

## **Kom, the Foothill Tribe and their cultural affinities with the Meitei A rethinking on the Colonial Ethnography of Manipur**

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### **Abstract**

One of the uniqueness of the state of Manipur is its mosaic culture which is the complex embodiment of different ethnoses. Throughout the long and glorious history of 2000 years of civilization, since 33 AD, the roles played by the Meiteis and many ethnic groups had also contributed their contributions in the making of this civilization. Over the centuries, different cultures have combined through many struggles to form the distinctive political and cultural identity of the Manipuri people. There are 33 scheduled tribes in Manipur recognised by the Government of India; Kom Tribe is one of them. The British Administrator-Anthropologists categorised Kom Tribes as one of the Old Kuki ethnic constellation. The paper attempts to explore the traditional social conditions that contributed a significant role in determining the position of the Kom tribe and their total socio-political system of contemporary Manipur and its cultural affinities with the Meiteis, the larger community of Manipur.

### **Methodology**

The paper has been developed basically from the oral narratives of the village Chiefs, elders of the villages and intellectuals of the community. This face to face interaction enables the researcher to develop and explore a new narrative.

**Keyword:** cultural affinities, foothill, folklore, marginalised community, socio-political

### **Introduction**

Manipur lies at the eastern corridor of India linking with South East Asian countries. It has a long and glorious history of 2000 years of civilization beginning from 33 A.D. in which significant roles were played by the Meiteis, and many ethnic groups had also contributed their mites to the making of this civilization. Over centuries, different cultures have combined through many struggles to form the distinctive political and cultural identity of the Manipuri people.

The unique characteristic of Manipur is its mosaic culture which is the complex embodiment of different ethnoses. There are 33 scheduled tribes recognized by the Government of India and the Kom is one of them. The Kukis of Manipur has been classified into two types on the basis of the time frame of their migration into Manipur, Old Kuki group and New Kuki group. The British administrator-anthropologist categorized the Koms of Manipur as one of the groups of the larger Old Kuki ethnic constellation. The other tribes included under the umbrella of the old Kuki group consist of Aimol, Anal, Chiru, Chothe, Gangte, koirao, Koireng, Lamkang, Paite, Purum, Simte, Vaiphei, Zou and Hmar.

## Roots and Route

The Kom tribe is believed to have been migrated from the land between North Eastern Frontier area and the Shan State of Burma (Myanmar) around 200 A.D. They moved towards the Arakan Hills and Bay of Bengal and made their way into the land known as Tripura under the leadership of the then chief *Nei-that-Hla*, a rich man belonging to this tribe. The Koms at the time of coming into Manipur made their first settlements in the places, such as Senvon, Vaigailon, Thanglon, Kairam- Tlangbung in the south-western area of Manipur. From these places they shifted to places as Thing-kangphai, Lokliphai, kapeitangbung and again scattered in different corners of Manipur.

The Koms believed to have emerged from a cave called ‘Khur’ in its dialect. Their version of emergence is supported by folksong and folktales.

*“Kanhongsok eh, kanhongsok eh  
Khurpui a kanhongsok eh;  
Kansakrong in kho lei eh roh  
Kantinser in kho lei eh roh  
Kanthleponinkho lei eh roh  
Kanbomhar in kho lei roh”.*

(Free translation)

*[We came out of the Khurpui (cave) strong and stout,  
We came out of the cave with shining dress  
Let our physique shine the world,  
Let our necklace shine the world,  
Let our striped cloth shine the world,  
Let our armlet shine the world.]*

Another folktale in support of the origin from the cave is also stated in an abridge version.

*....while passing out through ‘Khurpui’ (cave) their journey was obstructed by a tiger (sahumpui). Nobody could come out of the cave since the tiger ate every person who came out of the cave. Among them a man called ‘Karungpa’ dressed in a stripped cloth like the stripped skin of the tiger came out and solemnly asked the tiger to spare his life and the rest, because they were of the same stripped skin and from the same family. By that moment a man called ‘Parangpa’ shot at the tiger with an arrow (Leevasai). Finally, the Kom tribe made their way out of the cave and made their settlement and called the place of their first settlement ‘Chungkhopui’ which means ‘upland’.*

## Present Inhabited Areas

According to 2001 census, the population of the Kom tribe is 15,467 including male and female. The Kom of Manipur made their permanent settlement in the foothills of the five Districts of the state (Manipur Gazetteer, 2016) i.e., Churachandpur District, Kangpokpi District, Chandel District, Noney District and Kakching District. Each Kom village is administered by the village chief, who is Head of the village, assisted by his council of members (Sehmang-Pachong). The chief and the council of members are recognizable for the administration of justice, enforcement of executive functioning, maintenance of social practices and other customary laws in the village.

Linguistically, the Kom belongs to the Tibeto-Burman. The Kom shares similar traditions, cultures, customs and linguistic affinities with the Aimol, Chiru, kharam, Purum and Koirang tribes which are also included in the Old Kuki groups. To bring unity and development among these five related tribes, they have been working together under the banner ‘Komrem’, since 1947.

### Social systems and Practices of the Kom tribe

The Kom society is pregnant with a number of clans with a common ancestor each. As it is certain to them, the clans had been originated since their emergence from the cave. The Kom society is classified according to the clans, and it is the most important aspect of its social system. Each person is identified by the clan he/she belongs to. There are nineteen sub-divisions and seven major clans. The major clans are-

#### Clans

#### Sub-Clans

- |            |   |
|------------|---|
| 1. Parang  | Serto, Telen, Saiche, Thingpui, Khumdom, Neikhup, Neiler, Khuplei, Tuivopum and Thilom. |
| 2. Hmangte | Lampui, Nemrang, Rangthui, Sangpar.   |
| 3. Durlin  | -no-  |
| 4. Leise   | -no-  |
| 5. Sengte  | -no-  |
| 6. Leivon  | Sangnai, Vampher, Lumpheng, Mote/Lusei  |
| 7. Kilong  | Sahum   |

(Among these clans, Durlin, Leise, and Sengte have no sub-clan.)

The clan system is still playing an important role in the social system of the Kom tribe. Each member of the society belongs to a clan. It is based on patrilineal descent. There are also strict rules in mixing the clans in marriage. Marriage can not take place between the same clan and between the sub-clans, believing that the clan and its sub-clans were closely interwoven.

**Family System:** The Kom family as an institution is the smallest unit of its society. Joint family system was being practiced but today nuclear type of family is popular. The Kom family is patriarchal. However, the modern Kom family has experienced flexible system and practices. A son after having his own child and family is independent to run his own family. Any of the sons willing to look after the parents stay with them, though traditionally the eldest son took the responsibility to take care of the aged-parents. Properties are distributed equally among the sons. Today, daughters are even entitled to get their shares in the family property both movable and immovable.

**Marriage:** Marriage between first cousin is prohibited. Cross-cousin marriage is preferable. Monogamy is general rule and is practised by the Kom community. The Kom practised three types of marriage. The first is 'arranged-marriage', the second is 'love-marriage', and third is 'elopement'. The first marriage is cross-cousin marriage. It is between son and his mother's brother's daughter termed as 'Apu-sanu'. It is one of the most preferred marriages. The second type of marriage is marriage by proposal with the consent of the individuals. In this category the parents of the man approach the girl's parents for their approval. The third type is marriage by elopement. This type of marriage usually takes place when the parents of the lovers are against the marriage of the lovers.

**Nuchen or Nushik:** At the marriage of a girl, the groom and his relatives arranged a grand feast at the residence of the bride. This feast is to show honour and appreciation to the girl's mother for the labour and hardship she had faced in taking care of her.

**Widow Remarriage:** A woman is granted the right to re-marriage after the death of her husband. But she has the choice to remain with her in-laws or return to her parental home. All the properties of her husband are entitled to her as long as she remains in her husband's residence as a widow. But once she got married, the property would be entitled to her previous children.

**Death:** Only those who died a natural death were buried in the village graveyard. In other unnatural cases, the corpse was buried outside the village. The Kom believe in life after death. At the death of a person, a chicken is killed and hung upside-down, the head being put downward. This was done with a

belief that the noise of the chickens crowing will be followed by the deceased and go to the abode of the dead.

**Thirampei/Lukasun:** Thirampei is the first death anniversary. On this day the grave of the dead body is opened to remove the skull and bones which are to be washed and cleaned with liquor. They are then wrapped with new cloths and transferred to the common grave of the clan he belongs to. This ritual practice was performed by the Sakamaks (son-in-laws), accompanied by their wives. On this day, a big pig is killed for a feast. All the grandsons of the deceased were presented traditional shawls. The ceremony is performed with a belief that the spirit of the deceased remains on earth till this day.

**Kinship System:** Kinship is an important organizing principle of the Kom society. The maternal and paternal kinsmen are culturally differentiated in the Kom kinships system. The Kom kinship network is classified into two sets of relations. One is through the father (Pa-inku) and the other side through the mother (nu-inku). This division and variations is replicated through out the entire Kinship down to the distant circle of the personal kindred.

The Kom tribe is rich with traditional festivals and celebrations. From season to season, rituals and ceremonies are performed. Agricultural ritual called 'sanol-banol that nasikinthoi' which is performed for a fruitful plantation is a popular practice. 'khuser/khukham' is a ritual performed in the month of January every year to sanctify the village. The Koms believed in the village deities and its worship. They also worshiped the objects of nature or spirits residing in a particular place, these practices had been relevant with their life till they were converted into Christianity since it involves rituals with the changing life style under a new faith; this traditional practice has been discontinued.

### **Kom in the Socio-political system of Manipur**

Of the various tribes of Manipur, the Kom tribe pertained to the Kuki-Chin race and has been categorized under the Old-Kuki family. This tribe, due to its scattered settlement in various areas of Manipur came close with other cultures and societies, and this has brought about changes among the Kom people in various aspects. It is certain that Christianity has been the prominent factor of introducing an organized society among this tribe. In the process, the Kom tribe with unofficial relationships and social contact with other bigger tribes develop a sense of self-consciousness or ethnic assertion though it still remains as internal feeling and strive among the Kom tribe.

The Kom tribe identifying as the non-Naga tribe was one of the member tribes of Kuki National Assembly (KNA) which was formed during 1946, with an objective to make aware and conscious of a common identity and to standfast under a single political platform of the Kukis. However, the Kom tribe joined the 'Khulmi' National Union (KNU), formed in 1947 by the non-Thadou ethnic groups as an alternative to KNA. This group of tribals such as, Gangte, Simte, Kom, Paite, Vaiphei, Zou, Marhum, Mancheng, Chiru, Aimol, Purum, Tarao, Moyon, Anal, Maring, Mate, Baite, Khongsai, Saum and Dongel, believed in the theory of cave origin. These ethnic groups came together under the umbrella known as 'Khulmi'. The 'Khulmi', organization though tried, could not build a common ideology that could unite them under a common identity. Gradually, 'Khulmi' failed to unify the Kuki tribes. Many of its member tribes left the organization and began to constitute their own organization. In 1947, the Kom tribe along with the tribes having similar affinities such as Aimol, Chiru, PurumKharam and Koirang grouped together under an association known as 'Kom Rem Association'. For about 30-40 years, this tribe organized and work together for a common-cause.

Prof. W. Nabakumar a renowned Social Anthropologist in his paper '*Ethnic groups, ethnicity and contemporary social formation in Manipur*', had mentioned that inter-ethnic relationship in Manipur reached a turning point when the ethnic clash between the Nagas and the Kukis broke out in 1992. It was true that a feeling of insecurity surge the Kom tribe whose villages were either near by the Naga tribe or Kuki tribe. It may be appropriate to mention here that, two Kom villages 'Taita' and 'Mongkotching' in Tamenglong district whose neighbours were the Zeliangrong Naga tribes left their

villages and made their settlement at 'Samulamlan' a Kom village in Churachandpur District and 'Ichum' village in Senapati District. In the later year of the Naga-Kuki ethnic clash, a Kom village- 'KomKeirap' in Churachandpur District was totally burnt down on an unfaithful night by the Naga neighbours. The situation left a big question mark in the minds of the Koms. On the other hand, 'Makokching' and 'Saikhul' Kom villages in Sanapati District whose neighbours were Kukis, have often been disturbed, oppressed and suppressed by the majoritarian ideology of the latter. Such situations had provoked the Kom tribes to decide to maintain neutrality without any affiliations to any other bigger tribal constellation. The Kom-Rem Union in several meetings discussed on the matter. Finally, it was decided to maintain neutrality, not taking any side of the two major communities, such as the Nagas or the Kukis.

### **Cultural Affinities with the Meitei**

In 'MoirangKangleirol' the Kom tribe was mentioned as one of the early autochthones in Manipur. This tribe due to its scattered settlement in various parts of Manipur came close to various cultures and traditions. Today, many Kom villages are in the plain areas of Manipur inhabited by the Meities.

Prior to their conversion into Christianity the Koms of 'Sagang' village were worshiping the Meitei deities called 'Lai- Santhong' and other Gods. They joined in the festival of 'Lai Harouba'(a ritualistic observance) which used to be performed by the Meiteis. Another Kom village called 'KakchingMantak' whose close neighbours are the Meiteis were found worshiping the various deities of the Meiteis. It is also mentioned in the 'MoirangKangleirol' that 'Khamba', a legendary hero, went in search of flower, to 'MantakKom' village and plucked flower for his fiancé 'Thoibi'. It may also be mentioned that 'EbudhouThangjing'(God) worshiped by the Meiteis as the God of creation, who came down from the Thangjing hill and merged with the fishing communities of the Loktak lake, was also worshiped by the Koms as 'EbendhouThangjing'(Goddess) for the same cause.

### **Games and Sports**

The similarity with the Kom and the Meitei is also seen in the popular games and sports once practised. During the time when Sagang village was under the headship of 'TepuKhulakpa', there was polo match, played between the Meitei and the Kom players of Sagang, a Kom village. The Kom practised 'wrestling' known as 'mukna' by the Meiteis and 'Arbun' by the Koms during celebrations. 'Cock fighting' is another common game of both the Meiteis and the Koms. There are yet many children's games like *yumsabi*, *kangsanabi*, *kei-yen*, etc. which are played both by the Meiteis and the Koms.

### **Affinities through Folklores**

Folklore as a social need reflects a society. It gives information about the socio-political practices, belief, and economic life of the people. In other words, folklore is a lens through which the whole pattern of a social system could be seen. Perhaps, oral literatures can highlight the affinity, the transmission of culture, a common cultural citizenship and a possible contact in the past. There can be no ethnic ownership of tales; it is shared by the cultural communalities. Tales are the important parts of human existence and of universal characters.

In this study, an attempt is made to trace the affinity between the Kom tribe and the Meitei of Manipur through the formal content analysis of the folktales 'Thabaton' in Manipuri and 'Lenchonghoi' in Kom. The stories share similarities in their contents though their narration is found to be slightly different. It may be mentioned here that every folktale accommodates changes and variation in its narrative, though the basic structure remains the same depending on the narrator of the story.



The folktale being selected for observation is translated as follows as being narrated by the Meiteis and the Koms- ‘Thabaton’ ‘Rengchonghoi’( Sister of the seven brothers).  
Once upon a time there was a man with a tiger head-called ‘kabui-keioiba’ in Manipuri, and ‘Humpuipa’ in Kom. He has a head exactly with that of a tiger, and a human body similar to a well-built man. He was clever, cunning and well versed in black magic. ‘Kabui-Keioiba’ was a man before his transformation with a mixed physical structure. He turned into the present physique when he shows his act of magic to his wife by turning himself into a tiger. He remains in such physical structure as his wife forgot to hit him with a ‘khudei’ (loin cloth) he was weaving, as he told her to do so. His wife being scared of him locked herself inside the house, He has no choice, but to leave the village and remain as ‘kabui-keioiba’.

One day he was so hungry that he visited a nearby village where the beautiful ‘Rengchoihoi’/‘Thabaton’ was residing with her seven brothers. She was so beautiful that every garment suits her. She was provided all her needs by her brothers. Being aware of Kabui-keioiba’s visit the whole villagers were behind closed doors. He first came to bang the door of an old woman who was clever enough to save her life. She replied from inside her house- Oh Kabui-Keioiba, I am old and won’t taste delicious to you; Instead of me in the southern side of my house there is a beautiful lady who would be the right taste for you. She told him about her beauty and the absence of her seven brothers at the moment. She told him to plead her as to open the door-

“A Reng-O, Reng-o;  
Rengchonghoi-o;  
Na in KharKha,  
Jong MahlangRoh;  
(Free translation)  
‘Oh queen, Oh queen,  
Rengchonghoi-o;  
Please open the door”

But his voice was not similar with her brothers, ‘Thabaton’ replied- you don’t sound as my brothers’ voice I can not open the door. He tried but failed, then he went back to the old-lady for her help, otherwise threatened to eat her instead. Being scared, the old lady accompanied ‘Kabui-Keioiba’ to plead ‘Thabaton’ / ‘Rengchonghoi’ to open the door. The old-lady imitated the voice of her younger brother.... ‘My dearest we have come back from the hills, you can take out the seven ‘porons’, - opened the door’.

‘Thabaton’ at once opened the door thinking that her brothers have come back. As soon she opened the door ‘Kabui-Keioiba’ grabbed her and took her away through the backdoor by closing the front door as it was done by her brothers. She was carried to his abode as she cried and called out her seven brothers for help. She was beautiful so ‘Kabui-Keioiba’ decided not to eat her but he took her as his wife. ‘Thabaton’ was a clever girl. She pretended to love him so that she could make her way-out one faithful day. They lived together as husband and wife. However, ‘Kabui-Keioiba’ was always careful thinking that she might escape in his absent. On the other side, the seven brothers were back from the hills and learnt about their sister being captured. They were so angry, with all their weapons they started tracing for their sister.

Days and months passed, then a year. But Thabaton’s brothers were still searching for her. One day while ‘Kabui-Keioiba’ went in search of food, she was pounding rice as she sang.... “Thabaton the only flower among the seven brothers have been imprisoned by Kabui-Keioiba for already one year...”. Her song was heard by the youngest brother. He quickly rushed to her and the whole story was narrated to him. As they tried to escape, ‘Kabui-Keioiba’ had arrived. The younger brother was hiding on top of a tree. ‘Thabaton’ welcome ‘Kabui-Keioiba’ and took the rice and

vegetables he brought. She pretended to prepare food, and then she asked him to fetch water by giving him a hollow bamboo stick called 'Utong'. 'Kabui-Keioiba' was trying to fill the bamboo with water but since it was hollow he could not do so though he tried for many times. In that moment a crow cried out.... " Ha Kabui-Keioiba! The top is hollow so is the bottom. The wife has fled and the house is on fire". When 'Kabui-Keioiba' heard this he rushed to his house, but he found his wife had already left with her brothers and his house was burned down. Then 'Thabaton' lived with her brothers happily ever after.

## Conclusion

The Koms of Manipur are one of the marginalized communities of Manipur though they have a rich cultural heritage. At the surface level, it seems that Meitei and the Kom have a lot of differences but when we dissect their cultural life at the deeper level there is a lot of similarities between the two communities. The existing ethnography is the colonial mode of interpretation. Shared collectivity of the different communities of Manipur remains unexplored as the present available ethnographic sources are largely the product of colonial ethnography. A new ethno- historical narrative is to be attempted in the light of the deconstruction theory to explore the ethnographic text that remains hidden.

This paper highlights the fact that ethnic assertion or the question of identity consciousness is the product of colonial and neo-colonial attitude of the majority ethnic groups. It may also be mentioned that the ethnic consciousness of the different communities have a merit of deeper analysis, for it indicates the richness of the mosaic Manipuri Culture that embraces different cultures of different communities in a harmonious manner. It further reminds us of the successful practice of the multiculturalism and social pluralism in the historical past that again reflects the integrating power of the then socio-political system of Manipur that have been corroded under the impact of the colonial British administration on one hand and the neo-colonial political attitude hidden in the Indian democratic system on the other.

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