

The People: Kuki/Chin/Zo

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[Kuki People - History](#)



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1.1 Introduction

This chapter is intended to explain the identity of the target audience for the project. Its purpose is not to present a complete history of the people.



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The people, though belonging to the same group, carry different names and speak diverse dialects such as Falam, Hakha, Laotu, Mindat, Matupi, Mizo, Paite, Sizang, Teddim, Thado, Zo, Zotung, Zophei, and many more. However, they have common name(s) - Kuki/Chin/Zo (Zomi/Mizo).[1] For the sake of convenience, I will be using the term KCZ throughout my project.

In some sense, the KCZ people are unique. They came into existence without a decisive history of their origin. Their population is spread out along the Indo-Burma-Bangladesh borders. In Burma, they have Chin state of their own, and in India, they have a state called Mizoram.[2] Despite efforts to find a mutually acceptable common name, no agreement has yet been reached. They do not have a common language, but the different dialects they use are more or less intelligible. For instance, people in the town of Lamka (in Manipur state in India) could communicate with each other by using their own dialects.

1.2 The Origin and Identity of the Nation

The history of the origin of the KCZ nation is complicated since the people have their own legends regarding their beginnings. The common legend is that the nation came out of the bowels of the earth, or a cave and was called *Khu*[3] or *Chinlung*,[4] depending on the dialect. Some native scholars accept this legend as historical fact,[5] while others see it as myth.[6]

Some try to prove that this nation originated from China; this justifies the name 'Chin.' Some others say the nation descended from 'Zo' (the name of the ancestor), and thus should be called 'Zomi,' or 'Mizo.' Some further argue that this nation is supposed to be called 'Kuki.' The KCZ people, who call themselves 'Mizo', attempted to prove that the people are 'Mizo';[7] while the Chin group insisted that they were 'Chin.'[8] Likewise, people who call themselves Kuki stand for the name 'Kuki,' [9] and Zomi, for 'Zomi.' [10] This is the reason why I use the abbreviated term KCZ here. It seems to me that the various groups of this nation want to defend the name they have as its original.

In order to avoid such prejudices, and because of the limitation on the research I can do regarding this nation, I am only able to present different suggestions regarding the name of the nation as advocated by various authors without taking any position.

1.2.1 Chin

I grew up with the acknowledgement of being called Chin by the Burmans and being recognized officially as Chin. Also included in this group are Asho, Falam, Halka, Lushai (now Mizo), Thado, Tiddim, Siyin, Mindat, Matu.[11] The British adopted the name Chin from the Burmans. The question is where Chin and its people come from. We can find three different theories regarding the name Chin. The first one is that the name originated from the Chinese word 'Jin' or 'yen.' According to Carey and Tuck, "The name *Chin* is a Burmese corruption of the Chinese 'Jin' or 'Yen', meaning 'man.'"[12] This theory is accepted and further explained by some native scholars and authors.[13]

The second theory is that the name Chin was imposed by the Burmans. Golden believes that *Chin* is the modern form of

the archaic Burmese *khyang* which means 'allies' or 'comrades' in old Burmese.[14] However, Kennet noted, it is questionable whether the Burmans would call Chins 'allies' or 'comrades,' since they were a constant threat to the security of Burman villages.[15] Woodman records that it was because the British had annexed Chin Hills to Burma proper.[16]

The third theory is that the name Chin originated in the language of 'Acho Chin'.[17] In this language, a person is called "*hklaung*,"[18] and thus Asho Chins called themselves Asho *hklaung*. In his article, "*In Search of the origin of the names: Kuki-Chin*,"[19] Kenneth Vanbik tries to prove how the term Chin originated from the Asho Chin language. According to his explanation, the Burmans, at their first meeting with the Asho Chins, used the latter part of the name to designate them. However, the label became *khyang* because the Burmans had already lost the *kl-* affricate; the closest affricate they could use was *khy*. Accordingly, the term *khyang* appeared to designate any Chin group.[20] Later, *khy* became *ch*. [21] Thus, Vanbik concludes that the word "*khlang* (or *hklaung*) was pronounced *khyang* by the Burmans, until the Burmese language changed its initial *khy-* to *ch-*, dragging the name along with it." [22] *Chang* eventually became chin.

1.2.2 Kuki

Kuki is another name given to this nation. According to the Burmese accounts, we can trace the history of the Kuki in Myanmar to as early as 100 B.C. The Kuki nation had established their kingdom, with its capital of Hanglen known for the beauty of its queen, Lenchonghoi. The term *Kuki* appears to have originated in Sylhet, in East Bengal. The term first appeared in Bengal Rawlins writing of "Cuci's, or Mountaineers of Tipra." [23] Elly recorded that the Bengalis called the tribe *Kuki*, or "hill people." [24] Grierson also describes the term Kuki as an Assamese or Bengali word applied to such hill tribes as Lushais, Rangkhols, Thadous, and so on, who were residing in India.[25] In 1893, Reid also described: "Originally applied to the tribe or tribes occupying the tracks immediately to the south of Cachar. It is now employed in a comprehensive sense, to indicate those living to the west of the Kaladyne River, while to the west they are designated as Shendus would be known as Chiang, synonymous with Kyen, and pronounced as 'Chin'" [26]

Later, the term was spelled 'Kukis' by the British administrators (such as Lt. Colonel J. Shakespear and C.A. Soppit) in referring to the migrants in Manipur State, Naga Hills, and the North Cachar Hills of India. The term was actually not recognized by the Kuki people themselves.[27] In 1893, Soppit, who was Assistant Commissioner of Burma, and later Sub-Divisional Officer in the North Cachar Hills, Assam, remarked in his study of Lushai-Kuki: "The designation of Kuki is never used by the tribes themselves, though many of them answer to it when addressed, knowing it to be the Bengali term for their people." [28] But the term was still used as a designation to cover these migrants, since they had so much in common, both in language, manners, customs, and systems of internal government. [29]

1.2.3 Zo

Vumson, a KCZ scholar, suggest that the KCZ people should be called *Zo*. [30] He, Vumson, mentions Fanch'o, a diplomat of the Tang dynasty of China, who wrote in 862 A.D. about a kingdom in the Chindwin valley. [31] The princes and chiefs in this kingdom were called 'Zo'. [32] Vumson believes that the rise of the Tang dynasty (618-906 A.D.) brought contact between the early Zo people in the Chindwin and the Tang Chinese. The Tangs widely traveled and recorded the existence of three kingdoms in Burma: the Pyus, the Pegus (Mon), and the Sak, which Vumson speculates to be Zo. Vumson also mentions Father Sangermo, who wrote in 1783, "the petty nation called 'JO'," the name not used by the tribes such as ZO or YO or SHO. [33] and British officer Tom Lewin's record, indicating "The generic name of the whole nation is DZO." [34]

1.3 One Nation With Different Names

This nation has been carrying different names, such as Kuki, Chin, Zo and is spread over many different parts of India, such as Manipur state, Assam state, Mizoram state, Nagaland state, Tripura state, and the Chittagong Hills of Bangladesh, and in Burma, such as Chin state, Arakan state, Sagaing division, and Maguai division. By 1985, the population of this nation was two and a half million. [35]

Though the original name of this nation may not be discovered, nor their origin convincingly traced, the fact that these peoples with different names belong to one origin is unanimously accepted. There is enough historical evidence and records proving that the Kuki, Chin, and Zo people are one nation. To quote one of the most decisive records demonstrating the truth of this unification, Messers B.S. Carey and H.N. Tuck wrote: "*Without pretending to speak with authority on the subject, we think we may reasonably accept the theory that the Kukis of Manipur, the Lushais of Bengal and Assam, and the Chins originally lived in what we now know as Thibet (Tibet), are of one and the same stock; their form of Government, method of cultivation, manners and customs, belief and traditions all point to one origin.*" [36]

This nation had been united and strong, living in their own lands until the British came to divide and subdue them. The British split this nation into two, annexing one half to the then British India, and the other to British Burma. They gave different names to the divided lands – Chin Hills (in Burma) and Lushai Hills (in India). This is existing undeniable

evidence of wicked rule, which perpetuated division within the nation. Carey and Tuck record that the British gave separate names to these people with the intent to divide them. They wrote, "Those Kuki tribes which we designate as 'Chin' do not recognize that name,-----." [37] Though the nation was divided by the British, these people still belong to one origin and one nation.

Shakespear, who was one of the British authorities in Chin state, said in 1912:

"The term Kuki has come to have a fairly definite meaning, and we now understand by it certain---clans, with well marked characteristics, belonging to the Tibeto-Burman stock. On the Chittagong border, the term is loosely applied to most of the inhabitants of the interior hills beyond the Chittagong Hills Tracks; in the Cachet it generally means some families of Kuki. Now-a-days, the term is hardly employed having been superseded by Lushai in the Chin Hills, and generally on the Burma border all these clans are called Chin. These Kuki are more closely allied to the Chakmas, and the Lushai are more closely to their eastern neighbours who are known as Chin.-----"Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the Kukis, Lushais and Chins are all of the same race." [38]

1.4 The Nation Living in the United States: KCZ Refugees from Myanmar

Many from KCZ came to the United States of America for various purposes. Among them are hundreds from Myanmar. After the military coup in 1988, many came to the United States to escape hardship and persecution under the junta. My main concern in developing this project is for these more recent immigrants and refugees from Myanmar.

1.4.1 Brief Description of Myanmar

Myanmar, also known as Burma, is a country in Southeast Asia, bordering the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal, between Bangladesh and Thailand. The bordering countries are Bangladesh, China, India, Laos, and Thailand. Myanmar is comparatively smaller than the state of Texas. In 2006, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) puts the country's estimated population at 55.4 million, with an annual growth rate of 2.02%. [39] The major religion is Buddhism (89%), and other religions include Christianity (4%), Muslim (4%), Animist (1%), and other (2%). The common language is Burmese, and minority ethnic groups have their own languages. [40] Myanmar is divided into seven states and divisions: Chin State, Ayeyarwady,* [41] Bago,* Kachin State, Kayin State, Kayah State, Magway,* Mandalay,* Mon State, Rakhine State, Sagaing,* Shan State, Tanintharyi,* and Yangon.* Myanmar is composed of many nationalities: Burman, Chin, Shan, Kachin, Karen, Kaya, Palong, Lahu, Naga, Rakhine, Mon. The ruling juntas are the Burman Buddhists.

1.4.2 Crisis in Myanmar: Political, Social, Economical, and Religious

Burma gained independence from the British on January 4, 1948. The country had a fledgling democracy from 1948 to 1958. The 1962 military coup paved the way for General Ne Win to control the government until 1988; first as a military ruler, then as President, and later as political kingmaker. Despite multiparty elections in 1990 that resulted in the opposition parties winning a decisive victory, the ruling military junta refused to hand over power. Key opposition leader and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Aung San Suu Kyi has been under house arrest several times (1989 to 1995, September 2000 to May 2002, and again in May 2003); her supporters are routinely harassed or jailed. [42]

Burma is a resource-rich country that suffers from abject rural poverty. The military regime took steps in the early 1990s to liberalize the economy after decades of failure under the 'Burmese Way to Socialism', but those efforts have since stalled. Burma has been unable to achieve monetary or fiscal stability, resulting in an economy that suffers from serious macroeconomic imbalances – including a steep inflation rate and an official exchange rate that overvalues the Burmese kyat by 1000 times the market rate. [43] As such, the people have been going through an enormous economical crisis, from which the KCZ people are not exempt.

Religious persecution is a major concern for the KCZ people, who are almost 100% Christians. The Burmese military, which practices an egregious policy of Burmanization and Buddhization among minority racial groups, has been forcing the KCZ Christian villagers to construct Buddhist pagodas in their own villages and forcing them to donate money for the constructions too. Many pastors, evangelists, and young missionary volunteers have been arrested and tortured. [44]

One good example for national and religious hatred: A Kuki ethnic village called *Nung Kam*, a Christian village in Sagaing Division, was bulldozed in the beginning of 1993, as the villagers refused to become Buddhists. Then, a new Burman village known as *Saya San Ywo* was set up with a military platoon guarding the village. As the new Burman dwellers moved in to this new village, the neighboring Kuki villages were ordered to supply labor and their basic needs. The Kuki villagers had no choice but to comply whatever they were commanded to do. Resisting the military's order means risking one's life. [45]

One gruesome example of religious persecution, [46] worth mentioning here, is the incident that happened to the largest church of Kuki Chin Baptist Association (KCBA), [47] called the Phailen Baptist Church, Tamu, Sagaing Division, in August

1993, Sagaing Division. The army accused the church of buying weapons from a soldier and thus arrested several leaders of the church and tortured them. The army tortured the church pastor Rev. Zang Kho Let, beating him with rifle butts until his bones were broken; his mouth was cut open so that he could no longer preach. Finally, they shot his lifeless, resistless body claiming that he was shot while trying to escape. They also mercilessly tortured three helpless and innocent farmers and even buried one of them alive. Being wrongly accused out of religious and racial hatred, these heroes had sacrificed their lives for the truth they believed in under the inhumane dictatorship of the Burmese regime.[48]

1.4.3 Life Situation in the United States

Due to the unabated political crisis, religious persecution, ethnic hatred, and economic hardships, many come to the United States for refuge and survival; many more escaped to other countries. For them, life in the United States is very different from their homeland. When the KCZ people were in Myanmar they worked to live, but in the United States it seems that they live to work. They work hard, not only to survive in a foreign country, but also to financially help their extended families, relatives, and communities in Myanmar. They have to sustain a great deal of pressure and stress because of a sudden change of life style, their concern for their loved ones back home, and the general bleak state of Burmese society under the military dictatorship. They labor endlessly and tirelessly without proper rest.

Many of them work seven days a week. They even have to work on Sunday, unlike back home where the KCZ Christians ceased from working on Sundays. Consequently, they hardly take care of their physical, mental, social, and spiritual health. Families can hardly spend time together - eating, praying, sharing as a family – because of their busy, different schedules. Younger generation began to adapt American culture and life styles, which makes it difficult for understanding and communication between parents and children. Life situation in the United States, which is different from that in Burma, has made it difficult for the KCZ people as individuals and families to maintain their culture and identity. This causes great stress for the KCZ families and communities. [49]

Having gone through this myself and seeing the need of my fellow people, I decided to do research on the ‘Sabbath.’ My purpose is to discover the meanings of the Sabbath and how they can be applied to the daily lives of these people. I strongly believe that my research will be of great help to the KCZ people in managing their lives in this future-oriented and achievement-oriented culture.[50] By learning and applying the meaning of the Sabbath in every area of life, they will have a more relaxed and enjoyable life in this seemingly strange land. Moreover, they will live an abundant life, which I describe as wholeness.

[1] ‘Mi’ refers to ‘people.’ Zo here is one of the common names believed to be the name of KCZ people; it does not just refer to Zo speaking people.

[2] The target group for this project is specifically the KCZ people from Myanmar, while my project is applicable for all who go through similar life situation in the United States and other foreign lands.

[3] William Shaw wrote a story of how this nation came into existence on earth. This story is the version of the legend by the so-called Thado/Kuki of today. William Shaw, *The Thadou Kukis* (Delhi: Cultural Publishing House, 1929), 24-16.

[4] J. Shakespear, *The Lushai Kuki Clan* (Aizawl, Mizoram: Tribal Research Institute 192, reprinted 1975), 93-94.

[5] Thangkhomang S. Gangte, *The Kukis of Manipur: A Historical Analysis* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 1993), 14. Gangte agrees that this nation came out of the bowels of the earth, or a cave. Vumson also cited Hrang Nawl, one of the prominent politicians among this nation, who believes the term ‘Chin,’ comes from Chinlung where the Chin people emerged into this world. See Vumson. *Zo History* (Aizawl, Mizoram, India: published by author, 1986), 3.

[6] Vumson does not accept this legend as a historical fact because he regards the legend as a contradiction to facts of how humans originated. See Vumson, *Zo History*, 26.

[7] Mizo speakers advocate for Mizo as the common name for the KCZ people. See, S H M Rizvi & Shibani Roy, *Mizo Tribes In North East India* (Delhi : B.R. Publishing Corp., 2006).

[8] Hakha, Falam, Matupi, Mindat, and other dialect speaking KCZ people stands for Chin as our official name. Read, Cum Awi, *The Value and Identity of the Chins* (Irving, Texas: Published by the author, 2000).

[9] Thado or Kuki or Thado-Kuki speaking group believe Kuki to be the official name for KCZ nation.

[10] Teddim and Zo speakers argue that all the KCZ should be called Zomi. Read T. Gougin, *History of Zomi*, (Churachandpur, Manipur: T. Gougin, 1984) to know Zomi.

[11] These are the groups called ‘Chin’. But there are more groups with different names who call themselves ‘Chin’.

[12] Bertram S. Carey and H.N. Tuck, *The Chin Hills* (Rangoon: Gov. Print., Burma, 1896), Vol. 1, 3, Cited also by Lian H. Sakhong, *Religion and Politics among the Chin People in Burma (1896-1949)* (Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala University, 2000), 61.

[13] Sakhong, *Religion and Politics among the Chin People in Burma*, 57 ff.

[14] Gordon. H. Luce, “Chin Hills-Linguistic Tour” - University Project. *Journal of Burma Research Society*, Vol. 42, No.1, (1954): 25, quoted by Kenneth VanBik, *In Search of the Origin of the Names: Kuki-Chin*, Department of Linguistics, University of California, Berkeley, 2001, 2.

- [15] VanBik, *In Search of the Origin of the Names*, 2.
- [16] Dorothy Woodman, *The Making of Burma* (London: The Cresset Press, 1962), 421. According to Woodman, the main reason why the British annexed the Chin Hills to Burma proper was the constant invasion and harassment of the British-ruled Burman and Shan villages by the Chins. Also cited by VanBik, *In Search of the Origin of the Names*, 2
- [17] Asoh Chin is the Chin group with whom the Burmans first come into contact. They live in the plain region, not in the Chin State of Myanmar.
- [18] H. Joorman, *Chin Grammar* (Rangoon: American Baptist Mission Press, 1906), 12.
- [19] VanBik, *In Search of the Origin of the Names: Kuki-Chin*, 2.
- [20] As a matter of fact, in old Pagan inscriptions, both *khyang* and *khlaung* are written to designate the same people. Luce, "Chin Hills-Linguistic Tour," 25, cited by Vanbik, *In Search of the Origin of the Names*, 2.
- [21] Comparison between written Burmese (WB) and modern Burmese (MB) shows how *khy-* became *ch-* in Burmese history. See, Paul K. Benedict, *Sino-Tibetan: a Conspectus*. (Princeton-Cambridge Studies in Chinese Linguistics, 2) with contributing editor, James A. Matisoff (New York: Cambridge U. Press, 1972), 3:1, i-x. cited also by Vanbik, *In Search of the Origin of the Names*, 2.
- [22] Julian Wheatley, *Burmese: A Grammatical Sketch*. Ph.D. Dissertation (University of California, Berkeley, 1982), 18-19. Wheatley explains how the three phonetic shifts from written Burmese to Modern Burmese form a "drag chain" beginning with *s* to *th* (phonetically dental fricative). 1. *s* > *th* 2. *c*, *ch* > *s* 3. *ky*, *kr* > *c* *khy*, *kh* > *ch*., cited also by Vanbik, *In Search of the Origin of the Names*, 2.
- [23] John Rawlins, "On the Manners, Religion, and Laws of the Cuci's, or Mountaineers of Tipra. - Communicated in Perfian." *Asiatick Researches* (Calcutta: Manuel Cantopher, M.DCC.XC, 1787), 187.
- [24] E.B. Elly, *Military Report on the Chin-Lushai Country* (Calcutta: Firma KLM (p) LTD, 1978), 1.
- [25] G.A. Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol. III Part III (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1903), 5.
- [26] S.A. Reid, *Chin-Lushai Land* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Co. 1893), 5, cited by Sakhong, *Religion and Politics among the Chin People in Burma (1896-1949)*, 63.
- [27] John Shakespear, *The Lushai Kuki Clans*, 2.
- [28] C.A. Soppitt, *An Outline Grammar of the Rangkhoh-Lushai Language* (Aizawl, Mizoram: Tribal Research Institute, 1893, reprinted 1978), 2, cited by Sakhong, *Religion and Politics among the Chin People in Burma (1896-1949)*, 63.
- [29] *Ibid*, 4.
- [30] Vumson used the name *Zo* to be the name of the KCZ nation. Vumson, *Zo History*, 26. In my conversation with him, he suggested that I use *Zo* in my dissertation to refer the KCZ people saying, "We are *Zo*."
- [31] Chindwin valley is all the bay areas beside the Chindwin River, one of the most important rivers in Myanmar (Burma).
- [32] Vumson, *Zo History*, 1.
- [33] *Ibid*. 2. Cited from Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*, 25.
- [34] *Ibid*. 2. Cited from Thomas H. Lewin: *A Fly on a Wheel or How I Helped to Govern India* (London: Constable and Co., 1912), 35.
- [35] Vumson, *Zo History*, 7.
- [36] Carey and Tuck, *The Chin Hills*, 2.
- [37] *Ibid*, 3.
- [38] Shakespear, *The Lushai Kuki Clans*, 8. Also cited also in Sakhong, *Religion and Politics among the Chin People in Burma*, 63, and Gangte, *The Kukis of Manipur*, 21.
- [39] <http://myanmar.unfpa.org/profile.htm>. Retrieved on November 7, 2008 (There is no official data available as the country's last official census was done in 1983).
- [40] <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bm.html>.
- [41] (*) refers to division.
- [42] <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bm.html>.
- [43] *Ibid*.
- [44] One good source for detail information on persecutions among the KCZ people is www.chro.org.
- [45] Nehginpao Kipgen, *The Rise of Political Conflicts in Modern Burma (1947-2004)*, (May 2004), 7.
- [46] This is the summary of the incident. For the full story, read P. S. Haokip, *Zale'n-Gam, the Kuki Nation*. (KNO Publication for Private Circulation, 1998), 22.
- [47] KCBA is one of the KCZ religious organizations, affiliated to Myanmar Baptist Convention, Myanmar.
- [48] The regime denied their acknowledgement about the plan but is guilty of its irresponsibility and of its chaotic rule that had allowed such cruel persecution under an insane and unsupervised general, shedding the blood of the saints and taking away the innocent lives in the most dehumanizing way, which will remain imprinted in the hearts of the KCZ people as long as the human history exist. We will always remember them as our heroes with the indescribably ugly and incurable scars stamped in our hearts. Their blood still and will always cry out from the ground with an inexpressible hunger for peace and justice in Myanmar.
- [49] Life in America is based on the information given by the pastors listed in my design submitted to APS, The interview questionnaire I used for soliciting the data is in the Appendices. I mention more about the life situation in America and the

struggles of the KCZ people on pages 125-126.

[50] That the United States is a country of future and achievement-oriented culture is explained on page 92.

The writer, who received Doctor of Ministry from San Francisco Theological Seminary (California, USA) on 23 May 2009, submitted this as the first chapter of her dissertation entitled "Understanding And Practising The Sabbath For The Kuki/Chin/Zo In The United States: Cultivating Wholeness Through Self Care For The Service Of The World And Ministry Of God."

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