Origin:

The origin of this group of people is shrouded with myths and mythologies. One of such was the traditional accounts that had been handed down through generations in that the Kukis came out of the bowels of the earth or a cave called Chinlung or Sinlung or Khul, the location of which was believed by some to be somewhere in China. But others claimed it to be in Tibet (Ginzatuan, 1973:5).

McCulloch (1959:55) contended that the Kukis were known as Khongjai also in Manipur, and that they:

... bring their progenitors from the bowels of the earth, and they relate the manner of their reaching its surface thus: One day their King's brother was hunting hedgehogs, when his dog in pursuit of one, entered a cavern, and he waiting for its return remained at the mouth. After lapse of sometime, the dog not having returned, its master determined to go in and see what had become of it. He did not find the dog, but observing its tracks and
following them, he found himself suddenly on the surface of the earth. The scene presented to his view both pleased and astonished him. Returning to his brother, he related about his adventure, and counselled him to annex the new country to his territory, which the king did.

By way of explanation of their amalgamation with the tribes who speak different languages, they relate:

... the three grandsons of the chief, while one day all playing together in their house, were told by their father to catch a rat. They were busy about it when, being suddenly struck with a confusion of tongues, they were unable to achieve their object. The eldest son spoke the Lamyang, the second the Thado, the third, some say, the Vaiphei and some the Munipore language. Thus, they broke into distinct tribes.

Shaw (1929: 24) had his own version of the origin of the Kukis which he recorded from the collected verbal information as follows:

The story of their origin is that they used to live under the earth, or rather inside it. Noimangpa was the Chief of this Subterranean region. One Chongthu, a relative of Noimangpa, went hunting porcupines in the jungle with his dog and discovered a large hole. He perceived through this that the upper crust of the earth was un-inhabited and there was a great darkness. This darkness, which lasted for seven days and seven nights is called "Thimzin" by the Thadous.
Chongthu so rejoiced at this discovery that he gave up his hunt and went back to his house. He conjured up ideas of forming a village of his own on the earth and planned accordingly. Just about then, Noimangpa, the Chief of the underworld was performing the 'Chon' festival in which everyone had to attend, including Chongja, elder brother of Chongthu. Noimangpa's son, Chonkim, was also present. During this feast Chongthu started waving his sharp sword so vigorously that he injured some of the folks present, at which all became angered. This action of Chongthu was premeditated as he thought that by doing so he would be turned out from the underworld and thus have an excuse for going out to the upperworld and forming a village of his own. The news of Chongthu's behaviour became known to Noimangpa who said: Chongthu had better live in Heaven, meaning thereby that he better be killed. Chongthu hearing of Noimangpa's wrath at once prepared to migrate out of the hole in the earth which he saw and which is spoken of as 'Khul' by the Thadous. So, Chongja and Chongthu killed many pigs, fowls, etc. and feasted in preparation for their departure.

There are many more stories about it. The above story further relates that somehow Chongja's party was delayed, but Chongthu's party moved on followed by Chongthu himself. On reaching the 'Khul', the leaders found that a great snake called Gulheipi was in possession of
it and when they endeavoured to pass over it, the snake killed them with its tail. Chongthu, on reaching the spot, was not to be thwarted in his ambition. He tied his cloth around him and placed a Phoipi, a thick cotton cloth, over his head and attacked the great snake which he cut into seven pieces. At the same time, a Lhaw, a lion also attempted to block the way of Chongthu's egress. The lion withdrew and Chongthu's party moved up to the 'Khul'. They found that it was covered with a stone and one of Chongthu's party, called Vangalpa, lifted it up. While he could do so, only seven persons were able to get out and then the stone dropped and all further attempts to raise it ended in a fiasco. The seven persons who thus emerged were Chongthu, Vangalpa, the stone-lifter, Khupngam, the keeper of the dog, and four others whose names are not known. These four persons are said to be the progenitors of the Manipuri, the Naga, the foreigner and the Burmese. However, they are not definite about the last three although they are quite emphatic about the number being seven.

In the genealogical tree from Chongthu to Thadou, the persons are mythical and, therefore, when festivities entailing repetition of the genealogical tree of the Thadous became necessary, the Thempu starts from Thadou and not from Chongthu.
Further, from Chongthu to Thadou there were no
different languages, and animals and spirits, as well
as the mythical ancestors, lived in peaceful co-exis-
tence.

The hole in the earth called 'Khul' is said to
be at the source of the 'Gun' river which seems to be
identical with the Imphal river in Manipur State.
Etymologically, the word 'Gun' in the Thadou means
the 'Imphal river'. In all the stories and legends of
the Thadous the river 'Gun' is frequently mentioned
and is of great fame (Shaw, 1929: 24-26).

Hutton (1929: 14) said:

"... the story of Thimzin with slight
variation is found in Shakespeare's
Lushai-Kuki clans, Chapter V, Mills' -
The Ao Nagas, P.314. The Lhota Nagas,
PP 176, 193. Molola, in Man in India,
11, 100 had similar story of the Chang
Nagas, and versions are found among
the Hos and Santals of Bengal, the
Shans, and the Ami of Formosa, while
similar stories pervade the Indian
Archipelago generally in Frazer's
Folk-lore in the Old Testament, I,
IV, which said that the Thadou version
of Thimzin story is: "he knew of was
that" ... the great darkness was pre-
ceded by fire and accompanied by flood,
and it was this flood which drove the
ancestors of the Thado proper to take
refuge in the hills, where they found
Lenthang, whom they forbore to kill
as he, and his, knew the gods of the"
country; accordingly, it was Lenthang who caused a white cock detainer of the sun to come and look, whereby the sun escaped and came out again restoring light to the darkened world.

The story is obviously suggestive of a separate racial origin for the Thadou proper, the Changsan and allied clans, who presumably were in occupation when the Thadou arrived in the hills. Hutton further contended that such cultural diversion of the Kuki affinity was found in Naga Hills among the Sema tribe who "speaks a Naga language which is something of a 'Piggin type', lacking the inclusive and exclusive duals and plurals and similar subtleties of most Naga Languages". It has a political system turning on an automatic secular chief, with followers, who are house-warders, serfs or similarly bound retainers, known as 'Mughemi' (Literally, Orphans). It has other cultural items strongly suggestive of Kuki affinities and has lost the institution of the bachelor's house. It lacks in for the most part the sentiment which binds most Naga villagers so strongly to some particular site, or at least to stones, earth or water brought from that site.
II

Migration:

It was generally believed that the Kukis came out of China during the reign of Chinese Emperor Chinglung or Chie'nlung, around 200 B.C. Zawla (1976 : 2), a Mizo historian, claimed that the Kukis came out of the Great Wall of China in about 225 B.C., during the reign of Shih Hungti whose cruelty was then at its height. A number of other theories have been advanced in this connection. But in the absence of any written corroboration of existence of historical evidence to support them, such hypothetical theories are considered as highly subjective and conjectural. These are, therefore, taken with a pinch of salt. They remained only as legends.

Nevertheless, Enriquez (1932 : 7-8) was emphatic in his claim, in that he thought he had ample scientific data at his command to prove that Mongolian races, who now occupy South-east Asia, and also the North-East India, originated from the Western China lying between the sources of the Yangtze and the Hoang-Ho rivers, and migrated in three waves as follows:

1. The Mon-Khmer (Talaing, Pa Lung, En Riang, Wa, Pale, Khais and Annimite) which included Khasis;
2. The Tibeto-Burman comprising Pyu-Burmese-Kachin, Kuki-Chin and Lolo;
3. The Tai-Chinese which included Shan, Siamese and Karen.
The route-chart of the Mon-Khmer group was that they followed the Mekong valley towards south into Campuchea and Thailand until they reached Burma wherefrom some of them went further westward upto Bay of Bengal and then turned towards north. It is believed that the Khasis are the remnants of the Mon-Khmer group.

The Tibeto-Burman group initially moved towards the west and thereafter subdivided themselves into several groups. They followed different routes, one group reaching Tibet on the north where some of them stayed behind, while others moved on northwards until they reached Burma in three waves. These people were the Kuki-Chin and the Pyu-Burmese-Kachin groups. While the latter stuck to this place, the Kuki-Chin group moved further towards south-west following the Irrawady and the Chindwin rivers and continued to do so till they reached the shores of the Bay of Bengal. From here they turned back north and eventually fanned out along the mountains down the whole length and breadth of the hilly region, on either side of the existing Indo-Burma boundary lines. Thus when the British came here in the eighteenth century, they found the groups scattered about, and the British officers started keeping records of the various clans or groups of Kukis at different places wherever they were found to have settled.
Hutton (1929) in one of his monographs described the migratory routes of the Kukis in a lucid manner, and was more specific in regard to the scattered settlements of the Kukis.

For a very long time the Kuki-Chin groups of tribes, pressed from behind Kachins moving southwards from Chins, and been migrating down the course of the Chinwin River, and some turned back perhaps by the Bay of Bengal, had then moved slowly north-west and north-wards again, driving out or incorporating previous inhabitants of what are now parts of the Chittagong Hill Tracts of East Pakistan, the Chin Hills of Burma, the Lushai Hills of Assam, parts of the areas of Manipur State of the North Cachar Hills and the south of the Naga Hills.

Lehman (1963: 11) observed:

History shows, however, that both hills and plains peoples have moved about within the general region of South-West China and South-East Asia over considerable distances for many centuries until the recent past.

III

Speaking further about the Kukis, different scholars and British Administrators unanimously described them as belonging to the Mongolian stock, but they did not specify to which particular Mongolian group they belonged. While Yule (1855), Col. Phayre (1866) and Dr. Cabe concluded that the Kukis belonged to the Indp-Chinese family, Captain Forbes and Dr. Grierson differed.
and called them as a part of Tibeto-Burman group.

Taw Sien Kho, a Burmese lecturer at Cambridge classified the Kukis as Turanean (Carey & Tuck, 1932: 2) which included the Chinese, Manchus, Japanese, Annamese, Sianese, Burmese, Turks, etc., and further said that their habitat included the whole of north eastern India before the Aryan conquest.

Regarding the term 'Kuki', which denotes a particular type of people, Lieut. Col. Reid (1893: 5) said:

Previous to the expedition of 1871-72 the wild tribes, which had been in the habit of raiding our North-Eastern Frontier, were generally spoken of as 'Kukis', a Bengali word meaning hillmen or highlanders. The word was originally applied to the tribe or tribes occupying the tract immediately to the south of Cachar. It is now employed, in a comprehensive sense, to indicate all those living to the west of the Kaladyne river, while those to the west are designated Shendus. On the other hand, to anyone approaching them from the Burma side the Shendus would be known as China, ... of Col. Woodthrope, Synonymous with Khyen and pronounced as 'Chin'.

He further propounded that the Chins called themselves as 'Lai'. Considering their distinctive characteristics in dress and dialects, there can be

1. It may be noted that in Burmese a combination of alphabets 'Kh' is pronounced as 'Ch'
little doubt that the Chins, the Kukis, the Lushais, and the various tribes are practically of one and the same race and were included under the term 'Kuki' since the days of Warren Hastings. It is further learnt that their first attack against the British and their subjects dated as far back as 1777, "when the chief of Chittagong a district which had been ceded to the British under Clive by Mir Kasim in 1760, applied for a detachment of sepoys to protect the inhabitants against the incursions of the Kukis as they were then called" (Reid, 1893:667).

Lalthangliana (1975:69) claimed that the word 'Chin' in Burma was synonymous to the word 'Kuki' and 'Mizo' in India. He further contended that though the reason was not known, the Burmese called the people living in the north-west Burma and the North-East India as 'Chin'. In explaining the reason why the Burmese called the Kukis as Chins he inferred:

Perhaps they were always found carrying on their backs bamboo baskets called Chin by the Burmese. But this particular Burmese word also means friendship and by a stress of imagination one could say that once these two people live very closely together. Since there were relations not pertaining strictly to friendliness, I think the explanation "Man with the basket" is most reasonable.
Captain Lewin (1970:130) said that on the Chittagong side the Kukis were described as:

... men who live far in the interior parts of the hills, and have not the use of fire arms, and whose bodies go unclothed.

Later, when he became the Deputy Commissioner of Hill Tracts in 1870, he described:

The Loosei, commonly called the Kookies, are a powerful and independent people, who touch the borders of Chittagong Hill Tracts. They extend in numberless hordes in North and North-East, until they reach Cachar on the one hand, and the frontiers of Burma on the other, ... They are known to the Bengalees by the name of Kookie, and the Burmese as the Lankhe.

Col. Dalton (1872:44), Commissioner, Chutis Nagpur (Chotanagpur) and a member of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, in 1872, said that the Kukis were first known from an article which appeared in the Asiatic Researcher's journal, Volume VII, 1799 contributed by Superintendent McCres wherein he described the Kukis as:

... a nation of hunters and warriors, rules as a nation by their principal hereditary chiefs or rajahs, but divided into clans, each under its own chiefs.
Soppit (1893: 2), who was Assistant Commissioner, Burma and later Sub-Divisional Officer, North Cachar Hills, Assam, in his study of the Lushai Kukis remarked:

The designation of 'Kuki' is never used by the tribes themselves, though many of them answer to it when addressed, from knowing it to be the Bengali or Plains term for their people.

Lt. Col. Shakespear (1912: Pt.I,7), who was one of the authorities on the Kukis, said that the term 'Kuki' ... has come to have a fairly definite meaning, and we now understand by it certain closely allied clans, with well marked characteristics, belonging to the Tibeto-Burman stock. On the Chittagong border, the term is loosely applied to most of the inhabitants of the interior hills beyond the Chittagong Hill Tracts; in Cachar it generally means some family of Thado or Khawtlang clan, locally distinguished as new Kuki and old Kuki. Now-a-days, the term is hardly ever employed, having been superseded by Lushai, in the Chin Hills and generally on the Burma border all these clans are called Chins ... that these Kukis are also closely allied to the 'Chukmahs', and that the Lushais are more closely allied to the Chiru, Kom, Khawtlang families and are also related to their eastern neighbours who are known as Chins.

He concluded by saying:

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the Kukis, Chins and Lushais are all of the same race.
Meerwarth (1919 : 29), a noted Ethnologist from Russia, while giving an instructive illustration on the civilisation of the tribes in his comprehensive work on the Andamanese, Nicobarese and Hill Tribes of Assam, observed:

... under the term 'Kuki' we comprise a great number of clans... the most important of which are those which inhabit the mountain ranges known as the Lushai Hills.

Both by languages and race they are closely connected with their eastern neighbours, the Chins, and form a part of the Tibeto-Burman family. There is no doubt also that the Manipuris are closely related to them.

Carey and Tuck (1932 : 2) while dealing with the Chin tribes of Burma said:

without pretending to speak with authorities on the subjects, we think we may reasonably accept the theory that the Kukis of Manipur, the Lushais of Bengal and Assam, and the Chins, originally lived in what is now known as Tibet and are of one and the same stock; their form of government, method of collection, manners and customs, beliefs and traditions, all point to one origin.
Hutton (1928 : 24) while describing on the work of Shaw on the Thadou Kukis said that the origin of the word Kuki is not known, "but it first appeared in 'Bengal'," in the Asiatic Researcher journal, Vol. II, 1872. Likewise, Maj. Gen. Sir Johnstone (1971 : 25), the then Political Agent, Manipur, gave his findings from a different angle wherein he observed:

The Kukis are a wandering race consisting of several tribes who have long been walking up from the south. They were first heard of as Kukis, in Manipur, between 1830 and 1840.

Shaw (1929 : 16), a Civil Servant, whose work on the Thadou Kukis became the most controversial one that led to the disintegration of the Kukis in modern days stated:

The Koms, Aimols, Khawtlangs, Thadous, Lushais, Chins, Pois, Siktes, Paites, 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.

Majumdar (1944 : 127), in dealing with the cultures of India concluded that the Lushais are Kukis and are of Mongoloid stock. He also recorded:

The Kukis are known by various clan names. Those of the North Cachar Hills are called Biete Kukis and Khelma Kukis. To the north of the Lushai range in the forest-clad hills dwell the Darlung.
Where the Kukis settled:

It has amply been described in the foregoing section as to who are the 'Kukis'. It is now to be ascertained where they settled or are living presently.

Captain Pemberton (1835: 15), Joint Commissioner in Manipur in his report on the Eastern Frontiers of British India wrote:

... The Khongjuees, who under the more generally known names of kookies, Koo-chungs and Kuci, stretch from the southern borders of the Muneepoor valley to the northern limit of the province of Arracan, ... that the Kookies have been gradually advancing for years in a northerly direction, and have hitherto established themselves on the ranges which are originally occupied by more northerly tribes or committed such fearful aggressions upon the latter, as to compel them to retire and leave an unoccupied tract between themselves and these formidable opponents.

In this connection, Dalton (1872:44) observed:

... The Kukis are now found as neighbours of the Nagas in Assam and in contiguity with the Mugs of Arracan. The hill country occupied by them extends from the valley of the Koladyne, where it touches on the Khumis, to Northern Cachar and Manipur, a distance of about 300 miles.
But studying the Kukis, from their experience, mainly in Burma, in the Chin Hills, Carey and Tuch (1932: 2) remarked:

As far as the Chins are concerned, we know from our own experience, that the drift of migration has changed and is now towards the north. The Nwite (Gwite), Vaipe (Vaiphei), and Yo (Zou) Chins, who within the memory of men resided in the northern Chin Hills, have now almost entirely recrossed the northern border, either into the hills belonging to Manipur or to the south of Cachar and their old village sites are now being occupied by the Kanhow (Kamhow) clan of Sukte Chins, which also is steadily moving northwards.

Maj. Gen. Johnstone (1871: 25) said:

The Kukis were now immigrants and were believed to have caused a great deal of .... anxiety about the year 1845, and soon poured into the hill tracts of Manipur in such number as to drive away many of the older inhabitants.

Col. McCullah (1859: 55), the then Political Agent, Manipur, prior to Sir Johnstone, whom the later described as a tactful and generous officer and who often went out of his way to help the Kukis at his own expense said:

The Khongjais or Kookis until lately occupied the hills to the south of the Koupooes (Kabuis). Whilst in this position, little or nothing of them was known, but they caused fear from their numbers and the bloody attacks they sometime made upon their neighbours.
Similarly, Shaw (1929: 11) found that the Kukis
of Manipur as having lived:

.... in a large area of hilly
country bounded by the Angami Nagas
of Naga Hills District in the North,
the Province of Burma in the East,
the Chin Hills and Lushai Hills in
the South and the District of Cachar
in the West. Mainly, it may be said,
they occupy the Hills of the State of
Manipur on all sides of Imphal valley.

Meerwarth (1919: 29) in his study on the Andamanese,
Nicobarese and Hill Tribes of Assam observed that the
Kukis occupied:

... hill ranges south of the Naga Hills.
Their neighbours to the North are the
Nagas and the Manipuris, to the East
the tribes of the Upper Chindwin and
the Chin Hills, on the south those
living on the hill tracts of Chitta­
gong, while on the West they are
bounded by the plains of Sylhet and
the hills of North Cachar.

He went on to remark:
The Kukis are very migratory, and their
settlement can be found dispersed among
other tribes, such as, the Nagas, the
Cacharies etc. They are split up into
a great number of tribes.
Thanghlunkim Gangte, Churachandpur District, in a combined traditional dresses of 'Gangte Puondum' lungi, 'Thadou Thangnang-Puon' shawl and 'Hmar Blause'.
Majumdar (1944:127) demonstrated that the Kuki Chiefs:

...rule over the country between the Karnafuli river and its main tributary, Tuliampai, on the West, and the Tyao and the Koladyne rivers on the East. While their Southern boundary is roughly a line drawn East and West through the junction of the Mat and Koladyne rivers and their most Northerly villages are found on the borders of the Silchar district. The Lushai and others with distinct Lushai affiliations are found scattered over wide areas; they are found in the Southern borders of Sylhet, in Tipperah and in the North of the Cachar Hills, and the Chittagong Hill Tracts also contain some Lushai villages.

V

Disintegrated Kukis:

From the facts stated above we have an idea about the Kukis, their origin and where they live in. With the advent of Indian Independence, however, the situation has taken a sea-change among the Kukis and nobody can differentiate for sure between a Kuki and a Manipuri. These people have now become more politically conscious and socially sensitive. The new Constitution of India ensures an individual the right to equal opportunity
for all citizens, along with all other fundamental rights etc. with special provision for safeguarding the interest of the Backward classes, including the people who have been listed as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Thus, in accordance with the Notification of the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, published in the Extra-Ordinary Gazette of India, there are 29 recognised tribes in Manipur. But not a group designated as 'Kuki' is listed there. Therefore, in so far as official matters are concerned, after the publication of the above mentioned orders of the Government of India, no tribe could be referred to officially as 'Kuki' in Manipur, nor, the nomenclature 'Kuki' is recognised for all practical purposes.

It may be said here and now that the Kukis were the monarch in the hills surrounding the valley of Imphal and their relationship with the Raja of Manipur till the outbreak of Anglo-Kuki War in 1917 was one of mutual respect and understanding on equal terms which was well depicted by Hutton (1928:3) in the following words:

"... the administration in the hill areas of Manipur State is not very close, and as they (Kuki) were ruled by their own organised chiefs and treated as they had been in the past, at any rate, by the Manipur State as allies ..."
All the same, the contribution of the Kukis, who were hand in gloves with Juvaraj Tikendrajit Singh, in the uprising of 1891, was great. The changes brought about by the Anglo-Kuki war of 1917-19, formed a watershed for modern Manipur with a permanent territory that still exists. Their virtue of sacrificial spirit probably prompted them to join the Indian National Army in hundreds in response to the call given by Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose of the INA. They were a gallant and martial lot who, among the people of the North-East India, could challenge the invincible power of the British empire then.

But, alas, those glorious days of the Kukis are gone, and gone with them are the existence of these brave tribesmen now. The main factor leading to their extinction was political. The class composition of the Kukis and their political organisation were so independent of each other that the Kukis were obsessed with the idea of inter-clan rivalries, being helped and fomented by the designing political organisation. As a consequence, despite their being one and the same, clan-rivalries for supremacy over each other strained
their relationship. But such polemic could not raise its ugly head during the British administration which recognised the Kuki Chieftainship and administered the hill people through these efficient functionaries. However, after Independence of India, when the public in general had become conscious of the modern political trend that espoused the principles of democracy, the inherent but hitherto latent clan-rivalries began to manifest themselves among the Kukis with the result that the process of their disintegration came to a head. This process occurred in quick succession among the Kukis.

Another important factor leading to this disintegration was social which was inextricably inter-twined with the political factor mentioned above. According to their culture and tradition, the social system of the Kukis was so segmentary that every individual was made consciously aware that he or she belonged to a particular clan or sub-clan. Thus, a Kuki cannot be free from such idiosyncracy, be an educated person or not. Obviously, this became a fertile breeding-ground for discontentment, competition, jealousy, hatred, factionalism, etc. When afterwards, the Government of India started preparing the list of Scheduled Tribes
in Manipur, every imaginable group or clan aspired to get the recognition by inclusion in the list as a separate tribe. In the process, no one appeared to have claimed, consciously or unconsciously, to belong to the Kuki tribe and, as a result, no Kuki as such had been Scheduled in Manipur. Surprisingly, however, in Meghalaya, Assam and Mizoram, there are Kukis\(^2\) who have been included in the recognised list of Scheduled Tribes.

Despite the terminology 'Kuki', having not been scheduled listed in Manipur, the same is being employed for the purpose of this work, meaning thereby the people who claim to belong to the 'Chin', 'Kuki' and 'Mizo' groups.

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\(^2\) Fourth Schedule Section 26(1) of the Amendments to the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950 Part XIV for Manipur and Part XV for Meghalaya as amended under clause (b) of section 2 of the North-Eastern Areas (Re-organisation Act, 1971 and under the fifth Schedule Section 26(2) of the amendments to the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Union Territories order 1951 as amended under clause (b) of Section 2 of the North-Eastern Areas (Re-organisation) Act, 1971, Part II - Mizoram.
MANIPUR
Location Map of
Churachandpur & Sadar Hills
Sub-Divisions.

Fig. 1.2