Chapter V

Indigenous Games and Sports

Introduction:

T.C. Hodson says that the Meiteis are physically a fine race and are devoted to sports and games. Indeed the Meiteis have a number of indigenous games and sports, notable among them are the sagol kāngjei (hockey-on-horseback), khong kāngjei (hockey-cum-wrestling), muknā (Meitei style of wrestling), hiyāng (boat-race), lamchel(race), yubi lākpi (Meitei style of rugby), thāng-tā (sword and spear show), chāinabā (ancient style of duelling), etc. Besides, there are also a number of indoor games, the most important among them is the game of kāng. Unlike the other games mentioned above, kāng is played by both men and women. All these games, with the exception of kāng, are war-oriented and martial games of the ancient Meiteis. These games are thoroughly manly, sometimes dangerous and risky. Nevertheless these were the most favourite games of the old Meiteis and flourished under royal patronage throughout the monarchical history of Manipur. All these traditional games with the exception of chāinabā, are still played whenever the occasion demands.

Sagol Kangjei:

Of the various indigenous games, sagol kāngjei (hockey-on-horseback) is one of the most ancient and the most favourite games of the Meiteis. Sagol is the Meitei word for horse and kāngjei for modern hockey. How superbly and dexterously the game is played and how favourite it is to the Meiteis may be summed up from Hodson's description of it: "To describe the game is beyond the powers of any but an imaginative and practised pen, for, in respect of brilliance of play, constant excitement, rashness, courage, skill and popular enthusiasm, there is no game to equal it." This is the traditional game of sagol kāngjei which subsequently came to be known as the English game of polo.

Sagol kāngjei is the national game of the Meiteis. In former days, it was played throughout the country by all sections of the male population — old and young, rich and poor. Though the game has now become a rich men's game, it is no wonder that the game was formerly played even by the poorest section of the people. Ponies were then abundantly found in Manipur and maintaining a pony cost nothing to the people. Captain Pemberton has written that ponies were so numerous that almost every inhabitant of the state, however,

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2. Hodson, op. cit., p. 50.
humble his rank, possessed two or three. There was hardly any Meitei who did not know the art of riding and playing the game. It would, therefore, be wrong to assume that in Manipur the game was reserved for professionals and potentates. On the contrary, the villagers enjoyed many a rough but excellent game played mostly on the villagers' own grazing ground. Children, as soon as they were grown up, commenced riding and playing the game. This early training was essential to achieve the general aspiration of becoming distinguished players. For, an unusually good player commanded due social prestige and was sure of getting royal favours and good positions in the court. Today with the departure of monarchy, the privileges are gone but the ancient game is still being played with much vigour and enthusiasm.

Ancient texts and chronicles of Manipur give definite evidence to the effect that sagol kāngjei is one of the most ancient games of the Meiteis. The myths and legends of Manipur also trace sagol kāngjei and its allied game khong kāngjei to the mythological age when these were played by the gods. Dr. S.K. Chatterji writes, "The gods formed into two opposing parties of seven each and first played this game.

They are pleased when this game is played: that is why when there are plagues or pestilences in the country, the Manipuris offer polo-sticks and balls to the gods. We also have already mentioned, while writing about the Lai-haçoabā ritual, how God Khoriphābā after playing kāngjī went out to seek his bride.

According to the ancient text, Kangjeiron (book on the game of kāngjī) sagol kāngjī was first played during the reign of Ningthou Kāngbā who ruled Manipur in pre-historic days. The following extract from the text, in archaic Manipuri, also speaks about the origin of the game:

Ningthou Kāngbanā hayeng inung shoīrābagā idāirem pāthou pumnama yāngoī shyāngthaktā phamnā lichei toran haiṇā munnā thangu matum tānā nāinu pānjan tānnase haiṇabādā .........
Ningthou Kāngbā Kolloī maming thougī meīnā wāinā cheību kāngdrum-o kouna thonnare.

Ningthou Kāngbā expressed his desire to play the game of kāngjī on horseback and asked his subjects to arrange a match with him the next day. Henceforth, the stick and the ball were named kāngjī and kāngdrum respectively after him.

The book further records a match of the game that was played by the friends of King Pākhāngbā so that Lāisānā, his wife might be able to make acquaintance with his friends.

The game greatly flourished during the reign of King Kiyamba (1467-1508 A.D.). Subsequently, during the

7. Kangjeiron (MS).
reign of Khāgembā (1597-1652 A.D.), certain innovations of the game were introduced. One such notable change was the introduction of pāna kāngjei in 1606 A.D. According to the new system, public competition of the game was held on the basis of pāna or sub-division of society. The Meitei society was divided into six pānas (lups) during the time of King Khāgembā. According to the editors of the Cheitharol Kumbaba, what T.C. Hodson says, "In the reign of Khagamba 1600, the great and famous game of polo was introduced into Manipur," might be a misinterpretation of the introduction of pāna kāngjei. Since the time of Khāgembā the game has been being played regularly at Kāngjeipung, the present polo ground at Imphal.

The game was first introduced from the state of Manipur to Cachar and other parts of India and then to England by the British officers under the name of polo. Geoffrey Evans and Brett James write "When the British tea-planters first took up the game in Cachar during the 19th century, it was from the Manipuris that they learnt to play and their polo club at Silchar was the first of its

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kind in the world."  

In 1864, a Manipuri team was invited to Calcutta. With their small hardy mounts and scientific play they easily defeated the Calcutta team in spite of the larger and faster ponies of the latter.  

It was then introduced in England by the 10th Hussars in 1869. In 1878 the first polo match was played at Hounslow Heath between the 9th the Lancer and the 10th Hussars. From there it travelled to the U.S.A.  

It was only after the British learnt the game from the Meiteis and played with them that the latter came to know that their game of sagol kāngjēi was called polo by the British.

Robert Kelly and George Coleman are of the opinion that polo originated from Persia. From there, it went to Tibet and China. From China the game was imported to Manipur.  

There are, however, many other writers who hold that Manipur is the home of polo. Dr. Brown writes, "As might be expected in the place of its birth the play is much superior to what can be seen elsewhere, it is much faster and the hits are delivered with great precision."  

Commenting on the origin of the game R. Constantine

15. Loc. cit.  
16. Brown, op. cit., p. 79.
concludes, "In any case, that polo as the game is played now originated in Manipur is an undisputed fact." Further, while speaking on the affairs of Manipur in the British Parliament, Marquess of Ripon remarks, "It is a small state probably until these events took place very little known to your Lordship, unless, indeed, some of you may have heard of it as the birth-place of the game of polo."

In view of the historical background and the tradition of the game, it can definitely be said that sagol kangjei, the game of hockey-on-horseback, as played by the Meiteis of Manipur, is not an importation but an indigenously evolved game, quite unknown to the outside world, as a natural process of development in this hill-girt and inaccessible kingdom since centuries back.

Sagol kangjei is played by a team of fourteen players, seven players on either side. The ground where the game is played is called Kangjeipung. In former days, there was no hard and fast rule as to the accurate size of the ground. The size varied according to the fancy of the parties of the organisers. According to R.K. Sanahal Singh, the size of the ground was approximately 160x80 fathoms

Each of the seven players bears a distinct name according to the position he occupies. The names of the seven players are panjenbā, panjenchang, pallak, lāngjei, pallak, panngākchāng and pan-ngākpa.

The kāngjei (the stick) as used in the game is made of well-seasoned cane or a long shaft of bamboo with a head of hard wood set on an obtuse angle to the shaft and is about six feet in length. The kāngdrum (the ball) is made of seasoned bamboo roots. Geoffrey Evans and Brett James observed that the Manipuri polo sticks are usually long so that if the ball was just out of reach a player merely let out more stick whereas if the ball lay inconveniently near the riding line, he reversed the process and shortened his grip.20 The play starts as soon as the kāngdrum is thrown in the air in the middle of the ground; and it is in almost all cases struck before reaching the ground. A peculiar aspect of the game is that each player is always closely marked by an opponent who never leaves him alone. Thus the pan-ngākpa of one team is always marked by the panjenbā of the opposing team. Similarly, the pan-ngākchāng is marked by panjenchang, pallak by pallak, lāngjei by lāngjei, so on and so forth.

20. Geoffrey Evans and Brett James, op. cit., p. 10.
Public competition of sagol kāngjei was, in former days, held only on the basis of pānā system. Each of the pānās sent a team of players who were to play for the said pānā. The players were selected after much scrutiny. As mentioned earlier, every Meitei yumnāk or surname belonged to one or the other of the pānās. A man whose claim of belonging to a particular pānā was doubtful was debarred from participating in the competition. Hodson also speaks about a rule according to which no pony, which at any time during the preceding month belonged to a representative of another pānā, must be allowed to play.²¹

There were four main pānās having the same status, viz., lāipham, khābam, ahallup and nāhārup. Besides these, there were two other inferior pānās called hidākphānbā and potsangbā. The competition was held in order of seniority between the four major pānās. Thus, first of all, lāipham and khābam would play. This was followed by ahallup and nāhārup. But, a peculiar feature of the competition was that the winners of the two groups did not meet in the final. Instead, a team of seven players was again selected for the final match from each of the two groups. Thus the final was played between lāipham and khābam versus ahallup and nāhārup. Such a match is called chere kāre kāngjei. Chere is the name of the team selected out of lāipham and

khābam, and kāre for the ahallup and nahārup pānās. Being inferior pānās hidākphānba and potsangbā were not allowed to compete with the four major pānās and hence they competed only between themselves.

The dress for sagol kāngjei is pheijom (dhoti), which is well tucked up, a pair of thick woollen gaiters reaching from the ankle to the knee, a whip in the left hand suspended from the wrist, a shirt and a turban fastened under the chin. The turban is carefully worn so as to avoid damages or injuries on the head from deadly blows. The saddle is furnished with curbed flaps of enamelled leather suspended from the sides opposite the stirrups and stirrup leathers. Hodson says that the most curious feature about the saddle "is the addition to it of a pair of leather flaps which project around the legs of the rider and afford some protection from a blow." 22 In pānā kāngjei each team wears dresses different colours as distinguishing marks. The customary colours are green shirt for khābam pānā, red shirt for lāipham, white shirt for ahallup and yellow shirt for nahārup. The distinguishing colours of the two inferior pānās, viz., hidākphānba and potsangbā are black and blue respectively. These customary colours are still in vogue if the game is organised on the basis of pānā.

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22. Loc. cit.
The ponies of Manipur are small and generally are not more than 4 ft. 6 inches in height. But they are strong and spirited. Hodson describes them as strong, wiry little creatures rarely more than 12 hands in height. Once in the field, the spirit and the dexterity shown by these ponies would surprise even the coldest spectators. It is exhilarating to see the pony pursuing and kicking the ball towards the goal and stops suddenly in case the ball reverses or crosses the boundary line. As might be expected, a good pony was one of the most precious possessions for everyone from the king down to the commoners and was parted with very reluctantly. King Marjit Singh’s invasion of Cachar in 1818 A.D. was mainly motivated by his desire to take revenge against Govindachandra, the king of Cachar who had forcibly taken away his favourite pony when he was a refugee in Cachar.

The game as played in Manipur has certain peculiarities. There are no goal posts nor are there off-sides. The entire back line boundary forms the goal post and there is no custodian in the game. If the ball goes out the side-line boundary, it is regarded as out and the ball is flung as at starting among the players opposite the point of exit. Many dangerous and risky things are

permissible in the game. However, free hooking of an opponent's stick (hāirou loubā) and blocking a running horse by another from the side (sagol tubnabā), both being very hazardous to both the player and the horse were done away since 1928 on the orders of His Highness Maharaja Sir Churachand Singh. 25 A player may pick up the ball and run with it and hit it so that it may cross the goal line and score a goal. As soon as a goal is scored, the players hurry back to the centre of the ground where the ball is thrown not along the ground but in the air so that the players may have the chance to strike it in mid-air. When either side scores four goals, relief is given and ends are changed. Tired and injured players are replaced. In this way, the game continues score after score until either side is able to score seven goals. The team which scores the said number of goals is declared the winner. If time does not permit either side to score the requisite number of goals, the game is resumed on the next day.

Though the game no longer exerts any direct influence on the social and political life of the Meiteis, in former times its importance and influence was tremendous. As mentioned above, an unusually good player was certainly blessed with fame, fortune and royal recognition. Thus, becoming a distinguished player was the

cherised hope and aspiration of every citizen, however, poor or low his rank might be. This social outlook together with the encouragement given by the rulers of Manipur induced every Meitei to train himself so as to become a skilful horseman and an expert player. Thus the game also served as a training ground for the famed Manipuri cavalry or what the Burmese called Kathe-horse, the very mention of which once made the people of the neighbouring kingdoms tremble with fear.

The impact of the game on the success of the rulers of Manipur to wield political and military power over the neighbouring kingdoms has been emphasized by most writers on Manipur. Boileau Pemberton remarks, "The national game of hockey, which is played by every male of the country capable of sitting a horse, renders them all expert equstrains; and it was by men and horses so trained that the princes of Manipur were able for many years not only to repel the aggressions of the Burmahs, but to scour the whole country east of the Ningthee river, and plant their banners on the banks of Irrawattee in the heart of the capital of Ava." Indeed, it was the skilled horsemanship and aptitude in the handling of weapons on horseback through continued polo playing that the Meiteis, though a small community, could have achieved such a remarkable success against a very big community like the Burmese.

Today the game is played in two styles, viz., the traditional and the modern (international style). Even though the game no longer enjoys the old patronage of the kings of Manipur, it is still played with much enthusiasm. In the kāṅgjeipungs at Imphal and other parts of Manipur, one may still see people, even in their sixties and seventies, riding their ponies at full gallop and playing the game vigorously to the accompaniment of cheers and shouts from the enthusiastic crowd.

Khong Kāṅgjei:

Khāṅg kāṅgjei (khong=foot, kāṅgjei=hockey), otherwise known as kāṅgjei phānabi (kāṅgjei-hockey, phānabi= to seize), is the Meitei version of hockey. But unlike the hockey as played elsewhere, khong kāṅgjei is not simply hockey but a combination of hockey and wrestling. Hence, the game is sometimes called muknā-kāṅgjei. Muknā is the Meitei word for wrestling and kāṅgjei stands for the game of hockey and also the stick.

The game closely resembles sagol kāṅgjei except that it is played on foot and not on horse-back. But since the game is played on foot combined with wrestling, it needs, besides skill, extra-ordinary physical prowess. One who is not well acquainted with the art of wrestling can never play this game. This wrestling which is
indigenously known as muknē has its own laws and separate origin. As in sagol kāngjei, the rules of the game are not complicated and many things are permissible in it which render the game very hazardous. Like the sagol kāngjei, khong kāngjei is a popular national game of the Meiteis. In spite of the risks involved the game is played not only by the matured individuals but even by children. T.C. Hodson says, "the game is played by every naked little boy on the waste lands surrounding the village." 

We have already alluded to the common origin of sagol kāngjei and khong kāngjei. According to Kangjeiron, Ningthou Kāngbā played this game even before he played the game of sagol kāngjei. As in sagol kāngjei the game is played with seven players on each side. Formerly, area of the ground, the size of the stick and the ball of the game were like those of sagol kāngjei. But, now it is generally played in a field of about 200x80 yards in area with a stick of about 4 ft. in length. The names of the players, their positions, the nature of the goal line, etc, resemble the sagol kāngjei.

The costume of the players consists of khudei (a kind of attire) worn very tightly and fully tucked up. Over this, like a belt a twisted khudei or ngabong is wound.

27. Hodson, op. cit., p. 49.
round the loins and this, after having tied at the front, is carried in between the thighs and then tied securely at the back. This is known as kishi-shetpā. A simple type of turban is also worn by the players. But shirts are not usually worn. In order to safeguard the private parts from the blows of the stick, a protector, called phi-khāo-shābā passes over the player's crotch, between his legs and is tied firmly at the back in the sash.

The game is started with the ball being thrown in the air in the middle of the ground. As in sagol kāngjei, this is known as hantre-hunbā. When the ball is in the mid-air, one of the players hits it towards the goal. The game permits a player to carry the ball in any manner as he likes. He may kick the ball or grasp it with his hands and dash towards the goal. But unlike hockey as played elsewhere, it is very difficult to run even a few steps towards the goal line with or without the ball, for he is always attended to and guarded by his rival who never leaves him alone. When a player is carrying the ball, be it over the ground or in his hands, the opponent, instead of trying to snatch the ball from him, would rather try to seize him physically and wrestle with him. The opponent thus swings his hands on the waist of the player who is heading towards the goal thereby making him completely immobile. They are then engaged in locking and tussling for minutes even after the ball is carried far away by
other players. To release himself from the grip of his opponent, a player very often throws the other over the ground as is done in a wrestling match.

While a player is carrying the ball with his hands, it is dangerous for him to let his stick fall from his grip for in hitting the ball he himself may be severely roughed up by his opponent's stick. There is also no restriction against the operation of the stick in any position. Thus, in order to prevent his opponents from closing in upon him, a player, with the ball, often swirls his stick high above his head until he hits the ball. The opponent, in turn, may hook the swirling stick or strike it out of the rival's grip. In case a player picks up the ball and heads towards the goal, he has to score it only by hitting the ball either high in the air or on the ground. When the hitting ball crosses the back line fully, a goal is scored. As in sagol kāŋjei, as soon as a goal is scored, the next game is resumed by throwing the ball in the middle of the ground, not over it, but high up in the air. There is no fixed number of goals nor is there any fixed duration of the game. All depends on the discretion of the organisers. The usual duration is, however, about two hours.29 As in sagol kāŋjei, relief is given either in the middle of the duration or when half the agreed number of goals are scored.

29. Sanahal, op. cit., p. 64.
This is followed by the change of sides. The game continues goal after goal until the required number is scored.

The very nature of the game reveals that khong kāngjei is so far the manliest of all the games in which physical strength, speed, skill, courage and spirit are called for. It is, in fact, a game in which muknā (wrestling), kāngjei (hockey) and lamchel (race) are perfectly blended together. In former days, like other indigenous games, state competitions among the different pānas were conducted under royal patronage. Today, even though there is no such patronage, the game still flourishes and attracts the enthusiasm of the people.

Muknā:

Muknā is the Meitei style of wrestling. It forms one of the most important aspects of the traditional martial arts. Muknā is a game in which two unarmed persons contest to establish superiority in strength and skill. In this combat it is, however, the skill and tactic that really count rather than mere muscle strength. Thus, a person well acquainted with this art even though, his physical stature is comparatively, weak can easily outclass a stronger but less-skilled opponent.

Muknā is played only once and no more than that. In it one who is able to throw down the other once on the
floor becomes the winner. Even though a contestant is not thrown over the ground he may become a loser if any part of his body (other than the soles of the feet) touches the floor. Once a contestant loses the first bout, all is over for him. He has no further chance to prove his own superiority. However, in ordinary matches a return bout is usually arranged immediately after the first is over. In this also, the one who floors the other first is always the winner even though he loses in the return match. Though Muknā is a sport where two persons fight as if they brutes, at the end of the match the victor in a gracious and gentlemanly way embraces his fallen rival.

The game is one of the oldest games of the Meiteis. It has been in vogue since the very existence of the Meitei society. Its origin is even connected with the myth of creation. The myth of creation tells us that as desired by the Supreme Lord, the earth was created by His elder progeny Asībā (Sanāmahi). But the earthly kingship was given to Konglouton Louthibā (Pākhangbā), the Lord's younger progeny. Enraged at it, Asībā descended in the guise of a horse called Shamdon Ayāngbā. The animal trodded and up-rooted the vegetables and crops (hawāi thāngpāk) raised by Konglouton Louthibā. The animal was, however, trapped in the net. While the animal thus remained in the net, Konglouton Louthibā seized the animal by applying an effective hold and
lock called 'hāo muknā langphāi chan'. From this the game of muknā originated. The hold and lock once used by Konglouton Louthibā is still used as one of the recognised and effective tactics of muknā. Later in historical times, in the first century A.D. when King Pākhangbā, the first historical monarch of the Meiteis encountered and defeated Poireiton, he also used the same tactics. In Nungpān Pombi Luwāobā also we find how Pombi Luwāobā challenged the brothers of Leinung Thongāren in muknā matches. The ancient history of Moirāng principality is full of muknā exploits, especially in the story of Khambā and Thoibi.

Ordinarily, muknā contestants are dressed with kishi-shetpā of which we have already alluded to in the game of khong kāngjei. But in former days, when muknā was played before the royal audience, a special costume called ningkham samjin (national costume of the traditional Meiteis) was worn.

Muknā is held in the middle of an open grassy ground surrounded on all sides by a large number of enthusiastic spectators. The game is usually conducted by an elderly retired muknā star. The match is arranged between two persons of approximately the same physical build-up. The

30. Pudil,(MS).
31. Krathonq Lamlen,(MS).
two contestants, so selected, then turn up from opposite directions and are seated facing each other. Then they bow to each other slightly and move towards the middle of the arena. When they are close enough, they stretch out their hands and palms to show that they are unarmed. The stretched right hand of one wrestler is received by the other's left hand and vice versa. This is known as khut-pinabā (khut=hand, pinabā=to give). Then, a contestant's left hand slowly pulls his opponent's right hand towards the side of his abdomen and allows it to hold on to his loin sash. While doing so the left hand is always guarding and checking the other's right hand so that the latter may not intrude backward beyond the groin. This mutual gripping of the right hands on their respective sashes is known as phi-shinnabā (phi=cloth, shinnabā=to exchange). Once this is over, the contest is formally started. In phi-shinnabā the left hands may or may not grip with each other but gripping by the right hands is a must. Sometimes the actual contest starts only after both the hands of each contestant have fully gripped each other's sash.

Immediately after phi-shinnabā, each of them tries to take positions to his own advantage. They bend down fully almost parallel to the ground, pressing one's chin against another's and the shoulder against the shoulder. As mentioned above, muknā is won by one who can uproot and
throw down his opponent over the ground. In doing so, except punches, chops, etc., many other things are permissible in the game. A contestant may freely kick at the thigh of his opponent with the upper side of his foot. This may be followed by a more bloody kick with the knee which may directly land on the mouth or nose of the opponent. While punching and chopping are forbidden, a wrestler can use his hands in any manner as he likes against the opponent. He may grip the arm, the shoulder and the thigh. He may even twist the neck of his opponent.

In ordinary muknā matches, there are a number of contestants and one may become the winner by knocking out all the challengers. But in former days the state competition of muknā was held only on the basis of pānā. Each pana was represented by a team of seven wrestlers who were to combat for the pānā. These seven wrestlers were selected out of a number of wrestlers belonging to that pānā by the process of elimination. This process of selection within the pānā is called muknā yendamnabā (yendamnabā=trial). As was customary, the muknā competition was first held between the Khābam and Lāipham pana, followed by the shallup and nāhārup. The winners of the two finally met for the title of state championship. Since pānā muknā was played before the royal audience, the two contestants first of all had to pay obeisance to the king by prostrating before him. After winning the bout the victor had to pay obeisance to
the king again by crying an utterance. Hodson describes it thus: "The victor over the wrestler who competes with him, before salaaming to the Raja, leaps up in the air, alighting on his left foot; as he descends he gives his right buttock a resounding slap with his right hand; having thus asserted his superior skill, he makes his salaam in the usual manner."  

Muknā is an indispensable aspect of the traditional Meitei martial arts. It also forms a very vital part in the game of khong kāngjei, for a man not conversant with the art of muknā can never play khong kāngjei and also yubi lākpi, another manly game. In former days, the game was learnt by almost every male member of the population. The kings of Manipur also used to patronise this art as a perfect means of keeping the subjects in the finest mental and physical health. Muknā champions were held in high regard and respect in society. They were accorded royal recognition and other favours such as the exemption from the lāllup duty for the rest of his life. The game was so popular among the masses that until very recently almost all public functions or festivals were accompanied by muknā contests. Such competitions were also one of the most attractive features in the major Hindu festivals like Janmasthmi, Radhasthmi, etc. In the Holi festival also, for several days prior to its commencement, every evening, groups of organised

32. Hodson, op. cit., p. 54.
village boys and young men used to go out in procession to another village shouting all the way slogans of challenge where the match continued till late night. In the Lai-harāobā festival muknā competition is still held and the champion is entitled to till the land belonging to the lāi as his own for the year.

Though the mass participation in the muknā competition has become, of course, a thing of the past, the game is still very popular among the Meiteis. In the rural areas of Manipur, muknā is still widely learnt and practised. There are various organisations which impart all kinds of traditional martial arts including the muknā.

Hiyang:

Hiyang is the Meitei word for boat-race. Unlike the game of sagol kāngjei, it may look to a stranger as a simple and harmless game lacking that sporting interest which characterises the game of sagol kāngjei. But contrary to it, hiyang is not only a sporting event which displays skill and strength, but also the greatest and most popular festival of the Meiteis, where men, women and children of all walks of life in their best attire — the men in their spotless white and the women in their bright and picturesques dresses throng to witness the game regardless of the weather — heat or rain.
The spirit and enthusiasm of the people for this game is evident from the huge preparations made for the event and the unusually large number of people gathered at it. The grand old races where the kings of Manipur used to grace the occasion are now no longer seen; but, whenever a boat race is held -- whether big or small, the number of people who turn up to witness the game is still beyond anybody's guess. It seems as if the whole population of the town and the villages are gathered on the bank of the moat where the boat race is held. It is from such enormous gatherings of people at the boat races that we derive such a popular Meitei proverb which is still a household word: "Mee ashi hiyāngdā phāobā ukhidri" (This person is not seen even in the hiyāng festival).

The chronicles and traditions of the Meiteis clearly indicate that hiyāng was introduced by Luwāng Ningthou Punshibā, the famed scholar statesmen-king of the then Luwāng principality. An old manuscript called Hijan Hirāo, a long narrative poem dealing with the origin and evolution of boat-race in Manipur record how the Luwāng king struck the idea of making a boat after seeing a locust crossing the flooded Shingthā river with a dried grass and again a mouse cutting a dried stem of a particular grass (khikloī) and managing to swim across the flooded river with

33. A river near Iroishemba hill which flows into the river Nambul.
it. The text further mentions how the Luwang king sent a party of wood-cutters to the Ingen-Ching hill who after performing due rites felled down a big tree and brought the same to the Luwang capital. There, two artisans, viz., Nungbān Wāngmitkhu Khutheibā and Wāngmanāo Shinheibā built a big boat by hollowing it out properly. The boat, thus made, was first launched at the river Luwang-i placing on its hirubāk (prow) the dried and shrunken head of the sangāi (deer) believed to have been incarnated by Luwang Pudāngkoi Khutkoibā, the deceased elder brother of Luwang Ningthou Punshibā. The game of hiyāṅg originated in this way.

Subsequently, in imitation of Luwang Ningthou Punshibā's boat, the royal racing-boats were also decorated with the artificial head of a sangāi (deer) at the hirubāk. Since the 13th century, the hināo (stern) of the boat has been decorated with another emblem, the artificial head of Kwākpa Leiton Pānba, a prominent warrior of the then Khuman kingdom. When King Thawānthābā (1195-1231 A.D.) was returning through the Khuman principality after an expedition, the Khumans ambushed him and his boat was about to be seized by the said Khuman warrior. He was, however, caught hold of him by the hair and dragged on the boat by Taliyā Yellāngbā of the Meiteis who then cut off the head of the Khuman with his oar.34 To commemorate the event, an

artificial human head, a replica of Kwākpa Leiton Pēnba's head was henceforth placed on the hināo of the boats. But in ordinary boat races, the boats are not decorated with any of these emblems.

Boat-races in Manipur are usually held in the month of Hiyāngei (October/November) when the rainy season is over. According to Dr. Brown, "This festival is the most important held in Manipur, and great preparations are made for it; stands are erected on both sides of the moat, the one for the Raja being of considerable size and height. The women occupy stands on the opposite side of the moat." In the old royal boat-races preparations were made on a very grand scale. Stands were erected, one each for the king, the queen, and the two tengmāi-leppās (the chiefs of the contesting parties). These stands are still known as higashang.

The racing-boats are hollowed out of a single tree and are about 90 ft. long and broad enough for two persons standing abreast or peddling with ease. The crews vary from sixty to seventy in number. Besides the crews, there are seven persons on each boat attending to the steering and cheering the crews. Of them, five are stationed towards the hirubāk and the remaining two towards the hināo. They are clad in pheijom (Meitei dhoti), phurit (shirt), and ningkham shāmjīn (a national costume of the ancient Meitais). But

35. Brown, op. cit., p. 82.
ordinary crews are clad with shirt and pheijom but well tucked up. They also wear an ordinary turban which serve as the distinguishing mark of the rival teams. Those who are at the hirubāk in order of their seniority are known as tengmāi-leppā, chang, mathang, lāngjei and ton. The tengmāi-leppā is also known as hidongbā, the chief of the boat. He is standing in the front with a paddle in his right hand which is supporting on the bow of the boat. Leaning on his paddle he encourages the efforts of his crews rythmatically by stamping violently with his right foot at intervals and by waiving a piece of cloth or handkershief with his left hand. The next man, the chang, is also not directly participating in rowing. His duty is to attend and guard the tengmāi-leppā. But the remaining three, viz., mathang, lāngjei and ton are actively participating in rowing and steering the boat. The other two who are at the hināo act as the helmsman of the boat. They are known as the nāo-koireng and noumā. 36

As in saqol kāŋjei and other games, the hiyāŋg competition was, in former days, held among the different pānās. The pānās sent a team of peddlers who came with a group of fans and boisterous supporters to the accompaniment of penā and other songs. The song they sang on their way to the racing site is called hirao Ishei. Rather than

race in a group, each team representing one pāna competes against one another in a fixed order, that is, in order of seniority. Further, in each contest, the senior pāna must always row on the right side, and the junior, on the left. Thus if the contest is between the laipham and khābam pāna, the former must occupy the right side. Other pānas also followed the same rule. Col. McCulloch says, "The Heeyang continues for three days. The first day is devoted to a boat-race between Kaphum and Laiphum Punnahs, followed by a match at hockey on horse-back, wrestling, putting and jumping. The second day is devoted to the same description of matches between the Ahallup and Naharup. And the third to a repetition between Hitakphalba and Potsungba." The royal racing boats were kept in a specially constructed boat-shed called hijgāng. On the eve of their removal from the hijgāng for the great event, the boats were given an atonement rite by the Māibā, the traditional priest, by uttering long incantations called anam-athou and nāheiron. On the eve of the actual race, the Māibā again performed the rite of konyāi-hunbā, an offering to God Pakhangbā by throwing gold and silver into the water. The rite was accompanied by a long incantation praying to God

37. Loc. cit.
Pākhangbā to protect the kingdom from enemies and to bestow peace and prosperity on the country. Each of the boats was then ceremoniously offered a piece of cloth (khudei), a garland and pieces of sacred lāngthrei (*veronia divergens* benth composite) leaves. The rite of konyāi-hunbā must on no account omitted.

Then the tengmāi-lepās with their respective crews boarded their respective boats. In case the king did not compete but graced the occasion, the tengmāi-lepās would first row their boats towards the hīqāshang of the king and salute him in their traditional style, and offer various articles (*rathenpot*). After this they would go back to the starting point. When everything was ready a thundering sound of a drum or of a gun-fire was suddenly released which was the signal for the start of the game. As soon as the sound was heard the spectators also would know that the race was on. Absolute silence would then descend on the crowd and all eyes would turn towards the race. Though there was a lot of frenzy and excitement among them, there were no betting and gambling over the game, a habit loved by the Burmese and Chinese. In the great October boat-races of Burma, betting and gambling was freely indulged in which later on cause the British authorities to discourage the game.  

As might be expected, the old boat-races were sometimes very dangerous and risky. Every man in the boat competed with the impression that the name of his pānā depended upon the prowess of his arm. All his strength and skill were thus to be exerted to defeat his opponent. It was not uncommon to block or play foul against an opponent's boat which often led to serious clashes. Dr Brown writes, "The race itself differs from most boat-races in the fact that here the great object is for the one boat to foul the other and bore it into the bank, so that one side of the boat is disabled, the men not being able to use their paddles; the boats are thus always close together until at the finish, when the race is usually won by a foot or two only." 41

The contest became even more dangerous when supporters of the tangmāi-leppā who were already selected from their respective pānās also joined the fray. Since the start of the race these men known as khongbān chenbā would be running helter-skelter on the edge of the water after the speeding boats, cheering and boosting the morale of the crews of their pānā. More often than not, they jumped into the water and start pushing forward the boat belonging to their pānā. Long sticks or bamboo poles were also used in pushing the boats forward. Sometimes they attempted to pull

41. Brown, op. cit., p. 82.
back or overturn the boat of their opponent. Another very curious feature of the game was that at the peak of the race when the boats were sailing closely, men belonging to one boat might suddenly jump into the other to capture the chief (tengmai-leppā) of that boat. If they succeeded in capturing tengmai-leppā, the latter was bound to give a slave or pay the value of it to his captors. These events often led to serious scuffles in which the offended crews retaliated by using their paddles freely resulting in blood-shed and other acrimonious consequences.  

The goal line is marked by a long rope stretched across the whole breadth of the moat which is about 25 to 30 yards. The distance paddled is about a quarter of a mile. The boat which reaches the rope first is declared the winner. As a signal of his victory the tengmai-leppā raises his paddle high up in the air and then turning in the direction of the king or the deity, he shows his respect by prostrating himself. The contest is not, however, over because whichever wins each race would have to row twice. Thus after the first race, the parties would relax in their respective higāshangs. Then the next race is resumed as before. There is, however, no change of boats. When the competition is over, the competitors return home in a procession singing a song called "higaron ishei."

42. Khelchandra, op. cit., p.35.
It is sad that with the departure of monarchy the great royal boat-races have now become a thing of the past though ordinary boat-races still continue to be held from time to time. Today the most famous boat-race is the one held annually on the occasion of the heikru-hidongbā festival. Heikru-hidongbā is an annual festival observed to mark the seasonal maturing of an edible fruit, heikru (emblica officinalis). The boats used in heikru-hidongbā festival are not, however, decorated with any emblems as in the case of the royal boat-races. An important feature of this boat-race is that one of the tengmāi-leppās has to wear a garland of heikru. The tradition of heikru-hidongbā is quite old and historically its origin dates back since the time of King Iremgā (984-1074 A.D.). But its present Hindu form in which the boat-race is dedicated to Shri Bijoy Govindaji was introduced by King Jai Singh (1763-1798 A.D.). Besides the regular heikru-hidongbā boat-race, one may still see hiyāng matches conducted in many parts of the valley. But it is a pity to see that all these are but a pale imitation of the old royal boat-races.

The great hiyāng festival is not a mere social gathering or festivity. It has also a great religious significance. In this festival, God Pakhangbā, one of the highest in the Meitei Pantheon is worshipped for His blessings.

and protections. The worship is conducted by the traditional Maibās by uttering due incantations and other offerings. It is believed that by doing so He would bestow power and glory upon the king, peace and prosperity on the people and the kingdom. Besides, the kings of Manipur used to patronise this game with much spirit and enthusiasm so as to encourage the people in acquiring the ability and skill in water warfare. In their continued hostility with the Burmese, Meiteis not only showed remarkable courage and skill in infantry warfare but also in water warfare.

Lamchel:

Lamchel or foot-race was one of the most popular traditional games of Manipur. The race was held annually in the month of Ingen (July/August) before the royal audience. This annual race was conducted on the basis of the pānaś. Hence, it was known as pānaś lamchel. Like hiyāng, lamchel was not only a game but also a very great festival wherein people of all walks of life assembled to witness the competition.

The distance run in the competition was about half a mile. The race was started from a place called Khongnāng Hogāibi at Sagolband and passed straight through the Sana Keithel (the main market) upto the pair of nongshās (dragons) inside the Raja's enclosure at the capital Kanglā.
The sculptured dragons facing westward were placed just in front of the Uttra, the ancestral coronation hall of the Rajas of Manipur. In the race, the runner who could touch the dragon first was the winner of the race. This was known as sha paiba (sha=dragon, paiba=to touch). It was, however, more prestigious for a runner to touch the dragon situated at the right side (north) rather than the left one.

As in saqol kāŋjei and other games, the competition was between the different pānās or the units of the Meitei society. The Loi population, an indigenous people of the state, but were outside the pānā organisation, were not allowed to compete in the race. A Loi, in order to compete in the race must become a member of a pānā with the prior approval of the king. A Loi, when admitted into the Meitei community, is called pānā-thokpā. The Mussalmans who came from the rest of India and settled in Manipur since the beginning of the seventeenth century were, however, allowed to compete in the race. But unlike the Mussalmans, the Brahmins were not permitted to compete.

Each of the pānās of Manipur sent runners who were to compete in the pānā lamlchel. Dr Brown describes the competition thus: "The first part of the races consists of

45. As cited by Shri N. Khelchandra Singh, orally to me.
trials of speed by two panna at a time, the winners in these races run again when all have had their trial and the first man in of the whole wins the race of the year. Thus the first trial of the race was between the khābām and lāipham pānas and this was followed by the ahallup and nāhārup. The winners of these pānas again met in the final for the selection of the fastest man. This man was given the title of lamchel-ayangbā.

Lamchel, though a simple game, caused much excitement and enthusiasm among the masses. It was the hope and aspiration of every young man to become the champion at the pānā lamchel event which was always graced by the king and other dignitaries. So popular and prestigious was it that a lamchel champion was always addressed respectfully as "lamchel-ayangbā." The Lamchel champions were publicly honoured with rewards. They were also exempted from attending the state service of lāllup for the rest of their lives. They were also given the rare privilege of becoming the personal attendants of the king. Even those who won at the preliminary race were granted three months' exemption from lāllup duty.

Pānā lamchel, however, great and popular it once was, is now a thing of the past. But its glory is still reflected in the Meitei proverb: "mādi shā pāirabā mini"

(He is a person who touched the dragon). This proverb implies that the person is the best man in his field. The proverb originated from the pānā laīchel in which the fastest man touched the shā (dragon) of Kanglā first of all.

Yubi lākpi:

Yubi lākpi literally means snatching the coconut (yubi=coconut, lākpi=to snatch). It is a game which is equally manly and risky as that of khong kāngjei. In both of these games the art of muknā and shārit-shārāt, (traditional forms of unarmed combat) are more or less essential. The game can at best be interpreted as the Meitei counterpart of rugby. Yet it is under no way connected with rugby. Yubi-lākpi is an indigenous game and is played only by the Meiteis of Manipur. None else outside the state played this game save those Meiteis who are living outside Manipur. Rugby is played by two teams but in yubi lākpi there are no opposing teams. It is rather a game of one man against all.

There is no definite information as to when the game originated. The ancient legends and chronicles of Manipur do not make any particular reference to the origin of this game. It is, therefore, very likely that as compared with other traditional games, its origin is comparatively recent.
The game is played usually by young men well-acquainted with mukna and other martial arts with an un-peeled coconut. To win the game, a player has to snatch the coconut and offer the same to a person called ningthou (king), who sits at one end of the ground just beyond the goal line. Thus unlike other games, there is only one goal side. Since the game is played on the basis of one against all, there is no limit as to the number of players and is, therefore, open to all those who intend to join it. The coconut with which the game is played is thoroughly oiled so that it will be very slippery. The players are also fully smeared with oil (mustard oil), so that one could easily slip out through the fence of players. There is no hard and fast rule as to the correct size of the playground. It all depends upon the discretion of the organisers. At the goal side there is a rectangular small area called the box-area. This is situated in the centre of the goal line and may be indicated by posts or sometimes by two pieces of white cloth rolled up to look like balls. In order to score the goal a player has to carry the coconut straight through the box but not from its sides and cross the goal line against all opponents. He has to offer the coconut to the ningthou by prostrating before him who then awards him prizes, mainly consisting of various kinds of cloths. The coconut which he snatches is also given to him as a memento.
Yubi lākpi is played on open grassy ground. The rules of the game permit almost everything except punching, beating and kicking. The game starts as soon as the coconut is thrown at the other side of the ground opposite the goal line. While the coconut is in mid-air one of the players grasps it or picks it up, if it falls on the ground, and dashes towards the goal. Sometimes it is started with a player standing at the opposite end of the goal side with the coconut while the rest stand in a row some distance away from him. At the signal of the referee, the man with the coconut rushes towards the goal trying to slip out of the ring of all his opponents. As soon as the man moves, the others close in and jump on him and throw him over the ground. Before the man could get up, the others swarm over him each trying to snatch the coconut. But the man, unwilling to part with the coconut, keeps it to the last ounce of his strength. Soon the coconut is snatched by another player, who in turn runs towards the goal side. But as in the former case, he too is chased, rounded up, and knocked down over the ground. In this way the coconut may be snatched by one after another; however very few could make any noticeable break-through. It is difficult to move with the coconut even for a few steps if the player is not exceptionally strong as well as expert in muknā and, shārit-shārāt. Slowly and steadily, tussle after tussle, the coconut and the players approach the goal-line. It is
at this stage that the fiercest tussle takes place in which one, who could slip away with the coconut after out-maneuvering all his opponents crosses the goal-line through the box-area and thereby becomes the winner. Unlike other games, in yubi lākpi once a goal is scored, the game is over. In case darkness sets in before the goal is scored, it is to be resumed on the next day, or a special method is employed by which the coconut is placed at the centre of the ground and the participants are made to stand in a row at the other end of the ground opposite the goal. At the signal from the referee all of them dart towards the coconut. The fastest player picks it up or kicks it forward only to be picked up at his convenience and thus he may score the goal. If the players once again fail to score the goal in this special arrangement the game is to be replayed the next day.

As in kāngjei, muknā and other games men who could show expertise and prominence in this game were in former days highly honoured and respected. Like other traditional games, the game also enjoyed full royal patronage. Till very recent times yubi lākpi used to be played in the royal presence on the palace-ground during the Hindu festival of doljātra. It is also probable that the seat of the ningthou (which literally means the king), which is now occupied by a person to whom the snatched coconut is dedicated, was in former days occupied by the king himself.
Thāng-tā:

The Meiteis have a very wide range of culture. The most remarkable among them is perhaps the thāng-tā culture which has practical as well as spiritual aspects. Thāng is the Meitei word for sword and tā, for the spear. In archaic language the former is called kacheng or kajeng, and the latter, timen. They together constitute the chief martial art of the ancient Meiteis. The techniques, that is, the movements and postures adopted in thāng and tā are closely related with the techniques of shārīt-shārāt and muknā (the traditional forms of unarmed combat). That is why the teachers of thāng and tā are usually the masters of shārīt-shārāt, though their modes of combat and the field of specialisation differ.

Since thāng and tā are weapons of attack and defence, learned teachers have always emphasised that one must be more or less at home in both of them. Though they are distinguishable from one another, yet functionally the two must always be co-ordinated and go together. This explains why the Meiteis have always used the compound word 'thāng-tā' indicating the functional inseparability between them just as the hands and legs are inseparable with their functional value. The only difference between the two lies mainly in the emphasis given to either of them. While co-ordinated hand-work and foot-work are essential in both
of them, more emphasis is given on the sleigh of hands or skill in hand-works in the case of thāng and on the skilful movement of legs such as jumps and kicks in the case of tā. In view of their interdependence and functional inseparability hardly is a learned teacher in thāng not familiar with the techniques of tā and vice versa, though he may be more specialised in either of them.

The myths and legends of the Meiteis ascribe the origin of this form of martial art to thengou, a specific dance performed by the gods at the time of creation. The Supreme Lord, being desirious of creating the universe instructed his son Asībā to create the earth. But he was at a loss as to how the work was to be started. The Lord, thereupon opened His mouth and revealed through it the very process of creation, Asībā accordingly began to create the earth by performing thengou (a specific sword and spear dance). But the work being very formidable Asībā brought forth lāibangthous (primeval gods) and lāinurās (primeval goddesses), who assisted him in completing the work of creation. The lāibangthous performed nine different forms of thengous at different stages of creation. Each of them has its own specific names; akāo thengou, Leiphan thengou, leichāi thengou, nongphan thengou, leikak thengou, leinet thengou, atān thengou,

47. Pudil, (MS)., Thengoural, (MS).
lānkak thengou and akham thengou (also called leikham thengou). The ancient text, *Thenqourol* (the science of sword-dance) records the details of these thengous as performed by the primeval deities.

It is from these thengous that the techniques of thāng-tā originated. There are manifold techniques of thāng-tā. While the Meiteis have systematically developed and improved other techniques of sword and spear, its most sacred and spiritual aspect, the nine thengous or the nine forms of specific sword-dance remains unchanged through all the ages. Thengou is performed on the coils and curves of the Pākhangbā design (God Pākhangbā in His snake form). It has a very deep philosophical and ritualistic aspect and the Meiteis strongly believe that its performance have connection with the prosperity and disaster of the king, the community, and the performer himself. The movements and techniques of thengou are one of the most closely-guarded secrets of the Meiteis and only a very few learned teachers of thāng-tā are familiar with them. This esoteric art being very ritualistic in nature, the learned teachers do divulge its secrets only to their most trusted disciples who possessed the highest degree of mental stability.

Thengou is performed with a sword or spear in the right hand and a shield by the left hand even now. This is performed on the design of God Pākhangbā, which on no
account be manipulated. Hence, it is performed only by those who are competent and well-trained in the field. The Meitesis still believe that the proper performance of thengou has a far reaching social and religious significance. Each thengou has its own specific consequence. Thus if akāo thengou is performed properly, it gives abundance of food; nongphan thengou, the wrath of the king; lānkak thengou, war and rebellion; leichāi thengou, calamity to the country and the death of kings; lainet thengou, peace and harmony; achong thengou, disease and death; atān thengou, the longevity of the king; and laikham thengou, the welfare of the king and the kingdom.

While other thengous may be performed by those who have a full knowledge of the intricate art, the akham thengou, which is connected with the life of the king and the kingdom, must be performed only through the knowledge of the king. In former days, this thengou was the exclusive preserve of certain categories of persons such as the king, the members of his family, near kins of the king, and persons having the title of 'tāngballoī'. Tāngballoī is a title conferred by the king on a person for exceptionally meritorious service such as capturing an enemy king, or saving the life of his king, or capturing one hundred prisoners of war, or similar number of wild animals. There

48. Thengourol, (MS).
are prescribed costumes for performing the akham thengou. It is believed that any deviation from those prescribed costumes would severely affect the lives of the king, the queen, the welfare of the country and also the life of the performer himself. Again, if akham thengou is performed improperly, it is believed that the performer's line of generation would be extinct and the dreaded disease of leprosy would attack his body.

The significance of thāng-tā in the political and cultural life of the Meiteis cannot be over-emphasized. It was, indeed, through their superb technique and the style of fighting that, though a small community, the Meiteis in the past could raise their heads high above the natural barriers of hills and mountains and could establish themselves as a major political and military power in the surrounding regions. Since the fate of the nation was mainly subservient to it, in the past training in the art of thāng-tā was imparted to all sections of the people as the most important form of education. The king and other top officials were generally specialists in this art. The kings of Manipur also used to encourage their subjects to train

50. Ningkham Shamjin, Khudângyâi, Khubomyâi, Shironbâ, Khônôrâî mathak-makhâ, lânqmaî pungolenbâ matu, leikham, pajeng thonmathaktâ thonma, phiren nammathaktâ nâmâ, ningthouphi tajin, sayâng tânchâp (Khelchandra Singh, op. cit., p. 27).

51. Thengoural (MS).
themselves in the art of swordsmanship and spearmanship. Men who distinguished themselves in this field were appointed top-ranking officers in his court. They were endowed with rare honours and privileges. The Meitei swordsmen and spearmen both in infantry and cavalry were once a terror to the people of the hills as well as in the neighbouring kingdoms.

In the field of culture also the nine thengourols and other styles of thāng-tā may be regarded as the soul of Manipuri culture because of its close affinity with various other dance movements such as Lāi-harāобā, Rās-lilā, pungcholom, pēlā cholom, etc. Taking as illustration, the basic technique of khujeng leibi (the twisting of wrists) is used both in thāng-hāibā (sword-dance) and some other dance forms. This technique of khujeng leibi as found in dances such as Lāi-harāобā and Rās-lilā commences from left to right only. But the technique of khujeng leibi as used in the art of thāng-hāibā (sword-dance) has two-fold twisting of wrist, clockwise and anti-clockwise, the first is similar to that of Lāi-harāобā, Rās-lilā, etc., but the other commences from right to left, i.e., the movement of the wrist is in opposite direction. The movement of the wrist used in sword-dance (thāng-haibā) is done according to the co-ordinated movements of the legs. In sword-dance if a man uses only one-fold twist of wrist generally used in Lāi-harāобā and other dances,
he will not be able to brandish or waive the sword defending every part of his body. So in sword-dance a two-fold twisting of wrist is always used. Many thāṅg-tā experts are of the opinion that the basic movements as found in various other dance-forms originated from the movements of thāṅg-tā although many others are prepared to admit only the discovery of affinity in origin. 52

Not only do the movements of the thāṅg-tā have close affinity with or even influence on the various dance forms, one can also find the close resemblance and interdependence between the techniques of thāṅg-tā and other forms of unarmed combat such as shārit-shārāt and muknā.

Chainabā:

Chainabā is the ancient style of duelling between two heroes in settling disputes or to prove superiority in valour and prowess by fighting with weapons which they mutually chose. When a man was challenged by another, it was a disgrace not to pick up the gauntlet thrown by his adversary. After the challenge was accepted, they mutually selected the weapons with which they would fight as well as the date and place of fighting. They generally used spear or bow and arrow under a code of strict rules, the violation of

which was considered a sin. They also believed that the violator would be punished by God's decree. In this fight, if one could inflict some wounds and cause to shed some blood on the person of his adversary, he was regarded as the victor and had the right to decapitate his adversary. The victim on his part also was always ready to offer his neck to his victor. The head, thus cut off, was treasured as a trophy. In case a victim for fear of his life fled and escaped, the victor could pursue and kill him whenever and wherever he was found. He had the right to kill him even though the latter took refuge in the court of a king for everybody including the latter was bound to observe the norm of non-interference in this game.

Though the rules of the bout were simple, sometimes complications arose wherein an innocent victor was being cheated and killed by his crafty adversary. Such an instance as found in the book Chaïnarol describes how a widow tried to wreak vengeance upon the killer of her husband who was killed by foul means is reproduced below.

In the days when Manipur was divided into several principalities each ruled independently of the other, there existed the two neighbouring principalities of Heirem Khunjän and Khuman in the southern region of Manipur. Heirem Kangshibu was a hero of the former principality who often oppressed and terrorised the adjoining
Khuman villagers. Being a brave and skilful fighter, no one including the Khuman king could do anything against him. At last a Khuman warrior by the name of Chakhā-Moirambā appeared before the Khuman king declaring his intention to challenge Heirem Kangshibu in a duel. The two warriors agreed to fight the duel by hurling spears against each other. As a sign of true heroism each of them was eager to surrender the choice of hurling the spear first against the other, for he who gracefully agreed to throw the spear after the first was invariably considered to be a greater hero.

In their ordeal the Khuman hero had his lot first and hurled his spear thereby making a slight scratch on the person of Heirem Kangshibu. By the laws of the duel, the Khuman had the right to kill the Heirem Khunjān by decapitation. But the latter flatly denied the wound by saying that the scratch was due to a bite by a leech. In his turn the Heirem Khunjān could inflict wounds on the body of the Khuman which the latter did not deny. Exercising his right, the Heirem Khunjān decapitated his Khuman adversary and went home with the head of the latter as a trophy.

In the meantime words had reached the widow of the deceased that her husband was treacherously killed in the duel. She, therefore, took a vow of revenge against the
killer of her husband. She approached all the Khuman heroes and even implored the Khuman king to avenge the death of her husband. But none could dare to challenge the ever increasing prowess and notoriety of Heirem Kangshibu. So the widow went to the Moirang principality, her parental home where she approached her kins to avenge her husband's death. But the very mention of Kangshibu's name rendered all her entreaties fruitless. She finally went to Shikhong where her husband's brother was lived. There she found her brother-in-law, Ningthoubā, who immediately went to the Heirem Khunjan principality and wreaked vengeance upon the killer of his brother.

This ancient style of duelling or Chāinabā was in vogue till the time of King Munqyāmbā (1562-1597). 53

Kāng:

The indoor games of Manipur are many. The most important among them is the game of Kāng which is played between two opposing teams consisting of seven players on each side with an oval-shaped flat object also called kāng. Both the game and also the object with which the game is played derives their names from kāngkhil (costus specosus) which is the seed of a creeper (uri). In earlier times the game was played with this kāngkhil which is circular and

flattish in shape, about an inch and a half in diameter, about three quarters of an inch thick and in colour and smoothness it is like the English horse-chesnut. In course of time kāngkhil was replaced by kāngs made of wood, tusks of elephants and horns of animals. Now-a-days, kāng is generally made of lac but it still bears the name of uri-kāng after the name of kāngkhil.

The game is still very popular and exciting and enjoys universal acceptance among the Meiteis. Dr Brown says, "The indoor amusement in its season most enjoyed, is Kang-Sanaba, a game as peculiar to Manipur as that of Hockey-on-horseback."\(^5^4\) Besides the Meiteis of Manipur, the game is also played by the hill-tribes. Among the tribes inhabiting hill tracts of Chittagong the game is popularly known as konyon and is played with the same seed of the creeper mentioned above. The seed is also called konyon from whence the game derives its name. According to Dr Brown, the game as played by the hill tribes is but a modification of the game of kāng and is simpler than that played by the Manipuris.\(^5^5\)

Historically, the game was first introduced during the reign of King Loitongba (1122-1150 A.D).\(^5^6\) But the

\(^5^4\) Brown, op. cit., p. 80.

\(^5^5\) Brown, loc. cit.

\(^5^6\) Ibungohal and Khelchandra, op. cit., p. 5.
tradition of the game is even older. It is believed that the game was introduced by Panthoibi.57 The tradition that Goddess Panthoibi is the ruling deity of this game still persists in the minds of the people. Some people are even of the view that the game is connected with the myth of creation and the change of seasons.58

The game is played only in the summer season commencing from the festival of cheiräobā. The game may be played by male players only or by mixed partners; and in the latter case, the positions of both the two extreme sides of a team are taken up by the male players, the women occupying the centre positions. The court is a plain and smooth earthen floor of big out-houses. Its shape is rectangular and is measured between 30 to 42 ft. in length and 15 to 18 ft. in breadth.59 The court is prepared with accurate mathematical calculations wherein the respective positions (kāngkhuls) of the targets (kāngkhils) are indicated. There are eight chakfei kāngkhuls and seven lamthā kāngkhuls on each side of the court on which the respective targets called the chekfei kāngkhi or the lamtha kāngkhi are placed upright. The seven lamtha kāngkhuls also

indicate the seven positions of the seven players, viz.,
matai achoubā, matai mathang pan-ngākpa, chekfei tānba
yet-thangbā (right side), lāngjei (Kāngburen or captain),
chekfei tānba oi-thangbā (left side), matai mathang lamtha
tānba and matai khusi.

Though kāng is an indoor game, yet the names
and positions of the players are more or less similar to
those of sagol kāngjei or khong kāngjei. But unlike any
other games it is played alternately by each team, the
other has to wait till their turn matures. The play consists
in hitting and knocking the given targets by the process of
throwing the kāng in the standing position and propelling
it in the sitting posture. The former method of play is
called chekfei and the latter, lamtha.

The game starts with the chekfei. To earn a
successful chekfei, a player has to throu his kāng and
properly knock down the given target (chekphei kāngkhill)
at the other opposite side. Each player has to throw the
kāng one after another using his own respective kāng. As
soon as the team could secure two successful chekfeis, it is
qualified to play for the lamtha. In lamtha, the player in
the sitting posture has to propel the kāng on its flat side
along the surface of the ground by the force of the middle
finger of the right hand, which serves as a sort of spring,
pulled back by the left. To earn a successful lamtha, the
propelling kāng has to hit and knock down its target (lamthā kāngkhil) in the right way. As soon as one successful lamthā is secured, one score is made by the said team. Thus in order to attain one score, a team has to earn two chekfeis and one lamthā in the prescribed manner. After scoring one score if the turn of the players is still due, the play starts again from chekfei so that the team may earn score after score. In case a team fails to earn a score, even after the turns of the seven players are exhausted, the play would be handed over to the opposing team. In this way the game continues till the agreed number of scores are achieved or the agreed time is up.

The indoor game of kāng is the only one of its kind which is played by all sections of people irrespective of age, position and sex. The game is, therefore, regarded as the national indoor game of the Meiteis. In former days, it was the favourite pastime of the royal houses, nobles and commoners alike. In the modern times too this ancient game is played with no less enthusiasm.

The Political and Social Aspects of the Games:

Edward Gait describes the Meiteis as wild and warlike people.60 He is perhaps right because the ancient

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Meiteis considered war to be an important part of their tradition and way of life. The history of Manipur also reveals that until the nineteenth century she had been engaging in an endless warfare with her neighbouring tribes, especially with her permanent foe, the Burmese. These constant wars gave the Meiteis their glorious martial tradition, which in turn also promoted the growth and development of her indigenous games and sports. It is due to this aspect of martial tradition that though a small community, the Meiteis once established themselves as a dominant political and military power among the neighbouring kingdoms. Sir James Johnstone and other British writers have frequently referred in their monographs and accounts to the rare and inborn soldierly qualities of the Meiteis, and which, coupled with their skill in the art of fighting, helped the Meiteis establish themselves as the de facto masters not only of the neighbouring tribes but also of the various kingdoms that lay throughout upper Burma. Such an achievement by a small community would have been impossible had not the Meiteis systematically developed her war-oriented martial games. These games were also the means of imparting military training to the people. The kings of Manipur used to encourage these games so that their subjects might become accomplished fighters in every style of fighting—armed.

or unarmed. Thus in former days, every grown-up man was trained not only in armed modes of fighting such as with sword, spear, bow and arrow, arāmbāi or dart but also in wrestling and other modes of unarmed combats. Horse-riding, polo and other forms of games were universally practised by all sections of the male population.

To provide instruction and training in these games was in former days the chief mode of imparting education to the people. No doubt, the Meiteis have literary and other forms of education such as dance and music since very early times. But these were then considered of secondary importance. This outlook was necessitated by the then prevailing social and political conditions of the society. People who could show prominence and merit in war or in such manly games were more honoured and respected and were often placed in eminent positions in the king's court. The nobles, officers and top-ranking warriors of the king were men who distinguished themselves in these fields.

So popular and enthusiastic were these traditional games that, besides the state competitions, generally no public fairs or festivals were held without a display of some of these games. These games, therefore, flourished vigorously under the patronage of the kings of Manipur. But with the departure of royal patronage the old grandeur and glory of these games are now on the wane.
They are not, however, extinct. The present-day Meiteis with a keen sense of preserving their age-old indigenous games, still continue to play them with much vigour and enthusiasm. There are now various organisations which seek to popularise these games among the masses by staging tournaments and exhibition matches from time to time and also by imparting the knowledge of the indigenous games to young and enthusiastic aspirants.