CHAPTER 7: Conclusion

The Poumai Nagas are mainly found in the Senapati District of Manipur. Some of them are in the Chakhesang area of Phek District, Nagaland. Prior to their recognition as a Naga tribe the existence of the Poumais was not known to the outside world as they were clubbed together with the Mao Nagas under the nomenclature ‘Mao’. This continued till the Schedule Tribes Order (Amendment) Act, 2002 gave recognition to the Poumai Naga as a separate tribe.

The origin and migration of the Poumai Nagas is shrouded in mystery. There are many scholars like W.C. Smith, Gnagmumei Kamei, M. Horam, B.B. Gosh, etc. who trace the origin and migration of the Nagas including the Poumais to China. They point to different directions and places in China such as Manchuria, upper reaches of Howangho river, Yunnan Province, North-West China, etc. as the places of origin of the people. Though there are differences about the specific places from which they come, all agree China, which is also known as the mother country of the South-East Asia, as the place of origin for the Indo-mongoloid people including the Poumais.

Among the Poumai people themselves, there is a strong belief that the Poumais and some other Naga tribes have originated from a place called ‘Makhel’ (a village in the present Mao area about 2 km. distance from the National Highway-39). They consider this place as the place of their origin, migration and dispersion. This belief is also supported by their legends, songs and myths. There are also a number of sacred things at Makhel like a certain peepal tree known as ‘Life Foundation Tree’; dispersal stone monolith of their progenitors; the stone monoliths that represent God, man and tiger; the sacred pear tree and other sacred things laying in and around the Makhel village which according to the people, points to Makhel as the home of the ancestors. As such
they firmly believe Makhel as the place where they once settled together and also as the point from which they dispersed to their present habitations.

Socially the Poumais are classless and casteless. There is no hierarchical stratification of the status among them. There are also none too rich and none too poor. The principle of equality among all the people is deeply rooted in the society. Obviously, elders, parents and grand parents occupy higher position of respect. The democratic principles of freedom, liberty, equality and justice are all enshrined in the social system of the Nagas.

In the Poumai society, woman occupies almost equal position as man and enjoys considerable rights and privileges. While young they enjoyed the freedom of socializing in their respective age group dormitories, at work place, in times of festivals, playing games, etc. Women also participated in certain important social and religious ceremonies. In performing family rites and rituals both husband and wife took equal part. Like husband, wife also played the role of a leader, administrator and manager in the family. Taking care of family's 'Tachibii' (treasury box) was solely under the responsibility of the mother or the woman head of the family. Women also enjoyed the privilege to earn social recognition and title by performing feasts of merit and honour. Women married to other villages played the role of a peace maker during inter-village feuds.

The traditional economic system of the Poumais was one of subsistence nature. The mode of their economic production was traditional, indigenous and culturally dominant. They were their own enterprises, workers, producers as well as consumers. To eke out meager existence in the hilly regions they practiced both terrace and jhum cultivation as their main occupation. Animal husbandry is another important occupation practiced by them. Hunting, fishing, handloom and handicraft, pottery, black-smithy, etc. were also practiced as seasonal occupations. Besides, weaving is one of the important seasonal occupations of the Poumai women. They are experts in weaving and designing
clothes and ornaments using various colours and designs that well match the people and the land.

Songs, dances and music are part and parcel of their life. They play major roles in times of their festivals. During festivals and other special occasions boys and girls spent time together exchanging songs. It is also interesting to note that the Pounais have songs of every occasion such as song of love, praise, joy, war, lamentation, prayer, song sung while working, song sung in the form of story, etc. They celebrate different festivals in different seasons. Their festivals have both religious as well as social significance. Some of the important festivals are Taithounii, Sounii, Paoki, Ngheh, Baouloutou, etc. These festivals are well connected with agricultural activities. They are lavishly celebrated with gaiety by every young and old, haves and have-nots. Festive songs and music express the joyous mood of their festive occasions. Their festivals are celebrated not only for joy and happiness but also as a part of their prayer and offerings to the Supreme Being.

Besides the annual festivals, the rich and able men host different feasts of merit which involve different rituals signifying different steps towards the attainment of higher status and honour in their community. Hosting of feast of merit involves years of rigorous preparation and strict observation of norms, taboos and gennas including chastity of husband and wife for months. In spite of the rigorous processes and preparations and spending away huge amount of hard earned wealth, every one covets after hosting the feasts of merit and honour just to get a respected place in their community. In their traditional life, the prestigious hasha and hapeiteisa (shawls awarded to the feast of merit performers), stone monolith, horn house, stone piled up public platform, etc. were not only the symbols of rich men but were also the symbols signifying social titles and status being given to those who hosted feasts of merit and honour. These are also the pride and glory of those who hosted the feasts. Similarly, the able persons who won head trophies, killed tiger, won over
physical relation with woman, etc. could wear different social ranking ornaments.

In marriages, the Poumais practice village endogamy. Clan and ‘khel’ exogamy is strictly observed as marriage among the members of the same clan and khel is considered incestuous and taboo. They practiced monogamy. Polyandry is totally non-existent among them. However, polygyny is reported in very rare cases. Sororate and levirate are not totally absent among the Poumais. Traditionally, marriage among the Poumais was by mutual consent or arranged by parents with or without the consent of the boy and girl. Elopement was totally absent among them for fear of incurring heavenly curse.

The Poumais are known for their headhunting culture which once they widely practiced. They believed that head hunting war has high economic importance and socio-political values. Human head was believed to possess soul matter and vital power. Bringing a human’s head home was believed to enhance the fertility of man and animal as well as of the soil. A man who hunted more heads was placed to higher position in the society. They also had better say in the political affairs of the village and inter village affairs. Young warriors who have scored more number of heads had better prospect of winning the hand of the fairest girl in the village. Head hunting war also had religious sanction as well as significance. Human’s head was used to propitiate evil spirits to obviate diseases, natural calamities and other dangers. The head hunting practice was however strictly regulated by the rules and the laws of war that everyone had to observe.

The study of the traditional religion of the Poumais clearly reveals that they were monotheists. They believed in the existence of one Supreme God known as ‘Ramai’ who is believed to be living in the realm of the sky. Ramai is believed to be the creator and protector of the universe, and also the provider of every good thing. They also believed in the existence of both benevolent as well as malevolent spirits. They worshipped not only the Supreme God but also
the benevolent spirits and at the same time they also propitiated the malevolent
spirits. However, the Poumais did not have proper place to worship their God
and spirits. Worships were done wherever they wish as and when they felt the
need to do so. Observing gennas, taboos, performing rites and rituals with
offerings and sacrifices were the main aspects of their worshipping God, deities
and propitiating evil spirits. The village Chief was the religious head and was
also responsible for proper observance and performance of religious activities
in the village. He was assisted by a Napao (priest) who is considered as the
Chief intermediary between God and Man. He performed all the important
ceremonial sacrifices of the village community. Below them, there are
‘Ngumai’ and ‘Pousoumai’. Ngumai is a medicine man who is believed to
possess healing power and the knowledge of treating illness. Pousoumai is a
man well versed in performing divination known as ‘pousou’ with the help of a
bamboo. By performing pousou he foretells future, prescribes the rites to be
performed and offerings, and the sacrifices to be made.

The traditional religion of the Poumais was accompanied by a number of
rites and rituals. Rites and rituals were the important components of the Poumai
traditional life. Right from birth to grave a series of rites and rituals were
performed for every Poumai individual. Some of the important rites and rituals
performed in the life of a Poumai were birth rite, naming rite, rite for
sanctification of child, sanctification of boy, marital rite, rite of death, rite for
the departed soul, etc. The Poumais also performed a series of agricultural rites
and rituals starting from sowing of seeds till the dedication of the harvested
paddy to God. Agricultural rites and rituals were performed for fertility of soil,
good yield and protection of crops from natural calamities, etc. Further, a
number of gennas and taboos were also observed by them in order to ward off
all the unwanted incidents or dangers that may occur. They were also observed
for protection from sickness, for well being, happiness, etc. Breach of genna
and taboo is termed as sin. Sin is feared for heavenly wrath and punishment not only upon the sinner but to the whole village.

Traditionally, every Poumaí village was a self-administering and self-governing unit strictly maintaining its independent existence. In other words they were independent from each other. A village was headed by a hereditary Vhe (Chief). He is assisted by the 'Chiime' (Council of Elders) where every lineage is represented. The Chief occupied the highest official position in the village and he was the head of the overall village affairs. He was bestowed with vast powers but overruling the custom and laws of the land was strictly avoided.

In the administrative and political hierarchy, the village Chiime was the supreme governing body next to the Vhe. The functions of the Chiime cover the overall administrative, legislative and judicial affairs of the village. The Chiime was responsible for building and upholding peace, harmony and unity among the villagers. It was also responsible for maintaining village developmental activities. The Chiime was the real guard and upholder of their customs, laws and usages. Their customs, laws and usages were purely in conventional form. They are the guiding principles for every individual and the society as a whole. They coincided with ethical norms, which direct individual and societal behaviour in relation to their society. The well being of their society was measured on the basis of well maintenance of their laws and ethical standards.

The Poumaí customs were more religious in nature rather than secular. Breach of any custom and law amounted to sin and sin was feared to bring down supernatural punishment upon every villager. Therefore, it is everyone's responsibility to properly maintain their customs, laws and ethical norms. However, the responsibility of the overall maintenance, enforcement and controlling of customs, laws and norms of the people was laid upon the shoulder of the Chiime headed by the Vhe. Above all, the Vhe as the overall head of both secular as well as religious life of a village took good care of any
possible breach of their customs, laws and norms. His good reign as a village Chief was rated in accordance with the well being, prosperity and fertility of the village.

The customary laws of the Poumais cover all the matters and activities of every individual and the community as a whole. They have customary laws relating to land management, marriage, divorce, adultery, theft, homicide, death, war and peace, etc. The laws relating to land provide equal rights to every villager. It is taboo to move or remove the boundary stones. Infringement of this taboo usually leads to land disputes and at the same time invites wrath of the Supreme God. In dealing with disputes arising over land encroachment or boundary, if no sufficient witness is found ‘chachou’ (oath) was usually administered to settle the case.

Inside the Poumai society, male children enjoy the right to inherit moveable as well as immovable properties of their parents. Daughters are deprived of the right to inherit immovable and landed properties of the parents. The only properties a daughter may inherit are moveable properties such as cattle, paddy, household goods, etc. This is because they are purely patrilineal and patrimonial society.

During the pre-Christian period divorce frequently took place among the Poumai families. The main reasons that caused divorce were incompatibility between husband and wife, poverty due to laziness, barrenness, lack of male child to propagate further descendants, adultery on either side, excessive indulgence in alcohol, ill-treatment, unsound mind, infection with incurable disease, etc. When no amicable solution could be arrived, couples were allowed to separate with certain conditions and penalties as per the reasons put forward while seeking the divorce. In case of divorces caused due to having adultery liaison, infliction of inhuman physical torture, etc. all the moveable properties they have accumulated were to be bequeathed to the plaintiff. However, if both the parties are in favour of divorce moveable properties were usually shared
between them. Nonetheless, in both cases all the immoveable properties always belonged to the husband and can never be claimed by wife in any case. When divorce took place between a family having children, as per their customary laws, the minor or suckling baby would be with the mother until she or he attained 3 or 4 years of age. In such case enough extra properties mostly paddy were bequeathed to the wife for maintenance in rearing their child or children who were with the mother.

In the Poumai community, there is no place for illegal sex. Fornication, incest and extra-marital liaison are offences strictly prohibited. It is believed that persons who had committed incest will easily fall in the hands of enemy and will be mowed down by tiger while going for war or hunting in jungle. Persons who had committed premarital liaison are usually forced to get married. In case of refusal by the boy he would be severely beaten up and a heavy fine, mainly paddy or cows, are imposed against him. Pregnancy out of wedlock was considered as a social offence and it was kept strictly checked. Because, such pregnancy was believed to bring ill luck to the village and usually leads to defeat in war, inter-village wrestling and other competitions, and also obstructs successful hunting. Therefore, whenever such pregnancy was reported a thorough investigation was conducted. If any woman was found pregnant she would be forced to marry with the man who fathered the pregnant child and necessary fine in the form of cows would be imposed against both the man and woman.

Traditionally, the Poumais maintained sexual calendar. To them it was taboo for husband and wife to have physical relations during ceremonial occasions, rites and rituals days, before going for war, hunting expedition and during menstrual period. For the village Chief, it was taboo to have sexual relation on all the days of village gennas, festivals, rites, rituals, ceremonies, etc. Adultery was very rare among the Poumais and was looked down upon as they consider it a great and unforgivable sin.
In the early days, theft was not known to the Pounais. As such, they were very carefree, their doors were usually unlocked, and paddy barns were stored in un-walled roofed huts built mostly beneath the village or outskirts. According to their custom, if a thief was caught red-handed punishment comprising a fine of a bull or a cow was usually imposed along with the refund of the properties he has stolen. In case of failing to catch the thief red-handed or no clue was found, village cha (curse), houpheayu (spearing at the footprints of the thief), etc. were usually administered against the unknown thief. These are the traditional ways of seeking punishment from the Supernatural Being against the unknown thief and other evildoers.

Homicide was considered as one of the most heinous cases and it very rarely happened inside the Pounai society. When a person committed homicide, dismantling his house, slaughtering his cattle and confiscating his granaries by the victim’s kiths and kins were the usual actions taken against him. Besides, his family would be banished from the village for a certain period of years as fixed by the village court.

Traditionally, as the ways of settling both the civil as well as criminal cases such as land dispute, theft, murder, etc. Chachou (oath) and ordeals were generally employed. Chachou was administered as the last resort when no amicable solution could be brought due to certain complicacies like when both the parties stood for righteousness or due to lack of evidences or non-availability of proof. Dziileiyu (immerging in water) is an important ordeal usually administered to deal with very serious cases. When both the parties stood claiming their rights and do not want to compromise, the right was decided with this ordeal. Seipeipehyu (sacrificing of dog) is a sort of compromising act or peace treaty. When there was quarrel or fight seipeipehyu was administered as an act of compromise and a means to prevent revenge or repeated fighting between the two parties. In this ordeal, with the eating of the dog meat the two parties swear in the name of God that they will fight no more
on the issue in future. Once seipeipehyu was performed neither of the party
dares to take revenge or repeat fighting. Breach of the treaty was feared for
heavenly punishment and early death.

The Poumai were once great head hunters and war like people. During
their inter-village or inter-tribal war, the Poumai women who married to the
rival village intervened and stopped the fighting. After their intervention if any
of the warriors disobeyed the command and raise weapon, he will receive the
wrath of the people and be attacked by both the warring groups. Even if he is
killed in this attack, nobody is to be blamed but himself. There were also other
persons called Chichiyumai who worked as the mediators and peace
missionaries between the warring groups. Chichiyumai is the title given to
those who obtained high social status through their achievement as the real
warriors and their successful performance of all the steps of feast of merit.
They enjoyed diplomatic immunity. They can freely move from village to
village and has the discretionary power to declare truce between two warring
groups for a maximum period of six months so as to open life line
communication for survival. Further, when the warring parties wanted to stop
waging war against each other forever and build good relationship between
them, a peace treaty was usually negotiated. The treaty was normally
performed with grand celebration. It was hosted by both the villages one after
another. After declaration of peace treaty and holding the feast, none of them
was expected to wage war. Anyone who broke the solemn trust would face the
curse of God in the form of epidemic and natural calamity that would
depopulate and impoverish them.

Dormitories commonly known as 'Khechouziibu' and 'Louchouziibu'
for boys' and girls' dormitory respectively were an important institution of the
Poumai traditional society. Every young boy and girl joined their respective
dormitories when they reached the age of puberty or earlier if they so desired.
Dormitory was the center of youth for educating them with folklores, legendary
tales, songs, culture, social behaviour, discipline, etc. It was also a training center where boys were trained in cane, bamboo and wood works and girls learnt the art of spinning, weaving, knitting and stitching. In dormitory, strict decorum and decency was always maintained. For the Poumais, dormitory was also a place for recreation and entertainment where boys and girls spent their leisure singing, dancing, playing, telling stories, exchange pleasantries and cutting jokes. But pre-marital sex was strictly prohibited and also not found among the Poumais as they can marry when they wish to.

Politically, the Poumais were not as strongly organized as they are today. Their traditional political life was mainly confined within the walls of the village boundaries. With the exploration of the tribal areas by the Britishers, various administrative and political changes were introduced in the Hill areas of Manipur. The introduction of sub-divisions as administrative units in the hills; lambu system; Hill People’s (Administration) Regulation Act, 1947; inclusion of hill men in the Interim Council of Ministers; etc. are the well noted beginnings for the changes of tribal areas of Manipur. After the attainment of India’s Independence, further administrative and political changes were affected. Some of the main turning points for various administrative and political changes since independence are the Village Authority Act, 1956, the Manipur Hills (Acquisition of Chief Rights) Act, 1967 and the Manipur (Hill Areas) District Council Act, 1971. Under the Village Authority Act, 1956 and the Manipur (Hill Areas) District Council Act, 1971 elections at Village and District levels were introduced. All these have awaken the Poumais to political consciousness and brought them into contact with the modern democratization process and electoral politics. Since then, the Poumais have been actively involving in district as well as state politics. Starting from the first Territorial Elections of Manipur held in the year 1957 the Poumais have been participating in every district and state elections and some of the candidates have even secured Ministerial berths.
With the passing of time, the Pumais also have established a few well organized socio-political organizations with wider and more concrete objectives to better protect and safeguard their identity and rights, promote all round development of their land and the people. Some of the major socio-political organizations of the Pumais are 1) Pumai Masou Me (PMM), the Pumai apex general body; 2) Pumai Tsiidoumai Me (PTM), the highest Pumai Students’ organization; and 3) Pumai Naotumai Me (PNM), the Pumai Women’s apex organization. Apart from these, the Pumais also have been actively involving in various social and political activities through various organizations such as United Naga Council (the apex Naga civil organization), Naga Peoples’ Movement for Human Rights (the highest Human Rights organization of the Nagas), Naga Peoples’ Organization (another important Naga civil organization) and many other state and district level organizations.

Regarding changes in their socio-cultural life, prior to contact with the outside world, the Pumais were civilized and cultured in their own ways with their distinctive social and cultural life. They were happy with whatever they had and practiced. The absence of robbers, thefts, etc. on the one hand and the absence of police, prison, etc. on the other well reflected the simplicity, innocence and high moral standard of the Pumai people. They made no distinction between the rich and poor and there was no hierarchical relationship among the various sections of people within their society. In fact, their world was unique, where they lived a quite and peaceful life without having anything to worry about unlike the modern men who are worried for not having job, monetary security and many other necessities in this materialistic world.

However, since the onset of modern forces vast sociological changes have been taking place in the Pumai society. The most remarkable turning points in the history of the Pumais have been the advent of Christianity, introduction of modern education and development of modern administrative and political system which resulted to a radical shift of paradigm in the Pumai
society. No doubt, it is a shift from the old to a new world order. Yet, it does not mean that all the new things are good and beneficial to them. Even though these forces brought them to light and raised their life standards they are accompanied with a number of negative effects and evil forces as well. The so-called development and modernism became instrumental in discarding many of the cultural and ethical values of the people.

The advent of Christianity is the main factor responsible for discarding their traditional religious beliefs and practices. Their traditional belief in the existence of 'dead land' where the souls of human beings were believed to be living after death is overshadowed by the Christian concept of eternal hell and Heaven. The main religious functionaries viz., the Vhe and Napao were replaced by Church Pastor and Catechist. Their rites, rituals, sacrifices of animals, etc. are no more seen practiced among them as they are replaced with Christian prayer and fasting. With the introduction of the Village Authority Act, 1956, village Chairman and Authority members took away the powers of the traditional village Vhe (Chief) and Chiime (Elders' Council). The colorful traditional feasts and festivals of the Poumais which once they used to lavishly celebrate with full of glee have been discouraged by the Christian missionaries and they are replaced by the Christian festivals like, Christmas, Good Friday, Easter and other Fellowships and Conferences organized from time to time. Similarly, the well-designed colourful traditional dresses, ornaments and their hard earned coveted dress and ornamental titles of feasts of merit, of war and other achievements have lost their importance in the modern society. Today, they became the staff or souvenir to display only on rare and special occasions. Their traditional songs, music and dances have become obsolete to the young and educated boys and girls. The dormitory system of the people has also gone into oblivion as it has not found the approval of the new faith. The traditional marriage system is not recognized and strictly forbidden in the Christian
society. Leaving behind these traditional ways, today marriage ceremony is performed and administered in church.

It is also important to note that with the faster pace of advancement in transport and communication system, information technology and other developments, the world is becoming smaller day by day. People from different parts and poles are being connected with the net of modern communication system. In quest of knowledge and pursuit of careers the younger generations are pushed and pulled away from home leading to an increased momentum of assimilation and adaptation to other cultures by discarding their tradition and culture which have consequently resulted in cultural-shock. There is also fear among the people that their beautiful and valuable culture may go extinct due to new changes and continuous developmental progress. The elders are also worried for the decadence of their traditional ethical values of honesty, sincerity, truthfulness, simplicity, generosity, courtesy, hospitality, dignity of hard work, etc. Further, the people also have gone through a number of other social problems such as immorality among the youngsters, unemployment, increasing economic disparity among the people, etc.

It is inevitable that when old patterns of life have to adjust, fuse and adapt with new patterns of life, changes both negative as well as positive will take place. No doubt, in spite of the tremendous changes that have adversely affected the life of the people, the changes also opened up a new horizon and brought the light of a new life to the people in many ways. Christianity and modern education have brought the message of a richer life, wider outlook and companionship, a new sense of life and dignity to the people. They are delivered from fear, superstitions and uncertainties to faith and hope with reasons. Inter-village and inter-tribal wars and head hunting practices are termed as sinful, inhuman activities and they have been miraculously driven out by the power of the new faith in Christ and education. The teaching of moral lessons in Christian Church and schools have kindled the young minds
with good conduct, honesty and truthfulness and have made them morally dignified, loving and caring towards one another. Modern education has enriched their knowledge, broadening their thoughts, views, outlooks and has changed the mindset of the people. It has also liberated the people from confinement within their primitive village world to the open world of modern civilization. Through the relentless services of the Christian missionaries, the Poumais have improved their health care and living standard. This in turn has significantly reduced the rate of sickness and mortality among them. Their traditional economic scenario and occupations such as agriculture, pottery, handloom and handicraft, farming of domestic animals, fishing and hunting have been transformed to the great extent. The new world has enabled them to adopt various modern professions. Consequently, the economic life of the people has turned its head towards money making rather than food producing.

All these changes have altered the life of the Poumai people. However, changes are inevitable. A society cannot exist without change and development. Without change there will be no development and things would remain stagnant. So also where there is no development life will be meaningless. As such, change and development are inevitable in every society and in every aspect of life. However, change and development should be such that it does not discard the best of the old traditions. Because, the old traditions and customs are the images of the forefathers and they are the identity of the people. They have made ways for future. Therefore, change and development should be welcomed without neglecting the importance of traditional things and values. It is important to accept that neither the past nor the present would survive without the other. The past without the present would be too primitive so also the present without the past would mean a loss of identity for the people. As such, everyone should make a conscious effort to secure a just fusion of the wisdom in the age old traditions and the advancements that the modern times have brought.