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Stories Before The Borders: The Shared Origins of Chin-Kuki-Mizo People

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Abstract

The Chin-Kuki-Mizo communities, collectively known as the Zo people, who today live across Northeast India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh, believe in a shared origin myth that predates the boundaries dividing them. Despite national boundaries and tribal distinctions, their oral traditions preserve a collective narrative of origin. This study focuses on three popular beliefs: Khul (Kuki), Chhinlung or Chinlung (Mizo and Chin), and Ciimnuai (Chin), as documented by William Shaw, J. Shakespeare and B.S. Carey and H.N. Tuck, each representing more than just a place; they carry memory, identity, kinship, and a sense of common belonging.

These folktales hold more than mythic memory; they serve as cultural maps, passed down through generations in the form of stories, songs, and rituals.

Through close interpretation of recurring mythic elements such as the eclipse myth (Thimzing), the moon-devouring Awk, transformation themes and the divine creator (Pathen), this study highlights how oral traditions serve not merely as myth, but as emotional repositories of shared memory, kinship and recognition. Khul and Chhinlung are often described as mythic caves of emergence, symbolizing ancestral beginnings and common roots. In contrast, Ciimnuai is remembered as the first organized village, reflecting the transition from mythical emergence to remembered history.

The paper also briefly reflects on the "Jewish theory" of origin, found in some folk songs and chants, not as dominant beliefs, but as evolving interpretations shaped by time and belief.

Overall, the study emphasizes that these origin stories are more than myth. They are a living record of how the Zo people remember, relate to, and recognize one another, forming an emotional and cultural thread that continues to connect them today.

Keywords: Belonging, Identity, Kinship, Myth, Oral Tradition, Shared Origin

Introduction

Stories have been part of humanity since time immemorial. Long before writing, maps, or borders, communities shared their memory through oral narratives. These stories were told around the fire,

whispered to children, and passed down across generations. For indigenous peoples like the Chin, Kuki, and Mizo, collectively the Zo oral tradition is more than entertainment: it is a living archive, preserving culture, identity, and belonging in the absence of written records.

Modern scholarship recognizes the historical and cultural value of these stories. William John Thoms introduced the term *folklore* in 1846, while the Grimm brothers earlier described the study of people and their traditions. Jan Vansina emphasized that oral narratives are not mere curiosities but valid historical sources and Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory highlighted how myths preserve continuity across generations. For the Zo, origin myths act as symbolic charters, defining who they are, where they come from, and how they relate to the land.

The Zo people, found in Northeast India, Myanmar and Bangladesh, share Tibeto-Burman linguistic roots and interwoven cultural traditions. Colonial administrations labeled them differently, Kuki-Chin-Lushai, though these names often obscured their deeper unity. Scholars such as Vumson trace "Zo" identity back to early historical references, showing a continuity maintained through oral memory rather than written record.

Their myths reflect this enduring identity. The *Khul*, or primordial cave, represents humanity's emergence; the *Chhinlung*, "the covered rock," tells of early settlements; and *Ciimnuai* marks the first ancestral village. *Thimzing* narrates cosmic darkness and renewal, while *Pathen*, the divine creator, structures the world. These narratives, with recurring motifs of emergence, trial, and divine sanction, form an interconnected mythic structure that guides social memory and identity.

Origin stories evolve with historical and religious changes. In the twentieth century, some Zo groups embraced a Jewish connection narrative, identifying with the lost tribe of Manasseh. Songs like *Sikpuii Hla* reflect this reinterpretation, which led to the *Bnei Menashe* movement recognized by Israel. Though genetics offered no proof, the adaptation demonstrates how myths remain living tools for negotiating identity, belonging, and history.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative method of analysis. The study is drawn upon close textual reading and theoretical interpretation.

1. Close Reading for Textual Analysis

The study selects key *Zo* origin narratives, Khul, Chhinlung, Thimzing, and Ciimnuai, from documented sources and examines their narrative structure, symbols, recurring motifs, and patterns of representation. Close reading is used to identify how themes of emergence, dispersal, transformation, and divine intervention function within the texts.

Attention is given to narrative elements such as subterranean caves, darkness, curse, closure, clan division, and renewal. Rather than treating these stories as literal historical records, the analysis reads them as symbolic expressions of collective identity and memory.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study employs selected concepts from memory studies and structural anthropology.

Maurice Halbwachs' concept of collective memory is used to understand how these myths play roles as social frameworks that preserve group identity across generations. Jan Assman's idea of cultural memory supports the interpretation of symbolic sites such as Khul and Chhinlung as enduring markers of belonging.

Claud Lévi-Strauss's structural approach to myth is applied to examine underlying binary oppositions such as darkness/light, unity/division, chaos/order, and underworld/surface world. The opposition's help reveals how the myths symbolically organize social differentiation and kinship.

Mircea Eliade's notion of sacred or primordial time informs the reading of *Thimzing* as a moment of cosmic rupture followed by renewal, marking a transition from mythic time to social time.

Together, these theoretical perspectives guide the interpretation of the narratives, helping to situate them within broader discussion of memory, identity, and myth.

Khul: The Kuki Origin Myth and its Cultural Significance

The Kukis are a Tibeto-Burman speaking community inhabiting Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram, and adjoining regions of Myanmar and Bangladesh. Among them Thadou are one of the most prominent sub-tribes. Like many Zo communities, the Thadou trace their origin to a mythical cave, known as *Khul*, which functions not only as a site of emergence but also a symbolic threshold between a subterranean past and the surface world, marking the beginning of human habitation and social life.

Before turning to the narrative itself, it is important to note the historical complexity of nomenclature. The term "Kuki" is a historically layered and contested exonym. William Shaw notes its first appearance in Bengal in *Asiatick Researcher* (1792) and observes that variants such as *Khongshai* in Aracan and *Khongjai* in Meitei usage circulated unevenly (Shaw 11n).

In contrast, the people themselves used *Thadou*, their indigenous name. This distinction between exonym and indigenous memory underscores a critical point: it is not the imposed name, but the story of Khul, that functions as the deeper charter of identity.

The earliest written accounts of the *Khul* tradition were preserved not by the Thadou themselves, but by colonial administrators relying on oral testimony. As Jan Vansina notes, oral narratives reflect how communities understand and construct its history to serve contemporary needs. Thus, the writings of Shakespeare, McCulloch and Shaw preserve indigenous memory while also refracting it through colonial interpretation.

In *The Lushai Kuki Clans* (1912), John Shakespeare identifies the Thadou with the "New Kuki" and notes that several clans claimed to have emerged from the Khulpi, a term he equates with the Lushai (Mizo) Chhinlung (Shakespeare 187). This equivalence is important. It suggests that the cave motif was not isolated within one tribe but part of a broader Zo cosmology of emergence. Here, Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory becomes useful: Khul functions as a symbolic site that sustains intergenerational identity, binding dispersed clans to a shared origin.

McCullouch's detailed 1859 account *(Account of the Valley of Manipoore and the Hill Tribes)* expands the narrative. In his version, the king's brother follows a dog into a cavern, confronts and kills a serpent, and eventually emerges into the upper world. Meanwhile, a magical stone supported by a bird prevents others from escaping. Nemnik's curse condemns those who emerge to disease and suffering, while ritual dog sacrifice becomes a means of appeasing this affliction. The story also includes a "confusion of tongues," explains the division of one kin group into multiple tribes, illustrating how a single subterranean origin diversifies into human history.

Structurally, the Khul narrative is regulated around binary oppositions: darkness and light, confinement and freedom, unity and division, harmony and suffering. Claud Lévi-Strauss argues that myth works by mediating such oppositions, transforming contradiction into narrative order. In Khul, the movement from the underworld to the surface solved the tensions between chaos and structure, but not without cost. Emergence produces differentiation. Unity gives way to plurality. The curse of Nemnik ensures that suffering becomes a permanent element of human existence.

William Shaw's 1929 account introduces the figure of Chongthu, who deliberately provokes conflict to secure exile from the underworld. His departure transforms punishment into opportunity. Emergence is not accidental but socially negotiated. Ritual preparation, sacrifice, and leadership underscore that migration is both cosmological and communal. The myth therefore encodes not only origin but also political imagination: authority, kinship, and survival are deeply rooted in this foundational act of departure.

Together, these accounts show that Khul is more than a physical cave: it is a locus of kinship, ritual, and collective memory. The Thadou imagine themselves as "springing from the earth," while negotiating historical and social fractures. The motif of subterranean emergence also anticipates the Chhinlung tradition of the Mizos, a parallel myth emphasizing shared ancestry among Zo peoples.

Chhinlung: The Mizo Origin Story

For the Mizo, the cave of *Chhinlung* holds a place similar to *Khul* among the Thadou. It represents a shared beginning–a symbolic space from which people emerged and through which they understand their common ancestry. More than a geographical location, Chhinlung functions as a remembered origin that binds a dispersed community together.

The question of naming further complicates this history. Colonial administrators often use the term "Lushai" to describe the people of the hills. However, as John Shakespeare records, the people themselves used the term as *Dulian* or *Mizo*, meaning "Zo people" (Shakespeare xiv). Vinson similarly notes that the *Lusei* originally referred to a specific ruling clan, the term Mizo gradually becoming a border self-designation, replacing the colonial exonym over time (Vumson 2). The renaming of the Lushai Hills District as the *Mizo* Hills District in 1952, and later the formation of Mizoram as a state, formalized this shift. Yet beyond these political changes, it is Chhinlung that continues to anchor collective memory.

Early colonial records describe Chhinlung as the place from which all people emerged. Shakespeare recounts how two members of the Ralte clan chattered upon emerging, leading the divine guardian, fearing that the human population would grow too large, closed the stone, preventing further emergence (Shakespeare 56). Vumson presents a similar account, emphasizing that excessive noise led to the sealing of the cave, thereby limiting humanity (Vumson 56).

A more recent retelling by Cherrie Lanuziri Chhangte introduces the goddess Khuazingnu, who sealed couples from each clan and species inside the cave and later released them when the time was right (Chhangte71). Though the details vary, the central idea remains consistent: emergence, divine intervention, and the structuring of human society.

Analysis: Parallels Between Khul and Chhinlung

The Thadou *Khul* and Mizo *Chhinlung* narratives reveal striking not only thematic similarity but a shared symbolic structure. In Khul, Nemnik's curse introduces suffering, illness, and ritual obligation into human life. In Chhinlung, the closure of the stone by Pathian or Khuazingnu limits humanity and divides clans. Both myths dramatize the principle that humanity could have been infinite and marks the beginning of clan differentiation. In both cases, an initial moment of unity is interrupted by divine or supernatural intervention, leading to dispersal and fragmentation.

This pattern is not accidental. It reflects what Maurice Halbwachs describes as collective memory, social frameworks through which communities interpret their present condition. The myths do not merely narrate emergence; they explain why humanity is divided, why suffering exists, and why clans are fragmented. Through the image of a closed cave, both tradition tells the idea that the Zo people once shared a common origin before separation

Structurally, the parallels are striking: subterranean emergence, obstacle or interruption, divine agency, and subsequent dispersal. These recurring elements suggest a shared narrative across Thadou and Mizo traditions. Rather than viewing Khul and Chhinlung as isolated tribal myths, they can be understood as variations within a broader Zo mythic system.

Read in this way, these stories become "stories before the borders", narratives that go beyond colonial classification such as Kuki, Lushai, or Chin. They articulate kinship at a symbolic level, long before political divisions hardened these identities.

Thimzing: Darkness before Emergence

Although Thimzing chronologically precedes the emergence myths, it is discussed here to allow readers first to grasp foundational narratives like Khul and Chhinlung. Thimzing, a period of cosmic disruption, transformation, and eventual repopulation, extends these myths, highlighting shared motifs and resonances across Zo communities. Positioning it after the emergence myths foregrounds thematic continuity between human emergence, cosmic disorder, and social regeneration, rather than interrupting the narrative flow of the origin stories.

In the Lushei tradition, Thimzing is associated with the figure of the Awk, a harbinger of cosmic disruption:

> "Formerly the Hauhul chief swallowed the moon, having been changed during his dream into an awk… Once the awk swallowed the sun so effectually that general darkness prevailed" (Shakespeare 92).

The Awk embodies cosmic vulnerability, marking a threshold between ordinary and extraordinary time. Ritualized drum-beating during eclipses reflects what Maurice Halbwachs describes as collective memory in action,–society responding together to a remembered cosmic threat. The community does not passively observe darkness; it ritually manages it.

Shakespeare Further Records

> "This awful time is called 'Thimzing'…everything except the skulls of animals became alive, men were changed into animals… After this terrible catastrophe, the world was again repeopled by men and women issuing from a hole in the earth called the'Chhinlung'" (92–94).

Here destruction leads to renewal. Mircea Eliade's idea of sacred or primordial time helps explain this structure. In myth, catastrophe is not final; it resets the world and allows a new beginning (Eliade 68). Thimzing therefore functions as mythic cleansing preparing the ground for human re-emergence.

The Lushei account links catastrophe to renewal: out of darkness and confusion emerges a new cycle of humanity. Transformation into animals or hunters illustrates a cultural logic explaining the present order of clans, animals, and cosmological balance. Thimzing thus functions as a liminal space, bridging annihilation and regeneration.

In the Thadou narrative, Shaw describes a similar darkness lasting seven days and nights. Chongthu emerges into the upper world and discovers survivors who used fire and animal skulls to survive (Shaw 26). Shaw notes:

> "From Chongthu to Thadou there were no different languages; and animals and spirits as well as mythical ancestors all lived together in peace" (26).

This detail is significant. Before differentiation, there was unity. Through the lens of structural myth theory, this movement from unity to division reflects what Claude Lévi-Strauss identifies as a common mythic pattern–the mediation between opposites such as order and chaos, light and darkness.

Across both Lushei and Thadou versions, Thimzing marks a liminal period, a threshold between destruction and regeneration. Metamorphosis, survival, and fire symbolize the liminality of this period. It is a threshold between old and new orders, illustrating how catastrophe becomes a framework for survival, identity, and social reorganization. Placing these accounts together emphasizes their shared symbolic grammar: Thimzing is remembered across Zo communities as a transformative moment that resets humanity, linking mythic memory with social and cosmological order.

Ciimnuai: The First Remembered Village of The Zo/Chin People

While Khul and Chhinlung describe subterranean emergence, *Ciimnuai* represents something different: the first remembered and geographically grounded settlement of the Zo/Chin peoples. Unlike the caves, which belong to mythic time, Ciimnuai moves closer to historical memory. Situated near present-day Tedim in Chin State, it provides both spatial and temporal reference, linking oral memory to organized social life.

Carey and Tuck describe Ciimnuai or Chin Nwe as the site of the first humans, narrating that "a gourd fell from the heavens" and released a man and woman who became the Chin

"Adam and Eve" (Carey and Tuck 127). This imagery provides mythic qualities, yet the location itself is identifiable. The shift from cave to village marks a transition from primordial emergence to structured settlement.

Sing Kho Khai records Ciimnuai as an early collective settlement at present-day Chinram as Chin Nwe or Ciimnuai, where clans lived together and developed social and political organization (Sing Kho Khai). Over time, internal tensions, ecological pressures, and leadership struggles led to dispersal and differentiation. Sakhong traces post-Ciimnuai migration produced one distinct tribal formation: the Laimi at Lai-lung, the Mizo at Locom, and the Zomi in the northern highlands (Sakhong). Before this fragmentation, however, identity was collectively "Chin," suggesting that tribal names emerged later through historical processes.

Vumson further emphasized Ciimnuai's importance as a multi-clan settlement that sustained cooperative life for nearly two centuries (Vumson 76). Population growth and disputes, sometimes as ordinary as quarrels over hunted meat, eventually led to separation. Yet the memory of Ciimnuai endures as a shared point of origin.

In this sense, Ciimnuai occupies a middle ground between myth and history. It connects the Zo/Chin peoples to ancestral memory while grounding that memory in recognizable geography and social organization. If Khul and Chhinlung explain where the people came from, Ciimnuai explains how they began to live together.

Religion before Christianity: Pathen as Supreme Creator

Before the arrival of Christianity, the Zo cosmology centered on Pathen (or Pathian among the Mizos), the supreme creator. Shaw notes that :

> "The Thadou believe that life is given to everything by Pathen. He has power to subdue the evil influences of the Thilhas, and it is to Him that they do their sacrifices in order to regain health or escape any adversity… He is supposed to have made the heavens and earth and is all-powerful" (Shaw 107).

Among the Lushai (Mizo) clans, *Pathian* (equivalent to Pathen) was similarly regarded as a benevolent creator. Yet, everyday life was also shaped by a complex array of spirits, such as the *Huai, Khuavang*, and the dual souls (thlarao – wise and foolish).

Shakespeare Observes

> "The Lushai believe in Pathian, a benevolent creator of the world, but he is a distant god, who does not trouble himself with the affairs of men. Illness, misfortunes and death are ascribed to the Huai, malignant spirits of rivers, rocks, and trees. Each man is supposed to possess two souls—one wise and one foolish. It is the struggle between the two which accounts for his success or failure in life" (Shakespeare 61)

Together, these accounts highlight a shared Zo cosmology: a distant but supreme creator coexisting with local spirits who actively influence daily life. This cosmology underscores the richness of pre-Christian religious thought and reveals a dynamic framework where humans negotiate well-

being, morality, and survival through ritual and collective memory. The belief in Pathen laid the foundation for later reinterpretations, allowing the Zo to integrate new religious ideas without abandoning the logic of their indigenous spiritual universe.

The Jewish Origin: An Evolving Tradition

In the twentieth century, a reinterpretation emerged among certain Zo-Mizo-Kuki communities: the claim of descent from the lost tribe of *Manasseh*, one of Joseph's sons. Scholars like T. George Haokip and Isaac L. Hmar observe that while not universally embraced, this narrative gained traction after the introduction of the Bible, with legendary ancestors such as *Manmasi* being identified with Manasseh of the Old Testament. One vivid manifestation of this reinterpretation is found in the *Sikpuii Hla*, a festival song sung during the Sikpui festival. Its verses recount events reminiscent of the Exodus narrative:

"While we are preparing for the Sikpui festival,
The big red sea becomes divided…
We are being led by a cloud during the day
And by a pillar of fire during the night…
The enemies we fight all day,
The big sea swallowed them like beasts.
Collect the quails,
And fetch the water that springs from the rock." (Laldena)

The song also references quails and water from rock, echoing biblical motifs. Alongside this, certain folktales recounts a Great Deluge and a confusion of tongues, paralleling stories of Noah and Babel.

However, this interpretation was neither uniform nor uncontested. Many Zo-Mizo-Kuki communities remained firmly Christian, and debates emerged regarding whether such parallels reflected ancient memory or post-memory influence. Genetic studies conducted in Haifa found no evidence of Middle Eastern ancestry, situating the community within Tibeto-Burman generic patterns. Later, contested DNA reports from India suggested otherwise, but Israel's eventual recognition of the Bnei Menashe community was based on religious conversion rather than genetic proof.

The significance of this narrative lies not in scientific validation but in its symbolic function. The Jewish origin claim demonstrates how myths evolve, absorbing new religious frameworks while continuing to express older concern of belonging and dispersal. Similarly to Khul and Chhinlung, this reinterpretation reflects an ongoing negotiation of identity, showing that origin stories are not frozen in the past, but living narratives shaped by historical change.

Conclusion

Khul, Chhinlung, Thimzing, Ciimnuai, Pathen, and the later Jewish origin narrative together form a layered structure of Zo memory. When read side by side, they reveal a recurring pattern of emergence, rupture, settlement, and reinterpretation. These stories do not compete with one another; they accumulate across time, each adding a new dimension to how belonging is understood.

By placing Khul, Chhinlung, Thimzing, Ciimnuai, Awk, Pathen, and the later Jewish origin theory side by side, this study demonstrates how the Zo people remember their beginnings in layered ways: first through caves and darkness, then through the first village as a social center, later through biblical figures, and finally through identification with Jewish ancestry. These are not contradictions but continuities, revealing how a community reinterprets its past across time, faiths, and histories.

What continues is not a single fixed origin but a remembered place of belonging. Before colonial labels separated Chin, Kuki, and Mizo, these narratives articulated kinship beyond difference. Identity, in this sense, is situated less by proof of ancestry and more by the continuity of shared memory.

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