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Anthropological Study of the Origin of the Rem/Riam Tribal People of Manipur

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Abstract:

The Rem/Riam tribes are one of the indigenous tribes Manipur and recognised scheduled tribes of the state. They are one of the valley and foothill dwellers, the periphery region between the hills and the valley of Manipur. The Rem/Riam tribes collectively consist of six cognate kindred tribes. The Rem/Riam people speak a language which is intelligible and comprehensible among all the 'Riam/Rem' kindred tribes of Aimol, Chiru, Koireng, Kom, Kharam and Purum. The Rem/Riam tribes are classified under the Tibeto-Burman family of Mongoloid racial group and language group, native to the state of Manipur in India. The main objective of this paper is the elaborate and highlights the origin history of the Rem/Riam tribal people of Manipur. This study will take into the rich oral history, folktales, myths and legends of the tribes. The study also employs research methods like field study, interviews and records both colonial and Indian, and also tribal resources. This paper is a concerted effort to document the history and preserve the heritage of the Rem/Riam tribal people of Manipur.

Keywords: Tribal, origin, culture, oral history, folklore

Introduction:

The Rem/Riam tribes are an indigenous community of Manipur that has its own culture, tradition, language, social norms, aesthetics, beliefs and history. They are one of the smaller tribes of Manipur. The Rem/Riam community is collectively consisting of six kindred and cognate tribes viz. Aimol, Chiru, Kharam, Koireng, Kom and Purum. They are collectively known as 'Rem/Riam'. These six tribes share common or similar or identical customs, traditions, language, religion and history.ⁱ All the six Rem/Riam tribes speak a dialect which is intelligible to all its ethnic kindred tribes.ⁱⁱ The Rem/Riam people have their own unique identity which sets them apart from others. This paper is an attempt to shine light on the history of the origin of the Rem/Riam people. Also, with the advent of Christianity coupled with modernization and globalization, their ethno history have become submerged and buried in the sands of time. The ethnographic studies of the Rem/Riam

people are important because it provides a better insight into the tribal culture and society. Ethnography is a common tool used in Anthropology as a form of study to gain anthropological information. Ethnography is one of the main ways that cultural information of a small ethnic tribal group is gathered. The study of ethnography also gives the researcher direct access to the culture and practices of a group. Today, ethnography is a common study approach in the field of Social Sciences. Like mentioned earlier the Rem/Riam tribal community of Manipur consist of six kindred tribes namely *Aimol, Chiru, Kharam, Koireng, Kom and Purum* and are together known as Rem/Riamtribes which share common history, linguistic and cultural affinity.ⁱⁱⁱ According to T.C. Hodson, he mentions that the Rem/Riam speaks a language which belongs to the sub-group of languages spoken by the cognate tribes such as *Aimol, Chiru, Kharam, Koireng, Kom and Purum*. The history of the origin of the Rem/Riam people is shrouded with myth and mythology. Nevertheless, the Rem/Riam kindred tribes have a rich history based on folk, legends and oral history. According to them, their ancestors emerged out of a cave locally known as 'Khurpui'. According to one of their legends, their ancestors emerged out of a cave or dwelling pit locally called 'Khurpui' which is believed to be somewhere in China. The study of Rem/Riam ethnic tribal communities is subjected to the study of 'ethno history'. Ethno history usually deals with small tribal ethnic groups that do not have written histories. It is also the study of the history of various ethnic groups that may or may not still exist. It employs maps, folklore, myth, oral traditions, music and paintings. Historian Axtell defines ethno history as a 'hybrid' approach to cultural process and change. Anthropologist Hudson also calls for attention to folk history (people's own beliefs about their past). Africanist J.D.Y. Peel repositions ethno history as current historical representations of any people in any social setting and also celebrates indigenous narratives.

Origin of the Aimol Tribe:

The origin of the word 'Aimol' is taken from the word 'Aimual' which comprises of two words, 'Ai' and 'Mual'. Literally, 'Ai' is the name of a plant which belongs to the cardamom family locally called 'Aikuhng'. The real originating term of 'Ai' is the 'Aikuhng' of black colour locally called 'Aivom Kuhng' which is particularly used as medicine and a secret substance for the priests' spells and rites. The word 'Mual' is the spur or ridge of a hill range. Therefore, the term 'Aimual' means the spur of a hill range where the 'Ai' plants were growing therein and thereabouts.^{iv} During the long period of migration of the Aimols and its closest cognate tribes, the appellation 'Aimual' came in existence through the name of the place of their ancient village. It is very common for the Aimol people to coin a name after their surroundings, environment and geography.^v

The origin of the Aimol is found in one of their folk songs. The Aimols believed that they came out of a cave called 'Khur'. According to one of their folk song, their ancestors emerged out of a cave or dwelling pit locally called 'Khurpui' which is believed to be somewhere in Southern

China. The ancestors of the Aimols emerging out from the cave are clearly mentioned in their folk song as:^{vi}

Kanjuangsuak e juangsuak e,
 Khurpui a kanjuangsuak e;
 Kamsumtin le kanjuangsuak e,
 Kansumtin I kowlkei a manram e.

Literally it means,

We came out, came out,
 We came out of a big cave;
 We came out with our property or wealth,
 Our property (cloth) spellbound the tiger.

According to the folk song and also oral traditions viz. legends narrates that the ancestors of the Rem/Riam people came out of a big cave which was believed to have beenguarded by a ferocious tiger. When any member of the 'Riam' ethnic group tried to come out or escape from the big cave, he would be devoured by the tiger. Later an ingenious plan was hatch by two clever persons namely 'Korthangpu' and 'Korthangpi'. They tried to outwit the tiger by weaving traditional striped clothing called 'Puanchial' which have similar stripes and patterns to that of the tiger's coat. Korthangpu convinced the tiger that they were of the same kind and thus propose friendship. The tiger was fascinated and intrigued by the traditional striped clothe and finally the tiger ceased to attack and befriended them. Later the tiger was killed with spear after it was tamed.^{vii} After killing the tiger they came out of the cave and started their journey of migration and settlement. The Aimols after moving towards the southwest direction, they settled in the Chin Hills in Myanmar and further moved to Lushai Hills and finally entered Manipur.^{viii} All the Aimol and its cognate Riam tribes of Chiru, Kom, Koireng, Kharam and Purum share similar or even identical folk song, story and oral history regarding the origin of their tribe.

Origin of the Chiru Tribe:

The word Chiru is derived from 'Chibu' or 'Chiburam' (Chi meaning salt and ram meaning land, and, hence, Chibu or Chiburam means land of salt). The people living in here are known to its neighbouring areas as possessing salt in abundance. One scholar, Lalboi Kom Kilong is of the opinion that the term Chiru might have been derived from 'Chin-Lu' where Chin signifies the Chin Hills and 'Lu' means heads or Chiefs. According to him, the Chirus might have been those chiefs in the Chin Hills who have migrated to Manipur. Hence, they came to be known as Chiru. Like all Rem/Riam tribes, the Chiru tribe share share common history with all of its kindred tribes.^{ix} The Chiru people also believe that they came out of a cave locally known as 'Khur'. The Chiru legends

tell of the emergence of human being from a cave. As written in their folk song, '*Ami kanhong e khurpui a kanhong*' which literally means, '*We came out, we came out from a cave*'.^x During their course of migration, the Chiru people moved through different regions of Burma, from upper Burma across the Chindwin and Chin Hills, they moved into Tripura, to Lushai hills and then finally settled in Manipur.

Origin of the Kharam Tribe:

The Kharams believed themselves to have emerged from a cave called 'Khurpui', the exact location of which cannot be ascertained although there are numerous versions and claims with regards to the location of the cave. However, the belief to have emerged from the cave is consistent with their folk songs and folktales. As per the oral history revealed in a collection of folk songs called '*Lapu-Laa*', the Kharams after coming out of the cave first settled at a place called 'Ruongtuol'. The claim that the Kharams settled at Ruongtuol is also revealed by the 'Thutbul' folktale. The exact location of Ruongtuol is not known. After settling at the Ruongtuol Village for a long time, the Kharams settled at 'Charsuong' as reveal in the folk song called '*Raalngam Laa*'.^{xi} Like their kindred tribes, they also followed the same migration route across Burma, then to Chin Hills, then to Lushai Hills and finally settling in Manipur.

Origin of Koireng Tribe:

The name 'Koireng' is derived from two composite words, 'Kol' meaning 'east' and 'ren' meaning 'men'. Originally, they were known as 'Kolrem' which means people of the east. The Koireng people also had a mythological place of origin called 'Khur' also known as cave or hole. Therefore they are known as 'Khurmi' which means 'cave man'. The Koirengs do not have any written documents which record their history of origin and migration. However, their oral tradition handed down to them from immemorial past keeps the story of their origin and migration alive. They along with their kindred tribes moved through different regions of Burma. They moved across the Chindwin of upper Burma, Chin Hills and then into the Lushai Hills and finally into Manipur.

Origin of Kom Tribe:

The Kom people are believed to have different stories to tell regarding their origin and migrations. A renowned Kom scholar, Teba Karoung said that, 'We learn from our ancestors that our forefathers live in the nether world. Afterwards they came out one by one through a hole/cave'. It is a common belief among the Kom people that they emerged out of *Khur* (cave) and marched towards the south in order to find a suitable place for settlement. Such beliefs and legends are reflected in the traditional songs of the Kom people and their kindred tribes.^{xii} The name 'Kom' is literally derived from the word 'Lukakom' meaning 'turban' which translates to 'Turban People'. There are different variations regarding their descendants and ancestral history. Some says that the Kom people were the descendants of 'Puhring and Pudam' who kept their hair long and wore turban. A folk song

translated the translation –

Tena Umin Sharsam Kanjok

Thlunglu Kan Kom Eya

Kharbom Tipun Sharshamjaklei

Thlunglu Kande Eya^{xiii}

The above folk song literally means that the Kom ancestors used to grow long hair and wore turban. After the Kom people emerged out of the cave, they moved south towards Myanmar, then to Chin Hills and finally entered into Manipur.^{xiv}

Origin of the Purum People:

According to oral history, the Purum people too came out of a cave like all their cognate tribes mention above. T.C. Das wrote that the Purums came out of a hole/cave. K.N. Wainel Purum writes that, ‘We came out from the cave or route; a tiger was watching us in our ways; we made a striped cloth; which resembled of a tiger; by the means of this cloth we beautified the world’.^{xv} These similar stories of their origin story are shared by all its kindred tribes.^{xvi} Like all their kindred tribes, the Purums also migrated south towards Myanmar, Chin Hills, and then entered Lushai Hills and thus finally in Manipur. The origin and meaning of the word Purum is not known exactly. However, the Purums are certain that they were captured by the Meitei King in a war,^{xvii} and that they were later rehabilitated by the Meitei King Pamheiba at Lamdangching in 1748.^{xviii}

Conclusion:

The ethnographic studies of the Rem/Riam people are important because it provides a better insight into the tribal culture and society. This particular research work encompass the study of the Rem/Riam people of the history of their origin. Study on the tribal Rem/Riam people of Manipur is challenging as there is lack of written records and physical historical evidence. Researchers, scholars and historians mostly rely on oral history, folk tales and songs, legends, lifestyle, habits, etc. Some of the key features of studying on tribal communities are the challenge the researcher face while gathering sources and materials, lack of data and the difficulty in obtaining information. The history is transmitted orally and it is often repetitive. It is shared among the people and distributed in the memories of different individuals therefore it is constantly changing. The advent of Christianity in the Rem/Riam community drastically changed the social fabric of the people. The Rem/Riam people forego many of their culture, traditions, and also their history. The study and research of vulnerable indigenous tribal communities like the Rem/Riam is very important in the survival of indigenous cultures and therefore not get eroded by modernization and globalization. In view of this, the objective of the study is to preserve the rich history of the Rem/Riam tribes and draw the attention of the literary world of their historical importance.

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