

# Origin of the Nagas in Manipur

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There is no one accepted theory on the origin of the Nagas in Manipur; nevertheless the term “Naga” is not new, and is currently in use in Manipur and other parts of India. The Nagas had no written history till after their conversion to Christianity at the end of the 19th century. Reconstruction of the origin of the Nagas of Manipur is largely dependent on Oral History and Oral Tradition. There is however a kind of consensus that in the distant past, the Nagas of Manipur originated from China, they possess Mongoloid features. The reason for Naga migration into Manipur was the oppression they were subjected to by the Chinese Emperor. In the course of their migration they settled in Burma but ultimately made their way to Makhel, from which place they dispersed to different places in Manipur. To commemorate their origin and dispersal they built a giant monolith at Makhel as a memorial stone. Although the Nagas are divided into many tribes, they follow Naga customary law even at the present time, and the passage of rites of all Naga tribes bears a striking similarity.

*Keywords:* Naga, Manipur, Mongoloid, Makhel, origin

## Introduction

The origin of the “Naga” is unknown; it could not have originated from the Sanskrit “Nag” (snake), as there is no form of serpent worship among the Nagas. Though no final word has been said on this derivation, it is certain that this name was given by the outsiders, to mean this group of people who are divided into more than two dozen tribes. Whatever the origin, this is an old name, popularized by the Ahoms (of Assam) and the British (who occupied Assam in the colonial period). There are legends current among the Nagas about their origin and migration—they tell more about their migration and settlement in Manipur and the Trans-Chindwin region (in Myanmar). It is reliably believed that these tribes were in occupation of their present habitat in the early centuries of the Christian era (Irene, 2014, p. 2).

## Theories of Origin

Naga history depends heavily on oral tradition. According to B. B. Ghosh, Nagas belong to Mongoloid stock of human races. It is believed that the Mongoloid people originated in the upper reaches of the Howangho River in the Sinkiang Province of China, and then migrated in 2000 B.C. One group migrated south, and were divided into the different tribes of Indo-China. One of the tribes of this last group is the Karens, who are now living in Burma. It is likely that the Nagas belong to this group (Irene, 2014, p. 6).

According to the folklore of the Hao (Naga) communities, ancestors of the Nagas migrated from China in search of a safer place for settlement. In those days war was common among the tribes; the strong exploited the weak who were confined in a big area surrounded by a concrete wall resembling a big cave (Lunglo, 2019).

This corroborates other oral tradition that purports that the Nagas emerged from a cave in the subterranean world. Ningreishim K. Shimray stated that most of the Naga tribes believe that they come from a “Khur” or “Khol” or hole in the earth. The ancestors came out from the cave one by one, but a large tiger that was watching them devoured each of them as soon as they emerged from the cave. Different Naga tribes have different interpretations as to how their ancestors finally prevailed over the tiger, but it would appear that it was finally killed by an arrow. The people then emerged from the “earth hole” and spread over the open space around a hill. A “tiger-head” (Banee, *The Mao Naga*, 1995, p. 419) engraved on the stone monolith erected at Makhel (a place considered to be a point of dispersal for different Naga tribes) is indicative of the fact that the tiger has significance in the early history of the Nagas (Shimray, 2015). According to Shupfomei myths and legends (a group of Nagas from Mao in Manipur), they had their origin at Makhel-Makhrufu. The concept of “cave dwelling” should not and cannot be taken literally. At one point of time, Shupfomei in particular and the Nagas in general, did make their exodus from some place to their present homeland. The real historical records of the Nagas are available in writing form only from the time of the British. The Shupfomei creed passed down through generations is as follows:

In the Memei land of Makhrufu, human life it is told first started,  
And lived there together, the tiger, the spirit and the man.  
To commemorate the life together they erected three stones,  
As they parted their way.  
The tiger to the deep forest went, the spirit to the open space,  
And the man, it is told in the middle remained,  
And there lived in spacious comfort.

### **Myth of Creation**

The banyan tree in Makhel Village (in Senapati, North district, Manipur) is considered as a sacred tree, it is believed that Dzuliamosua the first lady was impregnated by a white cloud while she was sleeping under this banyan tree; she conceived and gave birth to three sons-tiger (ok-he), god (ora), and man (omei) (Nepuni, 2010, pp. 24-26, 30). A Lamkhang folksong corroborates the above.

While coming out of the cave, it was found that the tiger had eaten each and everyone who come out of the cave. When the horrible work of the tiger was seen, heaven and earth cried (Shimray, 1995).

With reference to Makhel as the place of origin and dispersal, there exists certain concrete proof in the form of existing relics:

1. A Menhir, called Tamaratu, dispersal stone (Tamara-departure, Tu-stone) with the engraving of a man dragging a bull, a cock, a tiger head, a shield and spear.
2. A wild pear tree Sajaoba near Makhel planted at the time of dispersal. It was forbidden to cut a branch of the tree.
3. A peepal tree-Marabu, a sacred tree, believed to have grown out of the burial place of the first woman who died at Makhel.
4. Three stone megaliths called Lino Tu (Shimray, 1995, p. 5).

### **Theory of Chinese Origin**

Modern historians and scholars have drawn a conclusion on the origin of Naga migration dating back to the Emperor of China, Qin Chin Haunghi, who built the Great Wall of China about 215 B.C. To escape his

cruelty the Nagas made a mass exodus along the rivers through South East Asia. The Nagas may have lived near the sea coast (as they showed a great inclination towards sea shells and beads) for generations, and then retreated to the North West part of Myanmar (Irene, 2012, p. 6).

Yarngam Lunglo while reproducing what an old Naga man narrated to him states that the big area in which his ancestors were confined and worked and which resembled a cage was surrounded by a room containing man-eating tigers. The Chinese did not have to guard their prisoners for this reason. The first two men who tried to escape were devoured by the tigers. However, a wise man among them proposed that all shout “Hau-Hau” loudly in unison to frighten the tigers. This tactic succeeded in scaring the tigers who retreated to a corner of the room, while the imprisoned escaped. They migrated via rivers and streams until they reached Shamshok in Burma (Lunglo, 2019).

Their settlement on the Arakan coast in the remote past cannot be doubted “The Nagas fancy for marine shells may point to a bygone home on the sea” (Shimray, 2015, p. 6). The Tangkhuls believe that their last migration was from Samsok in Burma. Tangkhul folk songs concur:

Oh whence cometh thou originally?  
 Oh we originate from Samsok in Burma.  
 We call and gather all our kindred at Shakvao.  
 We make fire at Maichailung.  
 We distributed at Rungatak. (Shimray, 2015, p. 6; Shimray, 1985, p. 30)

Elders of the Kashung clan of Kabomi (Tangkhul Hundung Village, Manipur) narrate that their ancestors settled in Hakwang valley (the present habitat of the Kachin) of Burma but were forced to migrate because of war and strife. Folksongs support this theory.

Modern Naga historians propounded a migration theory based on storytelling: One of the Naga groups moved out during the building of the Great Wall of China. The short tempered character of the Emperor who demanded forced labour, heavy taxation from his subjects, led to discontentment among the population. Many people died of starvation and exhaustion and political unrest forced the people to depart from this habitat. For reasons of survival, they made a mass exodus during this period. People escaped through the hilly terrain, valleys and meadows and slowly moved into the vast plains of Assam, experiencing the heat, rain and flood, and moved into the deep jungles of the present Assam. Those who survived moved towards the foothills of the mountain ranges following the course of rivers and streams. The present two stones in Makhel-Makhrufu Village known as Chunghi Rikru and Chunghi Ridzu, symbolizing the sun hen and sun cock were brought all the way from Assam.

### **Route of Migration**

Scholars studying Naga migration observe that it commenced from Mainland China—different waves of migration routes, along the rivers through South East Asia. R. B. Thohe Pou stated: The Southward movement (migration) from Mainland China is possible following along the three rivers Salween (Nu-Jiang), Mekong and Irrawaddy. The route of the Nagas was from Mainland China Yunnan Province—Salween River—Moulmein (Myanmar)—Irrawaddy and Chindwin Rivers—Imphal River (Manipur)—Barak River (Senapati District, Manipur)—Makhel (Dispersal site of Naga)—Naga Hills (India and Myanmar) (Nepuni, 2010, pp. 31, 33; Pou Thohe, 2006).

The Nagas stayed a long time in Shamshok whereas the Kabow valley's (in Myanmar) first settlers were Ingyis, Kadus, Kazets, Meiteis, and Nagas (Ingyis were kadu—Nagas whose villages were located toward the south—East of Tamu). The ancestor of the Nagas settled at Shamshok around 50 B.C. to 100 A.D. But most have migrated and settled at Makan, Pallel, and Kakching in Manipur (Irene, 2014, p. 6). There are still Naga Hao in Burma. Other Nagas who left Burma reached Ningthi River in Ukhrul District and later came to the valley where most of the places were submerged under water. Fishes were abundant but because of lethal mosquitos, a large chunk of the group migrated and reached Makhel. They stayed there for some years but due to a rapid increase in population many moved away, north, west, and east and occupied the hill areas of Manipur (Lunglo, 2019).

### **Dispersal From Makhel**

R. R. Shimray stresses that the Nagas had their origin and migration in and from Makhel. As to their origin and dispersal, the various tribes of the Nagas have now accepted that Makhel as the original place from where they dispersed themselves (Shimray, 1985, p. 29). J. H. Hutton wrote: The history of the Naga tribes has passed into dim obscurity of vague traditions. But enough of them remain to give some indication of the course which the migration took (Hutton, 1969, p. 7). Many scholars and researchers are convinced that the Nagas lived near the seas. This is supported by their use of marine shells, cowries, and conches decorating their dresses especially the kilt (*katei sa mani*). The main reason is that such decorative devices are not found in the hills. The Nagas must have lived near the sea coast for generations and then retreated to the north western past of Myanmar (Nepuni, 2010, pp. 33-34).

At Makhel the Nagas created a gigantic monolith (height 9 ft, width 5½ ft, thickness 1 ft) as a memorial stone. At one time this monolith bores the picture of a shield, a bullock with a rope tied on its neck, a cock, footprint of a tiger, and a script. There is also a megalithic fetish stone (*Tupha Chava*) 2½ km from Makhel. According to legend if a basketful of paddy was dried on the stone, it collected double.

Many of the village elders spoke of a certain “hole” (cave), but they could never mention any specific place, location, and time. It is told that from this hole people were just crawling out like moles (sole). With the passages of time, the population of Makhel increased and that led to dispersion. The Shupfomei group remained around Makhel. Before the final dispersion took place, the Naga race gathered at a big wild pear tree (*Chutebu Kaju*) at Shajouba Village (*Charangho inu*) which still stands as a symbol of unity and oneness of the whole Naga tribes (Nepuni, 2010, p. 37).

Another folk tradition narrates that the native Burmese people still call the inhabitants of upper Burma (Homalin Township) as “Khangs”. Khang is derived from the Kachin Naga dialect meaning “footprints”. The Nagas were earlier settled by the side of the Huang Ho River of Central China, and they participated as did the Chins in the construction of the Great Wall. Because of continuous Mongolian invasion into China, the Huang Hao decided to migrate to another suitable place around 700 to 600 B.C. They probably reached Yunan Province between 400 B.C. to 300 B.C. They followed three different river courses. Over hundreds of years, the pre-Chinese people of Central Asia were displaced into the upland area that triggered “a tribal movement”. The Huang Haos came through Salween River and reached Thailand, north of the Chiangmai border. They then proceeded to the Shan State in Burma, and finally reached “Pyu” now called Prome, 180 miles from Yangon. Before reaching here they were Monkhmer people. The Nagas were the descendants of the older brother, the progenitors of the Kachin (The three children of Dzuliamosua were Asupfo Alapha, Chutowo, and Alewa; the

last was the forefather of the Naga race). After several years at Pyu/Prome, the Nagas settled at Hallin, and then migrated to the Kabow Valley. They split into two dispersing groups Kabow valley group and Phompying Township group. But in order to retain their ties, they broke a pot into two; it is believed that if the two parts are joined at anytime, the groups would remain intact. It is said that one part of this mythological pot is still hidden under the ground at Thomagung Valley near Phompying Township. The other part is untraceable, but rumors place it in the safe custody of one Ngazek Horam, Chief of Phungcham Valley, Ukhrul District, Manipur. After settling for a long time, the Naga people reached present day Manipur (Irene, 2014).

From Makhel the group that moved east were the Tangkhuls and they settled at a place called Kongtei in Poumei areas at Senapati District (Lunglo, 2019).

### **Theories of Migration**

Folksongs corroborate that ancestors of the Tangkhuls who once were settled in Samsok (Thandut) migrated in hordes. Society was organized in a hierarchical structure as the leader was carried by Makunga, whereas Ngakanna protected the leader. A Kabomi (Tangkhul Hundung) Village folksong traces their origin up to Hakwang Valley, Kabow Valley, and Raphei. Archaeological findings from a cave-site in the present Naga habitat had stone relics dating to different periods of history—Paleolithic, microlithic, haobinhian, and Neolithic (Shimray, 2015, p. 12). O. Kumar Singh who carried out archaeological excavations in Manipur is of the opinion that the finds resemble those of South East Asia and China.

On the basis of language, G. A. Grierson assigns the origin of the Naga to Tibeto-Burmans who came in the second wave of migration from the north-western area of the Hwangho River (Grierson, 1967, p. 6). J. N. Chowdhury believes that all evidence points to a westward migration of people from the direction of Burma and South East Asia generally to North Eastern India and Assam. Fitz Gerald comments, Chinese influence, Chinese culture, and Chinese power have always moved southwards since the first age and continued throughout the centuries until modern times. Moving from China nearer to the North Eastern states of India, we find in the 5th century A.D. the Tibeto-Burman speakers had established their kingdom Pyu in Central Burma with their capital at Old Prome on the Irrawaddy.

S. A. Ansari is of the view that the Mongoloid reached North-East India following two routes. One passed through Tibet and the other through the Yunan Province of China. Those from the Tibet side came across the Himalayas and settled in Himachal Pradesh, Brahmaputra Valley of Assam, Nagaland, Northern-Western Burma and almost the northern half of Manipur (Ansari, 1991, p. 27). Naorem Sanajaoba opines that a second migration of a large scale from China took place in the 8th century A.D. Yunan witnessed tribal turbulence. Tai Ko lo feng's invasions of Burma and occupation of the fertile land of the upper Irrawaddy valley in 757-763 A.D. further accelerated the population push in the direction of weaker resistance like Manipur. It is quite probable that the ethnic strife which tore apart China and part of the South East Asian countries might have compelled the ancestors of the ethnos of Manipur, to migrate to a safer place (Sanajaoba, 1995, p. 9). Moirangthem Chandrasingh and elder of the Kashung clan of Kabomi concur with this view. Ranjit Kanti Das stated that the Maring (a Naga tribe of Manipur) migrated to Manipur to escape the wrath and torture of the Burmese, and to seek protection from the King of Manipur (Shimray, 2015, p. 20). According to Maring oral tradition the Marings lived in Leinung (a cave) called Nungmuisho at Kulvi Songsang (in upper Burma), in about 10,000 B.C. to 1,800 B.C. The cave however was a confined space blocked by a huge rock which the people were unable to remove. They sent three animals in succession to bore through the rock—the third

animal, a mithun (which resembles a bull) succeeded. The Marings migrated to the upper region of the earth, but before doing that they sent out a cock, pig, and dog which were eaten by a fierce giant Sovi-yah. So three clansmen were trained to kill the giant. The Maring moved to different places in Burma and then to Manipur. According to M. Moshil Kansou, the Maring moved to a valley in Manipur called Moirangkhom. Col. McCulloch stated that “the Marings say a position of their place of origin is the part of the Munnipore capital at present called ‘Haubum Maruk’, and another portion is at Leisang Kong, a village in the valley some seven or eight miles south of the capital”. G. A. Grierson concurs but adds that they inhabited also a few small villages in the Heiroke range of hills which separates Manipur from upper Burma. R. Brown citing Maring tradition—“we originally came out of the earth near the eastern foot of the eastern Heiroke range, but in the Kabbo valley at a place called Mungsa”. But K. S. Singh, M. Horam, and S. H. M. Rizvi assert that their origin was from the Kulvi songsang and Wasafai (Washaphai) from the Kabow valley in the east. B. C. Allen writes: the Marings are a small tribes who live to the south of the Tangkhul Nagas. The Aimols are another smaller Naga clan (tribe) who live south of the Maring (Maring, 2014, pp. 8-18).

Different Naga tribes claimed that they went out in different directions after their dispersal from Makhel; the Shupfomei remained. “Pou” had been the first to reach Makhel, so he stayed back with his elder son Meo, from whose descendants came the present Mao tribe (they occupy the northern portion of Manipur adjoining Nagaland). Maram, another Naga tribes of Manipur dispersed from Makhel stayed in the hill and founded “Maram”. From Makhel, the ancestors of the Zeliangrong Naga moved in a south-west direction. They settled at Ramting Kabin a cave, but moved on finally to Makuilongdi, a big round hill, considered the cradle of the Zeliangrong. With the growth in population and necessity for more land the kindred clans, Zemei, Liangmei, and Rongmei moved in different directions: Rongmei to the south (Rong-south), Liangmei north (Liang-north), and Zemei to the plains (Ze-plain, mei-men). Tamenglong (a district of Manipur) elders narrate that after the two brothers Rongmei and Zeme left Makuilongdi, the elder brother Liangmei remained in the original homeland and inherited his father’s property as per Naga custom (Shimray, 2015, pp. 23, 24-27).

The oral tradition of Shupfomei forefathers claims that the Shupfomei came from different directions to reach Makhel. Makhel is known as the “Womb of the Nagas”. In the case of the Tangkhul Naga, the earliest migrants from Shamshok in Myanmar led by Shimray went first to Shokvao (a village in Ukhrul District) then to Meizalung now at Hunphun (Ukhrul), and finally to Rungatak, but Shimray and his family settled at Longpi. Some Tangkhuls moved north-west. The Kashung clan traces their origin to Shirui Kashong (a mountain in Ukhrul District). From Shirui they moved to Hunphun and from there to other areas.

The Anal Naga according to folk-lore settled on the Arakan coast and then moved to the Chin Hills of Burma. Another theory is that they came from the Mizo hills. They settled in different parts of Manipur. The Moyon Nagas probably settled in Manipur from the first century A.D. They fled to Burma after the death of the famous chief Kuurkam Nguwruw but returned to Manipur after the defeat of the Moirang by the Meiteis. According to John Shakespeare, the Tarao came to Manipur from Burma in the 16th century A.D., although Gangmumei Kabui dates their arrival to the 14th century A.D.

It is apparent from Oral History and Tradition that the different Naga tribes came to Manipur from China, and en route they sojourned for a considerable period of time in Burma. It is also widely accepted that it was from Makhel that the Naga tribes dispersed and made settlements in the hill areas of Manipur. They inhabit today most of the hill districts of Manipur. Although split into different tribes, Naga customary law is applicable to all and the Passage of Rites of the tribes bears a striking resemblance to one another.

### Conclusion

Today, the Government of India has accepted the unique history of the Nagas, who are one of the earliest indigenous communities of Manipur. Even though the date of their migration from China is not known, it has been accepted that the Nagas did come from China, and Nagas who are settled in Manipur all dispersed to their present habitations in Manipur from a place called “Makhel” located in the Senapati District of Manipur.

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