



Deconstructing the Meitei-Pangal Identity: Unveiling Indigenous Roots and Syncretism in Manipur

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ABSTRACT

The Meitei-Pangal (Manipuri Muslim) community occupies a distinctive place in the social and cultural history of Manipur. Its origin is often reduced to a seventeenth-century settlement of Muslim soldiers during the reign of King Khagemba. This article re-examines that narrative through historical scholarship, the Cheitharon Kumpapa, clan traditions, and accounts of the Manipuri diaspora in Assam. It argues that Meitei-Pangal identity developed through migration, intermarriage, conversion, political incorporation, and long-term cultural assimilation. Four interconnected strands are examined: early Muslim settlers and their descendants; indigenous Meitei families incorporated into the Pangal social field; lineages associated in community traditions with the royal order; and indigenous hill communities remembered in some traditions, including the category of Fungga Naai. The article further considers Meiteilon, sagei affiliation, and shared Manipuri cultural memory, including the Khamba-Thoibi tradition. Rather than treating indigeneity as a simple biological category, the study approaches it as a historical relationship involving place, language, institutions, memory, and social incorporation. It concludes that the Meitei-Pangal community should be studied as a historically embedded and internally diverse component of Manipuri society, while genealogical claims should be tested through

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1. Introduction: Origin, Definition, and the Politics of Identity

The history of Manipur has been shaped by continuous interaction among communities, institutions, religious traditions, and political formations. Within this history, the Meitei-Pangal community occupies a distinctive position. The term commonly refers to the Muslim population historically settled in the Manipur Valley and subsequently dispersed to other parts of Northeast India. In contemporary usage, Meitei-Pangal also expresses a relationship between religious identity and a wider Manipuri cultural identity. The community is Muslim in faith, while its historical language, social institutions, food practices, dress traditions, clan affiliations, and cultural memory have developed in close interaction with Meitei society. A useful study of its origin therefore requires more than a simple migration story.

The word Pangal has generally been connected in historical and community literature with Bangal or Bengal, reflecting the western and eastern routes through which some early Muslim groups entered the Manipur region.[1] Over time, however, Pangal became an established ethnocultural designation in Manipur rather than merely a geographical label. In the social vocabulary of the valley, the term came to denote Muslims who became integrated into Manipuri society. The expression Meitei-Pangal consequently emphasizes a dual but historically intertwined identity: Meitei in linguistic and cultural orientation, and Pangal in religious and communal identification. The hyphen should not be read as evidence of an unresolved identity; rather, it can be understood as a record of historical accommodation and cultural synthesis.

The early seventeenth century is central to the conventional account of Muslim settlement in Manipur. During the reign of King Khagemba, traditionally dated to the late sixteenth and first half of the seventeenth century, Muslim groups became more firmly incorporated into the valley polity. Published histories describe a military encounter in which Muslim soldiers were defeated and subsequently permitted to remain in Manipur. Their skills in agriculture, crafts, warfare, and other occupations were considered useful to the kingdom, and their settlement was accompanied by marriage alliances and administrative incorporation.[2] This event is therefore an important historical nucleus, but it should not automatically be treated as a complete genealogy of every later Pangal family.

The central problem addressed in this article is precisely this reduction of a complex community to a single ancestral event. A community can have a historically identifiable point of institutional formation without all of its later members sharing one ancestry. Over several centuries, populations grow through marriage, conversion, adoption, political incorporation, occupational mobility, and migration. The Meitei-Pangal case



is particularly significant because Manipur itself has been a zone of interaction among valley and hill communities, and because periods of war and displacement repeatedly altered the demographic map of the region. The history of the community must therefore be approached as a process rather than as a single founding episode.

This article uses the concept of deconstruction in a historical, not merely theoretical, sense. It separates the commonly repeated origin narrative into its constituent parts and asks what kinds of evidence support each part. It considers the Cheitharon Kumpapa (Court Chronicle of the Kings of Manipur), modern historical works, scholarship on Manipuri Muslims, clan traditions, and observations concerning the Pangal diaspora in Assam. The aim is not to replace one simplified origin myth with another. Rather, the aim is to demonstrate that the evidence points toward a composite history and that some claims remain hypotheses requiring additional archival and genealogical research.

2. The Seventeenth-Century Settlement: Historical Nucleus, Not Complete Genealogy

The seventeenth-century settlement occupies an important place in Meitei-Pangal historical consciousness. Accounts of the period describe Muslim combatants and other persons being retained in the kingdom after military conflict and being integrated into the local social order. The importance of this episode lies not only in the presence of Muslims but also in the political mechanism of incorporation. Instead of creating a permanently separate enclave, the state placed the newcomers within an existing agrarian and occupational economy. Marriage with local women, the assignment of social identities, and participation in royal service created conditions for long-term assimilation.

Salam Irene's *The Muslims of Manipur* is one of the modern works specifically devoted to the history and social life of Muslims in Manipur. The book traces the community from its advent in the region to the modern period and discusses its social, religious, cultural, and political organization.[3] Such scholarship makes clear that the history of the Pangal community cannot be reduced to a military arrival. Once families became established in the valley, subsequent generations developed institutions and identities that were locally situated.

The distinction between a founding nucleus and a total population is important. If the seventeenth-century settlers were treated as the only ancestors, later processes of intermarriage and conversion would disappear from the historical narrative. In fact, the very existence of named clans, occupational groups, and family traditions indicates that the community developed internally over time. A historically responsible account should therefore describe the 1606 episode as one major stage in the formation of a Muslim community in Manipur, while avoiding the unsupported assumption that every contemporary Meitei-Pangal family descends directly from the original military group.



3. Indigenous Meitei Roots: Conversion, Incorporation, and Sagei

One of the most important questions in reconstructing Meitei-Pangal history concerns the incorporation of indigenous Meitei persons and families. Historical writing on Manipur records a social order in which political authority, clan organization, customary rules, and religious practices were closely connected. People who became separated from the conventional Meitei social order could, under particular circumstances, be incorporated into other social categories. The existence of such processes does not mean that every Pangal family originated through conversion; it means that conversion and incorporation must be included among the mechanisms through which the community developed.

The evidence of clan or sagei names is especially significant, although it must be handled carefully. Names such as Oinam, Maibam, Thangjam, and other names found among Meitei-Pangal families are also known within wider Meitei society. Their presence can support a hypothesis of historical incorporation, but a clan name alone cannot establish a complete genealogy. Names can be transmitted, adopted, reassigned, or shared across social boundaries. Consequently, clan evidence becomes strongest when combined with oral genealogies, archival records, marriage histories, land records, and references in royal chronicles.

The Cheitharon Kumpapa is particularly valuable because it preserves information about the political and social affairs of the Manipuri court. The chronicle should not be treated as a modern demographic census, but its entries can reveal how the state classified people and responded to social transgression, political conflict, and changes in status.[4] Where the chronicle records persons being transferred into or associated with Pangal categories, such entries provide evidence that the boundary between Meitei and Pangal communities was historically negotiable in certain contexts. This is a more nuanced picture than the assumption that the two identities were always genealogically sealed from one another.

Conversion must also be distinguished from cultural assimilation. A person or family could adopt Islam while retaining elements of local language, kinship terminology, food habits, personal names, or social organization. Conversely, a community could remain Muslim while developing a distinctly Manipuri cultural identity. The history of Meitei-Pangal identity therefore demonstrates that religious change did not necessarily entail cultural displacement. In many cases, the result was a new social formation in which Islamic religious practice and local Manipuri cultural life coexisted.

4. Royal Lineages and the Moijing Mayum Tradition

The composite character of Meitei-Pangal identity is also expressed in traditions concerning royal or elite lineages. Oral histories and clan narratives within Manipur sometimes connect particular Pangal families with the royal order. Such traditions are sociologically important because they challenge the assumption that the Muslim population was composed exclusively of foreign soldiers or ordinary migrants.



A frequently cited example is the Moijing Mayum tradition. Soibam Ibocha Singh's Community Policing is cited in later discussions of Pangal history for the statement that Moijing (Sheikh) Muhammed, identified as the founder of Moijing Mayum, was converted from one of the Rajkumars.[5] The existence of this statement in a published work provides an important lead for historical investigation. At the same time, the claim should be treated as a lineage tradition requiring corroboration through additional primary or genealogical sources rather than as a universal fact about the entire Pangal population.

The significance of the royal-lineage argument is therefore methodological as much as genealogical. It demonstrates that the historical relationship between Islam and Manipuri society was not necessarily confined to the margins of the social order. If particular royal descendants entered the Muslim fold, then religious affiliation and political status were not identical categories. Such cases invite historians to examine conversion, marriage, patronage, and political incorporation as processes that could cross conventional communal boundaries.

5. The 'Fungga Naai' Question and Indigenous Hill Lineages

A further dimension of the composite identity concerns indigenous hill communities. Manipur's history has always involved interaction between the valley polity and surrounding hill societies. The social and political relationship between valley and hill populations changed across periods, and categories used by the court or local society did not necessarily correspond to modern ethnic classifications. This makes the study of groups remembered as Fungga Naai especially important but also especially sensitive.

In some Pangal oral traditions, Fungga Naai is remembered as a category associated with household or hearth service and with people who became incorporated into Pangal society. Contemporary interpretations have linked some of these traditions to indigenous Naga or hill ancestry. The historical proposition is plausible enough to deserve systematic investigation, but it should not be presented as an established demographic fact without primary documentation. The category itself needs philological study, and its occurrences in chronicles, manuscripts, genealogies, and oral histories should be compared before a firm ethnic identification is made.

The diaspora of Manipuris in the Barak Valley provides a particularly valuable field for such research. The Seven Years' Devastation, conventionally associated with the Burmese occupation of Manipur from 1819 to 1826, caused large-scale displacement and reshaped the settlement pattern of Manipuri-speaking populations.[6] Refugees included different sections of Manipuri society, and the subsequent history of Cachar, Sylhet, and neighbouring regions created new spaces in which community identities were maintained, modified, and combined.



Reports and oral histories from Pangal settlements in Cachar have preserved memories of families who identify themselves as descendants of hill or Naga converts. Such testimony is important evidence of community memory. However, oral testimony should be triangulated with genealogical records, village histories, marriage networks, land documents, and linguistic evidence. The most productive interpretation is therefore not to claim a fixed percentage of Naga ancestry, but to recognize the possibility that the Pangal social field incorporated persons from more than one indigenous population.

If further archival and ethnographic work confirms these traditions, the implications would be substantial. It would demonstrate that the history of Islamization in Manipur involved not only migration from outside the region but also religious transformation within populations already connected to the land. It would also show that the categories ‘Meitei,’ ‘Pangal,’ and ‘Naga’ cannot always be projected backward in their contemporary meanings without examining the historical context in which people were classified.

6. Meiteilon, Cultural Memory, and Syncretism

Language is one of the strongest indicators of long-term cultural integration. Meiteilon functions as the principal language of the Meitei-Pangal community in Manipur and among many members of its diaspora. The community's use of Meiteilon demonstrates that religious affiliation did not require linguistic separation from the surrounding Manipuri society. Islamic vocabulary entered everyday religious discourse, but the grammatical and communicative foundation remained Manipuri.

The linguistic history of the community is therefore an important counterpoint to narratives that equate Muslim identity with foreignness. Languages are not inherited only through biological ancestry; they are transmitted through family, education, marriage, neighbourhood, occupation, and political institutions. A community can become deeply rooted in a place through language even when some of its earlier ancestors arrived from elsewhere. Conversely, local converts can become part of a Muslim community while retaining the language of their earlier social environment.

Cultural memory provides a second dimension of syncretism. The Khamba-Thoibi cycle, one of the best-known bodies of Manipuri literary and oral tradition, continues to hold cultural significance beyond a single religious community. References to Khamba, Thoibi, Moirang, and other elements of Manipuri cultural memory in Pangal social life can be read as evidence of participation in a shared regional heritage. Naming practices alone do not prove theological agreement, but they can reveal the persistence of literary and emotional attachments across religious boundaries.

Material culture provides further evidence. Traditional housing forms, agrarian practices, clothing patterns, foodways, kinship practices, and village organization developed in the same ecological environment as those of other Manipuri populations. Islamic requirements influenced dietary practice and religious life, but



cultural adaptation did not require the abandonment of local forms. Syncretism here should therefore not be understood as the disappearance of religious difference. Rather, it refers to the coexistence of Islamic religious identity with locally rooted linguistic, social, and cultural practices.

At the same time, the concept of syncretism must be used carefully. It should not imply that Meitei-Pangal religious life is simply a mixture of Islam and pre-Islamic Meitei religion. The community has maintained a distinct Islamic religious identity. The more defensible argument is that religious identity and cultural identity operate on different but overlapping levels. This distinction helps explain how a community can remain firmly Muslim while also participating in the cultural memory of the wider Manipuri society.

7. Rethinking Indigeneity: Genealogy, Place, Language, and Historical Belonging

The concept of indigeneity is particularly sensitive in Northeast India because it is connected with land, political representation, customary institutions, and collective rights. For this reason, historical arguments about who is indigenous can quickly become political arguments. A scholarly study should therefore distinguish between several meanings of belonging: ancestry, historical residence, political incorporation, cultural affiliation, and contemporary legal status.

The Meitei-Pangal case demonstrates why these dimensions cannot be collapsed into one category. Some ancestors of the community came through migration; some may have been incorporated through marriage; some traditions identify indigenous Meitei converts; some lineages claim royal ancestry; and some oral histories preserve memories of hill-community incorporation. These processes are not mutually exclusive. A family can have an immigrant ancestor several centuries ago and still possess a long history of residence, language, cultural participation, and local kinship in Manipur.

This does not settle contemporary legal or political questions, which depend on constitutional provisions, statutes, administrative classifications, and judicial decisions. It does, however, provide a more precise framework for historical research. The relevant question becomes: how did different populations become embedded in the institutions, language, economy, and cultural memory of Manipur over time?

Such an approach also prevents the opposite error of romanticizing the community as completely homogeneous or completely indigenous in every genealogical sense. The evidence points instead to plurality. The Meitei-Pangal community is historically composite, and its internal diversity is one of the most important facts about it. Recognizing composite identity does not weaken community identity; it explains how that identity was historically produced.

8. Sources, Method, and Limitations

This article is primarily historical and interpretive. It brings together published histories, the royal chronicle tradition, secondary scholarship on Manipuri Muslims, clan-name evidence, and community memories



concerning the diaspora in Assam. It does not claim to provide a genetic study, a complete demographic census, or a definitive genealogy of every Pangal clan.

Three limitations should be stated clearly. First, oral histories are valuable but may contain retrospective reconstruction. Second, clan names are strong indicators of social memory but are not by themselves conclusive genealogical proof. Third, the surviving historical record is uneven: court chronicles tend to record matters of political or administrative significance and may not preserve the everyday histories of ordinary families. These limitations make triangulation essential.

Future research should combine manuscript studies, archival research, genealogical interviews, village-level ethnography, linguistic analysis, and, where ethically appropriate, population-history methods. A database of Pangal sageis could record the earliest known references to each clan, occupational associations, migration traditions, marriage networks, and links to Meitei or hill communities. Such a project would transform a largely narrative debate into a testable historical research programme.

9. Conclusion

Deconstructing Meitei-Pangal identity reveals a community whose history cannot be adequately explained by a single migration event. The seventeenth-century Muslim settlement associated with the reign of King Khagemba is an important historical nucleus, but the subsequent history of the community involved incorporation, intermarriage, conversion, political patronage, occupational specialization, and migration. The result was not a community standing outside Manipuri society, but a historically evolving social formation within it.

The strongest evidence for this composite character comes from the convergence of several kinds of material: historical accounts of Muslim settlement; references to Pangal incorporation in the royal record; clan traditions that overlap with wider Meitei nomenclature; traditions of royal ancestry; memories of hill-community incorporation; the continued use of Meiteilon; and participation in shared Manipuri literary and cultural memory. None of these categories, considered alone, can establish every genealogical claim. Together, however, they justify a research framework that treats Meitei-Pangal identity as layered and historically produced.

The article therefore proposes a shift in terminology and method. Instead of asking whether the Meitei-Pangal are simply ‘outsiders’ or simply ‘insiders,’ scholarship should ask how different populations became connected to Manipur and how those connections were reproduced across generations. This approach recognizes migration without denying assimilation, and it recognizes local roots without erasing the community's historical links beyond Manipur.



Most importantly, the study demonstrates that religious identity and cultural belonging are not identical categories. The Meitei-Pangal are Muslims, but their long historical relationship with Meitei language, Manipuri social life, and regional cultural memory has produced a distinctive identity. Their history is therefore best understood through the concepts of cultural negotiation, incorporation, and syncretic formation. Further research—especially into the Cheitharon Kumpapa, Pangal clan histories, Cachar oral traditions, and the Fungga Naai question—can refine or challenge the hypotheses advanced here. The purpose of historical scholarship is not to freeze identity into a single origin story, but to recover the complexity through which communities become what they are.

Footnotes

1. Salam Irene, *The Muslims of Manipur* (Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2010). The work discusses the history of Muslims in Manipur, including their naming, settlement, social organization, and integration into Manipuri society.
2. N. Tombi Singh, *Manipur and the Mainstream* (Imphal: Chitrebirentombichand Khorjeirup, 1975). The seventeenth-century settlement under King Khagemba is widely treated in historical writing as a major stage in the institutional formation of the Muslim community in Manipur.
3. Salam Irene, *The Muslims of Manipur* (Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2010), 21 and related discussions. Bibliographic details of the book are corroborated by library and bibliographic records.
4. Saroj Nalini Parratt, ed. and trans., *The Court Chronicle of the Kings of Manipur: The Cheitharon Kumpapa*, Vols. 1–2 (London: Routledge, 2005). The chronicle is used here as a historical source for court and administrative events; it is not treated as a modern demographic census.
5. Soibam Ibocha Singh, *Community Policing: Principles, Practices and Perspectives in the Context of Manipur* (New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House, 2007), 116. The cited passage concerning Moijing (Sheikh) Muhammed and a Rajkumar is a source for the royal-lineage tradition discussed in this article.
6. Gangmumei Kamei, *History of Manipur: Pre-Colonial Period* (New Delhi: National Publishing House, 1991). The *Seven Years' Devastation* (Chahi Taret Khuntakpa), conventionally dated to 1819–1826, is discussed in the wider history of Manipur and its demographic consequences.

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