

Oral Narratives of the Kuki-Chin People: The Saga of Legendary Galngam

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The 'Kuki-Chin' people have common historical memories, languages, belief, cultural practices and values. The commonalities shared by this kindred group are also reflected in their common folktales which give an impression of collectiveness of the culture and tradition. Due to geographical location and their dispersed settlement, slight variations in the version of the folktales have developed among the different groups with the passage of time. However, it shares the same meaning and context for all the groups living in different parts of the region and even across national and international boundaries. The common folktales are living testimony of their common ancestry, identity and culture that they belong to the same racial stock. In the midst of various folktales abound with their history, the story of the legendary Galngam is being focussed herein. Attempt is made in this paper that the true identity and image of a particular ethnic group can be achieved and asserted through their life and lore which is based purely on verbal literature or oral discourse.

Keywords: Ancestry, Identity, Folktales, Imprints, Legendary, Myths, Oral narratives

Introduction

The 'Kuki-Chin' people are the trans-border tribes living across international boundary between Myanmar, North East India and the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. They are generally known as the Chin-Kuki-Mizo or in abbreviated form as Chikim. Historical and anthropological sources have revealed that there were successive migrations across the thick mountainous region of North East frontier at one point of time during the last several centuries extending over thousand years. In Manipur, the British colonial accounts have classified these groups of people into either 'Old Kuki' or 'New Kuki' depending upon the earlier and later arrival. Such classification has no significance as they are one and the same people. The leading Kuki tribes are Thadou, Paite, Hmar, Vaiphei, Kom, etc. These cognate tribes have close affinity in

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terms of culture, dress, language, way of life, world view, mode of living and food habits. These homogenous tribal groups have been scheduled into different tribal groups by the Indian Constitution, thus creating division and disunity among them. Due to such political and social classification they now prefer to be separately identified by their recognised tribe identities. The oral tradition of the Kukis today has a distinctive characteristic feature as it was a part of their past which has enormous significance today. Though they have erected monolith and stones in those villages where they had settled in the past nothing could be written on it as they were illiterate. Due to the unavailability of written document or any monumental inscription, it becomes very difficult to trace their history of origin. Their limited contact with the outside world makes the task more cumbersome. As such, their oral genealogy, folklore, folktales and songs, legends and poems have turned out to be the only reliable source materials available to reconstruct the past. With regard to their origin, their history is still shrouded in myths and mythologies. One such attempt is made here with regard to the mythical heroes of the past whose name is popularly known as Galngam among the Thadou-Kukis and Ralngam among the Hmars and Rengngam among the Koms, Chirus, Aimols and so on. The oral sources and their situational experiences provide resources for assertion of a homogenous ethnic identity. In various places of the southern districts of Manipur, the people have discovered and witnessed various artefacts associated with the mythical hero Galngam who was believed to have possessed super natural power and travelled across the length and breadth of the erstwhile ancestral territorial domain sparsely inhabited by them.

The history of the Kuki people and their distinct culture is hardly known in its true perspective. Attempt is made to dispel some of the misconceptions with regard to their indigeneity in Manipur. The past few years have witnessed debates on who are the 'indigenous peoples' of Manipur.¹ The narratives on the Kuki history with ulterior motives lacked historical sense and has resulted in willful misinterpretation of the pre-colonial past. The Kukis are, no doubt, nationalistic, temperamentally freedom loving, instinctive war-like, and able to retain their chieftainship institution despite many odds which eventually led to sustain their custom, culture, tradition and identity. Unlike the Nagas they are homogeneous and have no language barrier among themselves. They also possessed common historical memories, cultural practices, languages and legends. But since they are widely scattered across the national and international boundaries they remained insignificant minority. Despite such imaginary territorial divisions they live in a contiguous geographical region. Historical record testifies that their 'Kuki country' also known as 'Independent Hill Country' was taken over by the British and then they annexed the eastern portion of their rule in Burma, the western side to Assam, Bengal and Manipur without their consent. Therefore, in studying the Kuki-Chin people and their territorial domain, problem arises without referring the same people living in other areas. G.A. Grierson, the superintendent of Linguistic Survey of India, describes the length and breadth of 'Kuki country' demarcated them in 1904.² Their ancestral domain run along the southern mountains of Manipur extending up to the northern limit of Arakan ranges in the south and from the eastern mountains of Bengal to as far as the Chindwin river in the east. History

has revealed that the Kukis have been fighting for the protection of their freedom and independent living. The military history of Manipur has shown that they have been fighting against all odds for the kingdom of Manipur. They also fought for the assertion of their birthright to live peacefully free from outside interference. Today, some vested groups branded the Kukis as ‘immigrants’, ‘refugees’, and ‘foreigners’ without any historical basis. As such a brief historical position of their indigeneity is being addressed through the narratives of folklore.

The paper aims to explore into the rich oral literature in the form of folk songs and folk tales and to state how oral literature can also ensure one’s identity, history and culture despite their dispersed and scattered settlement, occupying a certain territory which they can claim as their own. It is also trying to generate some interest among the researchers and the likes to have more knowledge and understanding of the ‘Kuki-Chin’ history and their indigeneity in Manipur as a whole.

Literature review

Almost all the earliest historical and anthropological works on Kuki-Chin people were exclusively accredited to western writers, such as C.A. Soppit’s *A Short Account of the Kuki-Lushai Tribes on the North-East Frontier* (1893), the deputy commissioner of the hill tracts, T.H. Lewin, *The Hill Tracts of Chittagong and the Dwellers Therein* (1869), and by the same author - *Wild races of South-Eastern India* (1870). These books provide substantial historical and ethnographic accounts about the Chin-Kuki-Mizos. Another type of writing comes from the military officers which some of whom had given detail accounts of their military operations. These include L.W. Shakespear’s *History of the Assam Rifles* (1929) and A.S. Reid’s *Chin-Lushai Land: Including a Description of various Expeditions into the Chin-Lushai Hills and the Final Annexation of the country, with Maps and Illustrations* (1893).

Besides, there were also British administrators whose written works has provided us unprecedented historical and anthropological insights about the people; viz. Bertram S.Carey and H.N. Tuck’s *The Chin Hills: A History of the people, British dealings with them, their Customs and Manners, and Gazetteer of their Country*, Vol. I 1896, (reprinted 1976), and John Shakespear’s *The Lushei Kuki Clans*, Part I and Part II (1912). These books were of immense value to researchers and scholars, for which the Tribal Research Institute of Mizoram reprinted a number of these books to make it available to them. Sir James Johnstone’s *Manipur and the Naga Hills* provided us the authentic facts of historical events connected with Manipur and Naga Hills with substantial information about their relationship with the Kukis as well.

Another monumental work by G.A Grierson’s in his *Linguistic Survey of India*, III (1904) has given some anthropological analysis of the people at the time when Kukis were brought under the British colonial administration. William Shaw’s *Notes on the Thadou Kukis: With and introduction by J. H. Hutton* (1929) has become the most controversial book among the Kukis. Nevertheless, the book has made a very great contribution to our understanding of the historical and anthropological studies and provides valuable insights of the traditional Thadou Kuki culture and society. It may be noted that earlier there was no comprehensive work in English on the Thadou’s history and culture.

Another writing concerning the Government's dealing of the Kukis with the subsequent establishment of colonial administration is found in the book of Alexander Mackenzie's *The North-East Frontier of India* (1884), in which reports of several British administrators and military officials about the Kukis, such as, Major McCulloch, Capt. Butler (1873), Col. Lister, J. Ware Edgar (1871), etc. were incorporated in the books. Sir Robert Reid's *History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam from 1883-1941* (1983) and D.K Palit's *The Sentinel of the North-East: The Assam Rifles* (1984), has provided substantial facts about the Kukis of unadministered tracts and the war against the British during 1917-19. A group of Indian writers and their works like, T.C. Das's *The Purum: An Old Kuki Tribe of Manipur* (1945), and more recent works of Tarun Goswami's *Kuki Life and Lore* (1985) and A.K. Ray's *Authority and Legitimacy - A study on the Thadou-Kukis of Manipur* (1990) has provided us with historical and anthropological insights of the people concerned.

With the advent of Christianity and the spread of education today a number of books on Kuki-Chin people have been written by the people themselves both in their own dialects and in English. Their study makes important contribution to the understanding of different aspects of the socio-cultural life afresh. These books contain deeper anthropological insights and the socio-cultural changes as a result of the impact of western culture through the activities of governmental administrative machineries and the Christian missions. For instance, Lal Dena, David Syemlieh and other local writers and historians belonging to Christian faith of northeast were silent as to whether the realization of historical process is a 'divine manifestation' or not. In spite of that, it helps us to understand better about the history and culture of the people of the northeast in general and the Kukis in particular right from their migration in the form of oral tradition, myths, legends, folklore and some artefact. The studies made by the local scholars contain more authentic facts which have not been hitherto unexplored. They sometimes understand their own history and culture better and deeper than outsiders. Nevertheless, there are many elements of subjectivity as their writings are most often biased to the extent of the absence of historical validity. For that matter the writings of history in the case of Nagas, Mizos and Kukis or Kuki-Chin and some other tribal groups are, in any case, in its infancy stage unlike the chronicle or ancient literary texts of Assam, Manipur and Tripura of the northeast.

British had left information on different aspects of the people whom they ruled. There were reports, files and official records/documents which need to be historically assessed. Most of it has a strong administrative bias as it often meant to guide administrators or bureaucrats to facilitate better administration and for their convenience in framing a policy. As such all these writings were pro-British in character. Often, many rely on these written documents. On the other hand oral tradition, which consists of legends, folklores and myths, also serves as an important source of data collection for the reconstruction of historical past. There are only a few vernacular literatures available concerning about the folklore. With the introduction of Thadou-Kuki subject as Modern Indian Languages (MIL) up to the undergraduate level under Manipur University in recent times, textbook writers began

to collect most of the folktales, legends, etc. and included them in the academic textbooks.

Significance of oral narratives

The history of people as told by the elders and passed down from generation to generation is taken equivalent to normal history today. Such oral tradition deals with the past events of which no written records in the field of socio-political, cultural, religious and economic lives are available. Oral history is transmitted in the form of folksongs or tales which are told and retold in the society in which they have lived.³ Literally speaking, oral history is the history of the past events which are told by means of spoken words mostly from the mouth of the elders. It is only after the invention of scripts that normal history is maintained. The frontier tribes of North East India have generally rich oral traditions, which play an important role in the reconstruction of history of many tribal societies.

Usually history is based on written records or documents or archaeological evidence of the past. Normally it does not give first-hand account of the illiterate masses who normally form the bulk of the society. Orality is one of the important means of enquiry and investigation as it can substitute unavailable written records. As many tribal communities have no written records of the past, their origin and history can be reconstructed with the help of oral traditions. One cannot ignore oral traditions because it forms the raw materials from which pure history may be derived and sometimes picturised. J.A. Fadiman supports this arguments in saying, "A myth, a children's tale, work song, each may contain its fragment of data, which if recognised and placed in relation to others, may permit reconstruction of the past."⁴

Through legends, which are prose narratives, one can learn ones' society and its culture. The Kuki-Chin myths and legends are associated with historical accounts of their village settlements, romantic episodes, wars and important personalities of their ancestral history. A folktale provides continuity of history and link the past with that of the present in order to bring into life the unwritten past. The nuances in the history of any society or community can be discovered through the prism of folklore. With its associated belief and legends, the oral tradition provides the anthropologists, sociologists, historian, etc. the vast amount of information and resources on different aspects of the people concerned such as origin, migration, settlements, socio-economy, the belief system and cultural life.

Theoretical setting

In any given society there evolves a system of conceptual relationship vis-à-vis with the environment in its cyclic movements. As such folklore provides one such mechanism through which it maintains continuity in the course of historical process of the pre-literate tribal society. In the state of Manipur, a large chunk of ethnic Kuki-Chin community has lived since time immemorial. Their strategical geographical location is associated with many historical and political complexities. Malinowski, who is one of the pioneer expert consultants on primitive and folk societies, perceived that myth was "not merely a story told but a reality lived".⁵ The beliefs of the native people with regard to the landscape testify the truth. The tangible, visible and the

associated natural phenomena and structures like the cleft boulders, petrified human beings, imprints and sculpture brought the mind to the natives close to the mythological world. Thus, the story associated with the landscape is filled with incidents of heroic adventure in different dramatic forms.

Folklores are the reflection of a cultural identity of a people more than the literary expression. The ethnographic history of any community can also be constituted by penetrating into the way of life of a given picture.⁶ Here, we are trying to delve exclusively into their oral folklore. The study will be mostly descriptive and partly analytical in nature as well. Oral literature has always served as a source of interesting insight into the lives of any given particular community. It is a distinctive feature of the Kuki-Chin community today as it used to be in the past. It also represents the most valid and appropriate expression of religious, mythological, historical and cultural milieu of the folk community concerned. As William R. Bascom says, "Prose narrative is an appropriate term for the widespread and important category of verbal art which includes myth, legends and folktales. These three forms are related to each other, in that they are narratives".⁷ Any characteristics can be attributed to any subject. Myth are those stories which reflect traces of the origin of the present life. And those stories created only to express man's joy and sorrows and his emotional feeling may be classed as aesthetic myths. When he uses historical data as basis for his stories they become historical myths. And yet again, when a story is about an independent, valiant, and courageous hero and when it attempts to express powerful feelings of the characters in it, the story becomes romantic myth. The stories of Galngam, Ahshijolneng, Khupting and Ngambom, Jonlhing and Nanglhun and Lenchonghoi are such stories.

"The function of myth, briefly, is to strengthen, tradition and to endow it with a greater value and prestige by tracing back to a higher, better, more supernatural reality of initial events".⁸ To elaborate further, "a legend is a traditional oral narrative regarded as true by the many members of the society in which it circulates, but containing remarkable supernatural elements that follow".⁹ As the fairytale stands related to the legend, so does legend to history and so does history to real life.¹⁰ Hence, Bascom says again that myth has its source in reason, legend in memory and folktale in imagination.¹¹ Here, we are following the western academic practices that the characteristic features of 'oral tradition' can be attributed to any subject. The saga of legendary Galngam fits herein. In connection with this, the Kuki-Chin community have done a great embellishment to the structural marker as it provides the opportunity identify the myth with the people. As such, we are trying to reconstruct the historical past in the light of these present artefacts of various kinds evidently spreading across the length and breadth of their territorial domain.

The legendary story of Galngam with all its associated myths and tradition fits well. He left his footprints where he grazed his herds of cattle. The phenomenal footprints and hoof marks of his cattle still exist and is visible on the big rocks along Tuilelon near Valenkot or Valpakot village in the present day Churachandpur district of Manipur. The local people of Hmar community have erected a stone near the artefact of Galngam or Ralngam by identifying him as 'Kapu' meaning our grandfather.

In this connection, Elkin¹² has noted the importance of place on myth as:

The portion names on these myths and ritual and the sacred sites entrusted to such a cult group of mythological are determined by mythological history. It is basically the mythology which records the travels and action of tribal heroes in its subdivision of the tribal territory. The country of each local group is crossed by paths or tracks usually unmarked along which there are a number of special sites where a hero performed some action which is recorded in myth.

Here, it can be seen that location is indispensable structural marker which help in identifying the myth with a community. The mountainous ranges and the river streams were believed to have their respective supernatural guardians. They were venerated so much so that they worshipped them through the ages as it was believed to cause life and death, culture and tradition and even livelihood. All these constitute the core value of the cultural complexes and became vitally important in shaping and developing their rituals, folklores, myths and legends. In the context of the legendary Galngam, the various artefacts are evidently spread across the length and breadth of their inhabited territory. Among the folktales of Thadou-Kuki folklores repertory, the story of Galngam is considered the most popular one. Attempt is made here to uncover and reconstruct the past based on certain artefacts in the folktale of Galngam which was handed down from the past generation. It also tries to review the use of oral tradition in the academic discipline and research in the context of Kuki-Chin society. As such the narratives are believed to be real and such oral sources which comes out from the mouth of the elders constitute the basis for reconstruction of the past in our academic research.

Recounting of Galngam's saga¹³

Before coming to the main outlines of the popular story, it will be worthwhile to remember places, names, incidents and stories associated with Galngam, the legendary folk hero. The hero traversed the entire region inhabited by the Kuki-Chin tribes which extends from the Naga Hills in the north down into the Sandoway districts of Burma in the south, from Myatha river in the East, almost to the Bay of Bengal in the west. Various imprints of this legendary man on rocks, stone slabs and several phenomena related to nature attributed to him exist till today.

The folktale of Galngam begin with the exploits and all other forms of adventurous journey experienced by his father Selleh who was a man possessing multiple character such as bravery, physically strong and enduring and a man of exceptional magical powers. He is famous for his monkey drum episode where he annihilated a horde of monkeys and obtained their magical drum. The drum was said to be used by Selleh to raise the dead people and bring them back to life again. Legend has it that Selleh raised so many dead people that the road of Mithikho (village of the dead) had become unused and desolate. The earth had become overpopulated and Mithikho became deserted. The chief of Mithikho complained to the sun and the moon. So, while Selleh was drying his drum, the sun and the moon decamped with the drum toward heaven. Selleh went in hot pursuit along with his trusted dog. His black dog caught hold of

the moon which was in possession of the drum and swallowed its bottom half. The moon then passed it on to the sun which in turn was partially swallowed by another dog in traditional Kuki-Chin mythology, the occurrences of solar and lunar eclipses were interpreted as the sun and the moon being swallowed up by the Selleh's dogs. Another legend says that Selleh was a very idle man who did nothing except eating, sleeping and roaming and loitering around the whole day. He neither helped his parents in the fieldworks. It is said that the daughter of chief of his village was the most beautiful girl in the whole village. Selleh wanted her but the girl did not like him due to his idleness. Every morning when the chief's daughter went to fetch water from the hill stream, Selleh went to look at her from a considerable distance among the bushes. His clothes were wet with morning dew. All those village girls who went to fetch water were drenched with dew. But Selleh was surprised to see the chief's daughter returning almost dry, without a single drop of dew on her clothes. He was amazed and one day he waited for her near the spot from which the girl fetch water, by hiding himself among the bushes. When the girl came with pitcher she at first took off her clothes and kept them in a dry place. On seeing her naked body, the libidinal urge in him surge up very much. On the next morning Selleh stole the dress of the girl and hide it in the bush. On finding her dress missing, the chief's daughter wept and looked around for it. At that moment Selleh came out with the dress in hand and said that he would give her dress if only the girl agrees to copulate with him. The poor girl had no other way out except to yield herself to Selleh's sexual desire. So, from that day onwards the chief's daughter became the secret wife. They met daily at the bush near the stream. Though at first she was reluctant to become his wife because of his idleness, the girl enjoyed the game of sex all the more in their daily rendezvous. Though Selleh was idle in other works, he was very active like a bull and libidiously lascivious in the game of sex and finally she loved him in spite of his poor status. Soon it came to the knowledge of the girl's father. Being enraged by his daughter's infamous conduct the chief enquired of the unknown man who impregnated her. The daughter could not disclose the real identity of Selleh as he was not a competent man to be a son-in-law of the chief. So she kept mum. In course of time a son was born to her and the child remained fatherless for three years. When the boy was such tender age the chief invited all the young men of the village for a feast at his house and let the child select and identify his real father from among them.

The child pointed out Selleh from among the young men as his father. The chief got angrier on finding a dullard like Selleh as son-in-law. So he expelled Selleh, his daughter and the child from his village. Selleh, his wife and the child wandered aimlessly over the fields and meadows and at last reached a deserted hut in which they took shelter. Now Selleh had to abandon his wife and the child and had to work in search of food for their survival. He prepared fields for jhum cultivation and cut down trees but every morning he was surprised to see that all the trees stood up as before. He told his wife about the happenings and both want to verify it at once. They came to field with their dog. They cut down the trees and remained hiding to see how things happened during their absence. In the early morning a monkey emerged from a nearby forest with a small drum hanging on his neck and shouted 'grow' 'grow' while beating the drum. And lo! As he was beating the drum all the trees stood

up as before.

On seeing the mischief Selleh sent his dog to catch the monkey. The dog ran after the monkey and caught hold of the mischievous monkey. Trembling with fear the monkey requested the dog to set him free. And in return he would give the magic drum which could give anything desired when beaten. The dog set the monkey free and returned with the magic drum. On reaching their home, Selleh tested the power of the magic drum by commanding various kind of things which he wanted. The magic drum really worked wonders. It gave all that he wanted when beaten. Then Selleh and his wife had a large house, barn full of rice, chicken, crops, many domesticated mithuns, large number of fowls and a good number of slaves and labourers of both sexes only by the dint of the magic drum.

Now, Selleh became very famous and powerful chief in the land. He went to the deep jungle in search of white elephant as he wanted to ride on it. Meanwhile, news came from home that his wife and son were seriously ill. He didn't pay much attention to it as he thought that they could be cured with his magic drum. So he continued hunting white elephant. At last he arrived home and found his dead son in a state of decomposition and could not be brought back to life again even with his magical drum. Selleh got so furious that he broke the magic drum. Then Selleh came towards the land of the death in search of his son. There Selleh met his son who said, "I will not be permitted to go again to the land of living by our lord, the king of death. But don't worry another son will be born again by my mother. He must be named Khokhon and he will be a famous legendary hero of our clan." Then afterwards, Selleh returned home again and found his wife pregnant and in no time, she gave birth to a healthy baby son. Selleh named it Khokhon.

As years rolled on, Selleh's son Khokhon grew into a handsome and physically strong youth. But he was lazy and lethargic lad who slept day in day out and was too lazy to go even for hunting and fishing. Disgusted with his son, Selleh compared him to a Humpi Samangsong (toothless and impotent tiger). Selleh once said to his son Khokhon, "My dear son, don't waste time and energy of your youth. Go on hunting in the forest. I will give you weapons and magical powers to subdue any ferocious animals". So, he taught his son various magical powers and also gave hunting weapons. Khokhon obeyed his father and came to the forest in search of animals to hunt. Embarrassed with his father's feeling on him Khokhon woke up from his reverie and started laying trays to snare small wild animals. His first successful adventure was the slaying of *Thonotnu* (demoness) and her daughter for having stolen trapped animas from his *leithang* (trap). After this, Khokhon attained a widely acclaimed personality among his clan community.

As the legend goes there lived a creature popularly known as *Lhomipa* (half-lion half-man creature). One day Khokhon came across *Lhomipa* while clearing his *leithang*. They came face to face with a stream in between them, glaring at each other quietly but ferociously. On the first instance *Lhomipa* saw a ball of fire in the eyes of Khokhon because of the magical power given by his father. *Lhomipa* crouched down baring his fangs and grinding his teeth. His eyes were red and he growled with his tail standing up straight and swaying from side to side. Khokhon took his bow and arrow and aimed at *Lhomipa*. The latter was apprehensive of him since he had heard

of him slaying the demon - Thonotnu. So, instead of challenging him, *Lhomipa* pleaded to spare his life only and sought his friendship. When they introduced themselves *Lhomipa* said he had no name. Thereafter, Khokhon named him 'Haangsai' (known as Rangsai among the Hmars, Chirus etc.) meaning 'challenging from distance'. *Lhomipa* too gave him a befitting name 'Galngam' meaning 'daring from a distance'. Literally, it also means as one who is seen as a weakening from a distance but who becomes a terror when viewed near at hand. In this way, Khokhon and *Lhomipa* became good friends and christened each other's name as 'Galngam' and 'Hangsai' respectively. Thus, the wastrel Khokhon had reformed himself into one of the most daring and valiant man by the dint of his ability and intellect.

Both Galngam (Khokhon) and Hangsai (the lion man) often tested their skills and capabilities. They hunted in the wild games together and killed and caught many games in the forest. Initially, in spite of their outward friendship, inwardly they did not trust each other. They wanted to divide the games between them. Hangsai proposed it and Galngam agreed. But a problem arose as to how such a large number of games be brought to their respective homes. Hangsai worked out a plan and ordered Galngam to cut two bamboo tubes which the latter did. Then, Hangsai murmured some magical words and made all the game animals reduced to mini-mustard size and put them all into two bamboo tubes. Galngam overheard the magical words of the Hangsai and learnt it by heart. Then, they parted their ways for their homes with their respective shares in one bamboo tube each.

They earned each other's respect and admiration though Galngam earned this with more cunning and guile than with strength and courage. Hangsai was an exceptional magician and Galngam learnt magic from him including the art of storing huge quantities of meat in a piece of bamboo slot. This feat is often called Galngam's magic and believed to be practised to this day. This particular brand of magic is called *Savun* magic on account of the fact that a big spread of animal hide could be transformed into a small roll just as a huge quantity of meat could be stuffed into a small bamboo slot. When Galngam reached home after hunting, he asked his mother to spread a large bamboo mat so that he can pour down all the flesh of the day's game animals. The mother wondered in not seeing anything except weapons and a bamboo tube in the person of her son. However, she brought a large mat and spread it out and when Galngam poured out the contents of the bamboo tube, all these game animals enlarged to their natural size and filled the entire floor. Both the parents were amazed to see it and were happy at the magical skill of their son. It is also believed that Galngam would take one hill in one stride, two hills in two strides and so on by saying "*muolkhat kal khat, muolni kal ni*" the footprints of which have been visible even till today.

On one occasion when Selleh and Galngam were working on their fields, Galngam said to his father: "Father, I will go home first for today. On my way back home, I will make a wooden handle for my axe and keep it on the roadside and please bring it when you return home". Saying that Galngam went away. After a few hours when Selleh returned home he found the said handle on the roadside and brought it home. When he put down the handle at his courtyard it instantly turned into Galngam and

he said smiling, 'It's me, father' Selleh was very much pleased on seeing the magical powers of his son. On another occasion Selleh said to his son, 'Son, today I will go the field and you bring the bamboo piece lying on the yard after me. I will make splits of it at the field'. Saying so he left. Afterwards, when Galngam went to the fields with the said bamboo piece and as soon as he put it down, it turned into Selleh and said smiling, 'It's me, your father'. Thus, both the father and son had tricked each other several times on different occasions and tested their skills and were adept in exorcism, magic and witchcraft.

Discovery of the cornelian beads (Khipichang)

Galngam had on one occasion suddenly remember his onetime friend Hangsai. On the last occasion of their hunting expedition in the forest, he saw some cornelian beads in a heap of someone's excreta. Galngam collected it, washed it and kept it secretly as a very valuable treasure in his pocket. On seeing this Hangsai asked him as to why he did so. Galngam replied that the valuable beads are so much prized in their community. Hangsai laughed and said, 'If you want it, come to my land some other day. It is known as Khipichang by us and it grows plentifully in our land and we eat it as fruits. You will get plenty of it in my place'. Galngam suddenly remembered this and decided to go to the land of his friend to collect the beads. Hangsai instructed that if Galngam wanted to come to his land, he must conform to one condition that he must come alone and there is a high mountain near the land where Hangsai lived. And Galngam must burn a fire atop the mountain so as to inform of his arrival and thereby Hangsai would come to receive him. Otherwise other Hangsais would likely kill Galngam from misunderstanding. Galngam followed all the instructions of his friend who received him warmly on the hilltop. When they entered their village the other Hangsais wanted to eat off Galngam, the human. But his friend forbade them do so saying that Galngam is his best friend as well as a guest. Then his friend Hangsai brought Galngam at his house and introduced him to his aged father and mother. The two aged parents who were not only ugly as from being half animal creature but also were very dirty with their excreta smearing their whole bodies. On seeing all this foul appearances Galngam wanted to leave the place immediately. So he pleaded his friend to return home again. His friend Hangsai reluctantly agreed and after plucking a bagful of Khipichang fruits from his yard, he escorted him up to the hilltop where they met last. Then Galngam happily returned home with his exploits of the valuable Kipichang. The cornelian beads were distributed among his villagers and they were very happy and thanked him.

One day a friend of Galngam said to him, 'Galngam, why don't you take revenge upon the enemy of your father who beat him in sorcery and magic? If you want to know the whole story, go and ask your father'. On hearing these words of his friend Galngam went to Shelleh and asked about his one-time great enemy Doikungpu who had no equal in the world of magic. Doikungpu had four horned mithun *Selki li*. Selleh want it very much but could not have it due to Doikungpu's expertise and superiority in magic. So Galngam promised his father to bring the four horned mithun by any means of magical powers or by his sheer strength. Galngam departed for the village of Doikungpu. Galngam challenged Doikungpu and they wanted to test each

other skills and both waited for a chance. Doikungpu picked up a lump of earth in his palm and threw it out at the courtyard, where tall paddy plants instantly grew and bore fruits and rice. On seeing it Galngam picked up another lump of earth and threw it at the yard and instantly turned into a pig and ate up all the paddy plants and rice. The two appreciated each other for their skills. In another battle of magic that followed, Galngam emerged victorious and brought the four horned mithun towards his village. Doikungpu came after him and caught him on the banks of a river. More battle ensued wherein Doikungpu using his magical powers cursed Galngam who instantly became blind, lame and impotent. Galngam quickly wielded the same magic on him and Doikungpu too became blind, lame and impotent and his buttocks became embedded to a huge boulder on which he was sitting. Finally, they agreed to compromise and undid the magical spell they cast upon each other. However, Galngam being the winner came home with his prized mithun to which his father was completely satisfied. Galngam did not undo the magic fully and so Doikungpu on getting up left behind a portion of the flesh of his buttocks on the boulder. According to the legends, the flesh which he left behind is the white marbles visible to this day and the river mentioned is Tuivaaidung.

Galngam now became the most respected person in the whole village. He married the most beautiful girl of the village as his wife. On the other hand, Doikongpu was very unhappy on account of his defeat at the hands of Galngam. Doikungpu's daughter deeply incensed and infuriated at the manner in which her father had been humiliated and thus vowed to seek revenge. In accordance with her scheming plan she learnt magic and became Galngam's second wife. After feigning a prolong illness, the villainous woman said she could be cured only if Galngam could kill a wild boar and sacrifice it with due rituals. Galngam promised to fulfil despite many obstacles in his adventure because wild boars are ferocious and very dangerous animals to be hunted by ordinary hunters. On the eve of their departure for hunting the villainous wife bribed the hunting dogs by preparing a special dish of meat for them and said, 'Dear dogs, I will give you this meat to eat one on condition that if you promise not to participate in the hunting. And if you have to help Galngam in capturing the wild boars you cannot eat it'. The dogs promised not to help Galngam even if they are going to accompany him in the hunting expedition. The dogs said so because they were very hungry. And almost all of them ate the delicious meat except one dog Tangsi who was very obedient and faithful to Galngam. Eventually during the hunting expedition all the other dogs simply ran around doing nothing but the faithful dog Tangsi did his duty sincerely when the wild boar came out of the hole. Unfortunately, Galngam was overpowered by the ferocious beast and fell on the ground. He bled profusely and life slowly ebbing out from his body. He knew that his mortal life has come to an end. Galngam eventually died. He, however, came to life after seven days due to the efforts of his exceptionally clever and intuitive dog Tangsi proving true that a dog indeed is a man's best and loyal friend. Galngam became dejected due to his wife's betrayal and never went out. He released his hunting dogs to the wild to hunt for themselves instructing them to reserve a portion of the liver of the kill for him as a mark of respect and admiration for him to stick together and never disturb women and children and protect them from wild animals. Wild dogs, as they are

known today, are supposedly the descendants of the hunting dogs of Galngam. They roam in packs while hunting for food. It is said that at every kill they put aside a piece of the liver of the kill on top of the tree or bury it as a mark of respect for their beloved master Galngam. Finally, Tangsi turned into a wild dog. Even today, the practise is that when the Thadou-Kukis kill some animals for food, the heart and the liver are reserved for Galngam, the folk hero.

Galngam and Suvaikenu

Galngam being enamoured by the beauty of Suvaikenu set out to start courtship with her. She was a beautiful lady who became famous because of her reproductive organ which was placed or shaped horizontally and apparently possessed serrated blade like edges which can cut off anything. The story goes that whoever had physical relationship with her was deprived of their manhood. The valiant Galngam who was usually armed with bows and arrows, sword and knives attired in fancy and colourful clothing with *gosem* courted her by playing different tunes on his musical instrument *gosem* while the lady was weaving a loom. Gradually they became closer to each other and Galngam hypnotized her and while she was in a trance, he collected his saliva and spitted between her thighs. When the lady woke up Galngam told her that he had relationship with her. Since then they became close and inseparable. Further, the story about their physical relationship goes like this: that Galngam used to feed her private parts with *Thuhpi* (a very sour jungle fruit which made organ very sensitive so that it cannot harm Galngam's member during their sexual relationship). All this relationship was not disclosed to anybody but on the occasion of the village fishing Galngam blurted it out. Suvaikenu was deeply embarrassed and therefore look an opportunity to take revenge. The following morning she lulled him to sleep and used witchcraft to imprison him inside a huge boulder giving him enough space to enable him to breathe. When Galngam awoke he was unable to free himself despite all his magical might. But he was not to give up and ask for his magic gourd which he had taken from Haangsai. But the people sent by him to fetch the gourd were thwarted by Suvaikenu in every possible way. Galngam parents finally sent it through a reliable messenger who too was unable to deliver it because the woman caused a big flood which swept away the man and the gourd. Meanwhile, Galngam a man of great fame and valour breathed his last due to starvation as he was trapped inside the boulder for so many days. Another version is that he died with Suvaikenu.

The magic gourd (doi-um) of Galngam was carried downstream with a weird eerie sound emanating from it. It came across a barricade put up by villager. A blind aged man picked it up and on opening it a loud explosion of a deafening noise was heard which made all the people unconscious. After some time when all people regained their sense they had all become expert magicians instantly. The blind man also regained his sight and became the most adept magician of them all.

The story exists to be told and retold. The story of the legendary Galngam accorded a special position till today in the Chin-Kuki folktales. It cannot be denied or ignored of the fact that Galngam left his footprints in certain places in the wide range territories inhabited by these people. According to legendary accounts, Galngam caused the stone to bear his footprints and his herd of animals by spells of his magical prowess

Some have perceived it to be his progenitors. Some of the imprints and sculpture of Galngam in existence till today are as follows:

1. The marks of Galngam and the hoof marks of his cattle still exists on the big rocks along the river Tuilelon near Valenkot in the Churachandpur districts of Manipur.
2. The paw marks of his dogs can be still seen on the Machi hillock in Chandel district of Manipur.
3. His footprints are visible on a large rock near Bunning Kuki village in the present day of Tamenglong district of Manipur. The village once uprooted during the Kuki-Naga clash is now occupied by the Nagas.
4. There is a bowl-shaped block or rock on a mountain called Letsikhan near Khamphat in Myanmar (Burma). Legend says that Galngam had washed his hands in the bowl out of a rock.
5. Between Tuolbung ghat and Maulien ghat in Tipaimukh sub-division of Churachandpur 'Rawtaw' lies across the Barak river. This big rock stand as a symbol for the ancient history of the Hmars. It bears the footprints of Galngam or Laruong's mithun and a lump of Doikunpu's buttock. There are many artefacts remains of the Laruong in the Barak and Vangai range.
6. At Thangjing range in Churachandpur district, there are imprints on a slab of rock on which Galngam's knee marks are visible on the surface of the stone slab.
7. Galngam was said to have placed one big standing rock as his symbol near Hengkot village in Churachandpur village. It stands till today.
8. Laruong vawkong meaning Laruong's pig manger made of rock lies between Ngampabung and Phulpui in Tipaimukh sub-division.¹⁴
9. Galngam also built a stone resting place near Phaikoh village in Manipur eastern district of Ukhrul.
10. In the thick forest of Churachandpur district, Galngam was said to have sculptured a women's breast on the stone wall on a narrow passage whereby every one who passes through cannot avoid touching it.



Figure 1. Galngam footprint in a large rock near Bunning Kuki village in Tamenglong district, Manipur



Figure 2. Picture of Bunning Phaicham (Bunning valley) where Galngam was once freely treading.



Figure 3. Galngam twisel (water hiding) in Churachandpur district, Manipur



Figure 4. Galngam big standing rock as his symbol in Churachandpur district, Manipur

There were still many other marks and signs of the exploits in every nook and corner of the ancestral territorial domain of the Kuki-Chin people. Galngam traversed the entire region and left numerous imprints. These historical sites of legendary Galngam are clearly corroborated in the Kuki-Chin folktales. The folktales i.e. the 'text' that was narrated since the past is today notably visible in the 'context' i.e. the physical and geographical space authenticated by mythical lore and beliefs.¹⁵ Their legends and folk tales are nothing but their greatness and exploits and devoid of references to any other people. The detail ancestry of the Kukis or for that matter the Kuki-Chin from the period of legendary Galngam to the present times is not feasible to elaborate herein. There are, of course, many references about the Kukis in the old literature of Manipur if legends and mythologies have an iota of truth or believable reality. All the lands traversed by the legendary Galngam at one point of time in history were always the ancestral domain since time immemorial. Of late, the indigeneity of the 'Kuki-Chin' groups have been questioned. In this regard, looking from the same 'parent stock' including the majority Meiteis of Manipur for identity formation, there is no rationality to treat part of the same stock as 'indigenous' and another group as 'illegal immigrants' or 'refugees' in their own land which they had inhabited for centuries together. If so, the scientific validity for such shared history, shared belongingness and the very concept of indigeneity itself will turn into a mockery despite the long-cherished tradition of common ancestry and its long-chequered history throughout the ages.

Concluding remark

Myths, legends and folktale are the major forms that constitute oral narratives. They are considered truthful account of what had happened in the past. The story of the legendary Galngam is well understood by every Kuki-Chin kindred groups to which they are also identified with it. One interesting feature of this particular folktale is the existence of intimate relationship between the geographical landscape and the mythical tradition in the pre-literate tribal society. The imprints attributed to Galngam on rocks, stone slabs and some in the form of sculptures are a living testimony of the territory inhabited by the Kuki-Chin groups since time immemorial. The artefacts remains of Galngam today in different parts of the present geographical landscapes within Manipur and across international boundaries are proven historical facts of their indigeneity, nativity and belongingness. Based on these facts, the present generation are only trying to safeguard their ancestral domain of their forefathers in order to preserve their unique identity and culture.¹⁶ Thus, the common legacy and oneness of the Chin-Kuki-Mizo people had is undisputed. However, the feeling of alienation and loss of identity today needs to be addressed through this common legacy and oneness by building relations among these people. The story of Galngam, among others, which is a highly entertaining and exciting classic folktale, reflects a common history of the Kuki-Chin people and also highlights the need to strengthen sociocultural and traditional core values. It enables the understanding of their history from a different perspective and showcases the uniqueness in every culture and belief's system of people. The story also reflects the cultural heritage of the Kuki-Chin people and provided the essential cultural infrastructure by helping to discover their identity and

reinvigorate the sense of pride among the people with regard to their past cultural milieu.

Endnotes

- ¹ More about this contentious issue read Haokip 2016 and 2023.
- ² Grierson, G.A. ed. (1904). Tibeto-Burman Family, Specimens of the Kuki-Chin and Burma Groups, *Linguistic Survey of India Vol. III Pt. III*, published by Office of the Superintendent, Govt. Printing India, Calcutta.
- ³ Read the role of oral tradition among Thadou-Kukis by D. Mary Kim Haokip (2016).
- ⁴ Fadiman, J. A. (1973). Early History of the Meru of Mt Kenya. *The Journal of African History*, 14(1), 9-27. p.9.
- ⁵ Malinowski, Bronislaw (1948). *Magic, Science and Religion*, Glencoe: Free Press, p.100.
- ⁶ Herskovits, Melville J. (1955). *Cultural Anthropology*, New York: Knopf, p. 269.
- ⁷ Bascom, William R. (1981). *Contribution to Folkloristics*, Meerut India: Folklore Institute, Archana publication, p.96.
- ⁸ Malinowski (1926). *The Role of Myth in Life* (as quoted in Birendranath Datta's *Folklore Foragings in India's North East*, 1999, p.206.)
- ⁹ Dorson, Richard M. (1968) *Legends and Tall Tales in American Folklore*. Voice of America Forum Lecture, p. 175.
- ¹⁰ Degh, Linda (1972). As quoted in Dorson (ed.) *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago p.72.
- ¹¹ Bascom (1981) op. cit. p. 119.
- ¹² Elkin, A.P. (1964). *The Australian Aborigines*. New York: Anchor Books, p.151.
- ¹³ The story of legendary Galngam has been collected from various oral sources and published books in vernacular literature as well. 'Thusim Thum'- authored by Paokhohang Haokip, Unpublished dissertation entitled- 'Chonna' by M. Amang Haokip, and Zalengam by P.S. Haokip are some of secondary sources. It is also based on my knowledge of the story retained in my memory since my childhood days narrated to me by the elders and my parents. Listening the narration of folktales by my parents as bed time stories were our most exciting session after a hard day's labour in the jhum field. In most of the tribal community, elders were compelled to narrate folktales to their young siblings. Another informant of this story was Thangkhojam Haokip, Thangkanphai Village, Chandel District, 2007.
- ¹⁴ Haokip, P.S. 1988, *Zalengam: The Kuki Nation*, KNO Publication, pp.14-15.
- ¹⁵ Cited from the paper "Oral Narratives and Identity Assertion among the Kuki-Chin people", written by Ngamjahao Kipgen published in an edited book titled, *Kuki Society: Past, Present, Future*, 2011, p.362.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.

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