

RELOOKING ON THE CLAN AND SOCIAL FORMATION IN ANCIENT MANIPUR: A HISTORICAL APPROACH

DR.OINAM PREMJJIT SINGH

Assistant Professor Department of History, C.I. College, Bishnupur

ABSTRACT

The period between 6th to 8th centuries A.D. represents an important formative phase in the social history of ancient Manipur. During this period, the society of the Imphal Valley and its surrounding regions underwent significant changes associated with the consolidation of clan organisation, the emergence of political hierarchies, agricultural expansion, matrimonial alliances and the incorporation of diverse communities into an increasingly structured social order. This article examines the organisation of ancient Meitei society with particular attention to the salai or clan system, clan leadership, matrimonial alliances, the position of the Lois and Keis, and the relationship between social organisation and the emerging Ningthouja dynasty. It argues that the society of ancient Manipur was neither static nor homogeneous but was organised through a complex combination of kinship, clan identity, political affiliation, occupation, social status and ritual beliefs. The consolidation of the Ningthouja dynasty did not simply replace earlier clan structures; instead, it incorporated and reorganised them within a broader social and political framework. The study therefore views the period under study as a transition from a predominantly clan-based social organisation towards a more differentiated and hierarchically structured society.

KEYWORDS: Ancient Manipur; society; salai; clan; Ningthouja; Lois; Keis

INTRODUCTION

The social history of ancient Manipur is closely associated with the development of clan organisation, political authority, agriculture and changing patterns of settlement. Between the 6th and 8th centuries AD, the region witnessed important transformations in its social and institutional structure. The period was marked by the increasing consolidation of the Ningthouja dynasty, the integration of neighbouring clan principalities, the

expansion of agricultural production and the emergence of more clearly differentiated social groups. These developments contributed to the formation of a more organised social order in the Imphal Valley and its adjoining areas.

The available evidence for reconstructing this society is diverse. Ancient literary traditions, manuscripts, the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, archaeological evidence and later historical writings provide information about clans, chiefs, communities, occupations, religious beliefs and social practices. Such evidence must nevertheless be approached with caution because much of the early historical tradition is preserved through narratives that combine historical memory, mythology and religious symbolism.

The 6th to 8th centuries are particularly significant because the social organisation associated with the *salais* became increasingly connected with the emerging political authority of the Ningthouja dynasty. The seven principal clan groups identified in the historical traditions of Manipur were Ningthouja or Mangang, Luwang, Angom, Khuman, Moirang, Khaba-Enganba and SarangLeishangthem.ⁱ These groups were not merely kinship communities. They possessed their own political identities, leaders and territorial associations and their relationships with one another influenced the development of the wider society.

The social transformation of ancient Manipur during the 6th to 8th centuries was a process of integration rather than simple replacement. Existing clan institutions continued to structure social life even as the growing authority of the Ningthouja dynasty created new political and social relationships. Matrimonial alliances, clan leadership, occupational differentiation and the incorporation of peripheral communities contributed to the emergence of a more complex and hierarchical society.

CLAN AS THE FOUNDATION OF SOCIAL ORGANISATION

The clan system constituted one of the principal foundations of ancient Meitei social organisation. The available description of the clan identifies it as a collective of people who regarded themselves as descendants of a common ancestor, whether historical or mythical. Kinship could be traced through either the maternal or paternal line, while the clan was characterised by common ancestry and a distinctive social identity.ⁱⁱ

Three important characteristics can be identified in the organisation of the clan. First, the clan was exogamous, meaning that members were expected to marry outside their own clan. Second, members shared a belief in a common ancestor, whether real or mythical. Third, the clan represented a unilateral descent group associated with either the maternal or paternal line. These characteristics gave the clan an important role in regulating marriage, kinship and social identity.

The existence of the seven clans demonstrates that ancient Meitei society was composed of multiple communities rather than constituting a single homogeneous population. The term *Meitei* itself requires consideration in this context. The term is historically associated with the Ningthouja clans that subsequently became the ruling dynasty. This indicates that political dominance and collective identity were closely related. As the Ningthouja lineage expanded its authority, the political identity associated with it increasingly acquired a wider social significance.

The clan therefore performed several functions simultaneously. It provided a framework for kinship and marriage, preserved collective identity, organised leadership and facilitated political relations. The importance of the clan extended beyond family relationships into the broader organisation of society.

TRADITIONS OF THE ORIGIN OF THE SALAIS

The origins of the seven *salais* are preserved through a number of ancient literary traditions. Texts such as *KhagembaYumlep*, *KhagembaYumbi*, *YumdaYumkhailon* and *MeihoubarolSalaiPukok* associate the different clans with the body of the supreme deity SalailenSidaba. According to these traditions, different clans originated from different parts of the divine body. The Nganba were associated with the heart, SarangLeishangthem with the tongue, Luwang with the brain, Khuman with the right arm, Angom with the throat and Moirang with the eyes.ⁱⁱⁱ

Another tradition recorded by Atombapu Sharma presents the origin of the clans through the symbolic division of a cow. According to this account, different groups received different parts of the animal and subsequently adopted identities associated with those parts. The eye, for example, was associated with the Ningthouja, the brain with the Luwang, the front legs with the Khuman and the tail with the Moirang.^{iv}

These traditions are important not because they necessarily provide literal historical accounts of clan origins, but because they reveal how communities understood and represented their relationships with one another. The association of the clans with different parts of a single divine or symbolic body can be interpreted as an expression of collective unity within diversity. Each clan possessed a distinct identity, yet all were incorporated into a common cosmological framework.

Another tradition recorded in the *SakokLamlen* states that *salais* did not exist in Meitei society before the reign of NongdaLairen Pakhangba.^v A different account associates the emergence of the seven *salais* with the seven sons of Pakhangba, each born to one of his seven wives.^{vi} S. K. Chatterjee, in another interpretation, connected the seven *salais* with seven Apsaras or divine dancers.^{vii}

The variation among these accounts suggests that the origins of the *salais* were remembered through several overlapping traditions. Rather than indicating a single uncontested process of social formation, these traditions point to the historical importance of collective memory and the reinterpretation of social identities through mythology.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE SALAI SYSTEM

The historical development of the *salais* appears to have been gradual. According to KonsamManikchand, the Angom, Moirang, Khaba-Nganba and Chenglei groups were already established in different principalities before the beginning of the Christian era, while the Khuman, Luwang and Ningthouja emerged around the beginning of the 1st century A.D.^{viii} There was also a group known as NingthoujaAriba before the time of Pakhangba. This interpretation is significant because it suggests that the seven *salais* were not necessarily formed simultaneously. Their emergence may instead have reflected different historical processes occurring in different parts of Manipur. Groups that initially possessed separate political and social identities were subsequently incorporated into a broader conception of Meitei society.

The social formation of the period should therefore be viewed as dynamic. Communities could retain their distinctive identities while becoming part of wider political structures. This process was especially important as the Ningthouja dynasty expanded its influence during the 6th to 8th centuries.

MATRIMONIAL ALLIANCES AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION

Marriage constituted an important mechanism of social and political integration. During the reign of Naophangba, matrimonial relationships between the Ningthouja and other clans became particularly significant. The Angom clan is described as giving daughters in marriage to members of the Ningthouja lineage while similar matrimonial relationships were subsequently established with the Khuman and Luwang clans.^{ix}

These marriages had consequences extending beyond individual families. They created relationships between ruling groups and contributed to the expansion of Ningthouja influence across the valley. Marriage therefore operated as a form of social diplomacy. The importance of matrimonial alliances continued during the subsequent reigns. Naophangba's marriages with Kaireima of the Khuman clan and Yaoreibi of the Luwang clan strengthened relationships between the royal family and these clan principalities.^x Such relationships demonstrate that kinship and political organisation were deeply interconnected.

The prevalence of matrimonial alliances also suggests that political integration did not depend exclusively on military conquest. Marriage enabled the ruling lineage to establish relationships of trust and obligation with neighbouring groups. In this sense, the social structure of ancient Manipur was shaped through both political authority and kinship networks.

CLAN LEADERSHIP AND SOCIAL AUTHORITY

The clan was not simply a group defined by common ancestry. Each clan possessed its own leadership structure. The head of a clan was known as a *Piba* or *Pibarel*, whose responsibilities included protecting the clan and supervising its affairs. The authority of the clan leader was considerable, and his advice could be regarded as carrying religious or even divine significance.^{xi}

The selection of clan leaders was associated with qualities such as military ability and leadership. Succession to clan leadership generally followed primogeniture. As the clans developed, they established increasingly structured forms of hierarchy and governance.^{xii} This system of leadership indicates that political authority existed at several levels within society. The emergence of the Ningthouja monarchy did not immediately eliminate the authority of local clan leaders. Instead, the new political order developed alongside existing forms of clan organisation.

This helps explain why the early Manipuri polity cannot be understood simply as a centralised monarchy imposed upon an otherwise unorganised population. Clan leaders continued to exercise influence, and their support remained important to the legitimacy of the ruling dynasty.

SOCIAL DIFFERENTIATION AND THE LOIS

One of the most significant features of social organisation in ancient Manipur was the existence of communities occupying different positions within the wider social structure. The Lois represented one such group. The Lois are described as occupying a peripheral position within Meitei society and as being subject to

restrictions, particularly concerning intermarriage with other groups. At the same time, the Lois were not regarded simply as an ethnically distinct community. Villages such as Sekmai, Phayeng, Andro, Chairel, Kakching and Chandrakhong were associated with the Lois and were located around the periphery of the central valley.^{xiii}

Different traditions provided different explanations of their origins. Sekmai was associated with migration from the south, while Phayeng traditions claimed an earlier association with Kangla before the expansion of Pakhangba's authority. The Chairel Lois maintained traditions associating themselves with the slopes of Nongmaiching. These accounts suggest that the history of the Lois was closely connected with migration, territorial displacement and political change.

The Kakching Lois are particularly important in relation to occupational history because they possessed knowledge of iron-smelting. Their association with metallurgy demonstrates that social marginality did not necessarily correspond to economic insignificance. On the contrary, communities occupying a peripheral position could possess specialised technological knowledge that was important to the wider society.

Moreover, war captives from military campaigns could be incorporated into the Lois. This suggests that the category was not exclusively determined by descent. Social status could also be influenced by political circumstances, conquest and incorporation. The history of the Lois consequently provides evidence for a socially differentiated society in which status, occupation, political affiliation and territorial location intersected.

THE KEIS AND THE EMERGENCE OF OCCUPATIONAL DIFFERENTIATION

The *Keis* constituted another identifiable social group. They are described as attendants of the king whose principal responsibility was to serve the royal household and the king. Their existence can be traced to no earlier than the period of Naophangba.^{xiv} The emergence of the *Keis* is significant because it indicates increasing occupational differentiation within the social structure. As royal authority became more institutionalised, the royal household required specialised personnel. The appearance of groups associated with specific functions demonstrates that the development of kingship had consequences for the organisation of society. The distinction between clan-based identity and occupational role is particularly important. While the clan continued to provide an important basis for social belonging, the growth of political institutions created additional forms of social differentiation.

AGRICULTURE AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIAL LIFE

Although the economy of ancient Manipur constitutes a separate field of enquiry, agricultural development had important consequences for social organisation. Archaeological investigations at Khangkhui, Tharon and Napachik have produced evidence of Neolithic and bone tools associated with early subsistence practices. Napachik, in particular, has provided evidence of settled life and early agriculture in the valley.^{xv}

By the period under consideration, wet-rice cultivation had become increasingly important in the valley, while shifting cultivation remained significant in the hills.^{xvi} The expansion of wet-rice cultivation required irrigation, drainage and organised labour. The significance of this development for social history lies in the increased need for cooperation and coordination. Agricultural production encouraged settled communities and generated forms of collective labour that could be organised through local and political institutions.

The emergence of agricultural surplus also contributed to the development of more differentiated social relations. Surplus production could support rulers, warriors, religious specialists and other groups whose activities were not directly involved in agricultural production. Economic change therefore contributed to the emergence of a more complex social structure.

MATERIAL CULTURE, CRAFT AND SOCIAL ORGANISATION

Technological and craft practices also formed part of the social life of ancient Manipur. Pottery production, metallurgy and housing technology were not merely technical activities; they were associated with particular communities and specialised knowledge. Archaeological evidence from Napachik, Sekta, Irengbam, Meitram and Phunan demonstrates the antiquity of pottery production in Manipur.^{xvii} The Chakpas are identified as among the earliest known potters, while pottery production was also associated with communities in Andro, Phayeng and Chairel. Tangkhul and Paomei communities in the hills likewise possessed distinctive pottery traditions.^{xviii} Such evidence points to a society in which technological knowledge was distributed among different communities. Craft specialisation contributed to the maintenance of community identity while also creating relationships of economic interdependence.

Metallurgy provides another example. Literary records associated with the 6th to 8th centuries mention iron, copper, bronze, silver and tin. Kakching is identified with iron production and metal technology of the time was associated with agricultural implements, weapons and construction.^{xix}

The distribution of specialised knowledge among different communities demonstrates that social organisation was connected with technological practice. Communities could occupy distinctive positions within the broader social order partly because of the skills and resources associated with them.

HOUSING AND THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

The physical environment in which people lived also reflected social and ecological diversity. Traditional housing differed between communities inhabiting the hills and those living in the valley. Hill communities constructed houses on relatively flat ground, while the Meiteis developed the *Yumjao* or mud house tradition. Wood, bamboo and thatch were among the principal materials available for construction.

The development of royal architecture at Kangla represented another dimension of social differentiation. The *Kangla Houba* tradition associated the construction of the royal complex with specialised architectural knowledge and ritual considerations.^{xx} The contrast between ordinary houses and royal structures illustrates the growing differentiation between domestic, communal and royal spaces. Architecture thus provides another means of understanding the social hierarchy of ancient Manipur.

SOCIETY, WARFARE AND THE INCORPORATION OF COMMUNITIES

Warfare was an important feature of the political history of the period, but its consequences were also social. Military campaigns brought different communities into contact, created alliances and resulted in the movement or incorporation of people. The campaigns of Naothingkhong provide an example. His military expeditions brought him into conflict with the Mangangs and ThangaKambongs, while his subsequent relations

extended to the Kabui, Maram, Chairen and Tangkhul communities.^{xxi} Such interactions demonstrate that the social landscape of Manipur was not confined to the central valley.

The incorporation of conquered groups could result in changes in social status, political allegiance and settlement patterns. The inclusion of war captives among the Lois, for instance, demonstrates the manner in which military conflict could contribute to the creation or expansion of social categories. Warfare therefore functioned not only as an instrument of territorial expansion but also as a mechanism through which the composition and organisation of society changed.

At the same time, restrictions on intermarriage involving groups such as the Lois indicate that marriage also functioned as a mechanism for maintaining social boundaries. Marriage thus had a dual function. It could integrate elite groups while simultaneously reinforcing distinctions between different social categories.

POLITICAL INTEGRATION AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF CLAN SOCIETY

The consolidation of Ningthouja authority was accompanied by a gradual transformation of the social structure. Before the emergence of a dominant central authority, different clan principalities maintained their own leaders and political interests. The hill communities appear to have enjoyed considerable influence in the earlier period. There was a distinction between *Lai*, associated with hill communities, and *Saroi*, associated with the plains. It has been further suggested that influential leaders largely emerged from hill communities until the reign of UraKonthouba.^{xxii}

The social geography of early Manipur was more complex, with hill and valley communities interacting through political, economic and kinship networks. The emergence of Ningthouja dominance consequently represented a reorganisation of these relationships. Other clan principalities were not necessarily eliminated. Many retained a degree of autonomy while becoming integrated into a wider political framework.

SOCIAL LIFE UNDER THE NINGTHOUJA DYNASTY

The 6th to 8th centuries witnessed the gradual transformation of a clan-based society into a more hierarchical social order associated with dynastic rule. Yet the clan system remained an important foundation of social identity. The reigns of Sameirang, UraKonthouba and Naothingkhong illustrate the continuing importance of clan relationships. Sameirang maintained matrimonial alliances with neighbouring groups, while UraKonthouba continued diplomatic marriages with the Khuman, Moirang and related communities.^{xxiii} These relationships demonstrate the continued importance of kinship even after the emergence of a more centralised dynasty.

The reign of Naothingkhong further reveals the complexity of social interaction. His military campaigns brought him into contact with communities living in the surrounding hills, while his relations with the Shan prince Samlung introduced new external influences into Manipuri society.^{xxiv} Consequently, changes in clothing and food habits were witnessed in Manipur. Although such accounts require careful evaluation, they are significant because they reflect the perception that external contacts could influence everyday social practices.

Thus, society during the 6th to 8th centuries was shaped not only by internal processes but also by interaction with neighbouring communities and external political powers.

SOCIAL HIERARCHY, RITUAL AND POLITICAL AUTHORITY

The social structure of ancient Manipur cannot be separated from religious belief. Clan identities themselves were explained through divine genealogies, while clan leaders possessed religious significance. Political authority was similarly associated with sacred legitimacy. The coronation rituals of the early kings demonstrate the close relationship between social, political and religious life. For instance, the coronation of Naothingkhong, involved purification, sacred water, ritual plants, priests and priestesses, ceremonial dress and the participation of nobles and other members of the political community.^{xxv}

Such rituals were not merely religious ceremonies. They publicly established the ruler's position within society and connected kingship with ancestral and divine authority. The existence of *Maibas* and *Maibis*, nobles, clan chiefs and royal attendants indicates a differentiated social structure in which different groups performed distinct ritual, political and occupational functions.

CONCLUSION

The 6th to 8th centuries AD constitute a significant formative period in the social history of ancient Manipur. During these centuries, the society of the region developed from a predominantly clan-oriented organisation into a more differentiated and hierarchical social structure associated with the consolidation of Ningthouja authority.

The *salai* system remained the principal framework of collective identity. The seven major clan principalities possessed distinctive identities, leadership structures and political relationships. Their origins were remembered through diverse mythological and historical traditions, demonstrating the importance of collective memory in the construction of social identity.

Matrimonial alliances provided an important mechanism of integration among the clans. At the same time, the existence of communities such as the Lois and Keis demonstrates that ancient Manipuri society was characterised by social differentiation. The position of the Lois is particularly significant because their social marginality coexisted with important technological knowledge, including iron-smelting. The emergence of the Keis reflects the increasing occupational differentiation associated with the royal household.

Agricultural development, craft specialisation and technological knowledge further transformed social life. The growth of settled wet-rice cultivation created new requirements for labour organisation and contributed to the development of surplus. Pottery, metallurgy and other specialised activities connected particular communities with distinctive forms of technological knowledge.

The consolidation of the Ningthouja dynasty consequently represented more than a political transformation. It also reshaped social relationships. Existing clan structures were not simply abolished; they were incorporated into an expanding political and social order. Political authority, kinship, ritual, occupation and social status became increasingly interconnected.

Ancient Manipuri society during the 6th to 8th centuries can therefore be characterised as a dynamic clan-based society undergoing gradual integration and differentiation. Its transformation was neither abrupt nor uniform. Rather, it resulted from the interaction of indigenous clan institutions, matrimonial alliances, agricultural

expansion, technological specialisation, warfare and the consolidation of dynastic authority. Understanding this process provides an important foundation for examining the subsequent development of Manipuri society and state formation.

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