



Research Paper

The Vaiphei Tribe of Manipur: Its Origin and Migration

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ABSTRACT: The Vaiphei one of the indigenous tribes of Manipur belonging to the Chin-Kuki-Mizo group which is a sub-family of the Tibeto-Burman of the Indo-Chinese family. They are one of the officially recognized tribes of the State. It is believed that the ancestors of the Vaiphei once lived in Khul(Cave). The exact location of Khul is in obscurity. However, some Kuki-Chin historian believed that the location of Khul to be somewhere in south-West china. Due to suppression by the major communities, internecine village warfare and in search of better land the ancestor of the Vaiphei moved from their original place and around 16th Century they entered in the Hills of southern Manipur and made their settlement. According to J. Shakespeare they are one of the earliest emigrants of Manipur. As per 2011 census the total population of Vaiphei tribe in Manipur is 42,957 out of which 39,529 lived in rural areas and the remaining 3, 428 lived in urban area. They are found scattering in all the districts of Manipur. However, the bulk of their population is found in Churachandpur district.

KEY WORDS: Khul (Cave), Migration, Origin, Settlement.

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I. Introduction:

The Vaipheis are one of the Hill tribes of Manipur and Assam belonging to the Kuki-Chin group which is a sub-family of the Tibeto-Burman or Indo-Chinese family. The word Kuki-Chin is used by many writers to mean the following tribes as a whole viz. Hmar, Paite, Gangte, Simte, Zou, Thadou Kuki, Vaiphei, Lushei (Mizo), Tiddim Chin, Pawi, Purum, Chothe, Biete, Hrangkhoh, Darlong, Aimol, Lakher, etc. "There is no proper name comprising all these tribes.... the word Kuki and Chin are synonymous" (Grierson). Lt. Colonel. J. Shakespear in his monograph of "The Lushei Kuki Clan" recorded the Vaipheis amongst the old Kuki clan along with Aimol, Anal, Chawte, Chiru, Kom, Purum, Lamgang, etc. He further said that these tribes "are now found in various parts of the hills bordering the Manipur valley, and who resemble each other in very many respects" (Shakespeare, 1912).

Under the constitution of India Scheduled Tribe order 1950, which was amended as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Act in 1976 they are officially recognized as one of the Scheduled tribes of Manipur.⁷ Outside the state of Manipur, they are also officially recognized as Scheduled tribe in the state of Assam, Meghalaya and Mizoram (Directorate of Census Operation, 2015). Though, they also settled in the state of Nagaland and Tripura they are not a recognized Scheduled tribe in those states. The vaiphei has its own dialect called 'Vaphei Pau' wherever they are, they speak that dialect.

Origin of the name 'Vaiphei'

The Vaiphei tribe like most of its cognate tribes of the Chin-Kuki group are faced with the problem of tracing their original name. There are various theories about the origin of the name 'Vaiphei.' These theories will be discussed in order to find out how the name 'Vaiphei' originated. The various theories can be divided into major and minors and the first two theories represented major theories while the last four theories may be called as minor theories. The various theories are:

1. Phaiza-Khawvaiphei Village Theory
2. Liankhama Sailo Village Theory.
3. Vai-Tui-Chhun Village Theory
4. Vaikhawtlang-dung Village Theory
5. Lungleng Peak Theory
6. Losau Village Theory.

1. Phaiza-Khawvaiphei Village Theory: This is one of theory uphold and preserved by the Vaiphei themselves as the origin of the term ‘Vaiphei’. According to the historical account that had been passed down through the generation, it is commonly believed that the name ‘Vaiphei’ has been originated from ‘Phaiza’ which was a village set up by Suantak family, located in the Chin Hills of Burma. In course of time, the village had become prosperous and at the same time the population also increased rapidly. Various tribes began to pour in to suck the honey of this village Phaiza. Each sub-clan of Suantak was also multiplying rapidly. As the village had expanded breadth wise along the horizontal saddle of the hill ridge (Vaiphei, 2010) it acquired its pseudo-name “Khaw—Vaiphei” which means ‘a village expanded breath-wise’. By these means and through the processes of development, the word ‘Khaw-Vaiphei,’ the sobriquet of Phaiza village transformed to indicate its inhabitants too into ‘Khaw-Vaipheite’ or ‘Phaiza-Vaipheite’ meaning the people of ‘Khaw-Vaiphei’ or ‘the people of Phaiza-Vaiphei. Thus, the new-found name of the village was gradually transmitted into a term representing a tribal group between 1550 A.D. and 1650 A.D. (Suantak, 2010). This spontaneous development marks the origin of the name Vaiphei, the people of Phaiza alias Khaw-Vaiphei. During their settlement in this village, they invented a unique dance and song which they christened it ‘Thazing lam’ (Autumn Dance). which now became important festival of the Vaipheis. There are a number of folksongs or cry of triumph or success called ‘Hanla’ that substantiate Khaw-Vaiphei theory. Some of those songs are:

1. Siel lum leh in Khaw-Vaiphei

Jang-ma-suon-ing

2. Ka leidou mangpa chungpa kachuang e.

Free translation:

1. Sporting a Shield

Walking towards khaw-Vaiphei

2. Triumph over my great earthly foe.

Another songs of triumph composed by Mangkhotin-gou, Chief of Sangnao, a Thadou tribe who had once lived in Khaw-Vaiphei , authenticating the Khaw-Vaiphei theory is:

1. Kachunnu leh kavang khua lung-hiem tante

2. Lailu tawh tuonglam zawt-lam theipuonte

3. Laisimlu tawh Khaw-Vaiphei thil in jawt-ing

4. Suo-muol lung-ngui tin dal jing kathuoh sah

Free translation

1. My Mother and my villagers must have grown worried.

2. Unaware that I am trudging along with hunted enemy’s head⁴

3. Walking on with enemy’s head towards destination Khaw-Vaiphei

4. Suffered great worries at Village gate for my sake.

The Khaw-Vaiphei theory is further validated by Rev. Letkhosei, a noted historian of Nagaland in his interaction with Rev. S. Prim Vaiphei in 1984, he stated that Thadous were also once settled in Khawvaiphei and this fact cannot be ignored by any Thadou people. He further asserted that Khawvaiphei was a village of Vaipheis in which many tribes once lived together in harmony for a pretty long period of time (Vaiphei S. , 2009).

It is also said that after all other kindred tribes further moved on to other different areas the Suantak people continue to live on in the village and migrated last of all and because of this reason they bear the village name and identified as the ‘Vaipheis.’ Thus, wherever they migrated, they are recognized as Vaiphei.

2. Liankhama Sailo Village Theory: This version says that the Suantak people who later came to be known as “Vaiphei” lived with other people in the village of Liankhama Sailo. One day one Pawi member of that village by the name of Thangvuka killed one of these Suantak people and ate the heart of the man he killed in front of his relatives.

This infuriated the Suantak people so much that they chased the Pawi all over the village with an intent to kill and avenge themselves. Sensing the danger to his life the Pawi darted inside the Chief’s house and hugged the prime pillar.

According to Zo ethnic group custom such a criminal who seek refuge under the protection of the Chief is safe from any harm as he comes under the protection of the Chief by becoming the slave of the Chief. This is known in Lusei as Chemsen Bawi.

Realizing the implication of the custom the enraged people who failed to take revenge on the Pawi felt no more desirable to continue living together in that village side by side with the hated killer, migrated from that village en-masse. This action is expressed in Lushai as “an Vai in-an-pei tawh a”. (They left in body or exodus). Thence, wherever these people live, they came to be known as “Vaiphei” (Vaiphei S. , 2010).

The two theories clearly stated that the nomenclature or the name ‘Vaiphei’ is derived either under the Phaiza-Khaw-Vaiphei village theory or under Liankhama Sailo Village incident theory. However, other Suantak family members who had not lived in that particular village did not like to be identified by the name derived

from the village. So, they preferred to be known as Suantak till date. In this connection Dr. Henna also state that some Suantak clans like, Misao, Lupho, Lumpheng, Dopmul, Sektak, Sailo, siyin of Myanmar, etc. could not accept the name 'Vaiphei' as their identity. Because of these clan members claimed that they had never lived in Khawvaiphei. Though, they are fully aware that Suantak is their progenitor.

3. **Vai-Tui- Chhun Theory:** Notwithstanding the above discussion with regards to derivative of the name Vaiphei without a reference to Vai-tui-chhun notion it would be incomplete. In relation to this notion Lt. Colonel J. Shakespear in his monograph, *The Lushei Kuki Clans* wrote that, "A short distance to the East of Aijal (Aizawl), there is a village site called Vai-tui-chhun i.e. the watering place of the Vai- which is said to commemorate a former settlement of the Vaiphei. "He further wrote that, it seems probable, therefore, that the Aimol and Vaiphei left their former homes in consequences of the forward movement of the Lusheis" (Shakespeare, 1912). The said village is believed to be located somewhere in Lushai Hills (Mizoram). Therefore, the Vai-tui-chhun notion as stated by J. Shakespear also convey the same idea that the name Vaiphei is derived from their place of settlement and hence it has developed as their Tribe's identity.

4. **Vaikhawtlang-dung Theory:** Tailing the deliberation on the derivative name of the Vaiphei it would be pertinent to make a mention of the theory of 'Vaikhawtlang-dung' village theory though not much popular in the oral annals of the Vaiphei. It is said that between the Tuisha and Tiau rivers along the northern part of Chin Hills-Mizoram boundary, there is a hill range known as 'Vaikhawtlang-dung' and also a place known as Vaikhawmun. It is believed that the name Vaiphei is derived from that place (H.N., 1896). However, the name and place of this village is unheard among the Vaiphei elders. Further and deeper studies on this subject may bring to light vital information about the tribe in question.

Apart from the traditional account of the origin of the name Vaiphei, the information found in the Monographs of the then British Colonial Officials may also be mentioned as it will help in ascertaining the existence of this group of people in this part of the world.

5. **Lungleng Peak Theory:** Bertram S. Carey, C.I.E and H.N. Tuck writes, 'On the summit of Lungleng peak is found the remains of an ancient Vaiphei (Vaiphei) village, which was defended in a most extraordinary manner by boulders and sungars. Finally, just in front of the fortified gate, the rock had been cut perpendicular for 10 feet, which necessitated the use of a ladder before it could be scaled. The lungleng peak is located in the western point of the Chin-Manipur boundary and stood at about 6,531 feet above sea level. It is the most conspicuous peak in the north (H.N., 1896). Further description of the village was made by the authors as follows, 'The Vaiphei tribe, which now entirely disappeared from the Chin Hills, has left traces of fortifications in the north which will last for many years to come. Perched on the summit of precipitous peaks they built their villages, and if the approaches were not almost perpendicular, they proceeded to so cut away and block the paths the friend and foe alike could only ascend to the heavily stocked gates in single file.' Kaihau Vaiphei in his book the 'Maite Days' mentioned that in this village the Vaipheis lived together with clans like Lusei, Chawnthu, Kiangte, etc. The Lusei lived in Seipui, Saihmun, Khawkawk, Suaipui, etc and the Chawngthu in villages like Sanzawl, Bochung, etc. and the khiantes in Lungchhuan, Pelpawl, Belmul, etc. He believed that the time of their settlement would be around 1460 A. D (Vaiphei K. , 1999). Therefore, it can be assumed that around that point of time the name vaiphei might have been acquired.

6. **Losau Village Theory:** As per the Gazetteer of Village recorded in the Chin Hill Vol.II a Vaiphei Village around 100 houses settled in the village called Losau under the resident Chief of Pu Laltual. They were believed to be migrated from Kaptual village from Tedim area. T.C. Hudson also mention a passing reference with regards to the Vaiphei settlement in his book, 'The Naga Tribes of Manipur' as below: "Further south, where at one time there were settlements of the Kabuis, in the midst of jungle I have seen stone sculptures, rude, but distinct, and troughs which seem to have been used for the supply of water. The site is now occupied by the Vaipheis, a kuki sub-tribes" (Hudson, 1987 Reprint).

Though, the British Colonial Official did not make any attempt to trace how the Vaipheis acquired their name it has thrown much light on the movement and settlement of the Vaipheis. From their records it can be learned that the Vaipheis had acquired their name much earlier than their arrival in the hills of Indo-Myanmar border. Thus, the writings and records of the Colonial Officials provided the much desirable data for researcher in this particular field.

Origin of the Vaiphei Tribe

The origin of the Vaiphei is shrouded in mystery as in the case of any other tribes. The Vaipheis believed that they had originated from a cave called 'Khul'. This theory of Khul origin is also supported by legend and folk songs of the Vaipheis living in India, Myanmar and in other parts of the World. To comprehend the origin of Vaiphei copiously it cannot be examined in isolation, rather it should be studied in the broader realm; comprising its cognate tribes' history and descendants.

Khul Origin:

Legend has it that once Suantak the progenitor of Vaipheis lived in a Khul with many other people. One day Nuaimangpa, king of the subterranean world organized a feast called ‘Chawn’. In the feast, all the youths participated in the high jump (jumping over the Mithun) except Zahong, (Progenitor of Suantak) who was engaged in cutting the bamboo into pieces for binding thread called ‘nangmet’. In the meantime, Zahong who was performing his duty was also invited to join the high jump. When Zahong was jumping over the Mithun, he accidentally hurt a pregnant woman with his sword and the woman died on the spot. Zahong felt so sad and ashamed and he decided to leave the subterranean world. Consequently, he left the place for the outside world (Khaitingen, 2020). When Zahong started marching towards the out-side world, the way of the cave was blocked by a big serpent called Gulheupi and big stone. ‘Vangalpa’ a colleague of Zahong lifted the stone and Zahong covering his head with a thick cloth called ‘Phoipi’ killed the serpent and cut into three pieces by his doubled-edge sword. Thus, Zahong came out from the cave followed by many other people. Because of opening of the cave his name came to be known as Zahong. ‘Za’ means; ‘many’ and ‘Hong’ means ‘opened’ which denotes ‘opened the gate for many people’. In other words, Zahong is equivalent to the English phrase “open for hundreds”. One well known person who followed Zahong from the cave today is Chongthu who is said to be the progenitor of the Thadou tribe. One of the Hanla (song of triumph) which supported the cave origin theory of the Vaipheis goes as follow:

Kathange Khula kapiian
Kachun leh jua thanganan chembang ei choi e
Namtin Khovaipei lai ja gual lai lawi bang kathang.

Free rendering in English:

I was famous when I was born in cave
My parents hold me like a sharp sword for their fame
In the Khawvaiphei a village of many communities I am known like a strong Buffalo.
Another folk song used to be sang by the Vaipheis in of honour their progenitor (Zahong) for opening the Cave runs as follow:

‘Kathange, Kathange,
Khulsin dongkot kahonge.

Free rendering in English:

‘I am famous, I am famous,
I open the gate of the cave.

When Zahong came out from the cave and passed through the land, he marked a tree called Thankap on his way as a sign of showing the people that he went ahead so that they could follow his path. But the signs that Zahong marked on the tree looked very old even right after he marked it because the color of the tree was dark (Vaiphei S. P., 1975).

Therefore, Chongthu, the progenitor of the Thadou tribe, who came out from the cave next to Zahong went in another direction, and marked his direction on the tree called Khawngma, which always looks new because of the bright color of the tree. Thus, many people followed him.

Relating to Khul origin supposition Pu Ngulcholun Khongsai observes that the so-called Chin-Kuki-Mizo tribes, sub-family of the Tibeto-Burman stock once lived in a place known as Khul (cave) within the Great Wall of China. He is of the opinion that under the leadership of Pu Chongthu, Chongja and Zahong, these group of people came out of the Khul and settled in different places, and hills of nearby countries like Burma (Myanmar), East Bengal (now Bangladesh) and India. People who came out of the Khul were called Khullians (Khongsai, 1994).

Though all the Chin-Kuki-Mizo group claimed that they have come out from Khul the name of this mythological cave is known to them by different names such as Khul, Khurpui, Sinlung and Chhinlung. One of the Tedim folk song echoing Khul origin runs as follow:

Eiteng khawkhawm a tuam om lo,
Khul a piang in kilel le’ng
Tun sungkhata piang hi ngei ngei e.
Tun sungkhata piang hi ngei ngei e,
Suahpih sanggam laigui zawngkhawm hi ngei ngei e.

Free rendering in English:

All of us together,
Being aliens never,
Being born at Khul
Are born of a single mother,

Being born of a single mother,
We are brother and sister all together,
joined by navel cord forever (Singkhawkhai, 1995).

Chhinlung version upholders are of the view that the Chin-Kuki-Mizo groups of people are named after the Chinese King Chienlung. These group of people left China during the reign of King Chienlung and were conveniently known as people of Chienlung (Chhinlung) origin. Historian C P Fitz Gerald states that “Chienlung’s period covered the second half of the seventeenth and the eighteen centuries (Gerald, 1978).

China Origin:

That the physical features of the Vaipheis such as yellow or brown skin, prominent cheek-bone, brown eye, straight black hair, slanted narrow eye, flat and short nose, related to Tibeto-Chinese languages of Tibeto-Burman group. This lead one to believe that the Zo ethnic group of the Vaiphei people originated in China (Vumson, 1986).

Thus, the first version that is Khul origin supposition indicates that the so-called Chin-Kuki- Mizo group of people appeared out of Khul (cave) and advocates China as its location. The second version that is Chhinlung supposition also observed that Chin-Kuki-Mizo sub-families of Tibeto-Burman stocks were named after the Chinese King Chienlung and indicates that they originated from China. The third version also suggests China as the probable location of the cave and indicates that the Chin-Kuki-Mizo groups of people originated from Sinlung, which was a name of a city in China. Consequently, it is seen that the version of Khul origin pointed towards China as the original homeland of the Chin-Kuki-Mizo family of which the Vaipheis are important consanguineal members. Though, the exact place and location of Chin-Kuki-Mizo groups earliest homeland is still a contentious subject particularly among Chin-Kuki-Mizo historians. Present territory of Tibet, Yunnan Province and Shanghai are presented and presumed to be the original homeland of these people, however, there is no evidence to prove it till date.

Manmashi Origin

Manmasi theory is another equally popular theory of origin among the Vaipheis and Chin-kuki-Mizo group. This theory, depicted that Chin-Kuki-Mizo groups are the descendants of Manmashi one of the ten lost tribes of Israel. “Even the designated term ‘Lushei’ (one of the tribes of Chin-Kuki-Mizo) is believed to have been derived from the word, Luse/Lucie or ‘Luz’ which means ten tribes.”¹They believed that the word ‘Manmasi’ is a corrupted derivation of the Hebrew word ‘Manasseh’. It is the believed of the Vaipheis as preserved in their oral account that natural phenomena such as earthquake, eclipse and storms are the messages send by their forefather Manmashi enquiring the whereabouts and well-being of his descendants. Therefore, whenever such things happen the Vaipheis would utter, ‘Manmashi Chate ka um ui’ and Manmashi Chate ka dam nau’ which means, ‘Here we are, the children of Manmashi’ and ‘We the children of Manmashi are still alive’. It is said that in most cases when such expression is chanted, the storm or calamity, swiftly dwindled and no great damage or harm is cause to the people.² In many of their folksongs, rituals, sorceries, etc. the word Manmasi, has been mentioned by the primeval Vaipheis as given below:

Manmashi tuipi tuicha kan in na hawng,

Tanglian tangneu kan in na hawng;

Melma gamlei tawn tung ah

Salung-saliang la dawi man in,

A thin, a lung chang in Manmasi (Songtinlam, 1997).

Free English rendering

Manmasi, you came crossing seas and rivers.

You came through hills and mountains,

You came all the way through hostile countries,

Just to have the good parts of Meat,

Let the Liver and the heart be yours, Manmasi.

It is observed that among the Vaipheis a good number of them accepted this theory and are actually involved in the movement and promotion of Manmashi identity. It has offered a great ground work for further major research in this field to find out the wide-ranging cultural landscape of this people.

Migration and Settlement

The migration trends of the Vaipheis are dealt according to the movement of various tribes in time and space. The Vaipheis believed that their ancestors migrated from China to their present settlement. During those days there was no separate tribal identity as of now and perhaps all were known by one name. The Vaipheis were in Chin-Kuki-Mizo group and at the same time these group belongs to the Tibeto-Burman. It is believed that Tibeto-Burman group also belongs to Chiang tribe. In connection with the migration of the Chi’ang tribe

Hall writes...” these people had been mountain dwellers, originally living in the northwest China. The earliest Chinese records coming from the latter half of the second millennium B.C. called them the Chi’ang. Chinese hostility forced them to take refuge in northeast Tibet” (Hall, 1964).

The movement of the Tibeto-Burman people took many years perhaps several centuries. As they slowly moved through the hilly regions some settled one location and some move on. The result was their separation as different groups. Those who separated last remain closely related, for example, Zo (Chin-Kuki-Mizo) and Meitei. In moving toward the present Burma, Zo (Chin-Kuki-Mizo) people into two groups. One group moving southwards between the Chindwin and the Irrawady. The other group to the west of the Chindwin and reached the Zo Country (Chin Hills) and Arakan before 1000 A.D (Vumson, 1986).

In connection with Chin-Kuki migration T.S. Gangte wrote that for a very long time the Kuki-Chin groups of tribes, pressed from behind Kachins moving Southwards from China, and been migrating down the course of the Chindwin 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 (Gangte, 1993).

Thawngkhankhup, a local oral historian of Siyin Region also stated that the ancestor of the Vaipheis ascended the Kenny Peak from Kale Valley and descended towards the western slope and settled in Cimnuai. From Cimnuai the Vaipheis settled in places like Suantakjang, Khuasak, etc. During those days inter-village warfare was the order the days and Khuasak village came under frequent attacked by the Pawis. In the attacks the Khuasak Villagers (Vaiphei and Siyin) suffered heavy casualties resulting into the loss of many precious lives. The frequent village internecine war compelled the Vaipheis to migrate from Chin Hills. Finally, they left their place of settlement, migrated to the west and settled in the hilly region of Manipur. Their settlement in this hilly region of Manipur is believed to be around 16th century. J. Shakespear grouped the Vaiphei tribe within the fold of old Kuki clan and in respect of their migration he wrote, “the old Kuki clans of Manipur seem to have been the first to move, as records of their appearance are found in the Manipur Chronicle as early as the sixteenth century” (Shakespeare, 1912).

At present though, majority of the Vaipheis lived in Manipur, it is found that they have spread out in other states of Northeast India like Assam (North Cachar hills), Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura. Still a good number of Vaipheis stay back at Chin Hills and continued to live there in many villages particularly in the region called siyin region. Some group of Vaipheis are also found living in Sagaing region of Myanmar too. They have established their own village. These group of Vaipheis who lived in Sagaing region are the people who re-entered Myanmar from Manipur mainly from eastern Manipur.

Thus, it is seen that the Vaipheis who lived in either sides of international boundaries of India and Myanmar are bridged by consanguineal relation inseparable by any forces on earth. Looking in this background the migration factors or drivers of the vaipheis is push factors rather than pull factors. Often push factors are negative things such as unemployment, crop failure, droughts, flooding, war, poor education opportunities or poor services and amenities. The negative factors that influences the migration of the vaipheis are such as interminable inter-village warfare, infertile land, famine, persecution, etc. Now in the absence of such push factors the Vaipheis live with a sense of security and peace in this region resulting into the rapid increase of their settlement areas in the state of Manipur. In almost all the hill districts of Manipur the Vaipheis villages are found. Even in the districts where they don’t have a village of their own, they have their settlement area in every districts of the state.

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