CHAPTER II

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The Poumai Tribe is mainly concentrated in Senapati District of Manipur but also found in Phok district of Nagaland. Senapati lies between the longitude of 93.47°E - 94.18°E and latitude of 25.10°N - 25.31°N covering an area of 1249 sq km. The altitude varies from 1061 m to 1788 m above main sea level and has maximum temperature of 33°c and minimum temperature of 4°c. The land is of Himalayan type and it is made up of several parallel hill ranges having peaks and slopes. The mean annual rainfall in this area is 1135.5 mm.

Forest area covers about 80% of the land. There are two important hill ranges in this area (i) LULA HOUDU and (ii) KHOUCHI. The Lula Houdu hill range is located on the northern side of Phuba and Liyai Villages (Poumai village) and the highest peak is 2500 m above sea level and the highest of the Khouchi is 2345 m above sea level approximately. Many important rivers originate from this area. The Barak river originates from the west of Paomata area, the Ngairi river on the east of Chilivai area and the Iril river on the middle west of Chilivai.
The People

The Poumais inhabit the North-east side of Senapati District and are neighbours of the Maram, Mao, Chakeshasang tribes on its north west; the Tangkhul on its north east and the Kukis of Saikul on the south. The Poumais dominate two sub-divisions (i) Paomata sub-division (ii) Purul sub-division. In addition to this, 1/3 of Tadubi and some part of Kangpokpi sub-division are physically occupied by them. Then Poumai population is estimated to be 1,27,179 as per 1997 revenue census. There are 62 Poumai Villages in Senapati. The Poumai has a total electorate of 65,088 as per 1998 census who predominated the two seats of Assembly constituencies namely (i) 47 / ST Assembly constituency (ii) 48 / ST Assembly constituency. The literacy rate of the Poumais as per 1997 census report is 41.08% among the males and 20.03% for female.

The term “Poumai “ is said to have derived from the name of a person called 'Pou', who was the founder of the group that first reached Makhel. In course of time the population increased and they scattered away to various directions to be known as (i) Paomata (ii) Leopaona (iii) Chilevai. The Poumai possesses Mongoloid racial characteristics. Skin colour ranges from yellowish brown to darkish brown. Straight and black hair and presence of epicanthic fold, mesorrhinic nose and medium to below medium statures are general somatoscopic characteristics of the people.

Origin of the Poumai, like many other tribes of Manipur is shrouded in obscurity. No one of the present generation can tell about when and where did they come from. A common story of origin is that they emerged out of a cave
(maiteizhi) from a subterranean region and arrived at a place called Makhel, in Senapati district. This story of origin of coming out of the cave is narrated by all the tribes of Manipur. Such an old story must have spread from one tribe to another in the past and ultimately became a story for all. So, extra attention on such a story will certainly be a less meaningful exercise. By saying so we cannot deny the importance of folksongs / folktales and other traditional ritualistic practices that may provide clues of the past. Unfortunately, conversion into Christianity has gradually erased many of such cultural practices from the mind of today's people. Moreover, time has introduced variations in the opinion of the so-called “aged and learned” persons of different Poumai localities about their origin. But a few remnants of folksongs that are still in the mind of a few old persons unveil that the Poumai forefathers came from a watery domain called “SILIZHAI” which means violent sea and arrived at MAKHRIFII (Makhel, the place above mentioned). Origin from a watery domain has its merit if we look at the geo-morphological structure of Manipur. The valley is surrounded by series of mountain ranges forming a bowl-shaped structure. Mythology of the Meiteis, the major community of the state, also narrates that the land was once full of water. The Koubru peak in Senapati district was the first to dry and hence the abode of almighty God, Koubru. And it was the first place that mankind had settled. Such mythological sources provide clue upto that period when they found the land with full of water, not beyond that. No clue could be traceable as to when and from which part of the world did they come. Briefly stating, mythology began with this land (Manipur) itself.
For the Poumai, *Makhel* is the first place to have settled and "Pou" was the eldest person and leader of the group. Name of the tribe itself is derived from his name. He remained in *Makhel, Paomata* village while others dispersed in different directions and established villages one after another such as *Saranamei* village (known as *Siifi*), *Leopaona* and *Chillivai* etc. Many other villages have now developed from these villages. They are *Maiba, Phuba, Liyai, Tungam, Tungjoy, Ngafu (Koide), Hrrimai (Purul), Shomei (Thingbon Khunou), Schochaoma (Thingba Khullen), Phraomei (Kadom), Liamai (Lakhamai), Poumai (Shirong) and Shamai* etc. Till today, the Poumai people describes *Makhel* as a sacred place, the sanctity of which is evident by the big *Rasu* tree (Banyan), three monoliths representing God, man and tiger (about 3 km away from *Makhel* proper), other monoliths representing different groups of people like tribals, Meiteis and outsiders (*mayang*) and a wild pear tree *Tyaobe* (Chutebu) that is believed to have grown from the walking stick used by *Pou*, the progenitor. One will find all these evidences till today.

The Poumai tribe is divided into three groups, such as (i) *Paomata* (ii) *Leopaona* and (iii) *Chillivai*. Their society is based on patrilineal descent and patrilocal residence with primogeniture mode of inheritance. There are more than dozen exogamous clans among the Poumais, each of which may consist of a number of lineages. Every Poumai village is found to have three to four such clans. Name of the clans (*Khel*) and their respective lineages, as learned by the investigator are shown below:
(A) Paomota region (Saranamei village)

Clan (Khel)

(i) Rahmai

Lineages

Damai

Rimai

Pinghidumai

Vimai

Romai

Saichamai

(ii) Dumai

No lineage

(iii) Yumai

Ramai, Roshnimai, Lemai, Domai, Sachamai

iv) Poumai

Sanabveiinya, Hamaii, Ramai, Rasiimai.

(B) Leopaona group (Purul Akutpa village)

Clan (Khel)

(i) Shotamai

No lineage

(ii) Pouhaina

No lineage

(iii) Dutaomai

No lineage.

(C) Chillisvai group (Lakhamai village)

Clan (Khel)

(i) Zhaifiinah

Lineages

Pouchamai, Vakhamai, Hromai, Khamai

(ii) Dunah Vonah

Thoshamai, Dumai, Pouviima

(iii) Mepoumai

Shapoumai, Miipoumai, Mepradumai

(iv) Lofiipoumai

Lofiimai, Paomai
The Poumais are, by and large, monogamous and nuclear family is more common. As mentioned above, marriage within the same clan is prohibited. But marriage with cross cousins, even with maternal parallel cousins (Mother’s sisters’s daughter) are permitted. Marriage by elopement, that usually takes place against the consent of the parents of one or both prospective partners, is not encouraged. In marriage by negotiation, the first proposal comes from the bridegroom side and the decision taken by the bride’s side is binding. Quantum of movable and immovable properties to be given by both the sides as marriage gifts are settled before marriage. Marriage by negotiation takes five days during which a series of ritualistic activities are performed. Final and formal wedding ceremony is celebrated in the groom’s residence. But after conversion into Christianity the Poumais have given up these age-old practices in the favour of new Christian way of marriage in church. Christianity seems to have further strengthened their traditional adherence to monogamy. If a man happens to take another woman (second wife) in the presence of his wife and children he is not entitled to get his parental property. Pre marital sex, adultery and rape, etc. are all offensive to the society and depending upon the gravity of the crime penalty ranges from fine in cash or kind, public reprimandation to expulsion from the society.

After marriage a woman becomes a clan member of her husband. Among the Poumais, woman never inherits parental property except the gifts, given at the time of marriage and festive occasions. Senior most male member is the head of the family. He must be obeyed by all the members. Women are very laborious. They do almost every kind of work. In addition to the indispensable
domestic chores like, cooking, cleaning of homestead area, washing clothes, looking after the children and the domestic animals (pigs, buffaloes, cow or fowls etc.), foraging of food and collection of firewood, fetching water from streams etc. womenfolk also do agricultural works like tilling the jhoom fields with hoe, weeding, harvesting, threshing and what not! Over and above, they weave clothes and retain their traditional costumes. They go to the market places to sell all kind of items like vegetables, cloths or basketry item etc. to earn cash. In short, women may be described as the economic backbone of the family. They are, however, refrained from administrative activities, which are considered to be absolute responsibilities of menfolk. Construction of house, felling trees and cleaning forest, hunting, cultivation and horticultural activities, weaving, basketry items, iron smelting and blacksmithy are done by menfolk.

Rice is the staple food. They cherish meat of almost every kind of animals, viz. pork, beef, dog, chicken, wild birds and animals including monkey. Distillation of liquor and brewing of rice beer is done in most of the families. The most popular crop grown by them is, of course, rice, the staple food. Other popularly growing crops are maize, potato, ginger and cucumber in particular. One will find wide plantation of cannabis along the hill slopes of the Pounau inhabited areas. This must be the main resort of earning cash by the people, although the practice is against the law of the country. A casual visitor cannot easily raise question like, “how do they sell and who are the buyers.”
Size of the Poumai village ranges from 50 to 600 households. Every village is governed by a chief (maveo) with a council of elders called Tsiimai / chame. The council is divisible into Yaochimai or chachangme, who enjoy the cabinet status and Thaipa or Thikhei, the assistants or runners. Yaochimei post is hereditary while Thaipa members are nominated. The chief usually belongs to the clan of first settler, and the post is hereditary. In case a chief is heirless, then a new chief is chosen which is a very delicate and lengthy process. The person must be physically perfect, must have sons and daughters. He has to pass through a series of tests, like sowing pumpkin seeds, paddy seeds and rearing a cock, etc. Whether the seeds sown by him are fruitful and productive or fail to grow; how does the cock grow up and crow etc. are carefully observed. Above all, he must be acceptable by all.

The chief plays significant role in social, political and religious sphere of the village. He inaugurates the cultivation genna (rite) “dei dao souyu” every year, and he first sows the seeds. When the monsoon is late or poor he performs “dzii khoyo” genna. If epidemic breaks out in the village, he will set free a cock at the gate of the village to propitiate the concerned Rashi (spirit). In certain occasions of the village, the chief observes fasting for 2 to 3 days together to divert from disturbance of rain, thunder and other unpredictable eventualities. He drinks rice beer only during this fasting period.

The chief in consultation with Tsiimai, the council, governs the village. Maintenance of law and order, settlement of disputes of different types are done by the Chief and Yaochimai, the council members of cabinet status. All the settlement and cultivable areas are distributed among the people
depending upon the ability of an individual or a family from time to time. For example, if a family is not in a position to cultivate the whole area that they covered last year, the uncovered part in this year may forego to another family. This is regulated by the chief and his cabinet. House of the chief is the law court and also centre of administration. There are several traditional methods of taking oath and ordeals to settle disputes among the villagers. Quantum of penalty to be imposed to a criminal may range from fine in cash or kind to expulsion from the society depending upon the nature of the crime, committed.

It is reported that every Poumai village, in the olden days had dormitories for boys and girls separately. After family, dormitory was the only best institution for enculturation and socialisation of the maturing members of the Poumai society. The boys and girls began to attend dormitory with the attainment of puberty. The boys dormitory is called “Kechi” and “Louchi” for the girls. The dormitories were under the control of appointed senior citizens, a man for the boys and a woman for the girls. Here, they learnt to work together, lived together, helped together and sang together. The boys visited girls dormitory in the night to sing songs, cracked jokes, narrated folk stories, exchanged news and views. Thus, at the dormitories the youths were moulded, developed personalities, built their character, learnt tactics of games and sports, the skills of hunting, agriculture, building of house, crafts and looms, and many other various social activities. They knew each others life and thus love began at the dormitory and chose partner of the right kind of would be wife and husband.
Invasion of Christianity among the Poumais is reported to have started in 1927. Except a few of them, almost all of them are now Christians. They believe in the existence of a supreme God Ramai, the creators of universe, non-living things and all living beings including man. There are also a member of benevolent and malevolent spirits. Two very important benevolent spirits are Kurako the protector of house and Lurako, the God of crops and the protectors of agricultural fields. Malevolent spirits are known as Rashi, who dwell in the bushes, ravine and cliff. Rashis are responsible for sickness, epidemic and natural calamities. Among them, the most dangerous one is Kaora whose presence causes death. Items of offering to propitiate these spirits include rice, wine, egg, ginger, a piece of iron and certain specific herbs, shrubs and animals depending upon the kind of spirit. The Poumais also believe in existence of soul after death, reincarnation, Karma and salvation.

DRESS:

The usual dress for the Poumai man is ‘tousume’ (cotton belt) used as pant. It is designed with two or more stripes dotted with buttons. Use of shirts is not common, shawls are used instead. They use different types of dress for different occasions. On festivals men wear Rohlai on their heads and Vaohouzu shou on both sides of the ear. Ivory armlet and bracelets are in use. Cane rings dyed with black colour are used for leg, just below the knees. On both sides of the shoulder Phaona are used. Shach is hung on the waist of those who are married and have life partners. Lousa is most common cloth for both male and female,
old and young. This is made of wooden bark or skin. There are also varieties of
lousa, such as ngulousa, khailous, dolouse etc. Teisa, Hrgapisa, Rusa are
common dresses for all. Hugasa and Hugapeileisa are used only by outstanding
persons.

Female wears Poupume as petticoat on their waist girded with a
stripped cloth. Their body is covered with two black cloth crossed under the
arms and fastened on the opposite shoulders. Unmarried girls are not allowed to
keep long hair. Married women wear Nyodai (colourful cotton) in their ear hole.
They use bangle, necklace, hair rings. Pounui women do not wear ornament on
their legs or feet.

Usually the chief kept a portion of hair long always and it made a
knot in his back. It identifies that he is the head of the village. His dress is very
simple which is white kilt, while shirt and cloth (Yusan) etc. A typical ‘Arasa’ and
‘hya peiteisa’ is also used if the chief is rich enough.

Festival and Rituals:

Festivals are mostly centered around the agricultural season as most
of the Pounui’s life is connected with agriculture, horticulture. They are
celebrated with the age old tradition of rites and rituals with offerings, and prayers
of thanking God.
Some of the main Festivals and Rituals are:

a) Paonu: It is observed in almost all the villages at different dates according to their convenience as it falls in the season of transplantation and it goes on for about 5 days.

b) Nghenu: It is observed for about 7 days before harvesting their crops in order to get a good harvest and is observed in the month of NGHEKHOU (August to September).

c) Laonii: This festival is observed for about 7 to 18 days and its date varies from village to village. The transplantation should finish before this festival and during this festival they pray to God for protection of their crops and recreation.

d) Donii: It falls on the 1st month of DONIIKHOU (November - December) and is performed for the departed souls and last for 2 days.

e) Taithounii: It is observed just before sowing seeds by the people in the middle part of Poumai land especially Oinam. It is a 4 days festival and falls during Siipakhou (January - February).

f) Feast of Merit: It is performed mostly in the month of Siipakhou (January - February). It is celebrated to show generosity of the capable person by feeding the poor and to share the wealth with the community and to earn status and honour.

g) Feast of Covenant: This was done between two villages or groups when they agreed not to wage war anymore. It begins in the month of Khokhou (March - April) and lasted for several days.
h) Baolotto: During this festival the mother would go to collect coin and place it on the top of the granary. This is a 4 day festival and falls in the month of Dorupokhou (October - November). Those who wish to renew or build new houses collect thatch during this festival.

i) Rashi - Haudanak: This is an inauguration ceremony for new built houses.

j) Ritual for new born baby usually lasts from 3 to 15 days depending upon the wish of the parents. During this period naming ceremony and rituals for the well being of the baby are performed.

k) Marriage Ceremony: The marriage ceremony can be performed only in the month of Nghekhou (August - September) and engagement ritual last for 4 to 5 days.

l) Funeral Rites: After death the body is washed with water and buried along with many items such as shawl, spear, a dao and a spade and some dresses for man and shawl and necessary dresses for woman.

m) Head Hunting: Phachanai is one day festival and has something to do with Head hunting. The origin of head hunting is shrouded in mystery. This was usually taken place among the people of neighbouring villages. A number of scholars give a number of reasons as the cause of head hunting such as social, political, economical and religious causes. Socially they were given the privilege of wearing warring ornaments and dresses and usually got a beautiful girl as life partner. They also did it to maintain their village prestige. Head hunting was believed to bring an increase in population, soil fertility and
economic prosperity, for human head contained the soul force which was thought to be transferable and bring good results. At the individual level there was one superstitious belief that the souls of the victims will serve as the servants of the warriors in the next life. But this practise was completely abolished by the British during their rule.

Several of their rituals and festivals have several significance as they arouse awareness to the mind of the people about the right motive to work at the right season. These festival build relationship between the poor and the rich, the individual and society and from one village to another village. Moreover the cultural value and spirituality is maintained and passed on the younger generation.

**Games and Sports**

There are many indigenous games and sports played by different age groups for their entertainment.

*HYA*: A kind of drought which has at least six varieties is played most commonly. Short put is played by man only and the short put used in this game is approximately between 30 to 40 kg. They lift it upto the waist and throw.

*TOUTON* is also a game for the male to throw a flat stone towards the target.

*YAOYAO* is a long jump played by the male folks.

*SUTAS TAO* is a competition of climbing up a tree and it is for boys only.

*LOUKAVAYU* is a competition of archery which is organized for boys only.
MAKAI SUKAI is a game in which the participants make a big circle holding each other's hand with slogans.

CHAYU is a typical wrestling organized in all the seasons.

DIEHDEIYU is played by both old and young and it is somewhat similar to Kabaddi.

Music:

Songs form a very important part in any social gatherings and they take it as an integral part of their life. The folk songs can be divided into different categories such as song of insult, warrior folk song, genealogical folk song, ceremonial folk song, love song, seasonal folk song. Through song, youths of the village can express their feeling to the girls. Some of the musical instruments of the Poumai are Lana which is used by man, Shah is used by boys, Hngabai which is used as trumpet by boys etc.

Dance:

Poumai have a number of traditional folk dances. They can be divided into different categories such as war dance, public whooping dance, cultivation dance, cultural show dance etc. All these dances are group dances. Both boys and girls dance together except whooping dance which is only for boys. Whooping dance is performed mainly to show strength of the male population of the village. These dances are associated with many festivals.