CHAPTER – IV
The Koms of Manipur:
Narratives and Cultural Practices

The Koms are people of Manipur state. As a community, they ascribed themselves as 'Koms' or 'Kakom'. 'Kom' refers to the turban they were. Turban wearing was common among them. In fact, the cultural significance of wearing turban among male members of the community is ritualised in the 'Lukasun ceremony', last rite of the death in the pre-Christian period. Besides, it is also generally known that the people of Moirang (plain area) know them as 'Koms', referring to people coming from the great 'cave'. The term 'cave' in Meiteilon (Manipuri) is 'Kom'. In Kom language, it is called 'Khurpui'. The 'Khurpui' version of the Kom identity ascription is commonly understood within a 'Khurpui narrative' origin of Koms. During the British colonial period, Koms were broadly categorised as 'Old Kukis' of Manipur. They were called 'old kakis' to differentiate them from 'new Kukis' resettled in Manipur. The present tribes such as Aimols, Purums, Koren, Kharams and Chirus have close cultural and historical experiences with Koms. They are described as 'kindred tribes'. In fact, the Koms usually refer to the people of such tribes as 'Ulenais' (brothers and sisters). Based on the earliest British colonial Linguistic survey, Kom language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman group. In specifics, Kom language is grouped under the 'Kuki-Chin-Mizo' subgroup. In fact, as an ethnic group, they have close cultural affinities with the tribal communities inhabiting the southern part of the state. In particular, language and cultural similarities between Koms, Hmars and Lushais is observable. However, in the post independence era Koms were recognised as Schedule Tribes through Constitution (Scheduled Tribes), Order, 1950. The Koms as tribes in the state are well known for their narratives and cultural practices that binds them together as people.
The Khurpui Narrative and Experiences

The Koms trace back their history and culture to the Khurpui narrative. The Khurpui narrative is a creation history of 'Kom' people. It is a community narrative of origin, history and culture usually narrated in song (khovel lha), dance (khovel lham) and story (thuming, punga vari). This narrative provides the basic worldview, structure, institutions and historical experience of the Kom people as society and also tribe in the state. Therefore, this narrative becomes the epistemic premise for self ascription and social interaction in the context, time and place. This premise broadly describes Kom tribe at the following levels; a) Kom tribe as a society (tribe) in itself, b) Kom tribe in relation to Rem (Komrem) people and c) Kom tribe in relation to other ethnic groups and tribes in the state. The Khurpui Origin is usually narrated or sung by the elders of the community on important occasions of the community as (also cited in Kom, 1990:9-10);

Khurpui Song
Kan hong sok e, khurpui a khan, hong shok a (2)
Kan Lengsial le kho lei eng e;
Kan lak pon leh kho lei eng e;
Kan shak long leh kho lei eng e;
Kan chim shi leh kho lei eng e;
Kan bun haro leh kho lei eng e;

English Version
We came out from the cave or route;
With our mithun and cloth;
Our physiques well built;
Our necklace as decoration;
With the pointed thorns of porcupine;
And Silver Armlet and Anklet;  
This beautified the world;

**Aimol Tribe Version**

The Folk-song in Aimol language

Ami kan hong e; Khurpui a kan hong (2)

Kolkei rang in ralong alei chon;

Ami kan them e; amtin kan sher a;

Kan amtin sher kolkei kan ram;

A o; ya-e; ya; ya e (2) ya

Kolkei rang in ralong alei chon

**English Version**

We came out from the cave or route;

A tiger was watching us in our way;

We made a striped cloth;

This resembled the colour of a tiger;

By means of this cloth we killed the tiger.

**As Narrated in Nongmaiching Area (Thayong Village)**

“In the very beginning (akonpuia), Kakom(mehi, we), as told by our elders, emerged from the Khurpui, the Great Cave which connects the world below and earth (called rhingkho in Kom). The Khurpui, as it is described to us, was under the jurisdiction of a ferocious tiger. It would not allow anyone to leave the underworld. Koms overpowered the tiger and came out from the khurpui. It is told to us that Karongpa (one courageous Kom) took the initiative to approach the problem posed by the tiger using collective wisdom and strength of the community. The Karongpa, wearing the Ponthe (tiger stripped design community shawl),
approached the tiger. The tiger was deceived by the stripped cloth (thinking one like himself) and was befriended. In the meantime, Saichepa (kathempu clan) came and killed the tiger. Thus, the tiger was eliminated and the people come out from the cave and established villages. Over a period of history, the community prospered and progressed as a society and people on earth. This narrative marks the onset of the history of Kom people” (Translated version of the Khurpui narratives as retold by one of the oldest men of Thayong village, Pu. M. Mhunchung, dated August 2009).

The nongmaiching area Kom villages believed that in the prehistoric times, the community lived at Khutruitpui after they emerged from Khurpui. Khutruitpui is considered to be a village of origin of the community on earth (Khurpui origin). From Khutruitpui, they moved to Kholamdar. Kholamdar, as the name suggests is a village where community became rich and prosperous. It is a village where population grew, young increased and culture emerged. Terminologically this village is referred as a ‘village of dance’; signifying birth of their culture.

In this narrative they indicate that they are part of the larger indigenous society of this region. They say that they are the people from Mawochiru ram (south-west China) establishing their racial root to Mongolian race. In a more specific narration they say that they come from China, travelled down the present Arunachal Pradesh hills and rivers. This place in their memory is known as ‘Samang Ram’ (Tiger land). However, this place also is remembered culturally as place where they found a necklace called thrichung commonly expressed in their language as ‘thrichung nimhu na ram’ (place where we found our necklace). The thrichung is an important cultural element of Kom people, an ornament worn by women. Besides this, they recalled several rivers encountered such as Tiger River and Tuita-atbung River. The former is so named ‘Tiger
River' because they believed that drinking the water of the river turns one into a tiger. Therefore, it was forbidden to drink the water of the tiger river. The latter is also remembered as a river that cuts (probably a strong current), a dangerous river. Taking such rivers as landmarks, the community made a mention of Chitabung (Chin Hills) and the Arakan hills. They even talked about having reached the Bay of Bengal as given evidence by 'cap', a sea shell. This shell is one part of the thrichung. They narrate that they moved further crossing the Chitabung towards Tripura where they are of the opinion that some were left at Tripura.

In the context of the present location of this village, the people say that they came from the eastern side referred as 'nongpok'. Taking nongpok as a region, it is remembered that they traversed upon various places and established villages from time to time at different places. As such they commonly refer themselves as people of 'sim mar' (east and south). One of the earliest recollected landmarks in the state associated with the community is Chiruphai (also known as Chirubung). Chi means salt, phai means plain, and bung means mountain indicating that this place was associated with 'salt' – a place where they found salt. The other places remembered include Kailambung and Maphaibung (known as Kapeibung by the meiteis). These places are located in the western districts of Manipur. However, the present village under study, in the present Nongmaiching Area (Imphal East) as told by the elders was established during the time of Maharaja ‘Karta Phaikachandra’ (Bhaigyachandra). Nonmaiching Hills is fondly lived in the memory of the people as expressed in the song entitle “Rei Lha - Song of Flower” sang during the Reilam (Reiju) festival. The song as sung by the villagers themselves goes as;

Beloved lass and lads bringing fresh and faded flowers
Feel like putting them on to the hair of their beloved.
Let’s slowly go to collect flowers that are charming
And cut bamboo pipes for sipping rice-bear from Nongmaiching
(English translation by S. Micheal Achung, Thayong village, dated August 2009)

As Narrated in Thangching foothill Areas (A descriptive version as retold by one of the oldest men of Khoirentak Village, Pu. Rhangchailer, dated November 2010)

Most importantly (akaronpenna), the history of the ‘Koms’ (inclusive of larger present Rem Tribes) has it origin in the Khurpui narrative and the establishment of villages. The first village of the Kom people is known as Khothrutpui. The Korns began their history at the Khothrutpui village. It is usually referred to as the village of origin by the people. From Khothrutpui, the Korns moved to farther villages in the region and grew in number and prosperity. After Khothrutpui, the Korns settled at Khojepui. Then they moved to Kholamdar. At Khojepui, the people encountered a Samang Humpui (wild tiger). This stage or place in history is referred as a Kongram, Khur or sakhong ngakhong indicating the danger faced by the community at this stage. This tiger had a supernatural identity. It could take upon itself both the form of an animal or man and could converse even with the trees. The village was under the siege of the tiger. It prevented anyone leaving the village. This village, a stage in the community narrative is considered to be a very dangerous stage in the history of the Korns.

Considering the danger, the Korns approached an old and wise man named Puvom. Puvom was a kathempu, a village priest. He had the power to prophesy, defeat enemies and dispel spirits with his supernatural power, ‘Doi le ai’. The people went to him with ‘jupeng’ (good rice bear), wine and asked him to prophesy whether he could help them. The old man asked them to bring ‘aidum’ and ‘aidsaan’ (medicinal roots). Through these two elements, he
prophesied (tlaa asaan) and was able to foresee that the tiger would be charmed and tamed.

The old man wore a cloth called thepun also called punthle (Pun upa). The cloth has a tiger strip like design. It also includes both the design of puisapun (man shawl) and nhumheipun (woman shawl). This shawl is an important identity marker of Kom people.

Puvom influenced the tiger to befriend him as they had similar appearance. A friendship deal was made between them. They became friends (Pare, Thruin). Therefore, one was not supposed to kill the other. A promise was made that if the tiger kills man, let his teeth fall and if man kills tiger and eat let his throat swell. This promise (trong antong kamjo) between Puvom and tiger has got institutionalised as clan totem. Even today there is belief that the tiger will not be able to come into face-to-face with man as a mark of that that covenant. This covenant also has been applied in the process of settling dispute between individuals in the community. Usually disputes were settled through village legal process called ‘wasagnapa’ (Meiteilon), taking oath. In this ritual both the parties are asked to bite the teeth of the tiger. It is believed that the wrong one would be killed by a tiger. The overcoming of this stage of the history is given evidence through this song;

Khoronrang e khoronrang, e vammino
Meithlang tingkhon range, e vammino e
Vammo kalya e satin raja simruja e
Khoron range khoron range e vammino
Leisak tinglho ronrange vamino e
Vamma kaja e mitin raya e
Simruya e
A free translation: Tlangtingin (south) sarakip, varakip katrong, kayai hi manrhet ya ru (Let all the man and animal know my word and power in the north). Sakting (sakram), katrong kayai hi manrhet yaru (let everyone know my word and power in the north).

After the end of a difficult Khojepui historical encounter the Koms lived at Kholamdar. Kholamdar, literally meaning village of dance and celebration (freedom), is a village where they found freedom, security, happiness and prosperity. They recollect this stage of their life as place where they built houses and huts for shelter and rested usually expressed in their description as ‘rebook antakei’, ‘thlam antasak’. In this village, the people had good sleep and had good dreams. They celebrated this freedom by dancing, eating, singing and narrating stories for seven days and seven nights. This celebration gave birth to their culture; song, dance, customs and clans. This is referred in their language as ‘thrut antasem’ (constructing culture). The origin song is sung as:

Kan hongsuk e kan hongsuk, e Khurpui e kan hongsuk e
Khurpui akhan hongsuk e
Thingkalat lhongkatet mhorang e
Heiya he heiya he ya
Heiya he heiya he yo
(A free translation: We came from the cave. We established our villages)

Kom identity self ascription, Kakom inchangna, is derived from this song of history. It is the basic foundation on which community ethnonym, Kakom or Kom got constructed.

Kan honguk e kan hongsuk e Khurpui e kahong suk e
Heiya he heiya he
Kan honsuk e kan hongsuk e
According to this narration, the community ethnonym Kakom or Kom is related to turban, called Lukom in Kom language (Kom trong). Kom culture and tradition says that all Kom men wore turban, to bind their long hair. Such practice of using turban is also applied to burial rituals of the dead. As a cultural practice, although not in practice today, the lukasun day marks the first death anniversary ritual celebration. On this day family of the dead commemorate the death by feasting the village. There is usually good food, meat and drink. The most important ritual ceremony of this day is lukasun. On this day the tomb of the dead especially the elders is opened by the sons-in-laws (Sakamaks) and daughters (serjurs). The head of the death is washed with finest wine placed in a Sum (gong), dressed with the turban and laid back in the tomb for a final rest. This is called lukasun day. It is the last rite of the death. It is considered that lukakom, lukasun both referring to wearing turban becomes a vital element that establishes the basic identity of Korns. Therefore, Kakom or Kom is an organic cultural nomenclature of the community. This element binds together the family, clan, village and tribe. This is vividly described by this narration as ‘sam antakeikatum, khawakhan nikakom changna kha inching or anmalaar’. Here, turban (Lukom) is the symbol of identity and so they called themselves Kakom or Kom (a derivative of lukom, turban). This is given evidence through the song (khovel lha) below;

Khurpui a kan hongsuk e
Kan Kom luin abong heiye
KaKom kachang ung a
(A free translation: We came from the came with turbon on our heads. We are Koms because we wear turbon)

Kan honzuk e kan hongsuk e
Khurpui a khan, honzuk e
Kan Kom luin a bong hei a
Kan Kom luin a bon hei a
KaKom ka chang ung – e
(A free translation: We are Koms because we wear turbans)

After the establishment of their culture, clan and tradition, the community progressed socially and politically as seen in the number of villages established after Kholamdar. They were resilient and strong able to relate with a number of people, cultures and villages. Such a progress of the community is indicated in some of the most important stages of community history as remembered by the elders such as Bong Intlur / Bonginsae and Runglevaisoh or Rhemlevaiso. This stage is described as a meeting place of the Kom people with other ethnic groups called ‘vai’ (outsiders). ‘Rhem’ means the insiders, Koms and ‘vai’ means the outsider. It is also referred as a place where the community came into contact with other ethnic groups. Some also describe this place as a place where three rivers meet. It is believed that at this stage the community boundary got enlarged as the community split into different directions. This stage of the historical experience is captured through a narration of Mhurai Tepa Story (Story of Huge Eagle);

Mhurai tepa khan nite aloyo
Marvan thui hewa hin kaomjo
Asorna um alakna um heite amokjo
Rhemlevaiso rechunloye e
Yantra nunhui o
Mhurai tepa nite loye e
(A free translation: The great eagle has stolen the child. It is high up in the sky. We have no means to rescue the child at Runglevaiso)

According to the story narrated above, the Kom people encountered a huge eagle called Mhurai Tepa at Runglevaiso. The eagle used to kidnap the
children of the village. It had a nest high up in the sky, unreachable to man and animal. One day, a man of the village came forward to kill this bird. He knew how to make poison (Lhumtur). This man asked his wife to prepare a fine rice beer. When the beer was ready, he mixed the wine and tur (poison) and tied around his head and laid himself out in the open. The eagle noticed this man lying out in the open. It came and took him up in the high sky nest. The bird began to tear open the head of the man and began to eat. However, the bird got poisoned and it fell. In the meantime, the man took out his sharp knife and cut off the head of the bird. People of the village made a long bamboo ladder and brought down the man (It is believed that the idea of making the long ladder was told to them by another a bird).

After Runglevaiso, the community were at the Kangram (meaning burn village/land), present Moirang area. It is believed that this name is taken by the present Sagang village. It is also recalled that some moved further to Airam (Aibung, Aiwlzal and Aitlang). Airam is a hill range associated with ai (such as turmeric). Ai family of tubers and herbs are used as medicine for treatment of sickness as well as ritual elements for driving away evil spirits.

The Kom history after Aizwal (Champhai in Mizoram) moves on to the Chiburam. Chiburam literally means a land of food salt. Salt is considered to be a scare food commodity in those days. At Chiburam the people found the source of salt. They could produce salt at this place. Thus, this place is called Chiburam and the people who were specifically involved in processing salt came to be known as Chirus. In the course of time, Chiru became an ethnonym of a family and a tribe. It is inferred that this is one way of explaining the ethnonym of the Chiru tribe of today. This historical stage is recalled in the following song;

Achikasun se inna, achikasun se innaa
Chibu khur a ule nai khavang rabe
(A free translation: We went to get salt. We all went to get the salt from the salt cave)

After Chiburam the community established villages at Khodungsai (long village). It is believed that this village had long stress of length. The elders recalled that they were closely followed by the Mhar Tribes in their historical sojourn. In fact, at present, Khodungsai is now to be under Mhar inhabited area. The following song recalls the life at Khodungsai;

Akholun a kansomsang e, Saikholun a kansomsang (2)
Akung alen a sena hoi a
A kara sum tin a suna hoi
Akong khan saketna kathra
Apar in sana dumka kasuk
(A free translation: We lived in a village called Khodungsai (long and large village). A rich and prosperous village)

After Khodungsai they established villages at Reyangphai (plain area of fewer wars). The elders recalled that this stage of the history was marked by less conflicts and wars. From Revangphai, they moved to Senvan (now near Thanlon). This place is now in Manipur inhabited mainly by the Mhars tribe. The following song recalls this place;

Sanven sasa a anhuiya thle karhrang
A nhuiya thle karhrang
(A free translation: We lived in a village named Sanven)
Moirang Foothill Region

After Senvan, the elders recalled having lived at Rhenlenthlang, in Moirang area, also known as Thangjing Hills. This place is associated with 'an epic story of Rengam', the 'Doikungpu'. He is considered to be endowed with the greatest of 'doi-le-ai', a supernatural power. Many folk stories such as 'Suphaiva' and 'Sornu', the ideal woman of the community in beauty and greatness are also narrated in this context. The existence of the megaliths on this hill range is described by the community as a living witness to such a great lived experience in the community. Incidentally, this hill range has a divine interpretation in the ethnohistory and culture of the Meitei community. The worship of Moirang Thangjing lai has its genesis in this hill range. This deity occupies a core of cultural, social and religious space in the culture of Moirang area.

Koms (as an ethnic community) believed that they are one of the earliest tribes who came into contact with the Moirang/Meitei community, the plain ethnic community at Moirang area. It is also pointed that Koms since prehistoric times had close social interaction with the Moirang/Meitei community. Infact, one of the most accepted theories regarding the ethnynym Kom is based on the contact with the Meitei. This theory says that in the first contact between Moirang/Meiteis and Koms, the Koms told the Meitei that they came from Kom, meaning cave (referring to their theory of origin). Since then, the Meiteis perceived them as Koms and the ethnynym Kom got established. As a matter of fact, the community recalls that they are one of the earliest tribes who came into a mutual social relationship with the valley inhabited Moirangs and Meiteis. Evidence to this cultural contact could be derived from a popular Kom song:

Keini theimei le lei kaleng ung
A kho kan hei Chunna, mor kho kan hei Chunna
Mor kho bung kho inchenme
Tlheimei le leitur kan lengeh
Akho kanhei chunna, Mor kho kanhei chunna
Morkho bung kho insangheisik ah kanhei jamma
Tlheimei le leitur kan lengeh (as sung by Mr. L. Pakhup, Purrum Likli, August 2009)

(Free translation: I crossed all the villages, there were high hills, I left the high hills and reached the plain. There we live together with the Meiteis.)

Thus, the Moirang area is an integral part of the life-world of Korns. The epic story of the Khamba Thoibi and the Moirang Lai Haraoba festivals still find a lingering memory among the elders of the community as a case in point. Moirang is remembered fondly as ‘Moirang Lamdam Leinungshi’ (a common Moirang expression) meaning my belovéd land Moirang. In fact, Koms also name their children after the strong man, Khamba and the beautiful Princess, Thoibi of Moirang. One of the earliest Moirang Maharajas still recollected in the memory of elders in the community is Chingkhu Telheiba (known by Koms as Mheilang Rengpa). This contact still lives in the memory of the villages inhabiting the Thangjing ranges (generally called Hoatak, home of tribes). In particular, Khoirentak village is associated, as known by the elders, with Mheilang Rengpa, Moirang King, Telheiba. The village got its nomenclature from the King which is named after a variety of big honey bee prevalent in the area at that time called Khoiren in Moirang language as expressed commonly ‘Khoiren – Khoiren mas paiiba gumna paiiba Khoirentak (a Village which flies like the honey bee). In particular, it is referred to as original the homeland of the Koms, Karens, Chirus, Kharrams and Aimols since prehistoric times. For instance, the stream which comes down from this hill at the northern side of Khoirentak Kom village is still called as Chiru River, Chiru Tuidung. At the lower end of this river, there is a Karen village. Though these units of tribes have become independent as tribe specific since the formation of the state, they still
The people still share close historical memories and cultural affinity even today. The other contact with the other Meitei Kings such as Karta Bhaikachandra (Bhaigyachandra), Chandra Kirti and Gambhir Singh is also still vaguely remembered among the elders in the villages.

The Moirang hill ranges provides a mutual cultural co-existence between the valley people and Koms and other kindred tribes. The King depended on them for forest produce as well as for defence against the invading hill enemies such wild tigers, elephants and evil spirits. The inter ethnic interaction between them occupies a vital space in the lived historical and cultural experiences of Koms in the state. The Moirang Lai Haraoba Festival where, usually with the presence of a tribal chief, is remembered by the community as in practice especially in the pre-Christian context. Even today, some Kom villages of the Moirang area take part in this feastival. Mera Hoachongba (also pronounced as Mera Houchongba), an age old festival instituted to celebrate inter ethnic mutual relationship especially between tribes and Meiteis, is still finding its symbolic meaning among people in the month of Mera, a Manipur calendar. Besides, intermarriage is observed as one of the most important social institutions for mutual ethnic relationship between tribes and Meiteis.

Some of the other important villages remembered as recorded in the collective memory as Elephai, Tuilephai, Monbongtlang and Rhenlenthlang. Each of these places has some historical importance. For instance, at Elephai lamkut lham got institutionalised. It is known that from Rhenlenthlang, in Thangjing hills some people went to Langmaiching (Nongmaiching Hills in east Imphal). At Rhenlenthlang the people encountered the spirits of those whom they killed in the war. They were haunted and thus they had to leave that place.
2. Worldview and Beliefs

a) God, Spirits and Life

The worldview and culture of Koms are intrinsically theocratically oriented. They believe that the supreme God, the Creator of all being which they call Pathen is the ultimate reality. This God according to their belief created the world. The Khurpui narrative, a creation story of the Koms, also found common among the other kindred tribes, indicates the existence of the three worlds namely Underworld, Earth and Heaven. According to the Khurpui story, Koms emerged from the underworld and settled on earth. The journey, passage or the stage between underworld and the earth is usually referred as Khurpui (great cave) under the surveillance of Tiger. The world on earth is referred as rhingkho. As a term, rhingkho means ‘a village of the living’. The world above is called kathikho, meaning ‘a place of the death’. Kathikho is a village of the souls of the death which constitutes ‘a life after death’. They also believed in rebirth. This is vividly observed in the elaborated rituals and ceremonies observed during death ceremony and last rites in view of the people (dead) living in kathiram.

In the pre Christian era, Koms also believed in the existence of various deities, which finds a close similarity to the Meitei belief. They believed in the existence of such gods as thangjin god, inpathen or kasapathen, inroi (python-god) (household god, Meiteis called it Sanamahi), kho pathen (village god), lhei pathen (land god) and tui pathen (water god). Zmong Koms belief in household deity is traced back to the celebration at the Telenpa’s house after they came out from underworld and after which everyone took with them the household god to their homes. Usually, the main pillar of a Kom house is associated with this deity. The python-god was worshipped by the Koms as their protector and guide. This god was commonly known to the people through the folk story: Inroi, the
Python-god. Two stories about the python-god commonly known among elders of the community even today is given below (translated version as told by Mangpu Karong of Imphal, originally from Sempangjar Village, dated November 2011. The stories are also cited in Mangpu, 1990):

**Kom Warriors and the Python-god**

"Once during the war times, Kom warriors were trapped by a blood filled stream. They were in danger of being overpowered by the enemies as they could not cross the river. To their surprise, a python appeared and helped them to cross the river. That night, the python revealed to the leader of Kom warriors in a dream that he was their python-god who delivered them from the deluge and the hand of the enemy. Since this event, Koms worshipped python as a household god”.

**Chongnu (The Weaver) and the Python-god**

Chongnu lived during Khovondar life stage of Koms (probably in 500BC). She was a beautiful girl who fell in love with the python-god. She weaved a beautiful shawl for herself taking the design of the python-god. This story has been captured in poetic lines by K. Mangpu of Imphal.

"I sat weaving upon a rock
Placid stream runs below
I copied the markings
Of my lovers' skin
Added with craps markings too” (his own translation)

In fact, Chongnu story gives the origin of the weaving woman cloths (woman cultural cloths) among the Koms. Python-god who fell in love with
Chongnu is usually associated with women cloth design. Punkhokhoi and Khamtlang are design along the python. This story is especially told to young girls to inculcate the value of cloth weaving among them. Cloth weaving is a basic skill for girls among Koms. Girls are known for their beauty and skill of weaving cloths.

They also believe in the existence of spirits both good and evil. It is believed that the bad spirits bring suffering, sickness and death and the good spirits protect the people. The concept of propitiation of the spirit or ritual sacrifice for healing or driving away the evil, bad spirit is a common practice found among them before the Christian era. In the religious beliefs and practice the Koms were very much influenced by the Meiteis. Some time the Maibis and Maibas, the Priest and Priestest of the Meiteis, are called to administer in the religious rituals for healing as well as prophetic purpose. Normally, the village priest of the Koms is called Kathem (Thempu). The Thempu occupies a very vital place in social and religious as well as in political realm in the community. He performs all sacrifices connected with ceremonies of the life stage, healing and prophesy. He is usually known to have supernatural power called doi-le-ai.

The elders narrate the story of war victory through doi-le-ai. They often recalled through singing khovel lha about the place where they received doi-le-ai, ‘kan sim chem and kan mar chem’. In fact, the community believes that they learned supernatural power to overpower the enemy and foe or heal the sick called ‘doi-le-ai’ from ‘sim-le-mar’. They also found a knife, an important instrument for their livelihood at ‘sim-le-mar’. This is recalled in their expression ‘kan sim chem, kan mar chem’ meaning literally ‘our knife from the east-west’. This knife is used by the village priest called Kathempa during the ritual sacrifice (inthei) for healing the sick. Usually hen and dog are used in the sacrifice. The sacrifice of the dog is usually executed through the Chem and doi-le-ai, a supernatural spell to drive away the evil spirits by the priest. The origin
and importance of doi among the Koms is conceptualised usually through the story of the Great Rengngam, The Doikhongpu (The master of doi). The translated version of the story as retold by a group of elders from Thayong Village interviewed in November, 2011 is given below:

Rengam, the Doikhongpu and the Tiger-god

"Rengam was a great Kom warrior. He was known for doi-le-ai. He is also called Doikhongpu (one who possess greatest doi, supernatural power). He is believed to have learned doi-le-ai from from Rangshai (Tiger) at Shamang Ram (identified by elders as somewhere between the Arrakan hills and the Chin Hills. Rangshai was a supernatinal being (mythical god) who had doi-le-ai (magical power). Rengam reigned as a great chief in the northwestern part of the Bay of Bengal with his power of doi. He could overpower every enemy and evil spirit. He could raise the dead to life through his doi. He was like a god. However, the story had a sad ending as Rengam felt pray to lady goddess of the region called Suphaiva” (I was told that the whole life story of Rengam usually takes about a week to be narrated).

In the pre-Christian period this story had a great role to play in the society. This story inspired the youth to be like Rengam. Rengam is the personification of doi, a man with godly power and riches who could fight back all evil spirits and enemies without fear. A person who is trained in doi is called Kathempu (village priest). The priest is the religious head of the village and people. He cures the sick and dying with his magical power of doi. He could identify evil spirits and dispel them through sacrifice. He assisted the village in war. It is believed that Koms although small in number had been always out of defeat from the enemy because of their knowledge of doi. Boys and men are known to be courageous like the tiger, who posses magical powers like the
Rengngam. This is indicated by the shawl men wear. Puise pun and ponthe (cloth for man) signify tiger-god (tiger-man god).

The association with the tiger-god is also very significant among the beliefs of the people in the pre-Christian. Even today, it still has a symbolic meaning: of courage and strengthen very closely identified with the community. This belief was usually reproduced from generation to generation through the story. One such story is;

Mehsom E (the Beautiful Kom Girl) and Sahmang Ram (tiger god)

“There lived a lady by the name Mehsom E' meaning a comet of the known world. Her beauty and fame spread far and wide. A young tigerman from a Sahmang Tuishak (river of dead), the land of the were-tigers heard about Mehsom E. The tiger was so enchanted by the beauty that he decided to marry her. The tiger as he was wandering in search of his hunt came upon the human village. He was glad to kill the human beings from that village. However, an old woman who saw the tiger planning to kill people of the village distracted the plan of the tiger by directing him to the beautiful girl of the village, Mehsom. The tiger ceased Mehsom and fled to Sahmang Ram. The village people sent two strongest men, Fothir and Rhanche of the village to rescue the girl. The two men went and put up great fight and managed to return with the girl (the story ends saying that tiger was able to bring back the girl through his magical power)” (as narrated in August, 2010 by Mangpu and Pu. Toneithang from Tepui Village and also cited in Mangpu, 1990)

Besides, there are also various other stories and believes which provides an explanation of their lived reality. One such story is (adapted from Mangpu, 1990);
Warlaung and Tree of Life (considered to be sometime in B.C 200)

“One day, the seven brothers went to the clear the jungle for jhum field. During the work the brothers encountered a big python. They managed to overpower the python and killed him. The youngest brother was assigned to cook the python for the brothers under a big tree near the jhuming area. While the boy was cooking the meat, a leaf from the big tree fell in the cooking pot and to his surprise he saw that the python reshaped again and quickly slipped into the woods. The brothers after a day of hard work came back to eat the food prepared by the younger brother, but found to their utter disappointment that no food was left for them. They were so furious that they beat up their brother very badly and left him almost dead”.

“It so happened that the boy, as he was gaining his consciousness, happen to touch the big tree and to his great surprise found that he was healed and became strong again. He took some of the leaves and barks of the tree and went home. At the village gate, he saw a dead dog and he could raise the dog to life through the leaves. Upon entering the village, he also attended an aggrieved beautiful girl whose mother was dying. The dying lady was healed and happiness was restored to the family. Warlaung kept the secret of the bark to himself alone. Keeping it safely in a basket, he hid it somewhere in the corner of his house. He had a faithful dog who became a good guard for the basket. It so happened that one day while Warluang was away into the jhum fields, his wife unaware of the value of the bark, took out the bark to be dried in the open air. The bark came to the notice of the moon and the sun who eventually stole away the secret bark away into their abode. The faithful dog too was taken away as it would not allow to them to leave the bark. In fact, the solar and lunar
eclipses are explained through this story. Eclipse takes place when the dog bits the moon and sun in anger in remembrance of his faithful master”.

Since the Christian era among the Koms, the belief on God and spirits has changed structurally. At present the Koms have become all Christians. The concept of God as Jesus and the Bible has entered the worldview and beliefs and cultures of the Koms. The erstwhile Thempu, rituals and sacrifices have been adapted to the belief and culture of Christianity. In fact, the Church has become a vital institution that shapes the worldview, cultures and customs of the people. As an emerging practice, the Church pastors play a significant role in the all round development of the people in the village.

b) Life after Death

After death the Koms believe that the soul of the dead goes to Kathiram. Kathiram is usually described through a story (thuhming) entitled, ‘Rhenghenpa – Vorthling and Ngambom Thumhming’ (translated version as retold by Pu. Pakhup from Purrum Likli, dated August 2009);

“When Vorthling died Nganbom his friend maintained the tomb of Vorthling. Ngambom cleaned and planted flowers on the tomb. One night a sangar (jungle cat) came and tried to destroy the flower. Ngambom saw the cat and asked him to explain the reason for destroying the flowers. The cat said that he was asked to do so by his grandma, Vorthling. Ngambom wanted to know who the grandmother was and so he followed the sangar by holding its tail. In this way Ngambom reached Kathiram. At Kathiram Ngambam experienced that he could talk, see and hear the people including Vorthling but he could not relate with them as human persons. Ngambom came back to earth and induced death upon himself.
through a process suggested by Vorthling with the hope of experiencing life after death. On one fine day, he ate good food (sathai) and had a good sleep with a thrimpui (needle) dangling over his heart. A rat came and cut the thread holding the thrimpui and thus the thrimpui fell on the heart of Ngambom and he died. After his death he went to Kathiram. He could thus see the difference between rhingko and Kathiram. For this reason, he is known as Rhinglhempa or Ngambompa, a true man (atak taking), who was not afraid of death".

Kathilham (road to Kathiram) according to the belief of the elders is long and tedious. There are several stages to reach Kathiram. The first two important stages in this journey are marked by Sullhum and insirimu trees (kung). At sulhu tree one is thirsty and also develops a strong urge to eat the sullhu fruit but the fruit cannot be plucked. At the insirna kung (regret tree) one becomes conscious of the departure from dear ones and regrets. It is also believed that all the spirits of the hunt during one's lifetime become the guides of the soul in the journey to Kathiram (implies the importance of hunting). A good hunter is honoured in Kathiram. This is signified by erecting a carved out memorial posts, indicating the number of the hunt as a mark of achievement. Usually, the heads of the hunt is kept in the house of the father of the hunter. The neck portion of the hunt is given to the Apu (maternal uncle) expressed in Kom as 'Saring an tasak'. Apu maintains the account of the necks of the hunt received by 'a role of thread'. Each neck of the hunt received is counted by one role of a thread. Eventually, the single role of thread becomes a bundle of thread role depending on the increase of the hunt. This bundle of thread roles is placed beside the death by the Apu. It signifies that the number of hunt indicated in the thread role would become the guides in the journey to Kathiram when one dies. This indicates that those who do not hunt would have a difficult journey. It is also believed that even the rekathet, the spirit of the enemy killed in war becomes a protector in the journey to Kathiram. Besides, Koms place a coin with the death by the Apu indicating
that the soul would require money for crossing the river to Kathiram. In this version, the soul of the death has to cross a river through a bridge called Chingramchaeng. Chaeng is a bridge of that river and Chingram is small bird that guards this bridge. A passage to this bridge is obtained with the coin given by the Apu. It is also believed that there is a kayingru rathu (fearful jungle) on the road to Kathiram. This jungle is usually crossed with the help of a chicken which guides the soul by its voice, piak! Piak!. Therefore, chicken is usually sacrificed at the death of a person. This chicken is killed on the door post of the house. Food is also cooked and given to the dead to take with him in the journey. In fact, some rich families prepare a huge feast of meat and rice for the soul of the diseased. Rice beer, water and other belongings and needs of the deceased are also placed at the tomb hung over a wooden post, Y-shaped, erected on the tomb. The food is prepared usually for two persons. It is expected that one family member who has already gone to kathikho would come to take the spirit of the death.

c) Rebirth

The Korns believe in rebirth. This is signified in the process of giving a mark on the body of the person (especially a beloved child who dies) with bimhank (black colour from the burned pot). Children born with black spots on the body, 'Cha aron' are considered to be a reborn of some beloved one who had died earlier (as told by Pu. Pakhup dated August 2009).

“There is a story told among the elders that there was a childless man who died and was reborn in the neighbouring family. This was found out by the people on an occasion when they were playing hockey, kanchai (also game played usually in Manipur). It is said that a man, during the game, was able to recall the hockey stick which he had kept it over the oven (karap) in the family where he was born in his previous life. The
elders made him eat an egg (artoida) to let him forget the previous life” (translated version).

3. Social Structure: Clan and Kinship

Clan (Phung) and kinship (inkho) constitute the structure of social organization of the Kom tribe. This structure defines the ethnicity, tribe and identity. It has its foundation in the Khurpui origin narration of the Kom tribe, which is also found common in other kindred tribes of Kom tribes who have similar historical experiences. This theory assumes that clan and kinship system are based on real blood relationship. This structure binds the society as homogenous social and political unit. It binds the society, clan, tribe, families and individual within a collective social construct. Clan and kinship define every structural and cultural process of the society. The customs, norms beliefs and values are embedded in the clan system. All relationships and cultural interaction processes within the tribe as well as in relation to others are defined by the basic structure of clan and kinship.

Kom tribe, as commonly found, consists of seven major clans: Karong, Leivon, Serto, Telen, Saiche, Lupheng and Hmangte (as found common in the Muntung area) as usually expressed as ‘Yak taret salai taret’ (seven clan, seven family). The basic structure of these seven clans is maintained across all villages and even among the kindred tribes. In a documentation of Koms culture (in Kom language) Thangneirang Serto lists the seven clan as Karongpa (referred to as Shongthu and Puvom in some villages), Leivon, Serto, Mhantge, Telen/Thingpui, Khumdon, and Mirem. Each of the clans is associated with a totem such as tiger for Karong, Bilhum for Leivon and Biyang for Mangte etc. Clan totems are a sacred for the clan. They get personified with them. The clan is forbidden to the kill or eat the clan totems. Although the basic structure of the clan remains the same, there are variations in the terms used for the clan across
villages and areas among Kom tribe. As such as in Sagang area the seven clans are termed as Parang, Hmangte, Karong, Durlin, Leise, Sengte and Leivon. The Sagang area clan system also includes a sub-clan system such as (also cited in Serto, 2010: 47-48);

- Parang has ten subclans; Serto, Telen, Saiche, Thingpui, Khumdon, Neikhup, Neler, Khuplei, Tuivopum and Thilom
- Hmangte has four subclans; Lampui, Nemrang, Ranthui, Sangpar
- Karong has one subclan; Sahum
- Durlen, Leise and Sengte have no subclan
- Leivon has four subclans; Sangnai, Vampher, Lupheng, Motte/Lusei

Family as a unit of social institution among Kom tribe is located strictly within the boundary of a clan system. Clan system has the tendency of generating fairly large families and villages of clan groups before the coming of nuclear and individual centric social unit among the Kom villages. As a general social norm the father is the head of the family. He takes responsibility and makes decisions that concern the family and children. In practice, the mother has a great influence over the family matters. There is no rigid norm on the role of the sons after the death of the father. Usually the married elder brother takes over the father’s role in the family when parents become old or die. In some other cases, the youngest son is known to take the family inheritance of the family and the responsibility of caring for the aged parents. But family is always understood within the clan system.

The clan structure of the Koms establishes two lines of kinship social organization namely Father’s Line (paternal) and Mother’s Line (maternal) as viewed from a child of the family unit. These kinship lines establish the premise for social interaction within the group as relatives and family members. The father’s line of the children is considered to be the blood related bothers and sisters, siblings. All the father’s line grand parents, uncles and aunts are
addressed as ‘Apa’, father and aunties are called ‘Anu’. The family unit is further extended to the clan structure where the same clan members become close cousins usually considered as brothers and sisters. The grand parents, uncles and aunties will designate the children as ‘kansapu’/son or ‘kansanu’/daughter in each case. The mother’s line of children is also considered close relatives. However, they are not considered as blood relationship as the father. In fact, the preferred marriage of the son of the mother is the daughter of the mother’s brother. Family line of the sisters and brothers are also considered as close relatives. Marriage among them is considered exchange which is strictly not permitted. The maternal grand parents, uncles and aunties are addressed as ‘Apu’ and ‘Apis’ respectively by the children affectionately. The maternal grand parents, uncles and aunties will designate the children of their daughter as ‘tupa’ son, or ‘tunu’/daughter in each case. In fact, Apu plays a caring and protecting position in the life of the child. Gifts from the Apu/Api to children on naming day or other important occasion of the child is cherished and respected. The Tupa gives, in olden days, the saring (neck portion) of the hunt to the Apu. Besides this family lineage, the clan becomes the basic unit of kinship system among the Koms. This forms the basic structure on which all relationship within and outside are aligned. Individuals are identified and known by the others based in the clan, tribe and family in which one is born. In this way children trace their lineage from generation to generation.

4. Village Governance Structure

Kom tribe as a political unit is defined by a village (also a common structure found among all tribes in the northeast). A village is a republic, self sustained and self governed geo-political unit. It is intrinsically entwined with the people, their culture, history, livelihoods and a polity. It is considered to be a homeland where the forefathers and relatives are buried. The concept of a membership in the village is closely linked with the modern day concept of
citizenship within the state. Even today, there is a practice that a Kom individual wherever he resides or works, is always connected to the village and the community. In fact, in common practice, the name of the village bears the name of the place and also individuals of the village are addressed by the village where they reside. However, village collective and clan/tribe membership form the primary base of social organization. Individuals and families are understood only in relation firstly to the village, and then to the clan and tribe. Therefore, membership to the village necessarily entails an organic merger into the village, clan and tribe.

The independent village units were basically upheld by a village institution called the Seer-in (also called Som). Seer-in is commonly referred as a ‘youth dormitory system’ in today's understanding. However, it was a social institution for village youth training for life. The youth in particular went through learning and socialization process in the Seer-in. They learned the basic skills of warfare, defence and livelihood. They were introduced to processes of village governance system and were trained to become leaders of the village. Many of the elders interviewed in the village narrated their experiences about the Seer-in. In fact, some pointed out that those who were able to become Yusuklakpa (youth leader) in the Seer-in usually have the better change to become Khulakpa (chief of the village). They were also initiated into the socialization process of the community on areas such as marriage and relationship. For instance, marriage was basically within the village. Inter marriage was restricted by the Seer-in. Thus, Seer-in defined the actual boundary of social interaction within and across the community.

The village elders described that village settlements were carried with due customary rites and rituals. Usually, the elders, accompanied by a Thompu, would go in search of a village site. They would take with them a cock. The availability of a water source and land for community cultivation were usually
considered as important elements for locating a village site. If such a place is identified, they would clean and station there overnight. A small hut called thlam would be constructed for shelter near a big tree around that water source. The cock would be tied on the tree and they would sleep in the thlam. They would also weave shawl in the thlam - tapun akhongsik (weave the cloth). The Thempu would listen to the cock crow and only after which the water will be checked and the shawl would be cut. This is the way they establish a village (also found common among the kindred tribes).

The village structure as a political unit delineates the village/tribe and affirms its political space in relation to the larger societies and the State. It becomes a distinguishing boundary between the villagers, non-villagers, clan and tribe. The possibility of the ‘others’ being considered a member of the village without being absorbed into the tribe, a clan and family is ruled out. Therefore, the third person seeking membership into the village has to pass through the consent of the village Chief and the village authority. It naturally means assimilation into the village, family, clan and tribe.

Therefore, even a person from other Kom village can be a resident and member of the village only through the consent of the Chief and council members. Usually this agreement and consent of the village is considered through a feast to the village given by the membership seeker. There are also cases where other persons belonging to other tribe or ethnic group gets assimilated to the village through marriage. Absorption into the clan and tribe is necessary condition to be a full-fledged member of the village.

Chieftaincy system among Kom tribes is generally democratic. Chieftaincy and village council is nominated by the elders who represent the people in the village. The criteria of nomination are based primarily on seniority and clan consideration.
The chief stands as the guardian of the village, culture and land. He functions under the premise of the customary law, community ownership and collective interest of the village. The chiefs and the council members are the sole caretakers or guardians of the village. All affairs of the village, cultural and customs, legal, administration and political, are managed within a village council system headed by a chief. Every dispute within the village (also inter village disputes) is also settled with the intervention of the Chief and his council members. They are the legitimate authority on all matters and decisions concerning the village and the people. A story of the origin of a village council system is usually narrated in a mythical story (as narrated in Mangpu, 1990: 3-4). The story goes that the first Kom village council was run based on council of village ministers under the kingship or chieftainship of King ‘Thankarokpa’. The council of ministers is composed of the representatives with defined duties. The name of the post is suggested with a name of a known animal having certain features related to the roles, duties or responsibilities of a particular council member in the village such as;

- **Simbeng**: a wee rat, known for eating rice in the field as well as in the barns. It is commonly seen in the jhum and paddy fields. He is incharge of drinking (zu/wine) during the meetings.
- **Vakanim**: a tiny bird, known for its humming sound. It is commonly found on the mountains of jhum cultivation sites. He is a song leader.
- **Utokpa**: a frog known for its croaking sound across fields particularly during the rainy season. He is the mover of resolution in the meeting.
- **Thalanthla or Charoitetu**: The second mover of resolution in the meeting.
- **Simbupa (the Owl)**: The warrior.

The story goes on to say that Utokpa was the first mover of resolution in the meeting of the council. He moved a resolution that there should be six
months of day and six months of night. This resolution was rejected in the meeting. In fact, the birds came and picked him that made him have a rugged skin since then. The second mover of resolution, Thlanthla moved a resolution that there should be day and night alternatively. This resolution was accepted and that is the beginning of day and night (Zinglep-Varlep); a week, a month and a year. During this meeting an unfortunate event took place. Mr. Owl had killed the Simbeng perhaps due to failure of Simbeng to serve him wine sufficiently. This event marks the beginning of ‘violence’ in the village and society.

Responsibilities of Village Council Members: In the pre state structure, Kom village council is normally constituted of five members. However, in some village the size of the council depended on the size of the village and the number of the households. The five members are namely (also cited in Serto, 2007: 74-77);

- Haisapa: He is the village Chief or the Headman.
- Mantry (Minister): Usually there are two mantries called Savangpa and Serkatingtapa. They assist the Headman in the governance.
- Tlangva (hill bird): He is in charge of information on the meetings and decision of the council. He becomes the bridge for information between the people and the council.
- Thempu: He is the priest, administers religious sacrifices.
- Thirkasupa: He is the blacksmith. He prepares tools for the village.

Besides the five members of the councils mentioned above, there are other institutions namely; Lhapu and Shampu, Raven, Thingchom, Tuidon, Potsang and Lawm to assist the village administration under the Chief and his council (ibid: 76-77).

The structure of village polity is closely linked to the clan structure. According to the narration of the southern area Koms (as articulated in
Thangneirang, 2007: 42-43) the following are the clans vis-a-vis certain responsibilities associated to the village governance;

- **Karong (Pu Rongteer):** He is usually addressed as Luklakpa. He supports Khulakpa and/or Haisapa, also known as chief Kabom/tong ronpuipa.
- **Leivon (Pu. Khutinkhup):** He is the priest called Kathempa. He is also addressed as Maipa tonhmun karonpa.
- **Serto (Pu Rehmun/Saichepa):** He is the chief of the village, known as Savang/Khulakpa, Khoshung kho karonpa. There is a belief that if Serto clan becomes the chief, the village would be peaceful and prosperous.
- **Mhangte (Pu Bunghur):** He is the assistant and/or secretary, also known as Thempa Kabompalarhut antangpa.
- **TelenlThingpui (Pu Tukhmun):** He is called Ponpu antang, can also become Savangpa (Chief).
- **Khumdon (Pu Malek):** He is the blacksmith known as kut kathem mistry.
- **Mirem(Pu Mirem):** He is a member of the village authority.

However, in the present practice, the village council is constituted within the premise of Constitution article, 371 (c), the ‘Hill Areas’. The Hill Areas as an administrative unit is recognised in Manipur for autonomous tribal self governance system. This article has been implemented in the state through various states legislative Acts since 1950s such as Manipur Village Authority of the Hill Areas Act, 1950 and Village Authority Act, 1956. Based on these Acts, today the village council is constituted as a Village Authority. In this administrative structure, the erstwhile village chief becomes the ex-officio chairman of the council. He is assisted by the Secretaries, Treasurer and other council members.

In general, the village chief with the village authority is the supreme local self governance body. It has powers and functions pertaining to village judiciary, executive legislative and administration. It decides the village disputes.
between individuals and families through the customary laws and practices. For instance, a person who seeks divorce should return manphe (bride price) or the women share of property (nuchen, a-unpo) given to her by the parents at the time of marriage or as the village authority may decide based on the customary practices of the tribe. The disputes are usually processed through a payment of fine to the chief and the village authority by the convict. The payment is usually in kind (commonly a pig, measuring satuk ranga, approximately two and half chest circumference value). In cases considered extra ordinary to the village authority, expelling the convicted from the village is usually one option usually considered as a severe punishment. Otherwise, the chief and the village authority after deliberation on the case mutually arrive at dispute settlement. The village land, water and forest are administered by the chief and the village authority. They look after the overall administrative process of the village people and their wellbeing and development.

5. Culture and Customary Practices (External Manifestations)

a) Birth and Naming Ceremony

Based on the lived experience of the community as narrated by the elders of the community birth of a child marks an important stage in the life circle of the family. In the earlier days, there was a practice of ‘naiteso’, seclusion of the child and the mother for three days from the time of birth. The child normally is taken out after five days. This is followed by a naming ceremony usually carried out after a week, or when the child’s navel cord is healed and is strong enough to be taken out from the house. If the child is male, the compound name of the grand parents or great grand parents is given. The priority of naming the child is given to maternal grand parents. However, the child takes the clan of the father. It is also in practice that the grand parents of both sides would decide mutually as who would name the new born. Naming ceremony establishes the ancestor or
clan lineage of the child. This is usually carried out by giving a compound name to the male child who bears the name of grand parents, ancestors or clan. Therefore, the male child in particular is the carrier of family and clan lineage.

There was a practice of piercing the ear (ear boring) called kurvit ceremony. It is a ceremony of initiation into the norms and cultures of the tribe and family. It is considered that a child who has his/her ear pierced is considered 'an obedient child'. The date for the kurvit usually is village and family based. Some do it on naming ceremony and some others have fixed dates as a village practice. Today many do it individually. In earlier days, on the day of the kurvit, feast is given at the clan level. For instance, Leivons (luphengs) would make steamed rice bread (bolham) and celebrate on naming ceremony day.

Inheritance of the family usually goes to the male line. As a norm the girl child is entitled to gifts called 'Manphe' or 'aunpot' on his marriage. The brothers are supposed to extend social and economic support to the sister who has married. In recent times, Nigoan Chak Kaoba (originally festival of Meiteis) has also found as a common practice among Koms. On this day the head of the family (brothers), give feast all the sisters who are married. Giving a gift on this day is a common practice. The female child among Koms, in the recent times, has also been entitled to the inheritance. Moreover, as a cultural practice, the sister and the husband of the sister usually addressed as amarang and ani respectively by the children of the brother/s become a part of the family. They are bound by a family norm to extend service and help to the family of wife’s family and are recognised as sakamaks and sarjurs. It is the duty of the daughter to give party to the mother as a mark of her respect for the duty rendered to her as a mother.

However, as a practice final inheritance of the parents goes to the child who takes care of the old parents. In many cases the elder brothers after marriage establish their own families and the youngest child of the family becomes the
final caretaker of the parents and thus inherits the share of the final inheritance of the father. For the female children ‘aonpot’ (gift) is given to them. On the day of marriage, some of the customary gifts given to married daughter are Rhe, pun, sar, har, kurtan, necklace and cap (shawls and ornaments). Basically, all household articles such as bed, almera, pots and pants required for her to begin a family are given.

b) Marriage

Marriage is strictly clan exogenous. Marriage within the same clan is forbidden strictly. The father’s side relatives belong to the same clan, real blood relatives. Therefore, there is no question of marriage within that line. However, marriage can take place restrictedly between the father’s line of relatives and mother’s line of relative as in principle they belong to different clans. However, marriage of immediate children between these two clan relatives is restricted as cultural practice. It is also noted that there is no restriction in inter marriage among other tribal communities or ethnic groups. In fact, inter tribe marriage has become a common practice found among the Koms and its kindred tribes in the post Christian times.

Usually marriage takes place by love and consent. In the earlier days, the practice of the boy staying in the family of the girl for three years before the marriage was a standard practice. As of today, the boy’s family approaches the girl and her family with a proposal of the daughter for marriage with their son. This is carried out normally in three consecutive meetings between parents of the boy and girl at the home of the girl. This meeting is traditionally called ‘julamsa’, meaning, ‘in the way of zu’, rice beer. ‘Julamsa’, with the coming of Christianity, has been changed into ‘Chachai’, meaning, ‘taking tea’. At present tea has become a substitute for the zu/wine. Usually, the boy’s family with their serjurs and sakamaks approach the girl and her family with tea. Marriage
Proposal is made in this meeting. If the proposal is accepted, all matters relating to the marriage proposal between the two families are discussed and decided over a cup of tea brought by the boy family at the girl’s house. The acceptance of the marriage proposal by the girl’s family is expressed in the acceptance of the tea served to them. If the girl and her family refused the tea, then it is a refusal of the approach of the boy. If there agreement, further negotiation is carried out three levels with proper consent and appointment between the concerned families. In these meetings, all process with regard to the marriage is ironed out and dates are mutually decided. During this period, disagreement may also arise. However, if everything is fine, marriage is solemnised. Today, the solemnization of the marriage is done by the Priest, or Pastor in the Church, a substitute to the ‘Thempu’.

There is also a marriage by elopement. In this process, the boy and girl mutually agree to elope from their house for marriage. Elopement is simple, less tedious as a process. It is also relatively less expensive. It can also be preferred when parental agreement is hard to mobilise. In the elopement, marriage is decided mutually by the concerned families. Bride price is decided and the marriage is recognised by the families. There could be serious conflicts between the families in the event of the elopement especially if the girl’s parents do not approve of the act. However, usually the consent of the girl and boy is taken as binding. There are cases when the girl’s decision is against the family. In such case, the girl takes the sole responsibility of the marriage. She goes away from the family without the normally carried out norms of sending of the girl for marriage. There is also practice of marriage by capture, especially when the consent is not given. This is a coercive method marriage which could result in violence between the families and clans. The village headman and the elders of the village usually intervene in such events. The will of the girl is the utmost concern in the negotiation that follows.
There is practice of ‘tupnu’ ‘tupa’ marriage alignment among the Kom tribes. The son of the sister can marry the daughter of the elder brother in a mother’s line of relatives. This in biological terms would mean marriage between the close cousins. The idea of this marriage is centred on a feeling of brotherly care and love for the sister who is married of to other family and clan. The elder brother in giving his daughter in marriage to the son of the younger sister, called ‘ani’, implies the gesture of love from brother’s side. In this process, traditionally the son was to stay in the house of the uncle for three years as a service for giving the daughter in marriage.

Another name for the married daughter and son-in-law is serjurs and sakamaks. This is a family position given to the couple in the mother’s line of relatives. The serjurs and sakamaks play a vital role in all family functions that concerns the mother’s family line of lineage. Based on the decisions of the family, the sakamaks and serjurs implement social and customary duties in the family of the wife. They would cook and serve on family occasions. Digging of the grave is a customary duty as a practice today.

There is a practice of giving bride price (Jorman) among the Kom tribe. This is practiced strictly even today. In the earlier days, bride price consisted of a Sum (gong) and full grown Mithun. This was the highest standard bridge price. It could be also the small sum call Dar with a Mithun. Bride price is usually fixed as a common practice in the village. It is also given to the eldest member of the clan of the girl as well as the grand parents (maternal). The latter bride payments were made usually in cash. In today’s practice, bride price consists, although with some variations across villages, usually of pair of cows/oxen as given to the parents of the girl. Sum and mithun have become scarce and their values have changed. Therefore, as an emerging practice, bride price in cash payment has become an accepted practice. As such there is a practice at Sagang, village where the village has fixed the bride price ranging from Rupees four
thousand to rupees five hundred. The bride price is also usually accompanied by a presentation of shawls to the parents, siblings, serjurs and sakamaks of the boy by the girl.

Marriage is considered as a sacrament among Koms. Divorce is usually considered an abnormality in the society. As a practice, if divorce takes place, a very rare phenomenon among Kom tribe, man is to return all the property that she brought at the time of the marriage.

c) Last Rites of the Dead (Thlaantlang)

Last rite of the dead begins with the burial of the dead usually before the sun goes down. The tomb digging is usually a privileged duty of the sons-in-laws. The death is laid in the tomb usually facing the head toward the village. In the pre-Christain periods, the family, elders of the village would keep vigil of the tomb for a year by visiting the tomb every morning for a regular period; once in three days, after one week, after two weeks, after a month, three months (frequency of visits according to the economic status of the family) ... till one year, called Athren. The Athren is the death anniversary which is celebrated with Lukasun rites, a day on which the head of the dead would be laid for final rest. This is done with a great honour as well as feast. The family would give great feast to the village which would culminate in lukasun ritual (turban ritual). This ritual consists of opening the tomb and the head is washed with best of the wine, rapping it with cloth, they would place it in an earthen pot for final rest in a family tomb. In this rite the departed soul is believed to join the abode of the parents and ancestors in heaven. Besides, this ritual marks the formal acceptance of sakamaks (including the wives) as members of the family of the father-in-law. It is believed that only after performing this rite the sakamaks, serjurs and even wife become full member of the family. It is usually expressed in Kom as 'kathlanna nalut mak inchu, kasa kakamak inchangthei mak chening'. Erection
of the wooden post on the tomb of Kom men was in practice as a mark of status. However, in the present reality, the burial rite of Korns has been Christianized. The actual practice of lukasun is no more in practice but the customary values and norms of family, serjurs and sakamaks remains still intact.

d) Language

The language spoken by Kom tribe is called Kom tong, Kom language or simply Kom. It has no script of its own. Roman script is used for writing and reading. As a language it has been categorised as a Tibeto-Burman by G.S. Grierson. As indicated in Grierson, Kom tong has a structural similarity with all the kindred tribes such as the Kharam, Purum, Aimol and Khoireng. It is also easily adaptable to the regional languages such as Meitei, Lushai, Hmar and other tribes of the southern part of Manipur.

As a spoken language, Kom tong has variations across villages and areas. Some of the areas which can be identified based on the linguistic variations are project and Montung area, Sagang area, the Moirang Muntak area, the Tonsen and Tera-Mahou area. Since 1912, efforts have been made by the educated youth to standardise the Kom tong. Roman script has been adapted in writing. Teba's publication of Kom Rhem Primer is one of most important steps to this direction. In the recent past, the religious institutions such as Komrem Baptist Churches Association have made efforts to standardised Kom tong. In fact, they have gone so far as making Kom tong as a lingua franca for the Komrem Baptist Churches association. Such efforts have yielded a Kom version of the Bible, Hymn and other prayers books. Further, this development has been recognised in the state in the recent times. Today, Kom tong is used as a medium of instruction at the primary schools in Kom villages. This has been further strengthened since the introduction of Kom tong literature as a subject.
upto the higher secondary level in the state in 2008. In 2010, an all India radio programme in Kom trong has also been launched in the state.

e) Cultural Celebrations

The cultural process of Koms is believed to be originated from the Kholamdar. Kholamdar is the first place of land of freedom of Koms after they come out of the captive of the world below. The stage of their life signifies the birth of the culture. It is in cultural songs, dance, cloths and music that Koms find their bonding within the community. This constitutes a basic foundation of the cultural practice and social relationship. It is commonly known among the elders of the community that song helped them to identify each other. In the earlier days, they could identify a stranger in the village only when they sing khovel lha. It was in khovel that one could identify its kindred tribes. As such, the Khurpui song is common among all these tribes. Songs are composed on several occasions and life cycle of the village, clan and tribe. Every clan and family traces their ancestor through a song. Even today, on some important occasions, khovel lhas are sung to relive the memory of their ancestors and loved ones who have died. There are various types of songs. However, most of them are songs of celebration of life expressing beauty, strength, power, wealth, love, care, hunting, harvesting, sawing, war victory etc. However, it is known that earlier specific cultural festivals and practices have found newer dimension in the emerging cultural processes and contacts. There is a tremendous visible influence and changes taking place among Kom tribe as seen in the cultural expressions of the emerging generations. The Christian world, education and exposure to modern technology have become defining factors of cultural change and practice. Some of the earlier celebrations such as Yusuk Mhelap (giving rice feast to the whole village to raise one’s social status), Khongsuk (beating drum) and other ancestor related celebrations such have found exit from the community lived experience. However, some of the youth related celebration such as the
Bechep Lham have acquired new dimension of celebration. As a case in point, the Bechap Lham (harvest lham), a harvest festival is celebrated in Christian way called ‘thaithar lhun’, a new crop offering and thanksgiving prayer day in the Church. As a common practice the lham kut lhun is still a revered celebration among Koms. However, this festival has been subsumed into the general Kut festival of the southern tribes (Mizo, Chin and Kuki) as patronised by the state. Recently, as a Kom cultural specific, the youths have started celebrating a Khurpui Festival, a cultural festival day of Koms. However, Christmas, New Year, Good Friday etc. have become the main festivals and celebrations of the people especially at the village Church level. Some of the most important cultural dance and song performances of the community as still observed today based on the discussion with Khoirentak Kom Village Cultural Centre (dated October 2010) are (refer the appendix I);

- Khurpui Lam: A dance of pride and joy about themselves as sung in the Khurpui song.
- Reiving Lam and Reilam: Dance by young boys and girls during flowering season of Reivang flower.
- Lam Kut Lam and Salin Lam – Dance of Harvesting festival
- Buntak Lam – Dance during Derphun sports (archery), arrow shooting festivals. On this village festival day, the youth come out with their best of arrow and bow to compete on the target commonly place on top of bamboo pole.
- Dar Lam - Dance perform by young boys and girls accompanied with the rhythm of small gong.
- Waikep Lam (War Dance): Dance performed by the Kom warriors
- Waikhong Lam: A community dance accompanied with the rhythm of the big khong, side drum, rusem (backpipper), seraki and even sirangdar. It also is dance of joy and achievement and happiness. The dance is usually performed in pairs.
- Sakhong lam: Dance performed during celebration of the hunt accompanied with rhythm of the big drum and gong. It is usually performed by menfolk.

- Sitting together around the fire (oven) in the house, drinking (sipping rice bear called sawaiju with a small bamboo) and singing (re-storying their lived experience) together in choirs of men and women is an important cultural practice among them. In fact, songs of the collective and also individuals to mark certain stages of their life are sung in choirs. There are various cultural songs such as Khurpui lha (origin song), Sonkhong lha (hunting song) mi-intokha lha (social gathering song), mithi lha (songs to remember the death and grandparents who have died), Nughak rether lha (youth and romance songs) etc usually sang on some important community and family days.

Specific Cultural Elements: As observed in the community, Koms also has important culture elements that reproduce their identity. They constitute the cultural markers of the tribe. These elements are embedded in the Khurpui story. They have become a symbol of their identity which constantly impacts on the consciousness of the people. Some of the basic cultural elements of the Kom tribe are (refer the appendix I);

- Kantlh pon (Ponthe): Kanthe pon (ponthe shawl for manfolk) has its origin from the Khurpui stage. It is believed to the first shawl used by the first Kom man who crossed the critical stage of their history. This shawl has a tiger strip design. Wearing the ponthe, the Kom man managed to deceive the tiger. He befriended and eventually elemented him from the cave. That event marked the beginning of the emergence of the Koms from the captivity of the cave. Ponthe is thus today known as war victory shawl for the Koms.
• **Sumtin (Sum and Dar):** gong (big and small) used as ‘man le ro’ bride price. Gong is used in celebration as well as during funeral. It is common musical instrument used among tribes in the southeast region.

• **Mhaiphun (gun):** Gun is an important cultural instrument of the tribe. During burial ceremonies guns are fired as a sign of shooting at the enemy which has caused death.

• **Rungthei (matre, thrichung):** necklace for woman commonly believed to have been found from the northeastern hill ranges (now within Arunachal Hills), the northeastern part of the present South East Asia.

• **Kaeplai:** sea shell, part of the ornament. Indicates their connectedness to the sea and river.

• **Mhunhar:** armlet for the women

• **Tengsai:** girdle for men and women

• **Lukom:** turban for men

• **Mithon:** animal signifying food and wealth; a cultural and economic symbol (common for the entire South Asian region). Mithun horn is used as a musical instrument as well as cup for drinking wine.

• **Python:** the Kom shawl design represents python skin design

• **Rushem (backpipe):** a musical instrument. It is believed to have godly tuned that can entice any the girl of the village. The story of Rengtonghoi is made celebrated with this musical instrument.

• **Sirangdar (type of violin):** a string musical instrument somewhat resembling violin.

• **Sim chem and mar chem:** knife, believed to have come to the community from the arrakan hills. It is a knife usually used by the priest during religious sacrifice (usually dog or chicken) to dispel the evil spirits and diseases.

• **Punkhokhooi/punveil:** makla for woman
Puisapun: shawl for man
Numheipun: shawl for woman
Punchai: white shawl worn by man and woman
Khong (drum): musical instrument

Conclusion

Koms, proud of their rich cultural and historical experiences, have embraced change processes as a forward movement of the community over a period in the history. As a cultural community, they are aware of the challenges posed by the exogenous change processes. There is a common feeling among the people that these forces try to assimilate them. Nevertheless, the community is able to hold on to its cultural and political space as tribes in the state. They say that 'some people call us Kom-chin tribe as we have lived in the Chin hill sometime in history'. However, Koms constantly have to re-affirm that they are 'Kakom', 'Kom tribe'. Although, they share some common worldview, a common social phenomenon of influence due to geographical contiguity, Koms have a distinct lived experience as a politico cultural community. They are one of the earliest settlers of the geographical space which, unfortunately, become a 'frontier' area in the emerging state process of majority ethnic based district and revenue delimitation. They resist to be subsumed within the exclusivist ethnic politics of either Kukis or Nagas and simultaneously play a politics of co-existence of tribes in Manipur. They hold their self ascription as the final construct of identity expressed vividly among them as they say 'we are a Kom origin people and we are Koms'. They say that they cannot accept the outsiders or exclusivist ethnic politics ascription of 'who should be the Koms'. They have rejected the colonial ethnographic identity imposed on them. They say that they are not 'Old Kuki' or 'Kuki'. They consider such categorizations as against their community identity, an imposition of identity constructs of the colonial ethnographers, outsiders and visitors. They declare 'that we are Koms is given
evidence by our history, social organization, polity, norms, culture and customs, songs and dance.