The Academic
International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

An Online Peer Reviewed / Refereed Journal
Volume 4 | Issue 9 | September 2026
ISSN: 2583-973X (Online), SJIF IF(2026): 5.6
Website: www.theacademic.in

Cultural Syncretism and Enduring Heritage: An Ethnographic Exploration of Meitei Pangal Folk Culture in Cachar District, Assam

Dr. Abul Khair Choudhury (Moijing Mayum)

Assistant Professor & Head, Department of Manipuri, S. R. College, Cachar, Assam, India

Email: abulkhairchoudhury@gmail.com

DOI : https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23763702

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Received: 24-08-2026

Accepted: 23-09-2026

Published: 20-10-2026

Keywords:

Meitei Pangal; Folk Culture; Cachar District; Cultural Synthesis; Rites of Passage; Indigenous Traditions; Manipuri Muslims

ABSTRACT

This research paper presents a comprehensive ethnographic exploration of the folk culture of the Meitei Pangal community residing in the Cachar district of Assam. As a distinct socio-cultural group with historical roots in Manipur, the Meitei Pangals possess a unique cultural heritage that is deeply influenced by indigenous Meitei folk traditions. The community primarily settled in Cachar during the tragic period of the "Seven Years' Devastation" (1819–1825) and has since maintained a vibrant cultural presence on an alien soil. By examining their historical migration patterns and social organization—specifically the Yumnak-Sagei (clan) and Piba systems—this study highlights the structural foundations of their society. Furthermore, the paper provides an in-depth analysis of their rites of passage, encompassing detailed rituals associated with birth, marriage, and death, which blend Islamic doctrines with traditional Manipuri practices. The research also documents their vibrant festivals, illustrating the celebration of both sacred Islamic events and indigenous regional festivals such as Cheirowba and Talpiba. Additionally, the preservation of a shared sporting legacy through indigenous games such as Mukna and traditional martial arts is examined. Ultimately, this study investigates the intricate relationship between Meitei Pangal identity and folk culture. It concludes that the

Disclaimer: The opinions, interpretations, conclusions, recommendations, analyses, and statements expressed in this research article are solely those of the author(s) and do not reflect the views, policies, or positions of the Publisher, Chief Editor, Editors, Editorial Board, Reviewers, or their affiliated institutions. The author(s) are solely responsible for ensuring the originality, authenticity, and integrity of the manuscript and for ensuring that it is free from plagiarism, AI-generated content, copyright infringement, data falsification, and any other form of academic misconduct.

community has maintained its Islamic religious faith while preserving indigenous Manipuri linguistic roots and material culture, thereby contributing to enduring social and cultural harmony in the region.

Research Approach and Ethnographic Orientation

The paper follows a qualitative, ethnographic-descriptive approach to the study of Meitei Pangal folk culture in Cachar district. Rather than treating folk culture as a static collection of customs, it approaches cultural practices as living forms of social memory that are reproduced through family life, community institutions, ritual observance, festivals, language, dress, games, and collective participation. The discussion brings together historical accounts and folkloric scholarship with descriptive documentation of community practices. Particular attention is given to the ways in which inherited Manipuri cultural forms have been retained, adapted, and practiced within an Islamic social framework. This approach is useful for understanding cultural continuity without assuming that every tradition remains unchanged over time. The study therefore treats continuity and adaptation as complementary processes: some practices retain recognizable indigenous forms, while their meanings, contexts, or modes of performance may evolve in response to religious commitments, migration, settlement, and changing social conditions. The analysis is organized around historical settlement, clan organization, rites of passage, festivals, indigenous sports, and identity formation, allowing folk culture to be examined both as a repository of heritage and as an active mechanism of community cohesion.

1. Introduction: The Conceptual Framework of Folk Culture

The foundational concept of this study revolves around the definition and transmission of “folk culture,” a term conceptualized through various lenses by prominent anthropologists and folklorists. The term was originally coined by the renowned anthropologist Robert Redfield, who characterized it as traditions that stand in direct contradiction to modern urban life. However, a more comprehensive definition was propounded by G. M. Foster, who suggested that a folk culture may be understood as a common way of life characterizing the people of villages, towns, and cities within a given area. A “folk society” is thus an organized group of individuals characterized by this shared culture (Foster).

Etymologically, the term derives from “folk”—a group of people possessing their own specific traditions. When these traditions are transmitted across generations and practiced by society as a collective whole, they manifest as folk culture. According to James Rubenstein, folk culture refers to a culture traditionally practiced by a small, homogeneous, rural group living in relative isolation. Historically handed down

through oral tradition, folk culture prioritizes the "old ways" over novelty and is deeply intertwined with a sense of place and community (Rubenstein).

The mode of transmission has been a subject of academic debate. W. R. Bascom posited that "All folklore is orally transmitted, but not all that is orally transmitted is folklore" (Bascom). Subsequent folklorists, including Alan Dundes and Dr. Mazharul Islam, challenged a purely oral understanding by drawing attention to non-verbal aspects of folklore, including gestures, games, and dance (Dundes; Islam). In the context of this study, folk culture refers to the common way of life shared by the people of Meitei Pangal villages in the Cachar district, which cultivates cultural awareness and a profound sense of oneness among the folk.

2. Historical Trajectory: Emergence and Settlement in Cachar District

The Meitei-Pangals are Manipuris who profess Islam as their religion and speak the Manipuri language. This distinct community emerged during the historical period as a result of migration, conversion, and assimilation within the Manipur valley. The modern Manipuri nomenclature for a Muslim is "Pangal," derived from the word "Bangal" (Bengal). The earliest Muslim settlers migrated from Bengal and were consequently referred to as the Bangals, which soon linguistically developed into "Pangal." The Manipuris had utilized the word "Pangal" centuries prior to denote people belonging to the Bengal region, but following the permanent settlement of Muslims, the term came to be used specifically for them (Ahmed, Manipuri Muslims; Ali).

The first historical record of Muslims in Manipur dates back to 1607 A.D., during the reign of King Khagemba (1597–1652). According to R. Brown, Mohammedans in Manipur married Manipuri women, and their ranks subsequently increased through intermarriage (Brown). Possessing the native name "Meitei-Pangal"—which indicates their historical and cultural formation—the community became deeply indigenized and Manipurised (Hodson; Sanajaoba).

The migration and permanent settlement of the Meitei-Pangals in the Cachar district of Assam commenced between 1819 and 1825, a tragic era historically documented as "Chahi Taret Khuntakpa" (The Seven Years' Devastation). In the wake of the Burmese onslaught on Manipur, the Meitei-Pangals, alongside other communities, fled in search of safety. Leaving their motherland, they arrived on the banks of the Barak River in Cachar territory, an area inhabited by Bengali, Hindustani, Hmar, and Naga populations. While many Meitei-Pangals returned to Manipur after 1825, a significant number remained and settled permanently in Cachar, where the community has maintained a substantial demographic presence (Ahmed,

Concise History; Sanajaoba). The history of settlement is important not merely as a record of migration but also as a context for understanding cultural continuity. Displacement separated many families from the geographical environment in which their inherited customs had developed, yet settlement in Cachar did not require the complete abandonment of those customs. Instead, the community reproduced familiar institutions within a new regional setting. Village-based networks, kinship relations, ritual gatherings, and common linguistic practices provided mechanisms through which cultural knowledge could be transmitted from one generation to another. The resulting cultural landscape was therefore neither a simple continuation of life in Manipur nor a complete assimilation into the surrounding population. It represented an ongoing process of adaptation in which inherited practices acquired significance within a new social environment.

The earliest Meitei-Pangal settlement in Cachar was established at Tolenkhul, near present-day Lakhipur, named in memory of the historical Tolen Kazi. Today, the Meitei-Pangals reside in numerous areas across the Cachar district, including Banskandi, East Gobindapur, Tarapur-Manipur, Singerbond, Dalugram, Rupaibali, Tolengram, Sapormoina, Pailapool, Koroikandi, Chandrapur, and Dholai (Bam), among others.

3. Social Organization: The Yumnak-Sagei (Clan) System

The societal structure of the Meitei-Pangals is intricately organized around a Yumnak-Sagei (clan) and Piba system. The eldest son of the head of the clan is titled the “Piba” and is culturally recognized as the leader. The nomenclature of a clan (sagei) is typically derived from the profession of an ancestor or their geographical origin. For instance, the descendants of the indigenous medical practitioner (Maiba) are known as “Maibam.” The descendants of the individual who presented a Moina bird to King Khagemba are “Moinam,” and those who settled at Moijing are known as “Moijing Mayum” (Ali; Singh, Folk Culture of Manipur).

Prominent sageis in Cachar include Aribam, Maibam, Moijing, Sanggomsumbam, Keinow, Efam, Sajabom, Thoubal Mayum, Kontha, Khullakpam, Khutheibam, Phusam Baseimayum, Merai-Mayum, Pukhrimayum, Makak Mayum, Thongkhong Mayum, and Laireek Yengbam. Importantly, there is no hierarchical distinction of high and low among the sageis. A group known as “Fungga Nai” historically comprised household slaves who embraced Islam and maintained matrimonial alliances among themselves. Intermarriage within the same sagei is highly uncommon across the community, a custom that may reflect the continuation of traditional Meitei marital restrictions (Singh, Folk Culture of Manipur; Singh, Meitei-Pangal gi Khunung Esei).

4. Rites of Passage: Life Cycle Rituals

Prominent anthropologist Arnold van Gennep classified the rites practiced at birth, puberty, marriage, and death as "rites de passage." Different aspects of folk culture manifest profoundly in the lifestyle and rites of the Meitei-Pangals.

Birth Rituals: Traditions surrounding childbirth commence prior to the event, with observances such as "Ngamokpijaba" and "Tha Mapangi Sirni." Upon birth, the newborn is welcomed with the akamat (azaan). On the completion of seven days, a first clean-shaving ceremony known as "Lukokpa" is performed. Within forty days, the "Akika" ceremony is offered. The mother's forty-day confinement period is known as "Chak Mangba." Upon completing these forty days, she takes a purifying bath and later undertakes a highly anticipated journey to her father's house carrying traditional items such as "Kabok Afaba" and "Changbi Lafoi."

Marriage Rituals: "Chenba" (elopement) is viewed with displeasure; hence, arranged marriage is the common practice. Marriages involve complex customs such as Mou Haiba, Yum Changba, Kwa Puba, Sagei Kwa Yenba, Purjak, Gajal Sakpa, Asemba Eesei Sakpa, and Thabal Chongba. "Purjak" is a feast performed prior to the marriage day where invitees are served in distinct male and female batches. While the core Nikah adheres to Islamic standards, indigenous traditions such as Haijaba, Waroipot, and Haijingpot are observed with enthusiasm.

Death Rituals: The community practices rituals such as Asiba Khanglenba, Asiba Eruba, Kafan Yomba, Dafan Touba, Janaja Sonba, Jiarat Touba, Tasbih Chatpa, Khatam Sonba, Lik Chatpa, Humni, Taretni, Nifunigi Sirni, and Mangam. Demonstrating strong social cohesion, villagers contribute rice ("Asibagi Chengel") and cooked food ("Chakpuba") to aid the bereaved family for several days.

5. Festivals and Annual Gatherings: Religious and Cultural Syncretism

The Meitei Pangals celebrate sacred Islamic festivals in true religious spirit, including Eid-ul-Fitr, Eid-ul-Zuha, Fateha-duwajdaham, Sabe-Barat, Sabe-Qadre, Sabe-Meraj, Muharram, and Zumatul-Bida. However, in a display of cultural syncretism, the community also celebrates "Cheirowba"—a New Year's festival of Meitei origin—and "Talpiba," a unique festival welcoming the holy Islamic month of Ramadan. During Talpiba, women collectively prepare traditional cakes such as "Thaotal" and "Maroital" to distribute among neighbors and the poor.

Furthermore, the annual "Jalsah" is a significant festive gathering during the post-harvesting period. Here, religious scholars deliver lectures, and singers entertain the community with performances of Ghazal, Qawwali, Nate Rasool, Hamd, and Assemba Esei in the Manipuri language.

6. Indigenous Games and Sports: A Shared Legacy

The Meitei-Pangal community shares a common sporting heritage with their Meitei counterparts. During the dry season, they engage in indigenous games such as Mukna (traditional wrestling) and Kangjei (traditional hockey), with teams and individuals receiving prizes for their performances. For women, "Kang Sanaba" serves as a prominent indoor game. The community also practices traditional martial arts, particularly "Thang Haiba," utilizing coaches respectfully termed "Thanggi Oja," who were occasionally hired from Manipur. Games such as Yubi Lakpi and Hiyang Tanaba further strengthen their connection to indigenous Manipuri sports (Singh, Folk Culture of Manipur; Singh, Meitei-Pangal gi Khunung Esei).

7. Identity Formation and Cultural Synthesis

Folk culture plays a pivotal role in the formation of Meitei Pangal indigenous identity. While various facets of their culture have undergone evolutionary changes, the evolved form has retained distinctive indigenous marks. Language, religion, and lifestyle serve as crucial traits. Their mother tongue remains the Manipuri language, anchoring the "Manipuri/Meitei" dimension of their identity, while they simultaneously hold a strong Islamic identity due to their faith. This synthesis is vividly reflected in their material culture. The community wears traditional Manipuri garments such as the fanek, khudei, and feijom while ensuring that their attire adheres to Islamic principles of modesty. In this sense, identity is not expressed through a single cultural marker. It is negotiated through the simultaneous presence of several markers that operate at different levels. Religious identity is articulated through Islamic beliefs, worship, festivals, and rites such as Nikah and Janaza, while cultural memory is sustained through Manipuri language, clan terminology, customary ceremonies, food practices, clothing, music, games, and forms of collective celebration. The coexistence of these elements demonstrates that religious affiliation and inherited cultural identity need not function as mutually exclusive categories. For the Meitei Pangals of Cachar, the continuity of Manipuri cultural forms provides a historical and social vocabulary through which community members recognize one another, while Islamic faith provides an important religious framework for moral and communal life. The significance of this synthesis is particularly visible in collective occasions. A wedding, for example, may contain an Islamic Nikah alongside customary Manipuri practices; similarly, community gatherings may combine religious instruction with Manipuri-language musical performance. Such practices make folk culture a lived form of identity rather than merely an object of historical preservation.

8. Conclusion

This ethnographic study demonstrates that the Meitei Pangal community of Cachar district possesses a traditional identity firmly rooted in its unique cultural setting. Spanning from their displacement during the "Seven Years' Devastation" to the present day, they have preserved rich folk traditions on what was once an unfamiliar soil. The primary finding of this research is that although the Meitei Pangal community professes Islam as its religion, its folk culture—encompassing life-cycle rituals, marital customs, festivals, language, and indigenous sports—is deeply imbued with indigenous Meitei cultural traits. The unity rooted in shared language and similarities in folk culture has enabled Meitei and Meitei Pangal communities to coexist in social and cultural harmony, demonstrating how religious diversity can coexist with a shared regional heritage.

Works Cited

Ahmed, Farooque. Concise History of Manipuri Muslims. BUUKS, 2021.

Ahmed, Farooque. Manipuri Muslims: Historical Perspectives 615–2000 CE. Pharos Media & Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 2011.

Ali, M. A. Janab. The Manipuri Muslims. Imphal, 1979.

Bascom, W. R. "Folklore and Anthropology." Journal of American Folklore, vol. 66, no. 262, 1953, pp. 283–290.

Brown, R. Statistical Account of the Native State of Manipur and the Hill Territory under Its Rule. Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1873.

Dundes, Alan. "The American Concept of Folklore." Journal of the Folklore Institute, vol. 3, no. 3, 1966, pp. 226–249.

Foster, G. M. "What Is Folk Culture?" American Anthropologist, vol. 55, no. 2, 1953, pp. 159–173.

Hodson, T. C. The Meitheis. David Nutt, 1908.

Islam, Mazharul. Discussions on Folklore Transmission. 1984, pp. 1–35.

Irene, Salam. The Muslims of Manipur. Kalpaz Publications, 2010.

Rubenstein, James M. The Cultural Landscape: An Introduction to Human Geography. 10th ed., Pearson, 2011.

Sanajaoba, Naorem. Manipur, Past and Present: The Heritage and Ordeals of a Civilization. Vol. 1, Mittal Publications, 1988.

Singh, M. Kirti. Folk Culture of Manipur. Manas Publications, 1993.

Singh, N. Tombi. Manipur and the Mainstream. Chitrebirentombichand Khorjeirup, 1975.

Singh, O. Bhogeswar. Meitei-Pangal gi Khunung Esei. Manipuri Sahitya Parishad, 1990.

Van Gennep, Arnold. The Rites of Passage. Translated by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee, University of Chicago Press, 1960.