



Understanding the Origin of the terms ‘WUNG’, ‘HAO’ and ‘TANGKHUL’

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Abstract

Understanding the origin and meaning of nomenclature of the ‘people’ or term referring to the ‘people’ is as important as identity of the people itself. At times, terms and nomenclatures of the ‘people’ are given by non locals. In the Naga context, the term ‘Naga’ itself is non-local, nomenclature of its federating tribes like Tangkhul is non-local, and names of many Tangkhul villages like Ukhrul, Tushen, Lambui, and Hundung etc. are given by non local administrators, missionaries, anthropologists and neighbouring communities among others. The core focus of the paper is to understand the origin of the terms WUNG, HAO and TANGKHUL. It also brings in the hypothesis of ‘Tangkhul-Meitei Origin’ while attempting to understand the people in brief. One of the main arguments of the paper is that the term HAO is the original or traditional nomenclature of the Tangkhul Nagas.

Keywords: Wung, Hao, Tangkhul, Meitei, Christian and People.

Introduction

Though there is no consensus among the local writers and scholars on the origin and meaning of the term tangkhul, there is a consensus among them that the term tangkhul is of recent origin and was given by non locals. There are divisions of ideas on the original or traditional nomenclature of the tangkhuls; some favored wung and others subscribe the term hao. Mention may be made here that some of the population use the term wung-hao, a combination of both the terms wung and hao, considering as the original term of the people. However, the term wung-hao has little relevance or none, as this carries less meaning reflecting on their oral tradition. Thus, the contestation on the original nomenclature of the tangkhuls is between wung and hao. This contestation will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

On the term ‘Wung’

Some writers and scholars like T. Luikham¹, Shangkahao Longvah², R. Luikham³, and U.A. Shimray⁴ among others accepted that the term wung is the old nomenclature or original name of the people before they were known by the term tangkhul. In most of their writings, the term wung is used as a prefix before the word tangkhul. The term wung is also known by other terms like hong, hung and hwung; but all these terms carries the same meaning with that of the term wung. It means people or folk belonging to a regal family. T. Luikham was of the opinion that the term wung has been using for generations; whereas, the term tangkhul begun to use only when they started interacting with the Meiteis of Manipur valley¹. He had recorded some folk songs to substantiate his assertion that the term WUNG is the original term of the Tangkhuls¹. Authors like A.S.W. Shimray augmented that the term wung was used by the people in a remote past⁵. He also pointed out that the term

“Wung is no longer use today, neither by the people themselves, nor in official transaction”⁵. However, it would be wrong to say that the term wung is no longer in use today. For instance, all the Tangkhul hills are grouped together as Wung Tangkhul Region by the Naga revolutionaries. The term wung is often used as a prefix before the term tangkhul by some of the musical institutes in their lyrics, which include - Galilee Musical Institute, *Khavaokhon*, *Zingyin Tantak*, and *Wung Hirā* among others. Thus, it would be wrong to say that the term wung remains in oblivion.

On the term ‘Hao’

The term HAO is used in two different ways – Meitei sense of using the term hao, and the Tangkhul sense of using the term hao. The Meiteis of Manipur used the term hao referring to their neighbouring communities like Nagas, Mizo, Paite, Hmar, etc. residing in the Hill areas of Manipur. The Meitei population begun to use the term hao as a sign of affronting or insulting the hill people with the advent of Hinduism in the valley; alleging that the hill people as ‘inferior’ and they as ‘superior’ one. This is largely because of the caste system as practice in the Hindu society in other parts of India. Of late, academicians, scholars and writers among the Meitei population have started using the term ching-mi, Hill people. However, this Meitei sense of using the term hao has nothing to do with the term used by the Tangkhuls.

Many Tangkhuls believe that their original name is hao, which is still in use today. Writers and scholars like Maiya Gachui Lunghar⁶, Sothing W.A. Shimray⁷, A.S.W. Shimray⁵, Huimi Zimik⁸, Yarteo Kaping⁹, and Stephen Angkang among others strongly asserted that the term hao is the original nomenclature of Tangkhul¹⁰. In support of the term hao as the original nomenclature of the Tangkhuls, the organisations like

Development for Hau Ancient Custom and Research Organization (Dhacro) and The Hao Research Initiative (Thri) were formed under the initiation of Stephen Angkang and Yaronsho Ngalung respectively. Among them, writers and authors like Stephen Angkang and Huimi Zimik prefer to use the term hau instead of hao; however, this carries the same meaning. In an attempt to trace the root of the term hao, A.S.W. Shimray recorded that

“Some others are of the opinions that, in early days the Tangkhuls came from hao-city which today is called XIAN in China. Hence, they had been called hao. But others said that.... Meifu-Li, who was the progenitor of the Nagas, belonged to the Hao tribe of China, and so this tribal name was carried by the Nagas, particularly by the Tangkhuls. These theories may be accepted as the most appropriate one with some reservation. As a matter of fact, Hao was the earliest name ever used to the Tangkhuls. But this name was used in two ways. In narrow sense, Hao was used to the Tangkhuls only, whereas, in wider sense, it was used to all the Nagas irrespective of different tribes”⁵.

With the advent of Christianity - brought by William Pettigrew in 1896 at Hunphun village, Ukhrul District – and the following four-five decades in the Tangkhul hills, their populations were broadly divided into two, Christian and non-Christian. Foreign missionaries indoctrinated the newly converts that anything that was folk was against the Christian principles, and so they failed to distinguish religion with their culture. This marked the beginning of degrading their cultural heritages. On the line of missionaries’ instruction, the converted Christians called themselves as *Vareshi*, which means people of God or followers of Christ. The non-Christians were known by the term hao, and they begun to use hao and non-Christians synonymously since then. Very often aged men and women, usually uneducated elders, continue to speak one sentence: “*Hao sālakha wui atam*”, which means the days when they were still living as Hao. The periods that these elderly men and women referred to are the days before they converted to Christianity. This further augmented the statement that term hao was used synonymously with non-Christian in their Hills by the Christians. In other words, the term hao was carried by the non-Christians population.

Until today, the term hao is used as a prefix in their traditional dress, songs, implements, domesticated animals and other articles of the Tangkhuls. These include hao-sari (Hao Dress), hao-kachon (Hao Shawls), hao-lā (Hao Song), hao-shim (Hao House), hao-tin (Hao Spade), hao-kuiret (Hao Coiffure), HAO-hok (Hao Pig), hao-har (Hao Chicken/Fowls), hao-SEI (Hao Buffalo), hao-fā (Hao Dog), hao-machi (Hao Salt), and HAO-hanham (Hao Cooking Style) to mention just a few. In essence, it bears the evidence that the term hao is the original name of the Tangkhuls.

On the term ‘Tangkhul’

Derivation of the term ‘tangkhul’ is still a question today, and it is a field of study and research that continues. There are many versions on the emergence of the term ‘tangkhul’ which include atāngbā khun, tada khun, thang-tā, tāngna tāpa khul, tāngpat kahai akhur, tangkhu, than-khul thāng-ta, and tongkhul. However, none of these versions gave conclusive and satisfactory explanation to the derivation of the term ‘tangkhul’.

Some opine that the term tangkhul is derived from two Meitei words, tada (Brother) and khun (village). As found in this version, Tangkhul and Meitei at one point of time lived together sharing the same habitat in the Tangkhul hills. In search of fertile soil and in order to earn his livelihood, the younger brother moved down to the present Manipur valley. The younger brother referred to his elder brother’s village as tada KHUN. Sothing W.A. Shimray remarked that “[I]n course of time, tada was shortened into ta and ta into tang because of phonetic convenience. In the same way khun become khul. The Meiteis, in their typical accent, still calls ‘Tangkhul’ as tangkhun”⁵.

In the oral tradition of the Tangkhul Nagas, it is found that they had imported iron from Ava (Myanmar) for making spear, dao, arrow, and also for agricultural implements. According to some informants, the term tangkhul is derived from two Meitei words, thāng and tā which means Dao and Spear respectively. It is a fact that Dao and Spear are inseparable items of their daily use. However, on this background, it is difficult to draw a conclusion that the term tangkhul is derived from the word thāng-tā. One of the researcher’s informants, Betterson Mayirnao stated that the word tangkhul was derived from three Meitei words, tāngna tāpa khul. It means people who inhabit isolated places where each village are settled at far distance. For phonetic convenience, the name tāngna tāpa khul was shortened into tangkhul.

Another version on the origin of the term tangkhul is that it is derived from two Meitei words, atāngbā khun. The word atāngbā carries two meanings. It means scarcity or poor on the one hand, and rare or unique on the other hand. The word khun means village. “In the past due to the existence of head hunting and wild animal menace, the Tangkhuls became very poor as agricultural works were greatly hindered... The people of the valley, i.e., the Meiteis taking advantages of the difficult situation in the hill ...ridiculed by calling them (Tangkhuls) ‘men from the poor villages’ and the village of this people were nicknamed atangba khun. In the course of time the name glued down, the words later shortened into tangkhun and to tangkhul”⁵. Contrariwise, another version is that “the Tangkhuls are generous, full of hospitality and liberal who provided food and drink to their guest. Therefore, their Meitei counterparts called them tangkhul – atangba meaning rare, unique; and khul means village – there is no village as liberal and generous as these people”⁵.

Some opined that the term tangkhul was derived from their local dialect, *tāngpat kahai akhur* which means 'clean and smooth hole or cave'. There is an oral tradition among the Nagas in general and the Tangkhuls in particular that they emerged out of the cave at Makhel. Since many people came out of the cave, its hole became very smooth. In conformity with the above statement, R. Brown, cited in U.A. Shimray, recorded that, "[T]hey say they came out of a cave in the earth at a place called Murrinphy in the hills, about four days' journey north-east of the Munnipore valley. They attempted to leave this cave successively as they emerged. Seeing this, the occupiers of the cave by a stratagem – throwing out of the effigy of a man they had dressed up – distract the attention of the tiger, on seeing the numbers before him, fled. They placed a large stone on the top of a high hill near this spot as a mark from which situation they spread in the hills around"⁴. The place and the stone where Brown recorded were at Makhel, Senapati district, Manipur. The stone that was erected at Makhel became a historical significance and a standing monument for the Nagas. Mention may be made here that there are two major waves of migration of the Tangkhul people, which is known by the term *Makheltun* (Makhelians) and *Meiteisan*. *Makheltun* means those groups of people who resided at Makhel at one point of time, and have later migrated to their present hills. On the other hand, *Meiteisan* means those groups of people who resided at Manipur valley at some point of time before they finally migrated to the present hills.

Another version is that the term tangkhul is named after a person called tangkhu who was well versed in war dance and skilful in the art of using sword and spear. tangkhu "led out the population from the hole or cave after killing the tiger that haunts the vicinity of the debauch. The legend goes that, as the tiger haunts the vicinity of the debauch it hinders people to pass through the hole. This continue for a long time until a brave man called Tangkhu by adopting clever means killed the tiger"⁷. Therefore, the population were named after this brave man, TANGKHU and later changed into tangkhul. This version is supported by writers like M. Horam¹¹.

A.S. Vashi Shimray of Ningthi village, Ukhrul district, Manipur propounded a than-khul version, which he explained in his mimeograph, *The Naga Kingdom*. This was strongly supported by A.S.W. Shimray, considering it as the most acceptable explanation on the origin of the term tangkhul⁵. According to their folk story, they had a close trade and commercial relationship with the people of Ava (Myanmar). The Tangkhuls imported iron from Myanmar in a large quantity for making weapons and implements. A.S.W. Shimray remarked:

"Since then, the Avas (Myanmar) called the Nagas athangpi or thanpi meaning 'Iron-man' or 'Iron-People'... Later on, Samsok state fell into the hands of the Burmese king and it became a vassal state. However, at a time, the influence of the Ava king in northern Burma became so weak that the Meitei Raja once attacked Samsok (Thwangdut) and subdued it. Then the Nagas

of Samsok whom the Burmese called Thanpi was adopted by the Meiteis again. Therefore, the village which they lived was known by the name 'than-khul' meaning Than-Village in Meitei language. Therefore, the name 'tangkhul' is derived from Than-Khul, a combination of Burmese 'Than' (iron) and Meitei 'Khul' (village)"⁵.

Stephen Angkang is of the opinion that "Tangkhul is a name invented recently. When the Britishers like Pemberton first came to Tangkhul area from Nambashi side, a Meitei interpreter by the name Lairenjao was asked, *Mr. Lairenjao, what is called in Manipuri your language, elevated place?* Lairenjao replied, 'Atongba'. Pemberton asked Lairenjao again, *what is village in your dialect?* Interpreter replied, 'Khul'. Since all the villages (Tangkhul areas) are situated in elevated places, he recorded it as *Tongkhul*." With the passage of time, the word 'Tongkhul' was changed into Tangkhul¹².

Tangkhul-Meitei Origin and Settlement

Some Tangkhuls opined that the term meitei is derived from two Tangkhul words – mei (fire) and thei (see). According to this version, after the younger brother (Meitei) left the Tangkhul hills in search of new habitation, the hill people saw smoke and fire in the valley from their hilltop. Thus, the Tangkhul called his younger brother, meithe. For phonetic convenience, the term meithe was shortened into meitei. Another version is that the younger brother decided to leave the hills where his older brother lived, so he went down to the valley and resided since then. As the younger brother left the hill, since then he became a different person. Thus, the older brother called him mi-katei (Other person). For phonetic convenience, the term mi-katei was shortened into mitei. However, there is no consensus on the origin of the term meitei as the Meiteis have their own version on the origin of the term meitei.

In the writings of T.C. Hodson¹³, A.S.W. Shimray⁵, and Sothing W.A. Shimray⁷, among others explained the 'loose relationship' that was maintained in the past between the Tangkhuls and the Meiteis. But the question of domination or suzerainty over the other did not arise as far their past history has recorded in the oral tradition. Sothing W.A. Shimray rightly pointed out that "[T]he Tangkhul tradition further asserts that the Meithe of Imphal valley is their younger brother and that the name meithe is given by them. However, difficulty arose as Meithe is a congregation of seven major valley tribes viz. mangang, angom, luwang, khuman, moirang, khaba-nganba and chenglei. If at all the Tangkhuls' claim is correct, then probably, it must be mangang who were at later stage also called ningthouja is known as meithe to the other tribes. The formation of Mangang or Ningthouja or Meithe ethnic group took place after subjugating the other six valley tribes in their quest for supremacy by the Meithe"²⁸.

Some folk stories of both the Tangkhuls and Meiteis asserted that Hungpungwo (Chief of Hungpung village) and Meitei

Maharaja were of the same descendants and have shared the same progenitor in a distant past. Hungpungwo was regarded as the older brother of Meitei Maharaja. Besides, there are stone monuments erected at the residence of Hungpung village Chief in the presence of some Meitei Maharajas. The first two stone monuments were erected in the presence of the then Maharaja of Manipur, Churachand Singh and Budhachandra Singh. Following the footsteps of his predecessors, Ningthourel Pareihanba Okendrajit also erected two stone monuments at Hungpung village Chief's residence on the 8th of November, 1992. In one of the stones, the footprints of Okendrajit were engraved. On the other stone, it is written - *Elongnao kazipli Meinaonina kachiwui shakhi khami*. It means a sign given to reaffirm the brotherhood on this occasion. Further, on the 28th of April, 2000, Meidingu Leishemba Sanajaoba (His Majesty, the Maharaja of Manipur) engraved his footprints on a stone monument erected at the residence of village Chief of Hungpung on the occasion of Hungpung Long Kakom (a get together or meeting of Hungpung village along with others who share a close historical relation with the host). Below the footprints of Sanajaoba, it is written "One of our Mythology tells as under the Emperor of Manipur, the Chief of Hungbung and Chief of Thangal are born of the same forefathers".

Recently, on the 6th of March, 2010 the Chief Minister of Manipur, Okram Ibobi Singh unveiled the monument erected at the residence of Hungpung village Chief on the occasion of Hungpung Seed Sowing Festival. However, the visit of Ibobi Singh was argued that his visits attempt to bridge the gap between hill people and valley people by asserting the historical relation between Hungpungwo and Meitei Maharaja. Ironically, Ibobi Singh, as Chief Minister of Manipur, had never visited the Tangkhul hills throughout his political life on important occasions accept attending the Seed Sowing Festival (2010) of Hungpung village, which in fact is an annual festival of one village. In other words, his visit to Hungpung has some vested political interests. Unlike most of the Tangkhul villages, Hungpung village continue cherishing their past history with Meitei Maharaja, reasserting that Hungpungwo is the older brother of the then Meitei Maharaja.

Having mentioned the relationship between the Tangkhuls and the Meiteis maintained in the past, there is a need of understanding which section among the Meiteis is referred to as brothers by the Tangkhuls and vice versa. Based on their folk stories related to migration and settlement, villages like Hungpung, Hunphun, Phungcham and Tushen Chanhong stand out to be the oldest villages among the Hao people. It is noteworthy to mention that (only) some villages among the Tangkhul villages trace their origin at Hungpung village. Likewise, very small portion of the Meitei populations are the descendants of ningthouja. Thus, if the hypothesis of "Tangkhul-Meitei Origin" is found to be true, it is the 'historical relationship' between the descendants of Hungpungwo and Ningthouja, and not all the Tangkhuls and Meiteis. However, this requires further in-depth research work.

A Note on the People

Having explained on the original nomenclature, it would not be wrong to use the term HAO in place of TANGKHUL. The Hao people occupy the area lying roughly between 25°5' N and 25°41' N, and longitude 94°E and 95°E, situated in the North-Eastern part of India extending over to the North-Western part of Myanmar with a population of more than 200,000. In India, they are in the districts of Ukhrul, Senapati, Chandel, and Imphal East in the state of Manipur. On the Myanmar side, the Hao people are found in three Townships – Somra Township, Leishi Township and Homalin Township. Today, there are two hundred sixty one (261) Hao villages; out of which, twenty nine (29) villages are in Myanmar and two hundred thirty two (232) villages are in India.

Politically, they are under two sovereign states – Myanmar and India. Racially, they are one of the Naga tribes of mongoloid stock. Linguistically, their dialect fall under Tibeto-Burman language; having more than 200 different dialects as each village has its own distinct dialect and one common dialect called *Tangkhul Tui* (language of Tangkhul). Culturally, they maintain the same cultural history and folklore (folk literature, social folk customs, material culture and performing folk arts). Historically, they maintain the same origin, migration and settlement, and historical affinity. Religiously, more than ninety five per cent of the people are Christians; some of them are Buddhists, and few of them continue worshipping their Hao religion. Geographically, they inhabit in a compact land areas, which are broadly divided into nine regions viz. Raphei (North), Somrā (North-East), Rem (East), Veikhang (South-East), Kamo (South), Kharao (West), Khaorui (South-West), Kharao-Raora (North-West), and Kathur (Centre)¹⁴.

The regions mentioned above are not a rigid division as in some regions there are no definite demarcated areas popularly known by the people. As found in their oral tradition, these regional divisions have played an important role in the inter-village relationship. It is noted that the belief systems of the people are one with a minor or slight variation in their customary practices and beliefs among the different regions. Apart from common gathering, conference or sports meet of the people; many public gathering and conference-cum-sports meet continue organising on the regional line. After the Hao territory were divided and sub-divided by the British colonialism and later by the Government of India, the Hao people in India were restricted to have social and economic relations with the Hao people in Myanmar and vice versa. Of late, the associations like Border Areas Villages' Association (bava) was formed with the objective of fostering better relationship in all matters including people-to-people contact between Hao people in India and Myanmar. The Tangkhul Naga Long (Tangkhul Naga Hoho) functions as the apex body of all their civil societies. Tangkhul Naga Hoho has four zonal branches – Ato Longphang (Northern Branch) comprising of forty three villages, Zingtun Longphang (Western Branch) comprising of thirty four villages, Zingsho

Longphang (Eastern Branch) comprising of sixty five villages, and Aze Longphang (Southern Branch) comprising of ninety villages¹⁵. All the branches have their respective legislative, executive and judicial functions; they are accountable to the Tangkhul Naga Long.

Conclusion

In relation to the origin of the term wung, hao and tangkhul, less literature are available as very few writers or scholars gave attention on the areas. While accepting the fact that the term wung is not alien to them, it lacks evidence to substantiate that wung is the original or traditional term of the Hao people. Based on the findings of the work, there is no denying fact that the term hao is the original or traditional nomenclature of this people. However, there is no certainty whether the term hao is referred to Hao (Tangkhuls) alone or is a term referring to all the tribes of the Nagas. Though there is no consensus among the local writers, scholars and culture conscious citizens on the term tangkhul, most of them have the common understanding that the term is invented by other communities or people like Meiteis, Britishers and anthropologists among others. If they are to be known by their original or traditional nomenclature, the using of 'Tangkhul' referring to this tribe can be renamed as 'Hao', both in day-to-day use and also in their official transaction too. To conclude, the researcher would like to quote one of Stephen Angkang remarks, he remarks, "[I]f we are ashamed of being Hao, then we are running away from the truth"¹².

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