



DOI: [doiglobal.org/doi:10.2025/69477c97c792e](https://doi.org/doi:10.2025/69477c97c792e)

TRACING THE HILL AND VALLEY DWELLERS BASED ON MYTHS, ORAL TRADITION: ORIGIN, MIGRATION AND SOCIETY

*PHILATHING WS & **PROF. OINAM RANJIT SINGH

*Research Scholar, Department of Ancient History and Archaeology, Manipur University

Email: philathingphilathing@gmail.com

**Head, Department of Ancient History and Archaeology, Manipur University

Email: ranjitoinam09@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article explores the mythical origins and migration traditions of Manipur's indigenous hill and valley communities, with particular focus on the central role of Makhel as a shared ancestral homeland. Drawing upon oral narratives, folk songs, legends and ancestral chronicles, it examines how communities such as the Meitei, Tangkhul, Mao, Maram, Maring, Kabui and Thangal have preserved their histories through cultural memory rather than written records. Myths of emergence from caves, divine creation and dispersal from sacred areas reveal both distinct identities and overlapping traditions that underscore interconnectedness between tribes. The recurring symbolism of sacred trees, mountains, caves and megaliths highlights how landscape and myth are intertwined in constructing social memory. By placing these narratives within broader discussions of migration and identity, the paper highlights that Manipur's oral traditions function not merely as folklore but as repositories of collective memory, binding together diverse communities through shared origins while also affirming their unique cultural trajectories.

KEYWORDS: Manipur, Myths, Traditions, Communities, Cultural

INTRODUCTION:

The history of Manipur is located at the cultural crossroads of South and Southeast Asia, which is inseparable from the myths, oral traditions and migration narratives of its indigenous communities. In the absence of written records for the precolonial period, these oral traditions function as vital sources of memory, preserving collective identities and providing insights into the origins, movements and cultural interconnections of both hill and valley peoples. Far from being mere folklore, myths and legends served as historical consciousness, binding communities to sacred landscapes, ancestral lineages and shared origins.

Among the many sites of memory in Manipur, Makhel, situated in present-day Senapati district, occupies a central place in the imagination of numerous tribes. It is revered as the dispersal point of the Meiteis, Maos, Marams, Poumais, Tangkhuls and other groups. Myths surrounding the sacred banyan tree, the “Departure Stone of the Three Brothers” and ancestral dispersal songs not only affirm Makhel as a symbolic homeland but also underscore the interconnectedness of communities that later developed distinct identities. Similarly, narratives of emergence from caves, divine creation or descent from sacred mountains among the traditions of the Tangkhul, Maring, Kabui or Maodemonstrate the deep intertwining of myth and landscape in shaping community memory.

These traditions highlight two important dimensions of Manipur’s past. First, they affirm the diversity of indigenous self-perceptions, as each community locates its origins in a distinctive mythic narrative. Second, they reveal patterns of cultural interdependence: overlapping myths, shared sacred sites and recurring symbolic motifs suggest that the valley and hill peoples of Manipur were never entirely isolated but connected through exchanges of memory, ritual and belief.

This article examines these oral traditions of origin and migration, situating them within the broader framework of myth, memory and identity formation. By analysing the narratives of communities such as the Meitei, Tangkhul, Maram, Mao, Maring, Kabui and Thangal, it seeks to demonstrate how myths serve as collective memory, simultaneously distinguishing and uniting Manipur’s diverse societies. In doing so, it also claims that these oral traditions are crucial for understanding the cultural history of the region and for reimagining the relationship between Manipur’s hills and valley.

MAKHEL: THE SACRED SITE OF ORIGIN

Makhel, located about three kilometres East of Tadubi in Senapati District along National Highway 39, is revered as an ancestral site of origin and dispersal among several communities in Manipur. The sacred banyan tree of Makhel, believed to be between 800 and 900 years old, continues to hold deep spiritual significance. A fallen

branch from the tree is traditionally regarded as an omen, prompting rituals, sacrifices and the observance of taboos (Horam, 2016).

According to the traditions of the Mao, Maram and Poumai communities, the first woman, *Dzuliamosua*, conceived a child while resting beneath this sacred banyan tree. She gave birth to three sons—a tiger (*okhe*), a god (*ora*), and a man (*omei*) (Kaisii & Ariina, 2012). Another version of the narrative identifies her sons as *AsupfoAlapha*, the ancestor of the non-Naga peoples; *Chutuwo*, the ancestor of the Meiteis; and *Alewo*, the ancestor of the Naga groups. Although the collective term “Naga” was introduced only during the colonial period, this myth reveals an ancient consciousness of shared ancestry and interconnectedness among the various tribes of the region.

The three Brothers’ Departure Stone at Makhel stands as a physical symbol of dispersal and fraternity. The legends of several tribes such as the Angamis, Semas, Lothas, Tangkhuls, Maos and Maram traced their origin to Makhel or its vicinity. The Makhel folksong encapsulates this shared heritage, expressing the idea that linguistic differences led to misunderstandings and conflict, while mutual understanding and trade could foster harmony. The song thus reflects an early awareness of peaceful coexistence among the communities.

THE MEITEI TRADITION OF ORIGIN

The origin of the Meitei, the dominant group of the Manipur Valley is layered with multiple interpretations. Scholars agree that Manipur, located at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia, was historically a meeting ground for diverse peoples, including the Austrics, Mongoloids, Tibeto-Burmans, Tais and Indo-Aryans (Pramodini Devi, 2011). Consequently, the genesis of the Meiteis cannot be traced to a single ethnic source.

Tradition holds that the Manipur Valley, known as Kangleipak, was once submerged and that its early inhabitants lived in the surrounding hills, particularly around Mount Koubru, which served as the centre of population and dispersal (Chingtamlen, 2007). A sacred hymn venerates Koubru as the first habitation of *Leima-Lai*, representing the earliest man and woman created by the divine. The hymn that is still sung today also suggests that life first emerged in the Koubru range and that the Meiteis gradually descended to the valley as the land became habitable.

The name “Meitei” is believed to have emerged around 2000 B.C., coinciding with the community’s permanent settlement in the Kangleipak Valley. These early centuries, preserved through oral traditions, mark the proto-historic period before the development of a written script (Chingtamlen, 2007). Gangmumei Kamei (2003) observed that the study of Meitei origins is often influenced by religious faith and political ideology. While royal genealogies sought to trace their descent from divine figures to legitimize rule, clan chronicles such as the

Moirang Ningthourol Lambuba, Khumanlon and Angomlon reveal independent origins that later converged through intermarriage and political consolidation.

SapamBheigya (2021) identifies three broad ancestral streams within the Meitei population: the NongpokHarams (migrants from the East, including Myanmar and Tibet), the NongchupHarams (from the West, including Assam and Bengal) and the MeiteiAriba (indigenous groups who migrated from nearby hills before the 12th century A.D.). This synthesis illustrates the multi-ethnic roots of Meitei civilization. However, R.R. Shimray (1985) argued the idea of western migration, noting that most communities of Northeast India, including the Meiteis, traditionally claim origins from the East.

K.C. Tensuba (1993) further links Meitei origins to the region around the IreelRiver, describing it as the dwelling place of divine ancestors such as *Taangja Leela Pakhangba* and *Nongda Lairen Pakhangba*, the first historical king. The writings emphasize a continuous line of divine-human interaction, migration and settlement that shaped the early Meitei society and belief system.

THE TANGKHUL NARRATIVE OF EMERGENCE

The Tangkhul origin traditions also connect closely with Makhel. One legend tells of three brothers in which one who remained at Makhel (Senapati District), another who settled in Hundung (Ukhrul District) and a third who followed a pregnant pig until it gave birth near Yaingangpokpi. The descendants of the youngest brother are believed to have later assimilated with the Meiteis (Goshwami, 2006).

A second prominent Tangkhul myth describes their emergence from a *khulor* hole in the earth, a theme echoed in the oral traditions of several Naga tribes. This myth, which speaks of the sky and stars as witnesses to their emergence, portrays the Tangkhul as *earthborn people* (Luikham, 1961). Another version recounts how a tiger devoured the first people who emerged, leading the survivors to devise a ruse by sending out an effigy to distract the tiger before escaping the cave. The survivors then dispersed across the hills, marking their first settlement of newfound freedom by erecting a commemorative stone (Mataisang, 2019).

Although this myth is not scientifically verifiable, it resonates with prehistoric memories of cave habitation during the Palaeolithic era, thereby preserving a symbolic link between myth and archaeology (Mataisang, 2002). The Tangkhul folksong cited by R.R. Shimray (1986), reaffirms their subterranean origin, expressing the journey of a traveller emerging “through the deep holes and rocks” and acknowledging the sky and stars as witnesses. Such oral traditions illustrate how the Tangkhul conceptualize their beginnings as part of a cosmic order in which nature, ancestry and divinity intertwine.

MARAM

The origin of the Maram tribe is largely derived from oral traditions such as myths, folksongs, legends and proverbs, as written records are absent. According to a popular myth recorded by Robert Tiba (2013), PumpuPramha, the supreme creator, created the universe and later formed the first man, Madungkasie and woman, Samwtingrangpui, who lived at TaikongRajaimii. Their three sonsMaram Roukang, Maki Kangba and Kala Sanglunge eventually dispersed to different places, marking the origin of various groups. The Maram people trace their descent from Maram Roukang, the eldest son. Th. Thumba Maram (2013) identifies the Maram as one of the oldest tribes of Manipur, citing megalithic monuments in Maram village as evidence of early civilization. A traditional song referring to “stone-pulling for monkeys” reflects the antiquity of their cultural practices, particularly the stone-pulling tradition that continues today.

MARING

According to Ch. Angkham Maring (2003), the Maring tribe traces its origin to *Kulwi Shongshong*, located in the Kabow Valley near the Indo-Myanmar border. Maring mythology recounts that their ancestors emerged from the earth through a cave opened by a Mithun (bull) but a tiger named *Homshanu* killed many of them until two heroes, Charanga and Dangshawa, slew it. Thereafter, people emerged freely and dispersed across Manipur. The term *Maring* derives from *Meiring* or *Meiringba*, meaning “keepers of the unquenched fire” (*mei* = fire, *ring* = alive), reflecting their discovery of fire through the friction method *Meihongtang* (Modar Maring, 2011). Since ancient times, they have preserved the sacred tradition of keeping the *Meikhring* fire burning continuously in villages and shrines, a believed to protect against evil. Their oral traditions and war songs, such as “Tik Nahade, Nahade, Maring Meiringbade...,” glorify their valour and identity as the “keepers of the sacred fire” (Angkham Maring, 2007).

KABUI (RONGMEI)

The origin of the Kabui or Rongmei people is rooted in mythology and oral history. As recorded by RagongningGangmei (2003), they are believed to have lived in a cave called *Ramting Kaping*, whose outlet, *Mahou Taubei*, served as the entrance to the outside world. From *Mahou Taubei*, they migrated to *ChaguangPhunling* and *Makui longdi* in present-day Senapati district.

LanbilungGonmei (2003) explains that the Zeliangrong trace their origin to the mythical cave *Taobhei* and later established an organized society at Makui longdi, symbolized by two ancestral stones representing the Pamai and Newmei clans.

Hareshwar Goshwami (2006) further mentioned that their emergence was made possible when Dirannang, the deity, commanded the bison Gaichang to remove the stone (*Taopei Paak*) that sealed the cave's entrance. As light shone through, the people exclaimed *Ramting Kabin* (*the sky is shining bright*), marking their emergence into the world. This legend encapsulates their divine-guided origin and early migration.

MAO

Athikho Kaisii and Heni Francis Ariina (2012) observed that the Mao tribe, though composed of four subgroups—Ememei, Lepaona, Chuluvei, and Paomata—did not originally identify themselves by the name “Mao.” Historically, these groups were collectively known as *Shupfomei*, a term still recognized today. According to Mao oral tradition, God created the first woman at *Makhriifii* (Makhel), regarded as a sacred site where God and humans last communicated (K. Sani Mao, 2002). Makhel is considered the ancestral homeland from which various Mongoloid groups migrated to different parts of the world.

Mao legends trace human origins to *Dzili Mosiiro* of Makhel, who miraculously gave birth to *Ora* (God), *Okhe* (tiger), and *Omei* (man). After Mosiiro's death, Ora and Okhe departed, while Omei remained, giving rise to *Choutou*, *Alapha*, and *Khephio*. These became the progenitors of the Mikriimei (Meiteis), Kolamei (Cachari/Tripuri), and the Nagas, respectively (Kaisii & Ariina, 2012). A traditional Mao folksong recounts the divine test of marksmanship among the tiger-being, spirit-being, and man-being at Chazhelophi, symbolizing humanity's destiny to dominate the natural and spiritual realms. It also explains the origin of death and moral order, forming a foundational myth in Mao cosmology (Salew, pp. 13–14).

THANGAL

According to Khangba Anth (2002), the Thangal tribe is among the earliest indigenous groups of Manipur and is regarded as one of the founders of the Manipur dynasty. Their myths state that they separated from Makhel and initially settled at *Angkaipang*, later moving to *Angkailongdi* due to environmental difficulties. At Angkailongdi, they experienced prosperity and cultural flourishing, with traditions dating between 500 B.C. and 100 A.D (Anth, 2002, p.).

Thangal oral traditions narrate that three brothers once lived together in a cave near Makhel before parting ways: the eldest settled at *Thangal Surung* and became the ancestor of the Thangals, the second moved eastward to *Hundung* (founding the Tangkhul tribe), and the youngest migrated to the valley and settled at *Kangla*, giving rise to the Meitei lineage. The Thangals, also known as *Koirao*, were traditionally divided into patrilineal clans (*Patat*)—including Angkaisong, Angthangmi, Rakhongmi, and others—and exogamous lineages such as

Bomtoukahum and Rangtokahum. Their main settlements include Gailongde, Makeng Thangal, Mapao Thangal, Mayangkhong, and Thangal Surung (Goshwami, 2006).

SHARED ANCESTRY AND CULTURAL INTERCONNECTION

The myths of Makhel, Koubru and the Tangkhul *khul* collectively emphasize the interconnectedness of Manipur's ethnic groups. These stories reveal that the peoples of the hills and the valley are now often seen as distinct which once shared a common spiritual and geographical heritage. Makhel, with its sacred banyan tree and the Three Brothers' Stone, symbolizes not only dispersal but also unity and kinship among the Meitei and Naga communities.

Through these oral traditions and sacred sites, the memory of shared origin persists. The songs, myths, and legends of Makhel and Koubru convey that cultural differences among the communities evolved not from isolation but from diversification within a common ancestral space. The myths thus function as both historical memory and moral framework, emphasizing peace, coexistence and interdependence as essential principles of life in the region.

CONCLUSION:

The oral traditions of Manipur's hill and valley communities reveal far more than isolated myths—they embody a shared cultural memory that binds the peoples of the region across time, geography, and identity. From the sacred banyan tree of Makhel to the subterranean caves of emergence and the sacred peaks of Koubru, these narratives illuminate a world in which humans, spirits, animals, and landscape are inseparably intertwined. Though each community—Meitei, Tangkhul, Mao, Maram, Maring, Kabui, Thangal—preserves its own unique story of beginnings, the recurring motifs of common ancestry, migration, and sacred landscapes demonstrate that Manipur's cultural history is not one of fragmentation but of deep-rooted interconnectedness.

In a region where written records were historically scarce, these myths function as living archives, encoding memories of migration, settlement, conflict, and coexistence. They challenge simplistic binaries of hill and valley, tribe and non-tribe, by revealing long histories of shared origins, exchanges, and mutual influence. At the same time, they remind us that communities construct their identities not only through difference but also through remembered kinship.

By foregrounding myth and memory as legitimate sources of historical understanding, this article highlights the need to reread Manipur's past through indigenous perspectives. The narratives of Makhel, Koubru, and the ancestral caves continue to echo across generations, reminding all communities that their histories—though

diverse—are bound by a common cultural thread. In acknowledging these shared roots, contemporary society gains a powerful resource for reimagining unity, coexistence, and dialogue in Manipur's multicultural landscape.

REFERENCES:

1. Athikho, K., & Ariina, H. F. (2012). *Tribal philosophy and culture: Mao Naga of North-East*. Mittal Publications.
2. Chingtamlen, W. (2007). A short history of Kangleipak (Manipur) Part II. The Kangleipak Historical and Cultural Research Centre.
3. Gangmei, R. (2003). The Rauangmeis (Kabuis): The Kabui social status with regard to unity in diversity. In *A short history of the indigenous communities of Kangleipak* (Vol. III, p. 30). The League of the Fourth World People.
4. Gonmei, L. (2003). Social status of the Zeliangrong and question to the unity in diversity as indigenous people of Manipur. In *A short history of the indigenous communities of Kangleipak* (Vol. III, p. 162). The League of the Fourth World People.
5. Goshwami, H. (2006). *History of the people of Manipur*. Kangla Publication.
6. Horam, M. (2016). *Naga polity*. Sunmarg Publishers and Distributors.
7. Kamei, G. (2003). *History of Manipur: Volume 1, Pre-colonial period* (Revised ed.). National Publishing House.
8. Kangba, A. (2002). The indigenous cultural affinity of Thangal tribe. In *A short history of the indigenous communities of Kangleipak* (Vol. II, pp. 101–103). The League of the Fourth World People.
9. Luikham, T. (1961). *Wung (Tangkhul) Okthot Mayonza*, Imphal.
10. Maram, T. T. (2013). The status of language and literacy of the indigenous community of Maram. In *A short history of the indigenous communities of Kangleipak* (Vol. XI, p. 41). The League of the Fourth World People.
11. Maring, C. A. (2003). The indigenous social status with regard to unity in diversity. In *A short history of the indigenous communities of Kangleipak* (Vol. III, pp. 85–86). The League of the Fourth World People.
12. Maring, C. A., Rev. Kanou, & Maring, M. (2007). Deteriorating of mosaic ethnic society of Maring. In *A short history of the indigenous communities of Kangleipak* (Vol. V, pp. 28–29). The League of the Fourth World People.
13. Mataisang, N. G. (2002). Religious life of the Naga tribes of Manipur with special reference to Tangkhuls: from earliest times to the end of the British rule. Master's thesis, Manipur University. p. 5.