CHAPTER - 2
GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

Manipur is located between 23°50'N and 25°41'N latitude, and 93°2'E and 94°47'E longitude in the extreme North-Eastern part of the country. The state is almost rectangular in shape with a fertile alluvial plain in the centre surrounded by hill ranges on all sides. It is bounded by Nagaland in the North, Assam in the West, Mizoram in the southwest and Myanmar on the East and South-East with effective physical and administrative functional barriers. The hilly potters of Manipur with whom this volume is concerned are:

1. Oinam Mao (Poumai) who inhabit the hills north of the valley in Senapati district of Manipur. The Senapati district is bordered by Nagaland state on the north, Ukhrul district on the east, Tamenglong district on the west and east and west districts of Imphal on the south. The district is almost a mountainous region having varying altitudes ranging from 1061 to 1788 metres, it receives rainfall of 1135.5 mm with maximum temperature 33.0°C and a minimum temperature of 4.0°C (District information Office Bulletin, 1997) Japfii and Kobru and some of the highest peaks of the district. Barak, Imphal, Iril, Mayankang are

\[\text{Vedaja Sanjenba: 'Manipur Geography and Regional Development', 1998:14}\]
the important rivers draining the district. The biggest river Barak rises from Liyai in Pao-Mata sub-division and flows towards Cachar in Assam through Tamenglong district. The district is inhabited by various tribes such as Mao, Poumai, Maram, Thadou, Zeliang, Tangkhul, Maring, etc. and some non-tribals like the Nepali.²

2. Nungbi (Longpi) of Tangkhul who inhabit the hills immediately to the east and north-east of the valley of Manipur falls in Ukhrul district. The Ukhrul sub-division was established in 1919. The sub-division was upgraded to a district in 1969. It is very old and beautiful hill district in Manipur. Ukhrul district is bounded by Nagaland on the north, Myanmar on the east, Thoubal and Chandel district on the south and Senapati and Imphal East district on the west. The total areas of the district is 4544 sq. km. The altitude ranges from 914 metres to 2835 metres above the sea level. Ukhrul district is one of the important places for tourism. The famous Shiroi Lily flower blooms on Shiroi peak in the month of May/June every year which attract many tourists. The places of tourists interest are Khangkhui Mangsor cave and Khayang Dilily water fall worth mentioning since it is a hill district.³ This district is inhabited by the Tangkhul Naga tribe.

OINAM MAO (POUMAI)

Migration According to the traditional history that was handed down to us through generations by way of oral history, folk songs and folklore, the ancestors of Oinam village were believed to have migrated from Makhel village. Since they were at Makhel, they manufactured earthen pot known as Pouli in local dialect. With the growth of population, many moved to find greener pasture.⁴

Before leaving Makhel, ancestor of Oinam village received a divine directive with a packet of meal through their ancestral mother Naola who advised them to settle where the rooster crows. Accordingly, both ancestor Tei and ancestress Poune of Oinam along with the ancestors of other villages (Koide, Purul, Khongta) proceeded in their exodus down towards the Barak valley in the west. The four groups mentioned above are known as Lapoana.⁵ This group then proceeded upwards to the south through Nghaphouzle range and eventually reached Koide where they had a meal before journeying through Paodifi. When they untie their packed meal, provided by their ancestral mother they discovered a cat’s head in one of the packets. They remembered the words of the ancestral mother, “The man whose meal pack contained cat’s head is to be the head of the family”.

⁵ Informant Pani Varay and Ngaoni Shangne
They were happy. However, as they did not get any divine signal to settle there, they proceed further towards the present Oinam village in search of a permanent place. As soon as they reached Oinam, the rooster crowed. The ancestress then dug up the earth with her walking stick and smelt the soil. She found the smell similar to the soil of Makrafii. They were happy to find similar soil suitable for making earthen pot.\(^6\)

Ever since, they made the present Oinam village as their permanent habitated. They named the village as Ngimai or Oinam which, in Manipuri term means “a village discovered through smelling”. Therefore, the naming of the village Oinam is quite related and significant with the making of earthen pots.\(^7\)

With the passage of time, Oinam village multiplied in population. It was soon over crowded for dwelling as well as for cultivation. Therefore, some of the Oinam villagers were compelled to abandon the village in search of a better location elsewhere. By now, some new villages had been established in different places. They are Ngamju, Jinsong, Sorbung and Laila villages. As such, four more villages had been formed out of Oinam village. Besides, some of the Oinam villagers had migrated to Ukhrul

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\(^6\) R.S. Dowang: Op. cit

\(^7\) Ibid
The village is naturally stocked and fortified by the hill range of Laipoku, Sei and Kho in the South-east and South-west respectively with emerald forest. In the North, East and West there are patches of green paddy fields in terraces. Like other tribes, they might have chosen the hill top to be their village. The tribes, as a rule, always select hill tops for their dwelling places. This is done mainly for security reason, as head-hunting was prevalent among these tribes. This entailed inter-village rivalry. There are different terrains in this village. Some places are steep and rugged, some are thick and dark forests with evergreen trees, some are plain and slushy, some are rocky mountains. The plain and slightly sloping parts are cultivated as their paddy fields, while the upland mountainous region of the forest clustered with bamboos and trees is the home of wild animal of all kinds.

The major part of the village being covered by the forests, wild fruits are not only varied but are also wild lemon, wild bananas, wild mangoes, wild mulberries, wild cherries and other indigenous fruits are found in plenty. It is also natural that there are lot of wild animals and birds in the forest. Crops are rice, oat, millet, maize, pulse, pea, beans of various kinds, grams, soyabean, etc. Other crops are tobacco, oil seeds, and vegetable are
district and Thangal area in Senapati district and were absorbed into the tribes where they now dwell. In the beginning there were only four Lapoana villages but now there are thirteen Lapoana villages, namely Koide, Oinam, Thempa, Ngamju, Jingsong, Sorbung, Laila, Khamsom, Khapung, Keija, Rafa, Kapou, and Purul.

Physical features

Oinam Village is situated in Purul Sub-Division of Senapati district. The Village is accessible via motorable track east from Maram Centre on the National Highway No. 39. The distance from Maram centre to the village is around 25 kms. The village is reached after crossing the Barak river and passing through Khoide and Purul Atongba villages. These villages are inhabited by the Poumai tribe. Oinam village is located on the ridge of a hill range which extends in the East-West direction. In the north Loipoching, south - Jaoching, west - Jaokuching and in the East - Khoching respectively. To the west of the village is Thingbokhullen, Ngamju and Tinsong in the south, Koide village in the north and Purul village in the east.

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8 Ibid
9 Informant, Ka Khopuneme
10 Keisham Shantibala Devi: “Collections of Musem Artifacts” 2000:59
potato, cabbage, pumpkin, mustard leaf, squash, tomato, cucumber, brinjal, turnip. Fruits are banana, guava, pear, lemon, and fig. Spices are chillies, ginger, onion, garlic, coriander, etc. They rear pigs, dogs, cats, chicken, ducks, etc. Buffaloes and cows are kept in large number for meat and cultivation. The people relish meat and therefore, they rear domestic animals for food and sacrifices. Timber, uningthou, pine, angrou, oak, bamboo are the forest products. Wild animals are tiger, leopard, bear, barking deer, wild boar, wild cat, monkey, hedgehog, etc.

The tributaries of the Barak river which passes through Oinam village are: Voh from Purul to Barak, Dirae from Kho to Barak, Thai from Voh to Barak, Cha from Voh to Barak. The mountains are Kho, Laipo and Jamang.

Economic Life

As Oinam village is located in the hilly area away from the commercial centres, their economy is agrarian in nature. Though a few educated persons are employed in the government jobs and depend on their salaries, many work in the field cultivating food crops. Apart from cultivation, every male adult is expected to manufacture household goods such as baskets, mats, wooden plates, and furniture, to add to their
economy. Every female adult is expected to be able to spin and weave on their looms to provide clothing for the whole family. Besides, women make earthen pots for sale and domestic use. The earthen pots made by the potters is known as Pouli or Poumai pot and this is used by the neighbouring villages for their utensils as well as for performing socio-religious rites.

Manufacturing of earthen pots is a virtual monopoly of Oinam village from time immemorial. And this was their main trade in pre-Christian days. Women are expert in making pot, but their male members are restricted from doing this craft. Although the working tools are primitive and mostly wooden, they can make ten to fifteen pots a day. This provides sufficient earning to supplement their income.

Road Communication

The village is accessible via a motorable track, east from Maram centre on the National Highway 39. The distance from Maram centre to the village is around 25 Kms. Exporting their commodities to the outside markets has been a problem due to lack of proper transportation. The bus service is provided once or twice a week. Even when there is a bus service, it is usually loaded with people and has no place for pots or any other
goods. Because of this, Oinam people usually walk for 3 hours to Purul Atongba and catch the bus to go to Senapati, Imphal, Kohima, etc.

Festivals

The people are hard working. Festival are the only occasions that the people enjoy after toiling hard throughout the year. These festivals made them forget the days hard work and merry making soothe their aching body. The major festivals are:-

1. Chithenga This is celebrated in the month of February. Chithenga is a seed sowing festival in which the village Chief sows the seed first and the villagers follow suit later. On the evening of this day, there is wrestling, longjump, javelin throw, shot-put competition between the youth. The men goes and catch bird locally known as Lani. The prediction was observed by the chirping sound, if the bird chirp "Chuli chuli" it predict good sign and for success. If it chirp "Chek chek" its a bad omen. The bird was pierced on the stick locally known as Chandu and placed on the above entrance of the dormitory. This symbolise that they are the winner and the warrior. The young boys and girls sing heroic songs, tell stories and make jokes.
2. **Sünga** This is in the month of April. It is a festival to fix the date to start plantation and to get the prediction of the year by butchering a cow. Piercing with spear if plenty of water comes out, there will be lots of water. The elderly group including headman known as *Chame*, which consist of 24 members. The host who offered country rice beer believed to bring blessing to the family. Beaf meat was distributed to all the family for *Tülu* festival. The prediction of the year was observed by cooking the meat, if the gravy spill down in the fire while cooking it predict bad harvest. The date was fixed on this day for plantation by looking at the position of the sun. If the sun’s position is a little different from the actual position the plantation time has come, this gives the date and it was fixed according to it.

3. **Tülu** This is a festival of paddy transplantation observed for three days. The Chief transplants the paddy first and the villagers follow. First day, animals were killed and invited relatives, friends from different village. There is a grand wrestling competition to see the strongest men. After this competition, boys go out visiting girls house. If the girls do not open the door menfolk has the right to break it and enter. The day was spend by drinking rice beer. Second day, the chief transplant the paddy first and the villager (either mother or father) follows by taking a cooked curry.
The curry consists of a leaf locally known as *Paimope*, a pair of fish and the meat distributed in *Siinga* festival. This was sacrificed to field god. The third day, dropping the relative with packed meat and rice beer.

4. *Lakhanganga* Before the millet harvest the villagers go to the field plucking two branches of millet and placed it on the house wall. It was observed by fasting till noon. Before this festival all the plantation had to be completed. This festival is for fasting and praying to god to protect the crop as the plantation is over. This is a two days festival. In the evening the men practiced throwing spears as a practice for a war.

5. *Raothaiho* This is the name of the month. In this month two festivals are celebrated. Firstly on the 9th, they will repair the road clan-wise and have rice beer. It is a festival for man. Secondly, on the 20th the prediction of the year is done by detaining a chicken on a small basket without feeding until it dies itself. In order to save from children, it was hanged on high tree. This is done in chief house. During this period no villager goes to the field until the chicken dies. The prediction of the year was observed through the dying position of the chicken. The head of the chicken was observed whether it falls to the north, east, south and west. It is believed that the
place where the backside of the head fall is not good. It predict bad harvest.
If the direction of stomach is to the village, it is good as it is compared to
richness. Finally, when the face of the chicken is faced toward the village
it is believed that it will be a good year.

6. Danguga This is celebrated in the month of November. It is a festival
performed to bid farewell to the end of the year and to welcome the new year\(^{11}\).

**NUNGBI (LONGPI)**

**Migration** There are different traditions about the migration. One legend
goes that a very brave man called Shimray led the Tangkhul Nagas. This
dy party proceeded by cutting banana trees so that those who comes after
them may follow the sign. However, since banana trees sprouted quickly,
the later-wave of migration followed the remnant party thinking that it
would be difficult to catch them (Tangkhuls). This is why the majority of
the Nagas are found in Mao Maram, Tamenglong and Nagaland areas. After
sojournning many years, perhaps staying here and there, the Tangkhul Nagas
reached a particular high mountain called "Shokvao," means that their
party was called with the loudest voice possible so that all of them should
gather together there. After staying there for sometime, the party

\(^{11}\) Informant, Raoping Khapuneme, 104 years of Oinam
proceeded to a better place called, "Meizailung/Mavalung," now at Ukhrul. It is said that there was a big stone from which Shimray ignited fire for the party from which every family made fire and proceeded to "Rangatak" where the last dispersal of the Tangkhul Nagas took place in Nungbi (Longpi). From here his descendants went to all directions.\textsuperscript{12}

The other tradition is that they were migrated from Makhel from where they journeyed to Chingchui and Paoyi, then to Phungcham and to Nungbi (Longpi).\textsuperscript{13} Some others are believe to have come from Imphal, then to Shokvao, to Humbum and to Nungbi (Longpi). This name was given because they gathered at Nungbi (Longpi) (Long apam hili ungkaziplaga ngathan naowa. After gathering at this place they scattered to different villages like Lunghar, Khamasom, Chingai, Kuirei, Kalhang and many other villages for their settlement.)\textsuperscript{14}

Physical Features

Nungbi (Longpi) Village is situated in Chingai Sub-Division of Ukhrul District - after passing through Langdang, Shiroi, Lunghar and then Nungbi (Longpi). The village is reached from Ukhrul via a motorable road of around 39 Kms. These villages are inhabited by the Tangkhul Naga tribe.

\textsuperscript{12} R.R. Shimray, 'Origin and Culture of Nagas', 1985:31
\textsuperscript{13} Informant, Vareichung Awungshi of Longpi Khullen.
\textsuperscript{14} Informant, Maringmi Sharon 87 yrs. of Longpi Kajui.
Nungbi (Longpi) village is located on the ridge of a hill range which extends in a North-South direction. To the north of the village is Poi, Huishu, to its south is Lunghar, to its west is Kalhang, Kuirei and to its east is the Khamasom.

The hilly terrain of the village is well drained by Ngarai and Wara stream which starts from Sihai and Shiroi Kashong range respectively. These two streams join together and is thence called Wangjing river. This river flows through Chingjaroi, and turns northwardly in gentle pace along Jessami and to Nagaland Manipur boundary.

As these villages are located in a hilly area, the mountains on the east are Shakhok Kaphung, west is Nungbi (Longpi) Sara Kaphung, north Zingshan Kaphung. The village has no thick forest, almost all the forests were cut down for cultivation. There are rocky mountains with little grass. It is the place where different species of fauna like bears, deers, wild buffaloes, monkeys, porcupines and many other wild animals are found in the forest. Attractive birds of different varieties like hornbill, cuckoos, and many other varieties add to the scenic luster. Honey bees of different species are found in plenty. Besides, flora remarkable for their exquisite
beauty like orchids of different varieties bloom almost throughout the season. Many other attractive flowers of different species that bloom throughout the season are found in plenty to indicate the season of this touchingly beautiful land.

**Economic Life**

The Nungbi (Longpi) depend mainly on agriculture for their livelihood. Land is the most important economic resource of the people and almost the entire population is engaged as cultivators. They practise both terrace and jhum cultivation. Rice, the staple food, is the main product from their field. Other important cash crops are potatoes, tomatoes, ginger, peas, chilli, cucumber, beans, pumpkin, cabbage, maize, sesame, etc. These crops are grown in jhum field. Cotton is also grown and tobacco is cultivated. Apart from cultivation, man is engaged in making earthen pot known as *Hamrai*. This is used by all the Tangkhul villages for their domestic purposes, as well as for performing socio-religious rites.

**Road Communication**

The Imphal-Ukhrul-Jessami road is one of the important means of transport and communication. Ukhrul is the only town in the district. It is
linked with the capital of Manipur, by the State Highway No. 150 Ukhrul-Imphal road. It is 82 kilometres from Ukhrul to Imphal. The other road enters from Kohima via Pfutsero - Jessami on the extreme north of the district.

Festivals

Living in a peaceful fertile land of excellent climate, they have an abundance of natural gifts to satisfy their needs and requirements. The Nungbi (Longpi) perform their different festivals from time to time with the change of seasons.

1. Luira Phanit

It is the greatest agricultural “seed sowing” festival of the year, the potters cannot do the firing of pots before the celebration of this festival. It was believed that fire burning will ruin the seed which was to be sown. During this festival, the headman plants every crop to be planted and then only the villagers can start the plantation.
2. Luishom

Rice plantation is known as Luishom. In the days of yore the first rice plantation was done by the village headman. It is believed that if any other family other than the headman started the rice plantation, the harvest of the year would be poor and there might be famine in the village.

3. Mangkhap

Mangkhap festival is the occasion on which every Tangkhul takes rest and is in a festive mood. Because the cultivators were very busy during plantation and everyone is exhausted. As such, they take rest and spend the days in feasting, singing, dancing and in merry-making. During this festival, every family kills their domestic animals like buffaloes, cows, pigs, chickens, etc. according to their ability. As a sign of happiness and joy, every family lights up resinated pine-wood in front of their house. This symbolically shows that they have now passed over to a brighter period of happiness and a brighter future. They pray for a bumper crop and all round prosperity of the society to the almighty God.
4. *Chumpha*

*Chumpha* is a festival in which the women folk play an important part. It is the festival to mark the beginning of taking out newly harvested rice from the granary. This new rice eating festival begins with a taboo for the male members to stay in the house and, so they spend their night outside the village gate. Moreover, since it is a women’s festival all the implements or weapons used by the menfolk are also kept outside the house. At the time of removing the paddy from the granary, the women offer prayers to the supreme being so that she may have enough food for the whole year round. While removing the paddy from the granary or storehouse, woman should not take out more than the family’s needs. She must be sure that the paddy will be adequate only for one day, for it is believed that they must consume it early in the morning before sunrise, otherwise ill luck would befall them. In this, the cooking of rice should be done with a new pot. While the menfolk spend the night outside the village gate, they go out for fishing and hunting in the day time. In the evening the family may take the new rice with a curry prepared out of the collection made by the menfolk, like meat, fish or vegetables. Thus they serve fresh food on that day.
5. Zavar The Chumpha festival is closed along with the ceremony called Zavar, it means double eating. On the Zavar day also the woman or housewife should take the paddy from the granary and dry it in the sun and pound it properly. While drying the paddy, proper care must be taken so that not a single grain is eaten by the birds or chickens. If it is taken by the birds or chickens, it is considered to be a bad omen. To avoid such a bad omen, the work is properly done. During Zavar also the same kind of food is prepared and is eaten in the same manner.\textsuperscript{15}

**Historical Background of Potmaking**

Oinam The history of earthen pot making by Oinam village is as old as the origin of Makhel village. It is said that Oinam village had been blessed with the art of pot making by the special gift bestowed by the ancestral mother “Painaorou” on the eve of her departure from this world.\textsuperscript{16}

The legendary tales of Poumai handed down from generation to generation through folk songs and folk tales. It says that after the death of the ancestral father of humankind, the ancestral mother lived with her children for some period of time. She taught them how to cook, to dress and to cultivate field. But when she knew that her time of death was drawing near she called all her children one by one. According to this

\textsuperscript{15} Maya Gachui, *Hao Miun Ngashan kala Tongkhul Khararchan* (History of Tongkhul), 1986:37-49.

theory, the progenitor of Meiteis among others was gifted with a solid ball of aluminium along with a piece of advice to make utensils with that. The ancestral mother then gave a soft ball of clay to the Progenitor of Oinam village and advised him to make earthenware with that ball of clay for utensils as well as for performing Ceremonial rites. Without an earthen pot no ritual purpose would be completed. Accordingly, earthen pots have been used by all tribe of Makhel stocks till this day as utensils as well as for ritual purposes, specially at a new birth, construction of new houses, feast of merit, harvesting time and marriage etc. Earthen pots were their only utensils besides wooden plates before the present aluminium products were introduced in the market. 17

The ancestors of Oinam are believed to have migrated from Makhel. Since they were at Makhel, they manufactured earthen pot, but because of the congestion of the place, they moved from their original abode in search of a permanent location elsewhere. They settled at Oinam village and found the soil similar to the soil of Makhrafii. And the making of pot was continued from the ancestress. 18

**Nungbi (Longpi)** There is no definite idea as to when the making of earthen pot began and who started the making. Since, there is no written document,

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the only history left behind was through oral from father to son and so on. And while transmitting through this process many facts have been left out, twisted or forgotten. This is the main reason for not knowing the time and by whom it was started.

Through a report, Oinam and Nungbi (Longpi) were together once at Makhel. They were fighting for the pot and started pulling the pot, it was broken into half the upper portion of the pot was taken by Nungbi (Longpi), the lower basal portion by the Oinam. This shows that they were from Makhel and the pot was made at Makhel from the time of ancestral and ancestress. The report says that the Tangkhuls came together with Maos, Poumals, Marams and Thangals because all of them have reference to their dispersal from Makhel a Maram village in Senapati district. They had also erected Megaliths at Makhel in memory of their having dispersed from there in various direction.

It was the warrior who started the making of pot, while they were hidding under the cave. The warrior took the clay mixed with water and made the pot with the hand in giving the shape to the pot, the pot that was first made was Shaksaham.

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19 Informant, Yarhang Tallanao, 71 yrs. of Nungbi (Longpi) Kajui.
20 Muivah Ramganyung, 'An Introduction of Ukhrul', TBL Centenary; 1996:16
31 Informant, Yanglung Luiram, 72 yrs. of Nungbi (Longpi) Kajui.