

Kom -HISTORY AND LINGUISTIC CLASSIFICATION

INTRODUCTION

Kom is the name both of the people and the language. Kom is one of the constituents of the larger group called the Kom-rem. Kom-rem consists of indigenous minorities groups of five small tribes namely- Aimol, Chiru, Koireng, Kom and Purum. Kom-rem literally means 'cave' (Khur) and 'people' (Rem). The five component tribes share the common legend/history of cave origin. Today the Kom-rem stands as a distinct community, occupying mainly buffer zones between the hills and the plains and they are accustomed to both the hill and the plain life. The Kom-rem are found in the states of Manipur, Assam and Tripura. The major chunk of the population resides in Manipur, occupying the buffer areas between the hills and the plains of the states, inhabiting in all the districts of Manipur, but concentrated mainly in the districts of Churachandpur, Bishenpur and Senapati.

History

According to the Royal Chronicle of Manipur, the five tribes were first identified in the 14th century in Manipur, when they were known by the villages they settled in rather than by their tribe's name. These villages include Sagang, Aimol and Tikhup. According to Lt. Col. J. Shakespear, the Koms claim to have come from the Shakripung area in the Chiru hills. They are believed to have entered Manipur during the reign of Maharaja Gambhir Singh. It is also believed that they originally inhabited the hills lying the south of Manipur valley and entered into Manipur probably in the year 1600 A.D. from the east of Manipur. A statistical account by R. Brown of the native states of Manipur and the hill territory under the British rule said, "the only remaining Kuki tribes of importance are those called Aimol, Chiru, Purum, Koireng (Kuoireng) and Kom. These are the sub-divisions of Kom tribe". They were known as Nagas during the Manipur state Durbar, whereas J. Shakespear called them old Kuki in his book 'The Lushai-Kuki Clans.' But in reality, the Kom-Rem tribes have not joined any major tribal group like the Nagas, the Kukis or the Mizos.

According to Kom researchers, they entered Burma between 100 B.C. and 100 A.D., and sometime in 200 A.D., they had moved towards Arakan Hills and Bay of Bengal. Then the Kom people entered Tripura and from there they entered Manipur as the Soktes ousted them. According to their folk tales and tradition, it is believed that they originally might have come from Mongolia passing through China, Burma and settled at Tripura, Assam, and Manipur. It is also believed that they were the second community to have arrived in Manipur, only after the Meiteis.

According to the traditional belief, they claim to have emerged out of a cave, 'Khurpui' (the big cave). One of the legends had it that while trying to come out of the cave, a tiger obstructed them and nobody could come out of the cave as the tiger lay in wait to kill them.

The 'Karongpa' who came out of the cave wearing a stripped cloth made friends with the tiger as his cloth resembled the skin of the tiger, and that's why his descendents refrain from eating or killing a tiger. 'Saichapa', after having come out, killed the tiger. 'Leivonpa' cut out the tiger's tongue and wrapped it up in his waist. These people, in the subsequent generations became the heads of the various Kom clans, namely Karong, Saiche, Leivon, Tellein, Hmangte, Serto etc. After killing the Tiger they came out of the cave and settled in highland (Chungkhopui). All these tribes have the similar story regarding the origin of their tribes. This cave episode left many remarkable scars, one of which later became an instrument of identification among these five tribes. Of all the remnants, cultural traits have become the most accepted attributes of their belongingness or oneness, which have been binding them for ages.

The Kom-Rem people have a common language known as 'Kom-tong' which means 'Kom language'. All the tribes constituting it can communicate through this language. More or less all their languages are similar and their customary practices too. They have common associations like the Kom-rem Baptist churches association and union. Despite their gradual diversification in their dialects/languages, names and clans, they still assert having common ownership of the original cave song (folk songs), shawls, dresses etc. Today, the Kom Rem consists of Aimol, Chiru, Kom, Koren (Koireng) and Purum which are all recognized separately as a scheduled tribe by the Indian Constitution. Komrem, known as the united banner of five small tribes Aimol, Chiru, Koireng, Kom and Purum, seems to be heading for disintegration as some of its constituent members are showing the indication of pulling out from the common platform. In spite of all this, Kom-rem still maintains its hold as the symbol of emotional bond of love and brotherhood amongst its people. They have some similarities with the Lushai tribe of Mizoram, the Hmars of Manipur and the Hrangkhawls of Tripura.

Linguistic classification

Genetic

Kom is one of the Tibeto-Burman languages, which is not well described. Show (1929), a civil servant, stated, " The Koms, Aimols, Khawtlangs, Thadous, Lushais, Chins, Pois, Siktes, Paites, Gangtes, etc are undoubtedly all connected and are Kukis, and that the language alone has many similarities and the syntax is not dissimilar. Again, there are their customs which have a common principle running through them all."

R. Brown in his "A statistical account by of the natives states of Manipur and the hill territory under the British rule" said, "the only remaining Kuki tribes of importance are those called Aimol, Chiru, Purum, Koireng (Kuoireng) and Kom". He even called all these tribes as the sub-tribes of Kuki. Shakespear (1912) made the division of the tribes on the basis of their arrival:

Old Kukis

Aimol, Anal, Chiru
Chothe, Gangte, Koirou
Koireng, Kom, Lamkang
Paite, Purum, Simte,
Vaiphei, Zou, Hmar

New Kukis

Thadous (their other kins)
Groups such as, Dongel, Misao
Lupheng, Lupho, Ngoilu, Lamhao
Thengeo, Thouthang, etc. which
are not recognized as tribes.

G. A. Grierson in his 'Linguistic survey of India' (vol. III, part III) classified Kom under the customary name of old Kuki, which includes Rangkhoh, Bete, Halam, Langrong, Aimol, Chiru, Kolren, Kom, Cha, Hmar, Anal, Haloi-Lamkang. He also described Kom and other languages that constitute old Kukis as a mere dialect of one language. He further states that these languages are closely related to the central Chin languages. Kom, Anal, and Haroi-Lamkang show a closer connection with the Naga languages than the other dialects of the Kuki-Chin group. According to Grierson, the original old Kuki tribe seems to have lived in the Lushai hills, from where they were driven out by the Thadous. Kom, no doubt has some language affinities with the Lushai of Mizoram, the Hmar of Manipur and the Hrangkhawl of Tripura.

Due to lack of sufficient researches, it is difficult to get the proper division or classification of this language. Hence it is difficult to fix the position of Kom in the Tibeto-Burman language family. But there is no doubt that Kom is one of the Tibeto-Burman languages which has the language affinities with the languages like Hmar, Hrangkhawl, Malsom, Darlong, Lushai and Kuki apart from Koireng, Purum, Chothe, Chiru, and Aimol.

Family tree of Tibeto- Burman Languages:

Tibeto Burman

Tibeto Himalayan		North Assam		Assam-Burmese			
		Naga	Kachin	Kuki-chin	Burma	Sak	Lolomass
Naga	Western	Central		Eastern	Naga-Kuki		Chin
Angami	Sema	Rengma	Kezama		Hmar		Kom

Typological features in Kom

1. On the basis of the analysis of the morphological structure, Kom appears to be an agglutinating language.

2. Kom, like any other Tibeto-Burman language, has subject +object+ verb (SOV) order of the words in a simple unmarked sentence, i.e., the verb occurs in the final position. Consider the following example.

Kei bu kasak .

I food eat

'I eat food.'

3. Like other Tibeto-Burman languages, Kom has post-positions.

Khutchoi kha jekhum chungga kaom

Gift that (DEM) bed on there

'The gift is on the bed.'

Khutchoi kha jekhum thoiya kaom

Gift that (DEM) bed under there

'The gift is under the bed.'

4. Kom is a pro-drop language. The subject is not always essential because it is inferred from the AGR. In most of the cases the AGR indicates the number and person; gender remains unmarked.

Kei kamaluŋ kacam.

I my heart sad/tired- →Kamaluŋ kacam. 'I am sad/tired.'

Kei inpak eng.

I happy AGR

→Inpak eng. 'I am happy.'

5. In kom, the genitive precedes the governing noun.

Ka lekha

My book

Manguilen sanu

Manguilen's daughter

6. Kom is a tone language. Pitch plays a role in differentiating the meaning.

sun 'to write'

sún 'day'

sùn 'to stab'

7. Reduplication is also seen in Kom. Both full and partial reduplication is found in Kom.

Nanɔ inn-ínn rakip-a se roh.

You house-house every in go IMP

'You go to each and every house.'

8. Echo-word formation is another typological feature found in Kom. However, in most of the cases compound words are used like bube-anbe 'rice's pot-curry's pot' but it means all the utensils. In the same manner, the echo word like maju-khawa 'rat and the like' is used to describe rodents. Although the word 'khawa' holds no meaning of its own, it is believed that it must have been originated from 'khaw and wa' meaning 'locust and bird', which along with rat are considered as pest in the agrarian Kom society.

Thingbi-hlungbi karra se mak roh.

Forest and the like into go NEG IMP

'Do not go into the forest, etc.'

9. In comparative constructions, the marker of comparison follows the standard of comparison.

Alen kha akhup kanek-a insang-det

Alen DEM Akhup Comp-marker tall-er

'Alen is taller than Akhup.'

10. In Kom, indirect object (IO) precedes the direct object (DO).

Mary-in naipang hneng lekha apekjo-

Mary-ERG child (IO) to book (DO) give-PAST

'Mary gave the book to the child.'

11. Numerals in Kom follow the decimal system.

1 inkhat

2 inhni:

3 inthum

4 manli:

5 ranga:

6 karuk

7 sari

8 karet

9 ko:

10 som

11 somleh inkhat = som leh inkhat (10 and 1)

21 somni leh inhni: = somni leh inkhat (20 and 1)

12. In the adjective - noun relationship in Kom is not head-final, since the adjective follows the noun.

Hiva reihi katha neng

That flower good ATTR

'That flower is good.'

LANGUAGE VARIATION

Dialects:

Language is not a monolithic object. It is human phenomenon, which is as complex as human relationship in a society (Varma and Krishnaswami, 1989). It is also said that no two persons speak alike. Which means variation is a universal phenomenon. Kom language is no exception. Variation is seen at all levels-phonology, morphology, semantics and syntax. However, variations at syntactic and semantic levels seem to be lesser than that at the levels of phonology and morphology. We find slight variation in speech from village to village. Apart from the idiolects and sociolects there exist some regional variations. The Koms use a common language called Kom-tong, which means Kom language. It is considered to be the standard variety since it is used in literature, mass media, etc. Although the standard Kom appears to be the Mongtung variety, it is difficult to pin point the variety from where the selection is made. Mongtung variety is undoubtedly most close to the standard Kom, but there are other varieties, which seem to be quite close to the standard variety. It is so because the standardization of Kom was not properly done. The language of the majority or the dominant group seems to be the standard variety. A large majority of the Koms seems to speak the varieties closer to the standard one. Another interesting aspect of the Kom-tong is that it was and is upto some extent the lingua franca of the Kom-Rem people. Kom-Rem people, as mentioned earlier, are the group of people from five different tribes. Since all their languages are more or less similar it was chosen as a means of communication among the constituent groups. Kom is not a developed language. Religious books and hymns constitute the main component of the Kom literature. The religious books and hymns are contributed by the Komrem people, which include members or speakers from Koireng, Aimol, Purum and Chiru communities. So, the Kom-tong became the blended variety from all sources closer to it.

The Koms use the Kom-tong for communicative purposes and there appears to exist some forms of variation among its users. This variation seems to be mainly a regional one. The speakers of Mongtung variety are the group of people who have inhabited the northwestern part of Manipur,

somewhere in the hilly areas of Tamenglong district of Manipur viz-Mongkotyang, Songpher. They speak almost the same variety as that of the people settled in the districts of Senapati and Imphal west. Saikul, Makokching, Khongnangpokpi and Ichum Keirap are some of the villages speaking Mongtung variety of today. Another variety is the Kharam variety, which is also found in an Imphal west district of Manipur, few kilometers away from Ichum, one of the villages of Mongtung speakers. Kharam variety is quite different from the Mongtung variety. However, the varieties to be intelligible to each other since the speakers (only a few hundred) of Kharam variety tend to switch to the Kom-tong in formal settings, which is quite closer to Mongtung variety. Moreover, the speakers of the two varieties are almost in a contact situation resulting in the minimization of the question of intelligibility.

The variety spoken in the Bishenpur district of Manipur is also known as Moirang area variety, from the historic small town of Moirang. The Kom-Keirap (also known as project from the Loktak hydro electric project), the historic Khoirentak, Sengpangjar, Kangathei villages are some of the villages worth mentioning. It is also true that there is a little variation within this group itself. However the variation is relatively less compared to other varieties. Moirang variety is closer to the Mongtung variety. Hence, it also enjoys some prestige like Mongtung variety by virtue of being closer to the standard Kom-tong. The speakers of Moirang and Mongtung varieties constitute the major chunk of the Kom speakers.

The Mantak variety is one of the marked varieties, which resembles the Aimol and Koireng languages. It is spoken in the village of Mantak in Thoubal district of Manipur.

Mantak is one of the oldest Kom villages having around one thousand speakers. The accent and vocabulary show high resemblance of the Aimol and Koireng, which are found in the adjacent areas. The Mantaks use their variety in informal settings and for the in-group activities. They switch over to the standard Kom in the formal setting. The Mantak variety is quite unique because it resembles none of the varieties of Kom.

The Sagang variety is another unique variety of Kom-tong. It is spoken in the Sagang area of Churachandpur district of Manipur. Sagang is considered to be one of the biggest Kom populated areas of Manipur. Sagang Khupui is the oldest village in the surrounding area of Sagang. Speakers of other languages surround most of the Kom villages. Also, most of the Kom settlements are in the plain areas. So, the Meiteis are usually their immediate neighbors. But in other places, like in Senapati district, the Kukis and Nagas are their immediate neighbors. The speakers of Sagang variety use // and /r/ interchangeably. In other words, they cannot differentiate the two phonemes. // occurs in the place of /r/ and vice versa. But a closer look at the phenomenon reveals that // usually occurs in the place of /r/ so that rongpu → longpu, rengpa → lengpa, etc.

The Tonsen and Mahou-tera villages of the southern part of Manipur show some unique features, which may be considered as another variety of Kom. There is a slight variation within these two villages. Speakers numbering less than one thousand speak this variety. This variety is closer to Sagang variety. A good number of Tonsen speakers has settled in Sagan village and has got assimilated. Tonsen and Mahou area is surrounded on three sides by the dominant Meitei speakers and on the one side, by the Kuki and Naga speakers. There are a lot of Meitei elements in the Tonsen-Mahou variety of Kom. They are also isolated from other Kom speakers due to their geographical location. Consider some examples to illustrate.

1. /sak/ 'to eat' in Kom tong is /ba? / In Tonsen-Mahou variety.

2. /sak/ 'to eat' in Mongtung and Moirang varieties is /nak/ in Kharam variety.

3. Bu mo ni cha jei? (Mantak variety)

'Have you taken food?'

vs.

Bu mo nin cha joi? (Kharam variety)

'Have you taken food?'

vs.

Bu naba jo mo? (Tonsen-mahou variety)

'Have you taken food?'

vs.

Bu bu nin sak jo? (Sagang variety)

'Have you taken food?'

In spite of the variations among the Kom speakers, they could easily understand each other while speaking Kom-tong in its form or in a slightly variant form.

Dialect continuum

Mongtung, Moirang Area, Mantak, Kharam, Sagang, Tonsen-Mahou

The dialect continuum diagram (given above) indicates that there are dialects prevalent in the Kom speech community where intelligibility is not always bidirectional. Mongtung and Moirang speakers could understand each other. The same is true of Mantak and Kharam, Tonsen-Mahou and Sagang varieties. Moirang and Sagang varieties are intelligible to each other, whereas Sagang and Tonsen are not. However, it seems that Moirang variety speakers cannot maintain the intelligibility with that of the Tonsen-mahou variety speakers. Though there is mutual intelligibility between the Tonsen-mahou variety and Mantak variety, there is no indication of intelligibility between Kharam and Sagang, neither with Tonsen-Mahou variety and Kharam variety nor between Mantak and Sagang varieties.

From this diagram it appears that of the recorded six varieties of Kom, there is mutual intelligibility between at least two varieties. There is also some intelligibility between the two varieties due to geographical location like in the case of Sagang and Moirang. Moreover, the most interesting phenomena that are visible in the dialect continuum is that four of the six varieties are intelligible to the other two varieties but not vice versa. It seems that the four varieties could maintain the intelligibility with the remaining two because of their closeness with the standard Kom.

Social variables:

The variation is also seen between the two sexes. The women seem to retain the indigenous vocabularies and at the same time could handle the standard Kom-tong much better than the men. The reason could be attributed to their interest and their remaining constantly in touch with the religious scriptures and hymns, which are written, in standard Kom-tong. They seem to be more conscious in their speech than their counterparts because society expects them to behave that way. Moreover, language is also considered as an identity marker hence the women try to put as much cosmetic elements in the language as possible to make it more sweet and trendy.

Education:

Education is also contributing to the language variation. The educated persons seem to use more words from Meitei and English than the uneducated ones.

Age:

Variation is also seen among the people of different generations. The people of older generation seem to retain the indigenous vocabularies more than the people of younger generations. The younger generation, due to their exposure to other languages, tends to be more variant in their speech than the people of older generation. Code mixing and code switching is widespread these days. It is considered as a fashion to be bilingual and switching and mixing of codes while speaking. So, these have resulted in variations in the language.

Diglossia

Kom has more than two varieties that co-exist in the speech of the community. But, whether there is a diglossic situation or not, is a matter of debate as there is no clear-cut variety to be called as a high (H) or low (L) variety in Kom. The Mongtung and Moirang varieties though considered as the standard or (H) variety but are also used as spoken variety in informal situation. So the diglossic situation seems to occur partially among the Mongtung and Moirang variety speakers in its strictest sense. However, in the case of the speakers of other varieties like Tonsen-Mahou, Sagang, Kharam and Mantak, diglossic situation exists in some form or other. Standard Kom is used in formal settings or in the domains such as public speaking, religious texts and practice, educational texts, and other prestigious usages; their own varieties, which may be considered L varieties, are used in informal settings and for the intra-lingual activities. Standard Kom by itself is not the pure form of any one of the language varieties though derived mainly from Mongtung and Moirang varieties.

ARGOT :

We do find the use of slang among the speakers of Kom. 'Anbem ma ro naipang' in Tonsen-Mahou variety means 'don't loag around the boy' and is one of the slangs, which occur in informal settings. There are also codes, which are used to exclude the hearers from the conversation or to keep them away from knowing the words that is said or done. Consider the following examples.

Lukom kasan kakhit nei (men with red turban) is the name for Police.

'Pon kasan kasi hei (red shawl wearers)' for the Nagas, from the colour of the shawl of the Tangkhul Nagas of Manipur. Similarly, Pon kadum kasi hei (Black shawl wearers) for the Kukis, even though the colour of the shawl used by the Koms itself is black like that of the shawl of the Kukis. This code came into existence to refer to the Naga and Kuki rebels.

Ruphai, the old name of money, is sometimes used to refer to money. Kasanpa (the red one) is another name for money. Teng-teng, the echo word for the sound of coins, is also used to denote money in buying and selling activities.