dialect known as Kom-language. However, it seems that out of those five Kom-Rem sub-tribes, the Aimol along with another tribe the Anal are now prefer to call themselves as Nagas (Das, 1985).

According to the Teba Karong (1976), there are seven lineage heads of the Kom clans, viz. 1) Karong, 2) Saiche, 3) Leivon, 4) Tolen (Telen), 5) Serto, 6) Lupheng, and 7) Mangte (Hmangte).

Mangpu Kilong (2000) gave a hypothetical traditional migration pattern of the Koms but without any concrete evidence and it is given as follows :

| Period    | Location                   | Sub-Continent        |
|-----------|----------------------------|----------------------|
| 4000 B.C. | KHOTHU DPUI                | Middle-East          |
| 2000 B.C. | KHAMNUNG                   |                      |
| 1000 B.C. | KHOLAMDAR                  |                      |
| 500 B.C.  | KHOVONDAR                  |                      |
| 400 B.C.  | KHOSEKHO                   |                      |
| 300 B.C.  | KHOBEEKHO                  |                      |
| 1000 B.C. | KHOVONG (Chin Hills)       | Eastern Asia         |
| 100 A.D.  | KHOLENTHANG (Arakan Hills) |                      |
| 200 A.D.  | RENGPURI-RAM (Tripura)     | Bay of Bengal        |
| 300 A.D.  | MAHOIBUNG (Lushai Hills)   |                      |
| 700 A.D.  | LHUNGLENTHANG              | Manipur (Kangleipak) |

1973 A.D. The Koms had been living within the territory of Manipur for the last 1273 years.

J. Shakespear (1912) says that the Chiru, Kom and Tikhup still build *Zawlbulks* (dormitory). And no woman is allowed to enter these huts, which, besides being the dormitories of the unmarried man, are also used for drinking bouts. It was observed that there

were several fireplaces, evidently used for cooking. In the absence of the *Zawlbuk* the younger man generally slept in the house of a well-to-do family of the village.

The practice of *Khoser* or Genna was prevalent among the Koms, specially when there was rumour that epidemics like cholera or small pox has started to spread in the neighbouring villages by abandoning any stranger to enter the village (Teba Karong, 1976).

Every Kom village had a *Sawang* or a chieftain and the chiefship is normally hereditary, although appointment and or promotion may also take place (Benjamin Kom, 1990).

According to Teba Karong (1976), a marriage is arranged by the parents and the rule of exogamy is followed. He also states that marriage of mother's brothers' daughter is the preferential form of marriage among the Koms, although marriage by service known as *Nuhmei-hle* is also practised by them. Bride price, as he observed, is paid which normally consists of five mithuns, one gong of eight palms and another gong of seven palms at the first instance, while the remaining bride price (*Mankat*) may be paid latter on. Teba Karong (1976) also mentioned that if a wife commits adultery, she has to return double the value of *Mankat*, whereas, if the husband wants not to leave her, then, she had to pay one *mithun* being the charge of defamation.

Regarding the physical feature of the Kom, Brown, 1873 had the impression that the Koms are usually of a medium height incidentally with few tall individuals. Further also said that they are well build and some of them are very muscular with longer arms, Brown (1973) observed it as the general characteristics of the Kuki tribes. There is another suggestion of 44 percent Dravidian and the lesser population of Nesiot, pre Dravidian and Mongoloid elements in the Kom tribe of southern Manipur (Dasgupta and Basu, 1936).

## DISCUSSION

Data on socio-cultural background of the Koms, as collected from different informants have been summarised and some salient observations are given below:

Besides the theories, on the origin of the Koms as pointed out earlier, further, there are claims that the ancestors of the Koms are the migrants from the Chin hill and belonged to the Mongoloid stock. Etymologically, the Kom means cave, meaning thereby the cave man. Their traditional songs refer that their ancestors lived in the caves. The folk song is recorded as follows :

*Kan hong sok e, khurpui a khan, hong shok a (2)*

*Kan lengsial le Kholei eng e;*

*Kan lak pon leh kholei eng e;*

*Kan shak long leh kho lei eng e;*

*Kan chim shi leh kho lei eng e;*

Translation into English runs as follows:

We came out from the cave or route;

With our mithuns and clothes;

Our physique well built;

Out necklace as decoration;

With the pointed thorns of porcupine;

Which beautified the world.

Their tradition refers that the Kom tribe of Manipur, is originated from the East Asia. The site Khojengpui, now at China, is believed to be their first home land.

Due to enmity and frequent feuds, they were compelled to shift to different places. They had to pass through a cave (*khur*) known as Kom-Khongram from which the nomenclature of the tribe 'Kom' had derived. All the folklore of the community were based on this cave. According to this folklore, inside the cave, there was a tiger, which kills any passer by. Unlike other tigers known as *Khumpui* and *Kamkeis*, the *Samang Lampuis* was the one which involved the act of killings. On hearing the news, one person known as Sahumpa wearing the cloth known as *Ponthre* or *Leiponpin* (woven and embroidered by a woman named Chongnu, while at Khothoutpui) came to meet the tiger and sang with two songs in front of the tiger. Still, these songs are known to the village elders. The meaning of the folk lore is as follows :

We are the brothers, see this cloth and its patterns and compare it with your own body colour.

As your desire, God has provided it on your skin, and for us, we got it as cloth according to our desire. Of these similarities of patterns, we are brothers, so don't kill me as well as my followers, they are all our brothers and sisters. In case of you kill anybody, your teeth may break or if we kill you and eat, our throat may swell. The tiger was tamed. Sahumpa left for Chongkhupui – a place situated at the border of China and Burma now as Myanmar. Many people followed him. After sometime the tiger again started killing the people as usual. It provoked anger to the survivors. Two brothers of the group firmly decided to kill the tiger and thus proposed a plan, as while the elder brother talking with the tiger, the younger brother was to kill the tiger with poisoned with bow and arrow. Thus, the plan was carried out accordingly. The tiger was dead. Everyone –young and old enjoyed the victory with feast and dances, from the incidents of the killing of the tiger, the clans of the tribe have been formed (Songkhupthang Serto)

In another theory of Mr. Lenkhomang, the route of migration for the Koms are given as below:

| <i>Place of settlement</i> | <i>Territory/Country</i>                  |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| 1. Khojingpui              | China                                     |
| 2. Khothoutpui             | -do-                                      |
| 3. Khojepui                | -do-                                      |
| 4. Chongkhupui             | -do-                                      |
| 5. Kholamdar               | -do-                                      |
| 6. Champhaizol             | North Easter of Mizoram                   |
| 7. Aibulon                 | Mizoram                                   |
| 8. Renlewaiso              | Mizoram-Manipur border                    |
| 9. Ramlertang              | Tipaimukh (A song support its settlement) |
| 10. Senbon                 | Manipur (Churachandpur district)          |
| 11. Chongkhuzou            | -do-                                      |
| 12. Thinganphai            | -do-                                      |
| 13. Ompu                   | -do-                                      |
| 14. Ningthitang            | -do-                                      |

Further, from the Ningthitang village at Churachandpur district, the Kom people were distributed at various places forming small villages according to their habitational conveniences.

While according to Sinkhuplin Serto, the then Chief of Sagang village during 2001, the Koms were migrated as the following way:

| <i>Place of settlement</i>       | <i>Location of the village</i>                           |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Khaki                         | China                                                    |
| 2. Khaki                         | China-Burma border                                       |
| 3. Haotinkhupki                  | Burma known as Tiddin Chin                               |
| Leibak                           |                                                          |
| 4. Champhai                      | Mizoaram, formerly known as Lushai Hill                  |
| Then towards east                |                                                          |
| 5. Taithu, Longthulen and Sanbon | Manipur, at Parbung sub-division, Churachandpur district |
| 6. Thanlon                       | Manipur, at Taithu, Churachandpur district               |
| 7. Kairam Ching                  | Manipur, Churachandpur. district.                        |
|                                  |                                                          |
| A. Keipitang                     | -do-                                                     |
| Manabung                         | -do-                                                     |
| Thangjingtang                    | -do-                                                     |
| a. Thingangphai                  | -do-                                                     |
| b. Umphu                         | Ranges of Kumbi Ngairong side, Churachandpur district.   |
| c. Ngairong                      | Near Kwakta                                              |
| i. Kangathei                     | Churachandpur district                                   |
| ii. Keirab                       | - do -                                                   |
| iii. Khoirentak                  | - do -                                                   |
| B. Sanlan Ching                  | Haotak, at Kumbi, CCpur. District                        |
| a. Yongchabung                   | Western hill of Sagang                                   |
| b. Dampui                        | South of Youngchabung                                    |
| c. Sarik Ching                   | Kumbi, Thoubal district                                  |
| i. Sagang                        | Churachandpur district                                   |

### CONCLUSION

Trace of the origin of the Koms is still obscure. However, Brown (1873) stated that the Kom tribe originally belonged to the hills lying on the south of the Manipur valley and also claimed that there were about 2000 individuals only at the time of his investigation. Shakespear (1912) was particular in saying that the Koms have come from Sarikpung hills of the Chin hills. Teba K. Christian (1977), as his emic view claimed that the present Kom tribe is the descendant of the *Kakom*, the first issue of a couple called *Mipa leh Minu*. The Koms believe that their ancestors lived in the caves and then to the mountains and in the forest. Another claim of the Koms is that their ancestors came from the Chin hills and belonged to the Mongoloid stock. Etymologically in their

dialect, *Kom* means cave and *Rem* means people or tribe, meaning thereby, the cave man. There are folksongs amongst them, in support of the theory. McCulloch (1859) observed that the Aimole (Aimol), Koirangs, Chote (Chothe), Pooroom (Purum), Muntuk (Mantak) and Karum (Kharam) are all evidently only the varieties of the Kookie (Kuki) stock. Their customs too, are almost the same as those of the Kukis. He also pointed out that in appearance, they all are much alike, and there is no striking difference amongst them. The Kom folk-lore contains that they have originated from the East Asia particularly from Khojengpui at Khaki, now at China.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author sincerely thanks to (late) Sinkhuplin Serto, the then chief of the Sagang village, Mr. S. Songkhupthang, Sagang village, Mr. Achon Kom, K. Korpu Kom, Khoirentak Khopui, Mr. M. Lenkhomang, Chief and President of Kom-Rem Chief Welfare Organization, Harmontlang village, M. Serkhopao Kom and Maramhunsong Telen of K.R. Lane, Mr. Lalkhomang Karung, President, Kom-Rem Union Manipur and Mr. T. Hensing Kom, Information Secretary, Kom-Rem Union Manipur for their invaluable cooperation.

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