Chapter II
The Meitei Society

The Structure of the Society:

The Meitei society was formed by the amalgamation of different, but closely knit and allied communities, once settled in different parts of Manipur each independent of the other. In their bid for supremacy, internecine warfare amongst themselves was the order of the day resulting in the absorption of the weaker by the stronger communities. In the process only seven of the strongest communities were able to survive by establishing their strongholds in different parts of Manipur. Those seven communities were what are now known as the seven clans of the Meiteis, viz., Ningthoujā, Angom, Khuman, Luwāng, Moirāng, Khābā- Ngānbā and Chenglei (Sarāng Leisāngthēm). These seven clans, again, had to undergo an age-long struggle amongst themselves for power which lasted for several centuries till the Ningthoujā clan could ultimately establish its supremacy over the others. It must, however, be noted that the name 'Meitei' was formerly applied only to the Ningthoujā clan. It was after the amalgamation of the different clans under the banner of the Ningthoujā that the name 'Meitei' became applicable to all the members of the seven clans also. Thus, the larger Meitei
society came into existence after the hegemony of the Ningthouja clan was established.

Besides the Meiteis belonging to the seven clans, there is a community called the 'Loi'. They are believed to be one of the earliest bands of settlers in Manipur but were subdued by the Meiteis and hence the name Loi was given to them. Even after their subjugation they were not, however, admitted into the Meitei confederacy and hence they still preserve a separate identity. Col. McCulloch observes that "the Loi population consists of people who pay tribute and is considered so inferior that the name Meithei is not given to it." ¹

In former days large numbers of Meiteis who committed crimes against the state or those who violated social customs and traditions were degraded to the Loi community as punishment. These people were then merged into the said community. There has thus been a considerable Meitei blood among the Lois. The Meiteis and Lois, however, resemble each other so closely that they are indistinguishable for all intents and purposes. ² Though preserved as a distinct social identity, the Lois have been a part and parcel of the Meitei society and most of the pre-Hindu Meitei customs and practices are preserved

¹ McCulloch, W., Account of the Valley of Manipur, Calcutta, 1859, p. 13.
² Hodson, T.C., The Meitheis, London, 1908, p. 3.
As mentioned above, the present Meitei society is the outcome of the amalgamation of seven clans. But over and above the pure Meiteis constituted by the people of the seven clans, there were also people from the east (Shans, Burmese and Chinese) and also from other parts of India who came and settled in Manipur either as captives of war or as peaceful immigrants. Besides, a considerable number of hill people brought by the Meitei kings as captives of war or otherwise settled in the valley. All these people were, in course of time, merged into the Meitei population. They were then assigned to one or the other of the clans. There were, however, some new immigrants from the rest of India who had arrived and settled in Manipur after the general classification of the clans for the aliens. These later immigrants even though they merged into the Meitei society, still remain outside the pale of the clan structure.

The vernacular term for clan is salai. Each salai is divided into a number of sub-groups or surnames called sāgei or yumnāk. Most of these yumnāks were so named after their trade or occupations. The number of yumnāks of each clan is numerous. The Ningthoujā, the most dominant clan has the largest number of yumnāks, while the Khābā-Ngānbā has the smallest number of such yumnāks. Each of these sub-groups or yumnāks is under a head, called pibā. A pibā plays a dominant role in the social and religious functions of his yumnāk. He
is the custodian of the sāgei lāi, the ancestral deity of the sāgeis. Pibāship is hereditary and is succeeded to by the law of primogeniture.

The different yumnāks of each salāi are considered to have descended from a common ancestor, the founder of the salāi. Each of these founders also had his own ancestry but being the first and foremost leader of the salāi, he was regarded as the originator of the salāi. Thus the founder of the Ningthoujā salāi was Nongdā Lāiren Pākhangbā; the Angom, Pureirombā; the Moirāng, Ngānghunthok and Ngāngningshing; the Khābā-Ngānbā, Thongāren; the Chenglei, Nungou-Yumthangbā. But the originator of the Khumāns and Luwāng clans was Poireiton, a contemporary of Pākhangbā.

In view of their common ancestry marriage within the same salāi or yek is still strictly prohibited. In former days those who violated such norms were punished by exiling them to the Loi villages. In certain cases even inter-marriage between two different salāis is restricted. The Khumans and the Luwāngs do not intermarry as they are descended from a common ancestor. The Ningthoujā salāi also does not marry some particular yumnāk of the Moirāng salāi as those yumnāks are descended from Nongdā Lāiren Pākhangbā, the founder of the Ningthoujā salāi.

The ancestor of each salāi is called salāi apokpā. The worship of the apokpās which consists of adoration and propitiation is one of the most essential and highest aspects
of the traditional Meitei religion. Even after the Meiteis accepted the Vaishnava faith, the worship of these salāi apokpās continued as before. The rites and ceremonies in the worship of these salāi apokpās are, however, varied from one salāi to another. Each of them has its own paraphernalia and insignia by virtue of which it could also be distinguished from one another. The following table shows the main paraphernalia and the insignia of the seven salāis as found in Tharon, Salāi Thounirol, etc.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Salai</th>
<th>Colour</th>
<th>Sword</th>
<th>Water</th>
<th>Flower</th>
<th>Fish</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ningthoujā</td>
<td>red</td>
<td>chākthāng</td>
<td>Nungjeng</td>
<td>thambāl</td>
<td>sarang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angom</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>pukakthāng</td>
<td>Kongbā</td>
<td>tharo</td>
<td>sarang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khuman</td>
<td>black</td>
<td>tonkakpā</td>
<td>Meirombi</td>
<td>angāngbā</td>
<td>sarang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luwāng</td>
<td>blue</td>
<td>tondumbā</td>
<td>Pumlen</td>
<td>leisang</td>
<td>amuba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moirāng</td>
<td>multi-</td>
<td>yambā</td>
<td>Matok</td>
<td>serang</td>
<td>nāpu</td>
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<tr>
<td>ḅāng</td>
<td>yellow-</td>
<td>Sābā</td>
<td>Loktāk</td>
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<tr>
<td>Khābā-</td>
<td>multi-</td>
<td>laithāng</td>
<td>Leitāng</td>
<td>leisang</td>
<td>sarang</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ngānbā</td>
<td>greenish</td>
<td>chināibā</td>
<td></td>
<td>ngangna</td>
<td>lāngbā</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chenglei</td>
<td>brown</td>
<td>knunthong</td>
<td>Tāknā</td>
<td>leisang</td>
<td>sangna</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As mentioned above, the Meitei society consists of seven salāis and each of these is further sub-divided into a number of families called yumnāks. Most of these yumnāks were
associated with their occupations. Like the salāi, each of the yumnaks or families have a common descent which is known as sāgei-apokpā as distinguished from salāi-apokpā, the originator of the clan. However, the structure of the salāi is entirely different from the caste system as found in the Hindu society. A caste is generally defined as a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name which generally denotes or associates with some specific occupation and claiming descent from a common ancestor. It is a completely closed social structure, in which horizontal mobility of individuals is forbidden. A caste is endogamous in the sense that a number of the large circle denoted by the common name cannot marry outside that circle. Moreover, within that large circle there are usually a number of smaller circles each of which is also endogamous. Such a caste structure as is found in Hindu society does not exist among the Meiteis.

Under the Meitai clan oligarchies, there existed a class system which might broadly be classified into three categories, namely, the royal aristocracy, the nobles and the commoners. There was also a class of slaves. But unlike the system as found in other parts of the world, slavery in Manipur was of a mild type. The slaves lived in the same house as their master, ate with him in the same house and were altogether like other members of the family. Most of them became slaves only voluntarily and could redeem their freedom any moment if they wished. Hence, slaves did not form a separate class in Manipur.
The class of nobility was not hereditary. Any individual by virtue of his merit or by a favour from the king could become a noble at any time. Generally, social classes may be classified into open and closed systems. In the open system the upward or downward movement of individuals is possible. But in a closed system vertical social mobility of individuals is prohibited. A completely closed class structure is synonymous with the caste system. In the light of such classifications the Meitei social classes may be considered an open system. A Loi or a Naga may become a Meitei, of course, with the permission of the king. The royal aristocratic class was a class by birth but still it may be regarded as open class system. Marriage within this class was forbidden and sometimes it happened that should a woman of that class marry a man from the lower class, she was not degraded to the class of her husband. Instead, the social status of the husband was upgraded to the class of the wife and thus enjoyed the same privileges as the male members of the wife's class. Sir James Johnstone has mentioned that "they have a curious custom by which a man of low caste, marrying a high caste woman, can be adopted into her tribe, the exact reverse of what prevails in India where a woman of high caste marrying a low caste man is hopelessly degraded, and her children outcaste." Johnstone's observation seems to be correct but he was wrong to adopt the term 'low caste' and 'high caste' as there was practically no such system.

among the Meiteis. If by the term 'low caste', he means the Nagas or Lois, and that by marrying a high class Meitei woman they can be adopted to her class or tribe, his observation was also misleading as there was practically no such tradition among the Meiteis. The advent of Hinduism in Manipur, however, gave birth to a form of caste system in the Meitei society. But unlike the four-fold system as found in the Hindu society, there came into existence a dual-system, viz., the Brahmans and the Kshatriyas. While the Brahmans remain Brahmans, the Meiteis from the royal family down to the commoners became the Kshatriya caste. The other two lower castes of the Hindus, viz., the Vaishyas and Sudras have no room in the Meitei society.

The Meitei society composed of seven sālāis was organised on the basis of the pāna system. The pāna was the most important unit of society. The whole Meitei population was divided into several divisions and every Meitei must belong to one or the other of these divisions called the pānas. Those who did not belong to any of those pānas were not regarded as Meiteis. A person whether a Loi or a Naga in order to become a Meitei must be assigned to one of the pānas. This was known as pāna-thokpā (becoming Meitei). The role of the pāna in the society was so unique that a person whose pāna was in doubt even debarred from participating in social games and other state competitions. Formerly, the pānas were organised on territorial basis mainly for administrative and military purposes. But, subsequently, it was organised on the basis of yumnāks or
sub-groups most of which had their own respective trade or occupations and thus the basis of the organisation became functional rather than territorial. T. C. Hodson says, "the basis of it (pānā) was personal, not territorial, a feature which is due to the fact that such a system only became possible after the hegemony of the Ningthoujā clan had been finally settled."\(^4^) Formerly, there were only four pānās, viz., Ahallup, Nahārup, Khābam, and Lāipham. The number was subsequently increased to six pānās with the addition of two new pānās, viz., Hidākphānbā and Potsangbā. Pānās played a very important role in the social, political and economic life of the Meiteis. Each of these pānās periodically sent a team of men to work under the system of lāllup, a compulsory state service. The social festivals and games like sagol kāngjei, khong kāngjei, lāmchel, mukhnā, hīyāng, etc., were conducted on the basis of these pānās. Thus, the pānā organisation formed the back-bone of the Meitei social structure.

The division of society into exogamous units or clans was not confined to the Meiteis but was also common among the neighbouring tribes. Just as the Meiteis were divided into seven exogamous salāis or clans, the Ahoms, a dominant Indo-Mongoloid people who once ruled Assam, were also divided into seven principal clans or phaids who were

\(^4^\) Hodson, op. cit., pp. 58-59.
well known under the name of Šatghariyā Ahoms or the Ahoms of the seven houses. The first three houses constituted the royal family, the Buragohain family, and the Bargohain family, and about the remaining four families there was always a difference of opinion. According to one section, these four phaids were the Deodhai, Mohan, Bailung, and Siring families of priests and astrologers; while according to other they were the secular families Lahan, Sandikai (Hendiqui), Dihingia and Duara. The Šatghariyā Ahom families, whatever their constitution might be, were exogamous groups each family being derived from one common ancestor.⁵ Though the structure of the Šatghariyā Ahom was different from that of the seven salaīs of the Meiteis, there were certain common aspects between them in that both were exogamous units having descended from a common ancestor. Among the Naga tribes of Manipur, there also existed similar organisation of clans or sub-divisions which were also exogamic. These Naga clans, however, bear Meitei or Manipuri names such as Ningthoujā, Khuman, Luwang, Angom, Khaba.⁶ These Meitei titles are also known by their local names, viz., Duidang, Sādāng, Khongdāng, Choudāng, Sibudāng and Kingdāng in the case of the Tangkhul Nagas; and Kammei, Gangmei, Longmei, Marringmei, Pammei and Phaomei in the case of Kabuis.⁷ The Chothe Nagas are divided into families

⁵ Bhuyan, S.K., Anglo-Assamese Relations, Gauhati, 1974, p.16.  
⁶ Hodson, op. cit., p. 74.  
of Hiyang (Ningthoujā), Marin (Khuman), Piring (Khēbā-Ngānbā), Lunkung (Moirāng), Yurung (Angom), Thauqu (Luwāng) Makaan and Pipā. Similarly, almost all the other Naga tribes of Manipur have exogamous clans which bear Meitei names and these are also known by their local titles. These local titles vary from village to village as they have no common speech even within the same tribe.

The Origin of the Salais:

The origin of the seven salāis of the Meiteis may be viewed from mythological as well as historical accounts. There are several versions of the mythological origin of the salāis. According to one such version, the Lord of the Universe, Taibang Mapu Sidabā, entrusted his progeny Atiyā Sidabā, the immortal Sky God, to start creation. For being sent on this errand Atiyā Sidabā was henceforth called Asibā. Accordingly Asibā began to create the earth but he was obstructed by his younger brother Harābā. The Lord saw this and in order to prevent Harābā from destroying the creation, He brought forth goddess Nongthangleimā out of His body whose tantalising beauty and witty manners had distracted Harābā's attention from obstructing the creation. In the meantime Asibā was able to complete the work of creation. Thereafter, the Lord


9. Pudil, M. S.
decided to create mankind and entrusted the same to Asibā who created fishes, frogs and monkeys and presented them one after another before the Lord. But, the Lord was not satisfied with each of these creatures as their appearance did not measure up to his expectation.

The Lord thereupon cast His reflection and instructed Asibā to create one in the likeness of His image. Asibā did accordingly. Man was thus created to look like God's shadow in shape. But Asibā was unable to bestow life on it. The Lord thereupon gave the breath of life from Himself and thus man for the first time came into being. Afterwards, the fishes and frogs were let loose into the water; the monkeys on the hill and men came to live on the earth.

After a long time, one day, the Lord re-appeared in the form of a dead cow floating along a stream called Marongkhong from Kurumching hill, to test the wisdom of his sons, Kuptreng and Sentrang. Seeing the dead cow, Sentrang at once recognised it to be their father in disguise. Kuptreng, though he failed to recognise it, helped his brother in dragging the dead cow out of the water. Resuming his true form, the Lord declared that he was pleased with them and gave Sentrang a new name, Pākhangbā (he who knows his father), and Kuptreng, Sanāmahi, (implying his hot gold complexion). The carcass of the dead cow was cut into seven pieces and distributed

10. Ukak Latha (MS).
The present Kangla, the historic capital of Manipur was once a hill and was known as Kurumching Khongnem having seven ranges.
among seven persons who subsequently became the founders of the seven salāis. Each of these salāis was named after the name of the organs they received. Santreng received the ningthiba mit (beautiful eye) and from ningthiba his group was called Ningthoujā, Kuptreng got the angoubā makhouirī (the white neck) and hence called Angom, Pāmmāringbā got the lōwāi lamphu (the crown of the head) and hence called Luwāng, Konsouren got the maring marāngbā mabuk (the striped belly) and hence called Moirāng; Leishatōo got the khumāng (the front legs) and hence called the Khuman; Asāngbā got the chenglou māithong (the lower face) and hence called Chenglei, and finally Tumābā received the angoubā thamōi (heart) and hence called Ngānbā. 11

Another version of the myth 12 states that the Lord of the Universe created Atiyyā Sidabā, the immortal Sky God in His likeness and entrusted him to create human beings. Atiyyā Sidabā created seven varieties of frogs thinking them to be seven races of man and placed them before the Lord. But the Lord was displeased with them. So Atiyyā Sidabā created seven varieties of monkeys and placed them before Him. Once again the Lord was not satisfied with these creatures. He, therefore, let loose the frogs into water and the monkeys on the hills. The Universal Lord then cast His shadow over the ground and

12. Khāgembā - Yumlep, (MS)
instructed Atiya Sidabā to create man in the likeness of His shadow. But the man, so created, was devoid of life. To bestow life, the Lord then entered the created body and out of it emerged seven human beings who became the ancestors of the seven salāis. Each of these seven salāis derived their names from the manner in which they emerged from the different organs of the body. The Ningthoujā was so called as it emerged from the right eye (mit yattagi ningthinā chongthokle haidunā Ningthoujā kou-a), the Angom from the neck (khouridagi ngouna chongthokle haidunā Angom kou-a), the Luuāng from the crown of the head (lawāi lemphudagi wāngnā chongthoklakye haidunā Luuāng kou-a), the Ngānbā from the heart (angoubā thamoidagi ngānnā chongthoklakye haiduna Ngānbā kou-a), the Leishāngthēm from the tongue (leidagi shāngnā chongthoklakye haidunā Leishāngthēm kou-a), the Moirāng from the lower limb (maring marāngnā chongthoklakye haidunā Moirāng kou-a) and the Khuman from the right hand (khut yattagi chongthoklakye hāidunā Khuman kou-a). Thus, the seven salāis of the Meiteis came into existence.

Besides the above accounts, there is still another account of the mythical origin of the salāis, which differs from both accounts. According to this account, seven celestial goddesses who were born out of the body of the Lord of Universe were married to God Pakhangbā from whom each of the goddesses got a son who came to be the ancestors of the seven salāis. 

These mythological accounts, which are intended to account for the origin and interconnection of the salāis, tell us that the seven salāis originated or descended from the Supreme Lord. They further signify that these seven salāis sprang up at one and the same time. This, however, is contradicted by accounts based on historical evidence and other trustworthy traditions. It is very likely that the above accounts concerning the origin of the salāis were interpolations to the original Meitei myth of creation of the universe and man long after the hegemony of the Ningthoujā clan was established. Significantly these accounts tally with the Hindu puranic myths and legends. Dr S.K. Chatterji has pointed out that the story of the Meitei clans being derived from the different parts of the body of the Lord have partial Hindu parallels in that the Brahman emanated from the mouth of the Supreme Spirit or Brahma, the Kshatriya from his arms, the Vaisya from his thigh or loins and the Sudra from his feet. Further, the story of the seven clans being derived from the seven divine beings resembles the Hindu puranic story of the seven celestial risis or sages being the ancestors of the seven clans of Brahmins.14 T.C. Hodson is of the opinion that the genealogy of the clans being descended from the Guru, the sage who is the Lord of the Universe (Tāibangpānbagi Mapu) are the inventions of the Brahmins.15

Therefore, the above accounts which were later accretions to the

15. Hodson, op. cit., p. 100.
original Meitei myth of creation may probably be invented on the model of Brahmanical pūrnās after the Hinduisation of the Meiteis.

The ancient chronicles and other historical facts show that besides the seven groups that we find today, there also existed several other groups of people in ancient Manipur such as Chakpā, Heirem-Khujān, Chāiren, Khende and so on. These evidences also show that contrary to the mythical accounts, the seven communities, also called the seven salāis did not came into existence simultaneously but emerged in different ages and in different areas. While four of the salāis, viz., Angom, Moirāng, Chenglei and Khābā were in existence and flourished in different principalities before the beginning of the Christian era; two of the salāis, viz., the Khuman and the Luuāng emerged in the 1st century A.D. There was also evidence of the existence of Ningthoujā Aribā before the 1st century A.D. which later on merged into the Ningthoujā salāi founded by Nongdā Āiren Pākhangbā. There is still a yumnāk (surname) called Kānghujām in Ningthoujā salāi, which once belonged to the Ningthoujā Aribā group.

The recorded history of Manipur begins from the second quarter of the first century of the Christian era when Pākhangbā became the king of the Meiteis. Though the history of Manipur before Pākhangbā is still under investigation.

there are evidences to show that several clans or dynasties reigned in pre-historic days in different parts of Manipur. References as found in the ancient texts like Thiren Lāyāt, Chakpā Khundā Khunthok, Pānthaobi Khongun, etc., prove that before the accession of Pākhangbā to the throne of the Meiteis, several communities such as Chakpā, Chenglei, Khābā-Ngānbā, Angom, Moirāng were already in existence. Though the exact period and the date of their reigning years cannot be established, it is, however, definitely certain that immediately before Pākhangbā came to the throne, the Khābā dynasty was ruling at Kanglā, the historic capital of Manipur since time immemorial. These texts also reveal how Pākhangbā dethroned the Khābā king and occupied the throne of Kanglā. In their first encounter, Khābā Nongjembā defeated Pākhangbā and the latter fled to Moirāng. While Pākhangbā was at Moirāng, he left two sons, Mungyāng Chaobā and Tangkhram Limiyipa. The descendants of the two sons of Pākhangbā were absorbed in the Moirāng Ariba Khwang salāi and came to be known as Mungyāngjam and Loirengjam surnames respectively. The descendants of the sons of Pākhangbā, though absorbed into the Moirāng salāi, are still prohibited to intermarry with the Ningthoujā salāi, the descendents of Pākhangbā.

Pākhangbā then organized and trained an army at Moirāng, defeated the Khābās and occupied the throne of Kanglā. Khābā Nongjembā, the chief of the Khābās was shot dead by Kege Moirāng Chaobā Melleibā by one stroke of arrow.17 After

assuming power, Pakhangba tried to extirpate the Khaba dynasty. Afraid of the wrath of Pakhangba, the Khabas fled to different places in the hills and the valley. Some of them fled towards the eastern hills and became Tāngkhul Machibā, and those who fled towards the western hills became Kabui Nungāng, and those who fled towards the south became Mahou Londāi. Thus, there runs also a considerable Meitei blood among the hill tribes. Some of the Khābās took shelter in the court of Angom. But Khābā Nonganbā, the youngest of the Khābās besought the mercy of Pakhangba and was pardoned. In this manner Pakhangba usurped the throne of Kangla from the Khābā dynasty and since then the dynasty founded by him ruled Manipur throughout her monarchical history. This dynasty founded by him is till now known as the Ningthoujā salāi.

The rule of Khābā dynasty at Kangla before the 1st century A.D. is also evident from Panthoibi Khonqun which records that Panthoibi was married to Tarāng Khoinuchā, son of Khābā Shokchronbā, the king of Kangla. Many places and streams in and around Kangla were associated with various activities of Panthoibi. For example, Phisukhong is the name of a stream where Panthoibi used to wash cloths. In ancient chronicles like Ningthourol Lambubā, Chāda Lāihui and others, we find the name of the bridge on the river Imphal, near Kangla as Khābā Sanjenthong, which definitely testifies that the Khābās once ruled at Kangla.

Similarly the fact that the Angoms and Changleis
were already in existence before the 1st century A.D. can be
discerned from ancient chronicles like Chakpā Khundā Khunthok
and Chengleiron. Such chronicles also show that at the
beginning of the 1st century A.D. there was some turmoil in
the areas now covered by Imphal. Thereupon, the Angoms
invited Pakhangbā to come and occupy the throne and the
Chengleis invited Poireiton for the same reason. According to
Cheithārol Kumbābā and other chronicles, Pakhangbā ascended
the throne of the Meiteis in 33 A.D. and Laisana became his
queen. But Laisana was a girl belonging to the family of
Poireiton (according to some accounts she was the sister of
Poireiton). These facts prove that Pakhangbā and Poireiton
were contemporaries. While the descendants of Pakhangbā were
known as the Ningthoujā salāi, the descendants of Poireiton
became the Khuman and Luwāng salāis. Singtānpung Ēpung
Shingminnabā was the son of Poireiton. Singtānpung had two
sons, Arong and Pāmingnaba. While the descendants of Arong
became the Khuman salāi, the descendants of Pāmingnabā became
the Luwāng salāi. Because of this common ancestry, the
Khumans and the Luwāngs are not allowed to intermarry.

In view of the above accounts, we may definitely
conclude that out of the seven salāis that we find today four
of them, viz., Angom, Chenglei, Khābā-Ngānbā and Moirāng were
already existent in pre-historic times. The exact dates of

their origin are yet to be ascertained. But, the remaining three salāis, viz., Ningthoujā, Khuman and Luwāng originated around the beginning of the Christian era. In the 1st century A.D. all these salāis were found establishing their strongholds in different parts of Manipūr. It must therefore, not be supposed that the seven salāis originated from a common divine ancestor during one particular period, but their origins could be traced in different ages and in different periods.

Amalgamation of Clans:

The origin of the seven salāis has just been discussed. These seven clans were once reigning, independent of one another in well-defined regions of the valley and the nearby hills. It is, however, a formidable task today to ascertain precisely the erstwhile boundaries of these principalities. But, it is presumed that the western side of Imphal was the original area of the Ningthoujā clan. Their capital was at Kanglā, formerly occupied by the Khābās. To the east of the Ningthoujā lay the principality of the Angoms and their capital was at Pureirombā. To the south of the Ningthoujā lay the Khuman principality and their capital was at Thoubāl. Later, Khuman king Laiphengbā shifted the capital to Nongyai Leikoipung (now, Mayāngh Imphal). And to the south-west of the Ningthoujā lay the principality of the Moirāngs. Their capital was situated at Moirāng. To the north and north-west of the Ningthoujā lay the principality of the
Luwangs. R. K. Jhalajit is of the opinion that the present Luwangsangbam was probably the capital of the Luwangs. The principality of the Chenglei was probably around Taknā. This assumption is further strengthened by the events that led to the marriage of Thāngyi Khongjombā, the Chenglei king, to Penu Leimaren after his first wife Yaoreiba Chanu was forcibly taken away by King Nāokhambā (417-428 A.D.). According to Jhalajit Singh, the principality of Chenglei (Sarāng Leishāngthem) is difficult to be located and it appears to have been originally situated around Leitāng lake and Taknākhā.

These different clans waged an age-long struggle for supremacy against one another, resulting in the absorption of the weaker by the stronger ones. Besides these seven dominant groups, there were also some smaller communities as noted already. These smaller communities were absorbed into one or the other seven dominant clans which in turn were amalgamated politically under the Ningthoujā clan. Though maintaining their distinct identities these salāis belonged to a closely kin and allied group of people having more or less similar culture. Communication with one another was possible even though their languages still retained their distinctive forms. Inter-marriage among these different salāis has been a very common feature since the

earliest days. In spite of their internal feuds for supremacy, political alliances were not uncommon among them. If one of the principalities was threatened by an alien power, they stood united against the common foe. When Moirambā was reigning as the king of the Meiteis (1275-1302 A.D.), the Burmese invaded the Khuman principality. The invasion was repulsed by the united force of the Meiteis, the Moirangs and the Khumans. In their struggle for supremacy, the Ningthoujā or Meiteis proved the ablest of all, and one by one they subdued and annexed all the other principalities. Thus, finally all the remaining salais came under the sway of the Meiteis. Col. McCulloch also observed that "by degrees the Meithei subdued the whole and the name Meithei has become applicable to all."23

Historical evidences show that it took several centuries to complete the process of the amalgamation of the different salāis under the banner of the Ningthoujās or Meiteis. The process of absorption was started by Nongdā Lairen Pakhangbā and since his time the Khābās ceased to exist as an independent tribe and were absorbed into the Meitei fold.

There are evidences to show that when Pakhangbā defeated and annexed the Khābā kingdom, the principalities

of the Chengleis and the Angoms were also overrun by him. In ancient texts and chronicles, the three defeated Chiefs were referred to as "Sarāren Aribā Ahum." But while the Khābā salāi was subdued permanently, the Angoms and the Chengleis, however, preserved their separate political identity for several centuries. The Chengleis, however, were not powerful enough to withstand the ever increasing power of the Meiteis for long and they were subsequently merged into the Meitei community. But, unlike the Chengleis, the Angoms continued to be a powerful clan and it entered into severe conflicts and encounters with the Ningthoujā clan. Though the Chengleis continued to rule in their principality, not much was recorded about them in the annals of Manipur except an interesting incident in which the Meitei King Nāokhambā (411-428 A.D.) carried away the pregnant wife of the Chenglei king, Thāngyi Khongjombā.

When King Nāokhambā died, the eldest son of the queen, born and brought up in the court of the Meiteis, claimed the throne, but was debarred from ascending it as he was not the real progeny of the Meitei king. While in the Chenglei principality, after the death of Thāngyi Khongjombā, his son, Thāngyi Tāobung Khongdouba, born by his second marriage

24. Mansoyaima, op. cit., p. 3.
succeeded him as the king of the Chengleis. Chenglei kings continued to rule in their principality and in the seventh century A.D., we find a reference in Ningthourol Lambubā to the conquest of the Chengleis also called (Thāngā-kambong) by the King Nāothingkhong on his way home after the conquest of the Mangāngs at Loiching. Yet another reference in the state chronicle, Cheithārol Kumbāba, reveals that King Punsibā (1404-1432 A.D.) also invaded and conquered the Chengleis (Thāngā-kambong). This was the last that was heard about the Chengleis. However, it seems very clear that since the time of King Pakhangba till their final absorption, the Chengleis could preserve their political identity only at the pleasure of the Meiteis (Ningthoujā clan).

The chronicles of Manipur do not record any direct conflict between the Meiteis and the Luwangs. The Luwangs were ruling in their own principality independently of the Meiteis for several centuries after the 1st century A.D. But nothing worthy of attention was heard about them before and after the reign of Luwāng Ningthou Punsibā, the foremost king of the Luwangs. He was a renowned scholar-statesman king who flourished until the middle of the seventh century. Before ascending the throne of the Meiteis in 663 A.D., Nāothingkhong, son of Meitei King Ura-Konthoubā, on the advice of his father-in-law, Punsibā Yumoibā, the king of Khuman, went to

27. Ibungohal and Khelchandra, op. cit., p. 8.
the Luwang principality and stayed in the capital of the Luuangs. There he received instructions on the customs, manners, royalty and administration of the Meiteis from Luwang Ningthou Punsiba. The Luwang king died when Naothingkhong was at the Luwang capital. After his death, the Luuangs began to decline. Subsequently, the Luwang king Phantek Shoknäiba was defeated and his principality was devastated by the united forces of the Khuman and the Moirang. Later, the Luuangs were absorbed by the Meiteis.

When Naothingkhong became the king of the Meiteis, a small community, called the Mangang, was inhabiting Loiching Phouoiching as an independent tribe. Naothingkhong invaded the Mangangs and defeated Mangang Konkhuchä Atingä, the chief of Mangangs and brought them under the Meitei supremacy. Many spoils of war were brought from the Mangangs including Kori thraochi, a trumpet-like instrument made of copper which was later used for giving message to Kasä (Lord of Heaven) on the coronation of Meitei Kings. Naothingkhong was henceforth called Mangang Ngamba (conqueror of the Mangangs). Thus, the Mangangs too became a part of the Meitei community.

Unlike the Khaba-Nganba, the Chenglei and Luwang, the other three principalities, viz., the Angom, the Khuman

and the Moirāng were powerful enough to preserve their independent status against the onslaught of the Meiteis for a long time. There were, however, cordial relationship between the Meiteis and the three powerful clans, particularly with the Angoms. But such relationships were frequently interrupted, by feuds and warfares and on more than one occasion the Meiteis tasted defeat and humiliations from one or the other of them. But on the whole the Meiteis dominated and subjugated them and ultimately absorbed them in their fold.

Historical evidences show that in the first few centuries of the Christian era, no conflict or encounter took place between the Meiteis and the remaining three principalities. But in the sixth century A.D., Sameirāng, the Meitei king, attacked and conquered the Angom principality by killing Kuakpā Thawānthābā, the Angom king.31 The Angom principality was not, however, annexed and it continued to preserve its separate identity. Subsequently, it again became powerful enough to challenge the Meiteis. Like the Angoms, the Khumans and the Moirāngs also engaged frequent conflicts with the Meiteis. In the eighth century the Moirāngs invaded the Meiteis. But King Khongtekchā (763-784 A.D.) defeated and killed all the invading Moirāng warriors.32 With the Khumans, the beginning of such conflicts, started since the time of Ayāngbā (821-910 A.D.) When the

31. Ibungohal and Khelchandra, op. cit.,
Khumans attacked him for the violation of their territory, Ayāngbā defeated the Khumans and brought some prisoners to Imphal. These encounters marked the beginning of conflicts between the Meiteis and the remaining dynasties and this state of affairs continued for several centuries, until all of them succumbed to the ever increasing power of the Meiteis.

The Khuman principality lay to the south of the Meitei kingdom and covered a large area. The Khumans were particularly famous for their wild and turbulent nature. For several centuries the wild and powerful Khumans made their capital at Thoubāl. Around the seventh century the Khuman chief Adon Lāiphengbā shifted the capital to Nongyai Leikoipung (Mayang Imphal). Till the thirteenth century, in spite of the intermittent onslaughts of the Meiteis, the Khumans were able to preserve their sovereignty. But after their crushing defeat in the hands of King Thawān Thābā (1175-1231 A.D.), the power and glory of the Khumans began to wane and they seemed to preserve a separate political entity only because the Meiteis did not choose to annex them. The Khuman principality was declining so rapidly that subsequently their kings could no longer carry on the administration of the kingdom effectively. Unable to cope with the chaotic state of affairs in his kingdom, the Khuman king Adon Lamāi Kāikhinbā

voluntarily came to the court of the Meiteis and handed over the administration of his kingdom to the Meitei King, Kongyāmbā (1324-1335 A.D.). The Khuman king himself stayed in the capital of the Meiteis for the rest of his life.\textsuperscript{34} The Khuman principality thus came under the sway of the Meiteis.

Even after the decline of the Khumans, the Moirāng principality lying to the south-west of the Meitei kingdom still flourished as an independent kingdom. Like the Khumans, the Moirāngs also entered into frequent encounters with the Meiteis until they were permanently subdued by the latter. Though they suffered defeats and humiliations in the hands of the Meiteis, the Moirāngs were able to withhold their sovereignty until the middle of the fifteenth century. Avenging the death of his father Punshiba, Ningthoukhomba, the Meitei king (1432-1467 A.D) conquered the Moirāngs by killing the Moirāng chief Sanāhongbā.\textsuperscript{35} Since then the Moirāngs came under the suzerainty of the Meiteis. But the principality was not ruled directly by the Meiteis. Instead, a Moirāng chief, duly appointed and installed by the Meiteis, continued to rule Moirāng, principality. But during Jai Singh's reign (1763-1778 A.D.), the Moirāng chief Khellei Nungnāng Telheibā revolted against the Meiteis with the help of the Burmese. Being defeated Jai Singh fled to Assam. After his return from Assam Jai Singh killed the Moirāng chief and

\textsuperscript{34} Singh, Khelchandra, N., Khuman Kangleiron, Imphal, 1980, pp. 57-58; Moirāng-ion (MS).

\textsuperscript{35} Miyat. (MS).
the principality was then put under the direct rule of the Meiteis. Subsequently, the hereditary Moirang chiefs appointed by Meitei kings were made nobles in the court of the Meitei kings at Imphal.

The Angom principality lay to the east of the Meiteis. Their capital was at Pureiromba. The Angoms had already established their principality before the arrival of Pākhangbā. The Meiteis had so far extremely close relations with the Angoms throughout their history. A tradition appears to have existed requiring the Meitei Ningthou (king) to be a close relation by marriage of the Angom Ningthou. The relationship between the Meitei Ningthou and the Angom Ningthou, the heads, one of the Ningthoujā or royal clan, and the other of one of the most important clans, was generally that of son-in-law and father-in-law. Even after the Angom principality was formally merged into the Meitei kingdom, the relationship continued as before. At the time of Kanglā Mentongbā (the traditional coronation) of the Meitei kings, the Angom Ningthou ascended the throne at Pureirombā a few days ahead of the former.

In spite of such relationships, there were also frequent cases of enmity and bloodshed between them which ultimately resulted in the absorption of the Angoms into the Meitei fold. As mentioned already, King Pākhangbā also subdued

36. Hodson, op. cit., p. 76.
the Angoms when he usurped the throne from the Khabas and again King Sameirang over-ran and subjugated them by killing the Angom chief. But the Angoms continued to retain their independent principality and in the seventh century just after the death of King Konthoubā, the Angoms invaded the Meitai kingdom and over-ran the kingdom for five years.37

In 663 King Nāothingkhong, after returning from the Luwāng principality drove away the Angoms and occupied the throne. Since then the Meiteis dominated the Angoms though they could still preserve a separate political identity. In 1399, the Angoms again revolted and seized the throne for another five years.38 Subsequently in the sixteenth century also, Koiramba, the Meitei king, over-ran and subdued the Angoms.39

But they were still allowed to keep their separate entity and this continued up to the reign of Charāi-Rongbā (1678-1709) who finally crushed the Angoms and totally merged them into the Meitei community.40 The white chong and shekpin (ceremonial umbrella) used by the Angom king were seized and since then the chong and shekpin have been being used by the Meitei kings till date. Thereafter the Angom chiefs were appointed by the Meitei kings and they occupied the highest office among the posts held by salāi chiefs in the court of

39. Ibungohal and Khelchandra, op. cit., p. 11.
40. Miyat, (MS).
the Meiteis. The chong and shekpin once used by the Angom kings ceased to be used by subsequent Angom chiefs appointed by the Meitei kings. The chronicles and other historical evidences show that though Angoms often rose against the Meiteis and even defeated or killed Meitei kings on more than one occasion, they were practically dominated by the Meiteis since very early period of history. This is evident from the fact that on many occasions the Meitei kings seemed to exercise their authority over the Angom chiefs by sending them on expeditions, by removal or re-instatement of the chiefship, etc.

Thus, the seven principal clans of the Meiteis who at one time independently ruled in their well-defined principalities were ultimately amalgamated into a united people called the 'Meiteis'. However, the name 'Meitei' was formerly applied only to the Ningthoujā salāi or the ruling clan. This is evident from the fact that in the pre-amalgamation period, the people belonging to other salāis used to call the king of the Ningthoujā salāi as Meitei Ningthou (ningthou=king). Likewise, the people of the Ningthoujā clan were once addressed simply as Meiteis. But after the amalgamation of the seven clans under the leadership of the powerful Ningthoujā salāi, all the people belonging to the remaining six clans also came to be called the Meiteis after the name of their amalgamator. Thus the larger Meitei society was formed as a result of the amalgamation of the seven salāis into a single unit.
Absorption of other People into the Meiteis:

Besides the pure Meiteis belonging to the seven salais, a number of aliens also were absorbed into the Meitei society. These people and their descendants were, then, known as Nongpok Haram (people from the east) and Nongchup Haram (people from the west). The accounts of their arrival and settlement were recorded accurately in Meihoubaron and Sanggai Phammang and the particulars of the Brahman immigrants who settled in Manipur since the 15th century were recorded in Bamon Khunthoklon and Bamongi Meihoubaron.

As mentioned above, at various stages of her history many people from the east and the west came and settled in Manipur either as captives of war or as peaceful settlers. Those who came from the east were purely Mangoloids consisting of Shans, Burmese and some Chinese. The settlement of these people and their subsequent absorption into the Meitei society took place much earlier than in the case of who came from the rest of India. This is because of the fact that the Meiteis established political and cultural connections with her eastern neighbours since the early stages of her history. But her relations with the rest of India was comparatively recent. The earliest mention of the settlement of these people from the east dates back to the time of King Näothingkhong in the seventh century A.D. There is no reason

41. Sharma, Atombapu, Pakhangba, p. 130.
to doubt the accuracy of this date. We have already alluded to the visit of Samlung, brother of Pong king to Manipur during the reign of King NaTHINGKHONG. There are convincing evidences to show that even prior to the visit of Samlung, friendly relations between the Meiteis and the Pongs were already established. This is evident from the nature of the conversation that took place between the Meitei king and Samlung. 42 We have also already noted the Chinese invasion of Manipur and the subsequent settlement of the Chinese prisoners at a place called Susa Kammeng. W.S. Desai also writes about the influx of Shans into Manipur in the 14th century. 43 All these immigrants were assigned to one or other of the seven salais and were completely merged into the Meitei society. The descendants of these people are still known as Nongpok Haram (people from the east).

On the other hand, people from the rest of India were rather late to come to settle in Manipur and to be subsequently merged among the Meitei population. The accounts of their settlement and subsequent merger into the Meitei society were recorded in Nongchup Haram, Bamon Khunthoklon, Sangai Phammang, Leirikyengbamlon, Ukhongshanglon, Mayang Tekhaolon, etc. In Sangai Phammang, it is recorded that King Thangbi Lanthaba who reigned from 1302 A.D. to 1324 A.D. had

six wives including the principal queen. His son, Prince Kuākpa Thawāntha, born by his third wife Yumkhu Chanu, married a lady from the west. She was locally called Chingurembi. A large number of people came as her attendents and they were subsequently merged among the Meiteis. This was probably the first known band of immigrants from the rest of India. Since then there had been periodical arrival and settlement of such people in Manipur both as captives of war or peaceful immigrants. But since the time of King Kyāmbā (1467-1508 A.D.) the Brahman settlers who came to Manipur remained as a distinct entity though they had become full members of the Meitei community. The Brahmans of Manipur were not assigned to any of the seven salāis but they were allotted Manipuri sages (surnames) according to their priestly occupations, place of habitations, etc.

There were, however, other groups of people who came from the rest of India and were merged into the Meitei community, but like the Brahmans they had no salāis or yeks. This points to the fact that they arrived and settled in Manipur after the general assignment of salāis for the aliens. They were Lairikyengbams and Kshetrimayums. The former began to arrive since the time of Kyāmbā and the latter since the time of Chalāmbā (1545-1562 A.D.). Most of these immigrants

44. Jhalajit, op. cit., p. 16.
45. Atombapu, op. cit., p. 113.
both Brahmans and non-Brahmans came to Manipur without their womenfolk. Hence they married local women. This also hastened the speed of their integration and absorption into the Meitei society.

Retention of the Social Identity of the Clans:

It has already been shown that the seven distinct salāis or clans were politically amalgamated into a single community under the banner of Ningthoujā clan and the name Meitei which was formerly synonymous with that clan became the common nomenclature of the united salāis. In the pre-amalgamation days persons belonging to the Khuman or the Moirāng clan were not designated as Meiteis but after the amalgamation anyone irrespective of his clan affiliations became a Meitei. This seems to suggest that the identities of the former clans ceased to exist along with their political absorption. No doubt, the political entities of all the clans other than the Ningthoujā clan were already extinct when they were fused together to form the Meitei nation. But, socially, all the seven clans continued to exist and remain as distinct entities till today as in the past.

These clans still play a basic role in the social and religious life of the Meiteis. As mentioned earlier, the clans are exogamous units and marriage within the same clan is strictly prohibited. They thus play the most important role in determining the marriage pattern of the Meiteis.
marriage, the first and foremost thing before entering into any negotiation is to ascertain the respective clans, surnames, lineages of the bride and the groom. If they belong to the same clan, no further proposal or negotiation is needed as it would amount to the marriage between kith and kin which is strictly forbidden. In the days of the Rajas those who violated these regulations were ex-communicated and degraded by banishing them to the Loi villages. Sometimes the Raja punished not only the guilty couple, but also the families of the couple. Even the sagei of the couple could be denounced. In such cases the sagei so denounced was ex-communicated by the whole community. While punishment to the sagei and the family of the couple could be revoked in due course, the punishment inflicted on to the erring couple would never be condoned. With the end of the monarchy this tradition of banishment to the Loi villages and the public denouncements has been done away with. But, ex-communication to some extent and the total prohibition of the erring couple from active participation in the social and religious ceremonies such as the adoration and propitiation of the clan ancestors, sagei deities, etc., are very much in evidence till these days.

Though the Meiteis became Hindus, it is significant, they did not abandon the basic tenets of their traditional religion. The worship of the Hindu gods and goddesses is a common practice among the Meitei Hindus, but in the hour of their trials and tribulations they definitely turn to their
traditional gods. Each of the seven clans has its own ancestor who is deified and whose status in the clan structure has already been explained. The worship of these clan ancestors constitutes a very important aspect of Meitei religion. The period of worship and the sacrificial paraphernalia to be offered to each of the deities vary in the case of each clan. We have already alluded to some of their main paraphernalia in the table already shown. But the nature of worship of these salāis is almost the same as the Almighty God is uniformly worshipped through these many deities.

The heads of the clans called pibās assume the charge of the rituals of their respective clan deities. But the pibā must be free from any impurities such as marrying a tuman (a second-hand, that is, already married woman), or marrying within the same salāi or yek, etc. If the piba suffers from any such social stigmas, he is disqualified to conduct the ceremony.

Conclusion:

From the foregoing accounts we may conclude that in pre-historic day the kingdom of Manipur was inhabited by several groups of people, each of them independent of the another. In course of time some of the weaker groups were swallowed up by the stronger ones and in the beginning of the Christian era only seven major groups of people were found occupying different parts
of Manipur. After a series of encounters, all of them were subsequently absorbed by the Meiteis, who were also known as the Ningthoujā salāi. The founder of this salāi was Pākhangbā, the first monarch of the Ningthoujā salāi. His descendants ruled Manipur all through the monarchical history of Manipur for about two thousand years. It, however, took several centuries for the descendants of Pākhangbā to carry on the process of amalgamation of other salāis within the fold of the Ningthoujā clan. When the process of absorption was over, the people belonging to different clans came to be collectively known as the Meiteis, after the name of their amalgamator. Thus, the Meitei society was formed by the amalgamation of seven major groups of people.

Today, the seven clans as independent political entities are no longer in existence. But the seven clans still survive and continue to play a very pivotal role in the social and religious life of the modern Meiteis.