Introduction

Social organization and social structure are frequently used synonymously though there is conceptual difference between them. According to Palmisano, the term social organization overlaps with social structure and social order. Social organization aims at bringing together distinct components in a society into common relation through the adoption of various measures. A social organization can be characterized as any relatively stable structure or patterns within a society.

The Webster’s dictionary of the English language defines organization as any unified consolidated group of elements, systematized wholes especially a body of persons organized for some specific purpose as a club, union or society. Firth on the other hand conceives of organization as a way of getting things done by planned action, the arrangement of action in sequences in conformity with selected social ends. It demands elements of representation and responsibility. Representation here implies that the decisions that claim to be group decisions must in fact be individual decisions, where as responsibility signifies the ability to envisage a situation in terms of the interests of the wider group concerned, and to take decisions which shall be conformable to those interests, and willingness to be held accountable for the results of those decisions.

Social organization, according to ‘Encyclopedia of Sociology’, is characterized by interdependence. This implies that a change in one of the components can have a definite impact on some or all other components and the prevailing relationships with one another. “Social organization is non-random pattern within human population that

2. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p.38.
comprise society by sharing the main aspects of a common existence overtime as well as non-random patterning, the human and inter-human activities through which patterns are formed, retained, altered, or replaced.\(^6\) The concept of social organization is important for understanding the social change and helps in the systematic ordering of social relations by acts of choice and decision.

Social organization can be broadly classified into two kinds: formal and informal organizations. The former is established for the purpose of meeting a set of specific stated goals and characterized by a formal set of rules and guidelines, a distinct hierarchy of authority, a specific division of labour, and restricted membership. The informal organizations, on the other hand, generally focus on a set of central ideas or goals and lack pre-established rules and organizational guidelines as they are mostly evolved out of a common understanding.

There are various theories on social organization, focusing on the arrangement of activities of different members of the society, with orientation towards social ends. Many theorists talk of the intimate and intense relationship between social organization and social structure, but these two need not be taken as synonymous. According to Radcliffe-Brown, social structure which deals with social positions, is rather static while social organization with social roles is dynamic.\(^7\)

In addition, social structure is the arrangement of persons in institutionally controlled or defined relationship and organization is an arrangement of activities of these persons.\(^8\) For Malinowski: "Each institution, having organized type of activity, has a definite structure."\(^9\) According to Firth, social organization is concerned with the choices and decisions involved in actual social relations while, the social structure deals with more fundamental social relations, gives a society its basic form and formal shape and provides limits to the

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\(^6\) Ibid., 1992, p.1894.


\(^8\) Ibid.

range of action organizationally possible within its framework. He further argues that the principle of continuity can be found in social structure; at the same time, variation or the principle of change may be explicitly found in the organization. He asserts that the structure and organization of community life possess certain constituents, which are essential for social existence within a community. These constituents are social alignment, social control, social media, and social standards.

While to Radcliffe-Brown, social structure is an arrangement of persons in institutionally controlled or defined relationships; to Evans Pritchard social structure refers to the interrelations of groups, explicitly excluding inter-personal relations. S.F. Nadel, who has done a pioneering work in the field of social structure defines it in terms of the roles played by the individual actors in society and their consequent social status. To quote him: "We arrive at the structure of a society through abstracting from the concrete population and its behavior, the pattern and network or system of relationships obtaining between actors in their capacity of playing roles relative to one another."

In a nutshell, social organization implies the inter-dependence of parts, which is an essential and important feature of all enduring collectivities such as groups, communities and societies. It comprises various social institutions such as religion, polity, economy and culture. These interdependent parts consist of a set of roles and social positions, values, norms and beliefs, emotional attitude and practices, by means of which a group of people attempt to cope with the ultimate problems of life. In this regard, religion as a system of beliefs and practices play a vital role in holding the parts together.

11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., p.41.
This thesis seeks to examine the relationship between social organization and religion by focussing on the Lois, a scheduled caste community located in the state of Manipur, North-East India. The topic has been chosen partly because it is relatively an unexplored area of study and partly because of the deep influence religion exercises on human life. The interrelatedness between religion and society is particularly intense in small-scale agrarian based societies such as the Lois. Though today the Lois are treated as Hindus, their religious life not only continues to be dominated by ideas of animism and naturism but also permeates all other spheres of life. A close observation of the life cycle rituals, the Lai Haraoba festival, ancestor worship etc. clearly demonstrates this fact.

**Sociological Approach to Religion**

Scholars interpret the meaning and scope of religion from different angles. Different theories on religion highlight the existence of two opposed worlds as the primitive and the civilized. The focus of the present research is on the religious phenomena of the former type of society since the religious beliefs and practices of the Lois stand quite similar with the one practiced among the less advanced societies. Scholars like E.B.Tylor and James Frazer look at religion from the evolutionary point of view whereas Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, and Durkheim gave emphasis on its functions. Theorists on primitive religion such as Muller, Tylor, Spencer and Frazer developed the earliest anthropological theory about the origin of religion.

Max Muller believed that nature worship was the earliest form of religion. Naturism implies the belief that the forces of nature have super-natural power. This theory shows the close relationship between 'primitive' man and the super-natural world as well as the world of natural forces. According to Muller, as human beings cannot understand or explain the world of nature, they start worshipping it out of fear and awe. People used to believe in the celestial bodies, such as sun, moon, stars and dawn as symbols of the infinite. The
primitives derived the belief in the super-natural being from the sensation aroused in man by the overwhelming and at times cataclysmic manifestations of nature.\textsuperscript{16} Max Muller suggested that man first called the striking phenomena of nature by terms which denote their activities, such as, "a thunder bolt was called something that tears off the soil or that spread fire."\textsuperscript{17} For naturism, belief in spiritual phenomena arose out of the feelings of awe aroused by such natural entities as mountains and the sun or such natural occurrences as storms and volcanic eruptions.\textsuperscript{18} The primitive man was inspired by the natural phenomena, which were powerful and inexplicable and he sought to explain them. This description of the phenomena of nature, in terms of divine personality, was invented to account for the activities of natural phenomena. According to Max Muller, the origin of religion, thus, lies in a body of thought and language, since the words used to describe the inspiring phenomena of nature denote human activities.

Spencer sought to explain the genesis of supernatural beliefs by observing the phenomena of nature, especially those relating to death and dream experiences: temporary insensibility, ecstatic states, reflections in the water, and the like.\textsuperscript{19} Thus Spencer suggests that the belief in ghosts formed the basis of the earliest supernatural ideas. The idea of ghosts developed into that of gods, the ghost of remote or important ancestors becoming divinities and the offerings placed on their shrines became the ritual propitiation.\textsuperscript{20} For Spencer, ancestor worship was the earliest form of religion and concluded it to be the root of every religion.\textsuperscript{21} He regards the primitives as rational

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} E.E. Evans Pritchard, \textit{Theories of Primitive Religion} (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1965,p.23
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., p.24.
with limited knowledge. They made reasonable, though weak, inferences with regard to natural phenomena.

The theory propounded by Tylor has given primacy to the worship of the soul rather than of ghost and this form of worship is called animism. According to Tylor, experiences of death, disease, trances, visions and dreams, compelled the primitives to think about the existence of an immaterial power, called the soul.22 Animists believe that all inanimate objects and natural phenomena have a soul which is the cause or source of some of the peculiar experiences that humans undergo and create in them feeling of awe and wonderment. The idea of spiritual belief which leads to the origin of religion, arises out of the concept that the soul exists independently of the body. One of the most common primitive conceptions of the cause of death is loss of the soul.23 Tylor further argues that the concept of these spiritual beings later developed into gods who are believed to possess superior powers and control the destiny of human beings.

According to Tylor, primitive man had certain experiences and even while he was sleeping, in his dreams he engaged in various types of activities like meeting his dead ancestors and having hallucinating experiences about them and other beings; while he was awake, he heard the echoes of his own voice; he saw his own reflections in ponds, pools and rivers; and he failed to disentangle himself from his shadow.24 According to Tylor, primitive man thought that there are two souls in a human being: a free soul which goes out of him, meets with some experiences and comes back and a body soul which results in death if it leaves the body. Primitive man must have come to the conclusion that when the soul leaves the body permanently the person dies: and his soul becomes a ghost or spirit. Tylor believes that an attitude of awe and reverence towards these spiritual beings forms

the core of the earliest form of primitive religion. Tylor further writes that originally beliefs in spirits emanated from such practices as ancestor worship.\textsuperscript{25} Thus, for him ancestor worship is the earliest form of worship.

According to Frazer, religion is a propitiation or conciliation of super-human power which is believed to control nature and man, and regards magic as erroneous application of the very simplest and elementary processes of mind.\textsuperscript{26} Frazer writes that: "Religion is the belief in super-natural by which spirits and ghosts can be induced to exercise it for the benefit of men, that is the foundation of rites and practices which; and it is from the same belief that everything which may be called magic and witchcraft draws its origin."\textsuperscript{27} Frazer thought that religion grew out of magic thus, for him, magic comes first, and then religion and eventually religion leads to scientific thinking thus placing magic, religion and science in an evolutionary sequence. Frazer also stressed the role of religious specialists such as magicians and priests in dealing with the world of the super-natural. The most important aspect Frazer emphasizes is on the study of magic, its types and functions. Most evolutionists believe in the progress from less advanced to more advanced stages. For them, the primitive societies were examples of crude phases of development. Thus, the evolutionists believed that in course of time, there was evolutionary development in religious beliefs and forms, and the progress was from polytheism towards monotheism.

The most comprehensive sociological treatment of religion has been done by Fustel de Coulanges who along with Robertson Smith developed a structural theory of religion arising out of the nature of primitive society.\textsuperscript{28} Robertson Smith emphasized that the practices of religion such as ceremonies, rites and rituals are more fundamental

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., p.227.
\textsuperscript{28} E.E. Evans Pritchard, op. cit, 1965, p.53.
than beliefs.\textsuperscript{29} It runs parallel to Durkheim's approach to religion in which his position is perhaps the greatest one in the history of modern sociology. He attempts to relate the content of religious beliefs to general characteristics of the social structure.\textsuperscript{30} For Durkheim, religion is a social fact and as such it is independent of individual psychology. According to him, religious phenomena grew out of the nature of social life itself, being in the simple societies bound up with other social facts. To Durkheim: "religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden."\textsuperscript{31} Durkheim verifies social functions of religion by giving examples of totem worship among the central Australian tribes. He chose totemism for analysis due to two reasons: first, he considered totemism to be an elementary form of religion; secondly, he considered that the sacred-profane dichotomy arose from the totemic practice. The sacred is clearly identified by the fact that it is protected and isolated by interdictions, profane things are those which belong to the everyday sphere of life.\textsuperscript{32} Religion changes the society into a moral community and for Durkheim, when society worships God, it worships itself since society is a moral-religious entity.

According to Durkheim, myths, legends, dogmas and beliefs represent the sacred power, virtues and relationship symbolize the profane world.\textsuperscript{33} Durkheim found the sacred-profane dichotomy to be at the center of any religion and only after performing certain rites, the profane can contact the sacred. These rites are derived from beliefs. The division of religion into two fundamental categories, namely, beliefs and rituals, corresponds to the difference between thought and action. For Durkheim, religion is nothing other than the

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\item \textsuperscript{29} Malcolm Hamilton, \textit{Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives: the Sociology of Religion} (London: Routledge), 1995, p.97.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Robertson Roland, op. cit., 1970, p.19.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Emile Durkheim, \textit{The Elementary forms of Religious life} (London: George Allen and Unwin), 1968, p.47.
\item \textsuperscript{32} E.E. Evans Pritchard, op. cit., 1965, p.56
\item \textsuperscript{33} Robertson Roland, op.cit., 1970, p.42.
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collective force of society over the individual. Religion 'is a system of ideas with which the individuals represent to themselves the society of which they are members, and the obscure but intimate relations which they have with it'. Durkheim also states that religion promotes the ascetic aspect of human behavior, encouraging self-discipline and self-sacrifice. It establishes group solidarity and harmony and obtains the network of social relationships in a given society.

Malinowski, like Durkheim, is a functionalist, who investigated the role of religion in society and Malinowski pursues religion as a reinforcing agency with the social norms and other value systems, leading to the promotion of social solidarity. However, unlike Durkheim, he does not conceptualize religion as a reflection of society as a whole, nor does he see religious rituals as the worship of society itself. According to Malinowski, the feeling of fear and sadness that arise in the minds of primitive people on some occasions, are overcome by falling back on to religious activities or by performing certain rituals that help them to get over the insecure feelings. For him, the essential function of religion is to help one to regain one's stability of mind and re-adjust to situations of emotional stress that had arisen. Malinowski states that much of the importance of religion applies to factors beyond the understanding and the control of man, which may affect the outcome of his efforts. Religion has been functioning as a tool for adaptation to any such situation. For example, when the Trobriand islanders would set out on a long journey, they would perform rituals and magic on the boat so that it would not give them trouble on the way. Such an exercise is carried out in all kinds of mental and physical instability. Public rituals have a social function, for they have been the cement of the social fabric;

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34 Emile Durkheim, op. cit., 1968, p.257.
and as such, is considered as being indispensable for the maintenance of morals. Funeral rites, in particular, serve to reassert the unity of the group. Religion contributes toward the integration or maintenance of either the society or the individual. Malinowski and other scholars have hypothesized certain "basic needs" of the individual and society; and the function of religion or any other item of culture is then the part they play in filling these needs.

Radcliffe-Brown shares the views of Durkheim because, for him, religion binds the complex system of human relationship which helps people to live in an orderly system. The social functions of religion play a predominant role in contributing to the formation and maintenance of a social order. Following Robertson Smith, he suggests that we should focus our attention on rituals rather than on beliefs, without treating rites as primary, for both are merely parts of a coherent whole. He indicates that ancestral cults are often associated with lineage structures, the sacrificial rites serving to reaffirm and strengthen those sentiments on which social solidarity depends. He maintained that religion expresses everywhere, in one form or another, in a sense of dependence on an outside power. He suggests that religion could best be understood not by thinking of it in the abstract and searching for origins but by explaining how it is related to the social life of a specific community. He also admitted that in some societies, there is a direct relationship between religion and social structure and in others, the relationship is indirect and not always easy to trace.

The commonality of these theories is that religious phenomena among the relatively less advanced societies arose out of relationships between social, psychological and natural phenomena. The functionalist theory of religion has been widely criticized for its

tendency to emphasize the unifying role of religion and ignore conflict generated by adherence to different beliefs. In the present context, however, the framework has some relevance as the Lois though increasingly exposed to Hinduism have retained many of their traditional beliefs and practices which bind the members together.

In fact, religion is one of the most important aspects of Lois culture and is firmly rooted in its physical ecology. What is found from the fieldwork after observing the minute details of the religious life of the Lois is that their beliefs possess elements of naturism, animism, ancestor worship as well as Hinduism. Like many other communities of the world, the Lois worship many gods under the manifestations of one supreme God to secure protection from suffering and pain and to give them a healthy, wealthy and good life. To secure this end, the Lois worship different manifestations of gods at different levels of organization such as, the household deities, the directional deities, the village deities (umanglais) and ancestors (apokpa). Several gods are worshipped but all gods gradually dissolved into one supreme god. Belief in witchcraft and evil spirits, sorcery, black magic and evil eyes are also common among the Lois. Blood sacrifice especially of animals is also practised among the Lois in connection with fertility cult and community welfare. Specialists such as priests acting as shamans help people combat witchcraft or protect the victims from the infliction of harm caused by the evil spirits. The priest and priestess also perform medical and psycho-analytical method of treatment. On every ritual and ceremonial occasion, the Lois worship their ancestors. The apokpa (ancestor) deities are also worshipped on all festivals and ceremonies and the Lois believe that the deities, specially the village deities, are very ferocious in nature and mete out serious illness or death to any offender. To appease the deities the Loi regularly resort to sacrifices and food offerings.

The Lois, like other ethnic groups in Manipur, mostly live in habitations surrounded by trees, plants, bamboos, shrubs, rivers and ponds, and their religion sharply bears the imprint of their surroundings. In social and religious parts of their culture, the sun, wind, the moon, stars, trees, animals, water, streams, hills, and earth play a vital role. Their interaction with such natural objects became part of their great cultural heritage. Whatever happens in their natural world, any happening beyond their control or any odd in their natural and social environment is generally attributed to the influence or mechanism of supernatural powers that ultimately result in the beliefs in various malevolent and benevolent spirits. To overcome all the anxieties and feelings of uncertainty believed to be created by those spirits and to get strength of mind, the Lois perform several rituals to appease the spirits. While many of these rituals are carried out within the confine of the family and lineage, such as life crisis rituals and rituals relating to healing of the sick, some like Lai Haraoba are carried out by the whole village.

From these brief observations on the religious practices of the Lois, it can be said that religion remains an integral part of their social life and calls for a detailed study. The study also tries to explore the various aspects of social organizations such as polity, economy and kinship.

There has not been a systematic study on Loi people. It has been an ignored and unexplored area both by anthropologists and sociologists. The present work is the first comprehensive ethnographic study, prior to which few piecemeal studies have been carried out mostly by foreign scholars. In fact, no one has attempted to examine the Loi life and culture in detail. It is hoped that the present study would be able to throw light on different aspects of the Loi society.
Objectives:

Broadly, the objectives of the study are:

1. To examine the social organization of the Loi with special focus on their religious beliefs and practices.
2. To examine the effect of the Hinduisation of Manipur on the social and religious life of the Loi.
3. To look into the political and economic organization of the Loi.
4. To explore the social history of the Loi and their relation to the Meitei.

In brief, the present research tries to give a holistic account of the Loi social structure by looking into the different parts of the system and the interrelation between these. This is made easier by the fact that the community is small in size with a well-knit social organization in which the customary laws and traditions are well adhered to by the people themselves, despite the forces of Hinduisation and, more recently, modernization. The findings of the study are presented in six chapters and the Conclusion.

In chapter I, an attempt has been made to highlight the origin of the Loi people, the process of enumerating and designating the Loi as Scheduled Castes and the relationships between the Loi communities and other ethnic groups, especially the Meitei, whom the Loi closely identify with.

Chapter II highlights the religious beliefs and practices of the people. The Loi have remained outside the pale of the Hindu civilization and are governed by their traditional ways of life. Evidence shows their religion is a mixture of animism, naturism and Hinduism. Till now, the Loi believe in ancient faiths and as a matter of fact, traditional forms of worship has not yet disappeared. Their cultural life enlivened by the performance of magnificent ceremonies, rituals and festivals accompanied by beautiful dance and song, is presently facing the challenge of Hinduisation.

Chapter 3 discusses the rite of passage of the Loi starting from the pregnancy of a woman and the practice followed at the time of the
birth of a child, other rites and life cycle rituals to be performed related to every stage of life unto the last rite performed at the time of death.

Chapter 4 focuses on the kinship organization of the Loi, looking in particular at the family, clan, lineage, marriage pattern and kinship terminology.

Chapter 5 discusses the village level politics highlighting the importance of village chiefs and other village officials in the administration of the village and maintenance of law and order followed in the past. With the introduction of the representative forms of government, the traditional political system has been replaced by the democratic system but the traditional order has yet to fully disappear.

Chapter 6 deals with the economic life of the people and also highlights the changes that take place in the realm of economic development.

Chapter 7 summarizes the research findings.

Methodology and Sources of Data

The sources of materials for the study are collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources comprise data collected through empirical observation, which include participant observation and interview techniques. To gain a deeper understanding of the Lois culture and tradition and the meaning people attach to religion, a study of legends, folktales, folksongs and ritual chants form a major part of the fieldwork.

Information on religious beliefs, practices and festivals are collected from both priests and priestesses and knowledgeable persons through intensive interview. Besides these, observations of the religious celebrations and rituals have been made in the villages during fieldwork. Case studies have also been conducted to collect data particularly on maibas, maibis and polygynous marriage.

Many of the interviewees believed that the researcher has the knowledge about the overall social system of the community since the researcher is an insider. Therefore during the course of fieldwork, one of the most important points that had to be kept in mind was to be
cautious regarding the community's response to the various questions asked. Care has also to be taken to note the variations witnessed in the beliefs and practices.

During the fieldwork, it was found that in many ceremonies, the procedure followed by the villagers tend to vary from one village to another and the articles used are also different, though the purpose and occasion are the same. Despite the small size of population, every Loi village has its own norms and traditions that the villagers adhere to. While these variations highlight the importance of local structures in shaping people's behaviour on the whole they are too minor to produce division in the society.

Besides primary sources, various secondary sources have also been referred. The secondary sources include books dealing with Manipur in general and the Lois in particular. Apart from articles published in various journals, research and seminar papers presented on the Loi have also been consulted.

**Limitations of the Study**

It is very difficult to carry out a comprehensive study incorporating all the aspects of a community within a short span of time, as the social and economic systems vary, to a considerable extent, among different villages of the community, which has been discussed in detail in the following chapters. Socio-economic and political changes are continuously taking place as a result of the dynamic forces operating in the country and within the community itself. Some of these changes are generated within the structure of the Loi community and also from some exogenous forces, which, in turn, are affecting the internal structure and functioning of the system. Within this limitation, a sincere attempt has been made to systematically understand the structure of the Loi society and the organizational principles that bind the different parts together. This attempt is important as process of modernization and change may soon push traditional practices into oblivion. As would be seen in the following chapters, this possibility is sharply indicated by the threat posed to the institutions of *maibas* and *maibis* (ritual specialists) by the spread of the modern education and values.