CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Kom, an ethno-linguistic marker, stands for both the people and the language. Kom is one of the minority linguistic communities of the Northeastern states of Manipur. Kom is one of the nomenclatures of a larger group called Kom-rem. Kom-rem consists of five indigenous minority groups of smaller tribal linguistic communities- Aimol, Chiru, Koireng, Kom and Purum. The term Kom-rem literally means the people who emerge from the cave. The five constituent tribes share a common history and legends of cave origination theory.

1.2 ETYMOLOGY OF THE WORD KOM

There are various views as to how the people came to be known as Kom. One of the views is that the word ‘Kom’ is derived from the word Lukakom that means ‘wearing turban’ in Kom language. From Lukakom it gradually moved to Kakom, which means ‘to wear’, and from Kakom to ‘Kom’. According to this view, Kom literally means the people who wear turban or turban people. Another view that slightly substantiates the previous view is that the Koms are the descendants of Puhring and Pudam who kept long hair and wore turban. This view is supported by a folk song that goes like this;

Tena umin sharsam kanjok,

Thlung lu kankom eya.

Kharbom tipun sersam jaklei,

Tlung lu kandei eya...

A free translation of the song is;
Our ancestors grow long hair,
And wore turban.

But half man half beast did not grow long hair
And wore no turban.

There is also yet another view that holds that the word Kom might have been derived from the Manipuri word Kom meaning small opening on the earth’s surface or the cavity on the earth or a cave.

However, it is not easy to explain the term Kom as there is no written document to support the claims. The only resources available at our disposal are the folk tales, folk songs and the legends that have been handed down from generation to generation through oral narratives.

1.3 ORIGIN AND THEIR EXODUS

Koms believe that God created them. Serto, S. (1995)\(^1\) maintained that, “from the very inception of creation, our forefathers told us that they were created by Pathen (God). Firstly, he made man and secondly, woman. Pathen was pleased to call them ‘Mi’ (man). Then Pathen was also pleased to make them husband and wife and called them ‘Mipa leh Minu’ (Man and woman) and blessed them.” He further states that the traditional song supports this belief.

\[\text{minu leh mipa leiranot saye-eh}\]

Mi inthokna tita ninge yah

A free translation of the song goes;

*Man and women united in love
shall I call it the origin of man.*

According to the traditional belief, Kom people emerged out of *Khurpui, a big cave.* This view draws its support from the folktales and the folksongs that tell about the journey of their ancestors until they emerged out of the cave. One of the most common folksongs sung while performing *khurpui laam* (cave dance) goes as-

*Kanhong suk eh, kanhong suk eh,
Khurpui ah khan kanhong suk eh...*

A free translation of the song is;

*We came out, we came out,
From the cave we came out...*

Another similar cave song that the Koms sing about their origin goes;

*Keini kanhong eh, khurpui ah kansok,
Kamkeirang in hma ah aleingak...*

A free translation of the song is;

*We came, from the cave we came out.
The Tiger waits us in the front.*
Karung (1976)² mentioned, “we learn from our ancestors that our forefathers lived in the nether world. Afterwards they came out one by one through a hole which is in the fort of Manipur”. The myth has it that while trying to come out from the cave, they were obstructed by a tiger and nobody could come out of the cave as the tiger lay in wait to kill them. The Karungpa who came out of the cave wearing a loincloth called ponthe, made friendship with the tiger. He told the tiger that he himself is a kind of tiger. As his cloth resembled the skin of the tiger, the real tiger believed it and that was the reason that refrain the descendants of the Karungpa from eating a tiger or any feline until today. Saichapa, the bowman, after coming out of the cave killed the tiger with his arrow. Leivonpa cut off the tiger's tongue and wrapped it up in his waist. These people became the heads of the various Kom clans, namely Karong, Saiche, Leivon, Tellein, Hmangte, Serto etc. After killing the Tiger, they came out of the cave and settled in the highland (Chungkhopui). All the Komrem group of communities have similar story regarding the origin of their tribe. However, there is a slight variation in the story from one tribe to another. All these communities believe that they came out from a cave.

According to Karung (op.cit), Kom people entered Burma between 100 B.C. and 100 A.D., and sometime in 200 A.D., they moved towards Arakan Hills and Bay of Bengal. Then the Kom people entered Tripura and from there they entered Manipur. It is believed that they came from Mongolia passing through China, Burma and settled in Tripura, Assam, and Manipur.

Serto, S. (ibid) also shared this view stating, “according to the historical course of migration, the Koms are said to have migrated from the land between North east Frontier area

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and Shan State of Burma. They entered Burma, moved to the Arakan and Lushai Hill and finally entered Tripura. The Soktes, who were more powerful tribe than the rest drove out the Koms, Thadous and other tribes from the entire Chin Hills.”

It is also believed that the Koms migrated from place to place in search of fortune and in search of suitable place for settlement. One of their traditional songs says that;

\[
\text{Sima tiang mo kirangvan aom?} \\
\text{Marra tiangmo kirangvan aom?} \\
\text{Ruangthei pumkhat choi-inlange;} \\
\text{Ravan ajong seri-bah}
\]

An English translation is;

\[
\text{Where will be my fortune?} \\
\text{In the East or the West?} \\
\text{Taking a necklace,} \\
\text{Let us go to seek our fortune.}
\]

Another song that describes about their journey as the wandering tribe goes;

\[
\text{Khulla jinjin kanlon karra,} \\
\text{Kanchung simni thang kanriate-ah,} \\
\text{Thunglam-amo, phelam amo,} \\
\text{Naleingak roh, sendango-eh}
\]

An English translation is rendered as;

\[
\text{While marching on to seek fortune,}
\]
we travel up to the mount, and
down in the valley, to and fro,
under the scorching sunshine.

It is believed that Koms were among the first group of tribal communities to have arrived in Manipur. McCulloch (1980) stated that “The Kom at one time was powerful tribe, and their chief village not very long ago contained so many as six-hundred houses...” Serto, S. (ibid) stated, “In Meetei chronicles, the Kom was also mentioned as one of the early settler groups. In the legend of Khamba and Thoibi, the name of Kom is mentioned here and there (a free translation is ‘When Khamba caught the wild tiger in the field of Khoirentak’) Khambana Kei Phaba and Leilangba chapters incorporate the Kom Khoirentakki lamyaida pamba keibu Khambana phabada. The place cited is Kom village. He further stated “…when Khamba went in search of flowers he went to Mantak Kom village and plucked flower from there for his fiancé, Thoibi ”. Singh (1986) mentioned that the old Kuki are Kom, Chothe, Koireng, Purum, Mantak, Namphou, Lamgang or Hiroi. He further stated that the old Kukis are those neo-Burmese who migrated to Manipur by about 11th century AD.

1.4 GEOGRAPHICAL PROFILE

The Kom tribe originally inhabited the hills lying south of the Imphal valley and some in the hill area -the western part of Manipur, but today, they are scattered in a number of villages and many are settled in the plain of Imphal. This has exposed them to other cultures and societies and has brought about changes in the Kom society.

1.5 DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE
There is no accurate documentation regarding the population of Kom. The recorded population of the Kom is still a controversy. The Koms, according to 2001 Census number 15,467. The survey report of the Komrem Students Union in Manipur places the total population of Kom at 21,858 individuals. Koms are found in the Northeastern states of Manipur, Nagaland, Assam and Tripura. The majority of the populations reside in Manipur. They are found in all the districts of Manipur and concentrated mainly in the districts of Churachandpur, Bishenpur and Senapati.

1.6 LITERACY RATE

According to the 2001 Census, the literacy rate of the Kom tribe is 75% as against the population of 15,467 both male and female. However, the unofficial survey conducted by a religious group called the Komrem Baptist Churches Association (KRBCA), 90% literacy rate has been reported based on the knowledge of reading the Bible and writing.

1.7 ECONOMY

The Koms are an agrarian society and self-subsistent in their economy. They practice both shifting (chinglhei) and wet land cultivation (phailhei). They cultivate rice, which is their staple food, and grow potatoes, millet, yam and sugarcane. Domesticated animals include pig, fowl, goat, cow, buffaloes, dog, cat, etc. Apart from agriculture, the people are also involved in other activities such as weaving, handicraft, tailoring, horticulture etc. Some sections of the Kom community are also engaged in trade and working in government and private offices and institutions. Koms are dependent on forests mainly for resources like timber, bamboo, cane, honey, wax, turpentine oils, etc.

1.8 THE PEOPLE, THEIR DRESSES AND ORNAMENTS
The Koms are predominantly mongoloid in looks and structure with brown skin and are well built physically. Brown (1873) observed that the Koms are usually of a medium height and incidentally with a few tall individuals. He further adds that they are well built and some of them are very muscular with longer arms.

Dresses of the Koms can broadly be classified into female clothing (Nuhmeipon) and male clothing (Pasepon). The men wear *der* that is a long thin towel and a shirt and shawl. They have *pase pon or saipuikhup* the shawl meant exclusively for men. Women wear sarong called *ponvei* and *Khamtlang*, *ponlak* with *Khonkhi*, a strap of cloth, are some of women’s wear.

Both men and women wear traditional ornaments. Koms have traditional ornaments such as bangle (*khutkhi*), armlet (*bunghar*), headgear (*lukhum*), earrings (*Korkhei*) and hairpin (*Shaikhoe*) etc. Necklace (*Thichong*), armlets of metals worn in the upper arm called *her* and the women folks wear brass ring ornaments.

Men wear silver earrings, this is done ten days after birth, and necklace is worn before marriage but removed after marriage. These ornaments are mainly used during ceremonies and festivals.

1.9 **FESTIVALS**

The Koms are fond of celebrations and have several festivals celebrated during different sessions of the year. Most of the festivals are celebrated with songs, music and dances. They express their joy at the completion of plantation and harvesting, victory over enemies, and successful hunting. The cultural festivals are performed in each season of the agricultural year. Some of the festivals are celebrated collectively while others are individual.
**Seling** is a harvesting festival where boys have to jump over a cow tied to an erected wooden pole. Every boy is to jump over the cow and everyone who succeeds is given a piece of cloth as an appreciation of the courage. A cow is then killed and the meat is used to feed the boys and girls who work in the paddy field.

**Lhungphun** festival refers to the erection of a mega-stone in remembrance of a person mainly after his or her death. It is also done while the person is alive. On this day all families and friends are invited. It is the occasion of giving tribute to the person for whom the stone erection is done. A ceremony is performed by the person as a fulfillment of obligations in one’s lifetime or for the person by his family to commemorate or to remember the person.

**Kumther** is the New Year’s Festival based on the old Meitei calendar. It is same as the *cheirouba* of the Meitei, and *uggadi* of Kannada.

**Lamkut** is the biggest and the longest festivals of the Koms. The festivity continues for one month. At dusk, songs and dances (*Lamkut lam*) are held in every house, accompanied by a feast to sanctify the houses and to keep them as sacred places throughout the year.

**Bechap Lam** is celebrated after completing plantation of crops. It is usually celebrated in the month of August (*Jhongpui*) and sometimes until the month of September (*karam*). The festival is celebrated in the moonlit night only. This festival is not celebrated every year because it takes time. The festival is celebrated for a successful and fruitful harvest.

When the whole village completes plantation, the labour organisation called *lawm* request, any well to do man who could host the celebration do so for the whole village. The
man who hosts the celebration gives a grand feast to the lawm on the final day of the festival. Sam-pu, lhapu, the musician and the song master, and the elders in the lawm assist the lawm members in celebrating the festival. The lawm gather every night in each of the houses in the village. They dance and sing the songs of the family. In case the family has no songs, the lawm would compose songs for the family. During the house visit, the leaders led the lawm members strictly. They have to be punctual and sincere. If anyone is found to be late or irregular, the person is punished. After the lawm has visited every household, they gather in the house of the host for a feast. The host (in-tlung) provides the lawm with ju (rice-beer) and rice only. The lawm contributed meat and ju, which they make themselves with the rice they have collected from the village.

**Kut** is celebrated after harvest, which falls in the month of November (Pheva). It is believed that, if the harvest ends successfully, the next harvest will be more productive. A group of villagers (lawm) harvested for the man who is the host in the village’s feast. The lawm carried all the rice to his house using their cloth. Usually the last one to harvest hosts the Kut. In the evening after the lawm has completed the harvest, the host kills a huge Mithun (a kind of Buffalo) for a feast. The whole night they enjoy by drinking, eating and dancing. In the morning, the lawm departs to their respective houses.

### 1.10 HUNTING

The Koms are excellent hunters. Hunting is not only a means to survive but it is also considered as a sporting activity. The hunters use bows and arrows and the arrows are laced with poison using lactations of wild trees and the glands of some highly poisonous snakes. Hunting dogs are trained for the purpose besides setting up traps and snares of various types.

The Koms hunts various wild animals for their delicious taste and some to ward them off from their crops. Birds are also killed using catapults for consumption. Hunting
expeditions are also organized on certain occasions. When the animal is killed, the hunters enter the village singing merrily, beating gong (*Shum*) and blowing trumpets (*Roshem*). Usually, the hunter who gets the first strike at the killed animal retains the head of the animal. A foreleg is given to his sister if any, the breast portion is given to his intimate friend and the rest of the villagers would share the remaining portion. Killing of tiger, elephant and other ferocious animals are regarded as a heroic achievement for which a feast is arranged. The head of the animals killed by a hunter is usually kept in the homes as trophy. A man who can kill 100 animals is highly honored in the society for which a pillar is erected in his memory.

1.11 WARFARE

According to Karung (ibid) ‘Koms were and are peace loving people even though they took offensive operations but always took a defensive position’.

However, if their enemy were cruel they would flay the enemy and dry the skin in the sun. They plan their strategy with the help of *thempu* (the magician) who wears magic gear called *shonrei*, which will make him and his force invisible.

1.12 BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

Non-Christian Koms believe in *Pathen*, the supreme God. *Pathen* is the creator of all living beings and the Universe. They believe in the existence of soul after death and that the soul goes to the land of the dead *kathi-kho*. Heaven and hell are considered as the abodes of these souls. People with good deeds inherit heaven after death. The *Pathen* (God) is worshipped for good health, good harvest and the prosperity of the village as a whole by offering sacrifices, praying and performing other rituals. They also believed in the existence of supernatural powers and their relationship with humans. They also worship *Inn-lai* as their household God and make sacrificial offerings of a particular breed of hen, pigs and dogs.
blood etc...to other spirits. These sacrifices were performed by the priest *thempu* or *maipa*, who was also an expert in black magic, which is known as *doi*.

**Magic:** In the past, the Koms practised different forms of magic, which also played an important role in their religious life. Magic was considered as an art. *Doikungpu*, the chief magician, imparted certain level of this art to the interested and capable young boys and girls up to certain levels. They used their skill of magic as weapons to fight against their adversaries and even in hunting expeditions. Their expertise in magic helped them at times of hostility.

**Khuser/Khu-inthoi/Khukham:** this is a ritual performed in the month of January every year. It is a ritual practiced by the village to sanctify the village. During this ritual, the villagers are required to be in the village and no outsiders were allowed to enter in the village from dawn to dusk. Male members of the village go for hunting and if they come with an animal, a feast and a ritual are performed in the house of the person who killed the animal. However, if they could not get one on this day, an eagle or a bird is killed and offered as sacrifice. No fire is lit in any house until midday when the priest would light a fire in his own house. The villagers would then go and get the fire from his house and light their furnaces. In the ritual, a red dog would be killed and its head and intestines are hung at the village gate. Its blood would then be mixed with a root called *Ai* and sprinkled on the walls of every house in the village. It is done in the belief that evil spirits hate dog’s blood.

However, with the advent of Christianity, these rituals and practices including magic (both black and white) for which they were once famous for, are no longer practised by the people.
1.13 MARRIAGES

In Pre-christian days and even to these days in some cases, marriage of a son or a daughter has to be arranged by the parents. For a male member, his mother's brother's daughter (Hlodei) is the preferred bride by the community. Parallel cousins marriage is forbidden in Kom society. Marriage within the clan is prohibited and marriage between sub-clans of a major-clan is also prohibited. The groom has to serve at his father-in-law’s house for three years (this practice is no longer practised). This practice is known as Numhei-hlo. The alternate form of acquiring a bride is Jorpui or love marriage. The third form is through elopement. At present, the practice of acquiring a bride or a groom is done through mutual consent of both the parties. So, arrange and love marriages are the two most common forms of marriage. Monogamy is mainly practised in the Kom community though some are found practising polygamy too. The reason for the polygamy is said to be due to the barrenness of the spouse.

**Bride price:** Paying Bride price called *Jorman* is regarded important and is being practised strictly by the Koms. The bridegroom’s family pays bride price to the family of the bride while fixing the marriage. It is practised with a strong social motive. Traditionally, there were four kinds of bride price, which has been practised from generation to generation. The first bride price is called *Alukhong-Akangk* or *Man lukacing*, which is the biggest bride price. This bride price consists of *Sum* (a brass gong) and well-grown mithun. The second bride price is *Sum-Kharpruk* or *mithun*. The third bride price is *Rangam*. This bride price is given to the eldest man of the groom’s clan usually the eldest among the grandfathers of the boy, that is, the groom. This bride price is paid in cash around six rupees in olden days. The fourth bride price consists of a traditional shawl and a sum of rupees five. This bride price is given to the grandfather of the girl. *Sakamak-serjor* (son-in-laws and daughters) of the boy’s father are each presented a traditional shawl. There had been changes though in the bride-
price value nowadays. In modern days, the bride-price is payable in cash without kind, equivalent to its value.

*Nuchen or Nushik (mother’s share):* to show love and respect, the son-in-law gives a grand feast to the mother-in-law. On this day, all the friends and relatives of the mother and the daughters are invited for the feast. They dine together and spend the day with great enjoyment. A traditional shawl is presented to the mother. This tradition had been followed from ages and is still regarded as very important.

*Child Birth:* In the past, Kom women believed in supernatural things. They believed that during pregnancy, there were certain things a wife should restrain. Therefore, during pregnancy a woman took great care to observe the social taboos. According to the custom of the Koms, a pregnant woman should always cover her head to protect the baby from evil spirits. This was mostly done when a pregnant woman goes to the forest or outside the house.

In olden days, having baby twins was not preferred. Therefore, in order to avoid twins, a pregnant woman should not use certain materials used by a mother who had given birth to twins. Besides, a pregnant woman also avoided any doubled fruits or twin-fruits. It was also believed that the husband of the pregnant woman should not kill any living creature. The belief is that the child might not live long. All these beliefs were based on the knowledge and practical experiences of the elders through the ages.

When a child is born, the mother is not allowed to walk out of the house for five consecutive days. She is allowed to do so only when the baby is brought out of the house on the fifth day for name giving ceremony. This is called *Naiteso,* which means that the newly born child is brought out of the house.
1.14 DEATH

The Kom tribe accepts death as an unavoidable event of life. They believed that the spirit of a man after death remains with the family for a year, after which the spirit goes to heaven. They also believed in the existence of a place called mithikhu, a place where the dead people live and the belief of the existence of the spirit of the death. They follow different formalities at the time of death and for a year, till a ceremony called lukasun, proper dressing of the skull, was performed.

Death is generally classified into three divisions, namely natural death (thi-phakathi), childhood death (naidong-a-kathi) and unnatural death (saar-a-akathi).

**Natural death (Thi-pha-kathi):** When a person dies, each and every one of the relatives, far and near are immediately informed by sending some boys among the neighbours. All the friends and relatives of the deceased bring garlands of flowers and sometimes coins for the deceased believing that the spirit of the dead is still around; those who have lost someone earlier would send messages or things to the dead person through the person who had just died.

**Childhood Death (Naidong a akathi):** When an infant dies, the dead body is not buried in the same way as that of a grown up person. The dead body is buried in the nearby cemetery and the body will be carried through the hollow of the wall if any or through the window. No rituals or formalities are followed.

**Unnatural death (Saar-a-akathi):** People who face violent death, or are killed or murdered are regarded as having met with an unnatural death. The dead bodies of such people are not entitled to proper funeral rites, as in the case of the person who died a natural death. The dead body of such a person is not allowed to be brought into the village. The dead
body is taken to the grave directly where formalities are performed as in natural death. However, in present days, this practice has changed except for those who commit suicide.

1.15 FOOD HABITS

Most of the Koms are non-vegetarians. Their custom and their religion prohibited them from consuming animals that are sick and dead. Their custom also forbids eating of birds like crows, vultures, etc as they are regarded as unclean. People who practise magic are more conscious about their food habit as there are many prohibitions required to be maintained for practicing magic. Their staple food is rice supplemented by vegetables, chatani, and anbut (boiled vegetable without salt). They drink waiju a kind of rice-beer, jukha a type of country-made liquor.

1.16 CLANS’ STRATIFICATION

The clan system among the Koms is the most important aspect of its social system. The clan system still exists in the Kom society. The members of the clan believed that they are descendants of a common ancestor. The Koms believe that the clan and its sub-clans are closely related. The Kom society is divided into social groups, which are again sub-divided into smaller stratum. The clan is the biggest social group and it reflects familial and filial relationship. Clans that are exogamous are Karong, Leivon, Tellein, Serto, and Hmangte. A descendant is traced exclusively through the paternal line. The youngest male of the family looks after the ancestral home and inherits the parental properties.

Serto, M (2007) states “The Kom society originally had seven clans, called Phung. These seven clans are the major clans. There are nineteen sub-divisions of Kom clans. The
major clans are- Parang, Hmangte, Kilong, Durlin, Leise, Sengte, and Leivon”. Serto, S. (ibid) on the other hand maintains that, “The Koms are divided into six to seven main clans. Each clan is again divided into sub-clans. The name of the clans had been derived according to the activities, they pursued when they came out from the cave. The clans are; Karong, Telen, Serto, Leivon, Hmangte and Lupheng”.

1.17 THE CHIEF

The village is the highest political unit of the Kom tribe. The village chief called Sawang or Khullakpa and his council members govern each village. The village chief and his council regulated the village administration. The chief’s consent is necessary for any immigrants in the village. The chief and his council are responsible for the administration of justice, enforcement of executive functioning, maintenance of social practices and customary laws.

McCulloch (ibid) said, “The heads of the pure Kom villages appeared elective…” However, the office of the chief is mostly hereditary if one individual or family founded the village. The chieftainship is passed on from the father to his eldest son. In the absence of any son, the eldest son of the chiefs’ closest relatives inherits the chieftainship.

1.18 POLITY

The administrative system of the Koms is simple. The Sawang or the village chief is usually the founder of the village and is the supreme authority. However, according to McCulloch (ibid) he mentioned that the chief of the Kom villages who are elected does not have great powers or perquisite. The Sawang (chief) rules the village and runs the affairs of the village assisted by his Semang-pachong or the council members. Each council member is assigned to discharge a duty in connection with the village. The sawang appoints a minister on consensus with the villagers at the general meeting of the village.
1.18.1 Functions of the Council

The Kom village council usually consists of five members though the number depends on the population of the village. The council comprise of the following members;

2. Mantri (minister) - 2 mantries/ ministers.
3. Tlangva - the announcer or messenger.
4. Thempu - the priest.
5. Thirkasupa - Blacksmith

The Khullakpa or Chief is assisted by two mantris in the administration of the village. However, in some villages there is a post of luklakpa (the assistant chief). The chief and his council fulfill their responsibilities within the traditional customs of the community.

Each household honours the service of the Khullakpa or Chief of the village with five tins of rice in a year. However, his council members do not enjoy any such material benefits. The chief is the honoured guest at all village functions. He is given the privilege of the ‘first-meal’ in community feasts or festivals. In matters concerning the state government, the chief represents the village.

Tlangva: He is in-charge of giving information to the villagers and his responsibilities include conveying decisions of the council meetings and gatherings of the villagers. In case the village has guests, he has to prepare food and arrange a place for the guests to lodge for the night.

Thempu (priest): He is responsible for the rites and rituals in the village. He is also in-charge of the health of the villagers. He would attend to the villagers in times of sickness.
He also performs sacrifices during religious festivals. He is highly regarded by the people for his important function. The person or the family concerned pays him for his service. However, nowadays the role of the *thempu* is almost non-existent.

**Thirkasupa (blacksmith):** He is the village blacksmith. A man can be elected as a blacksmith only if he possesses the highest dexterity in black-smithy. He is responsible for making war weapons, like arrows, guns, swords, etc. He also make agricultural tools like hoes, axes, spades, etc, for the villagers.

Besides the above functions, the village council has its song leader called *Lhapu* and a traditional musician called *Sampu*. *Lhapu* is in-charge of leading the songs and dances in festivals of the village. His presence is very important at special feasts and festivals in the village. *Sampu* and *Lhapu* have to lead the youths in singing and dancing in festivals and gatherings.

**Lawm (labour organisation):** this group of the village is called *Lawm*. It consists of the village men and women of every age group. All the men and women who are able to work join the lawm. Any household of the village can hire the *lawm* to work for them during cultivation and harvest. The *lawm* members help each other in service. *Lawm* is not only engaged in economic life of the village but also in festivals and celebrations of the village. Through this organization, the village youths learnt the spirit of co-operation, a sense of duty and dignity. The *lawm* system is still practised as it provides self-dependency in matters of physical labour in the village.

1.19 THE LANGUAGE

The *Komtong* or *Kom-rem tong*, which means ‘Kom language or Komrem language’, is considered as a common language of the Komrem. All the constituting tribes of Kom-rem
can communicate through this language. More or less all the languages of these small tribal communities are very similar. Kom language has some similarities with the Lushai of Mizoram, the Hmars of Manipur and the Hrangkhawls, Malsom and Darlong of Tripura. They have a close affinity with Thadou-Kuki, Tarao, Chothe, Saibu-Maring and Nampasi-Tangkhul. The Kom language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language family. The Roman script is adopted for writing purposes.

1.20 POSITION OF KOM IN THE TIBETO-BURMAN LANGUAGE FAMILY

Northeast India is the home of numerous Tibeto-Burman languages that form the branch of a larger Sino-Tibetan family. In term of language, Sino-Tibetan family is the largest of any spoken in south Asia. Burling (1999) stated that ‘by comparison with most Indian states the seven states of the north east are small in area and low in population, but even by Indian standards they are very high in linguistic and ethnic heterogeneity’. He further stated that ‘the Tibeto-Burman languages of these north eastern states cannot really be counted’. He is of the view that too little is known about this region to list all the languages. Shapiro and Schiffman (1983) stated that due to the unavailability of data for many of the languages of north east India, coupled with our own lack of expertise in this field, it is impossible to give a satisfactory classification. Apart from the lack of proper study in the northeastern languages, Burling (ibid) pointed out that changing of nomenclature among the Tibeto-Burman languages further complicated its classification. However, regarding his own classification of The Mizo-Kuki-Chin, which is a modification of Shafer and incorporation of Grierson, Burling (ibid) states, “the Mizo-Kuki-Chin Dialects and languages form a branch within Tibeto-Burman is abundantly clear. Indeed, there are far more unified than the languages, for example, the Angami-Pochuri group, and they be no more diverse than
Tangkhul, which is usually described as a single ‘language’, even though it has several mutually unintelligible forms”.

Show (1929) mentioned, “The Koms, Aimols, Khawtlangs, Thadous, Lushais, Chins, Pois, Siktes, Paite, Gangtes, etc are undoubtedly all connected and are Kukis, and that the language alone has many similarities and the syntax is not dissimilar. Again, there are their customs which have a common principle running through them all.”

Brown (1873) said that “the only remaining Kuki tribes of importance are those called Aimol, Chiru, Purum, Koiroung (Kuoireng) and Kom”. He even called all these tribes as the sub-tribes of Kuki. Shakespear (1912) made the division of the tribes based on their arrival:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old Kukis</th>
<th>New Kukis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aimol, Anal, Chiru</td>
<td>Thadous (their other kins)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chothe, Gangte, Koirou</td>
<td>Groups such as, Dongel, Misao</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koiroung, Kom, Lamkang</td>
<td>Lupheng, Lupho, Ngoilu, Lamhao</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paite, Purum, Simte</td>
<td>Thengeo, Thouthang, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaiphei, Zou, Hmar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Grierson (1904) classified Kom under the customary name of old Kuki that include Rangkhol, Bete, Halam, Langrong, Aimol, Chiru, Kolren, Kom, Cha, Hmar, Anal, Haroi-Lamkang. He also described Kom and other languages that constitute old Kukis as a mere dialect of one language. He further states, “these languages are closely related to the central Chin languages. Kom, Anal, and Haroi-Lamkang show a closer connection with the Naga languages than the other dialects of the Kuki-Chin group”. This view is substantiated by Burling’s (1999) classification. According to his classification, the Mizo-Kuki-Chin speakers in North-Eastern India include: Aimol, Anal, Chiru, Chothe, Gangte, Hmar, Kom, Lakher, Mara, Lushai, Paite, Pawi, Ralte, Riang, Vaiphei, and zo.
The position of Kom under the Tibeto-Burman language family differs from one linguist to another. According to the classification made by Grierson-Konow (1903-1928), Kom is placed under Kuki-Chin proper of Old Kuki. Shafer (1955, 1966) grouped Kolhreng-Koireng, Kom and Tarao under Kolhreng unit of Old Kuki branch under Kukish section. Vogalin-Vogalin (1977) put Kom under old Kuki and grouped together with Kolreng (Koireng), Tarao and Anal. Bradley classification of Kuki-Chin-Naga (1970, 1997) placed Kom under Old Kuki of Kuki-Chin-Naga (as shown in diagram 1). Benedict’s classification (1972) and Egernod’s (1974) do not mention about the Kom at all. It appears that the whole classification of the Tibeto-Burman languages itself is still very uncertain. Due to lack of sufficient researches, it is difficult to get the proper division or classification of this language. Hence, it is difficult to fix the position of Kom in the Tibeto-Burman language family. However, Kom, undoubtedly, is one of the Tibeto-Burman languages which has close linguistic affinities with other Tibeto-Burman languages like Hmar, Hrangkhawl, Malsom, Darlong, Lushai and Kuki apart from Koireng, Purum, Chothe, Tarao, Chiru, and Aimol etc.
Diagram 1. kuki-chin-naga (Bradley 1997) (insert it from other file)