



Traditional social structure of the Thangal tribe of Manipur

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Abstract

This paper examines the traditional social structure of the Thangal tribe in Manipur, focusing mainly on traditional family, clan, marriage, and village administration. The study is based on qualitative method using primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected through personal interviews with local elders, village chiefs, and community leaders. The Thangal family is organised in a patriarchal system. They practice exogamy marriage where within clan marriage is prohibited. Village administration is carried out through the village council. The khullakpa, acts as the main authority for governance and settling disputes and other clan elder members. Together, these institutions maintain order and unity in the Thangal community.

Key words: Family, Clan, Marriage, Thangal

I. Introduction

Tribal communities in India constitute a significant part of the country's demographic and cultural fabric. Scheduled Tribes make up approximately 8.6% of the total population, according to the 2011 Indian Census, and are found dispersed across many states and union territories.

The Thangal tribe is one of the smaller indigenous Naga tribes inhabiting in the state of Manipur, located in the northeastern region of India. They are most commonly settled in the Senapati and Kangpokpi districts of Manipur. The Thangals claimed that they are one of the first and the most ancient native groups and is associated with the founder dynasty of Manipur.



Figure 1. Map of Senapati and Kangpokpi district, Manipur.

According to the mythological accounts, Thangal tribe once inhabited in Makhel (origin place of many Naga tribes) located in Maram, Senapati district of Manipur (Singh, 2008) along with other Nagas. After staying there for a certain period they went further south, and settled at Angkaipang, later they moved to Angkailongdi due to lack of resources where they grew, lived and stayed for a long time from 500 B.C. to 100 A.D (Anth, K. 2018).

According to the census that was conducted in India in 2011, the population of Thangal was 4,475, with 2,208 males and 2,267 females. This meant that Thangal accounted for 0.38% of the total tribal population at the state level. The Thangals believed that they were native to the region in which they had established their settlement. Currently, they reside in 12 villages : Mapao, Thangal Surung, Makeng Thangal, Tumnoupokpi, Yaikongpao, Ningthoupham, Mayangkhang, Angkailongdi, T. Khullen, Katomei Makeng, Makeng Chejinba, Ngaihang, Takaimei of Senapati district and Kangpokpi district as well as some areas of Imphal East region (Thangmi, 2025; Thangal Union, 2023).

The Thangal community is patrilineal in nature, and communal activities like rituals and festivals play a vital role in maintaining social cohesion and cultural identity (Thangmi, 2002). Their traditional social structure was closely tied to



religious practices, which continue to shape their socio-cultural fabric. The Thangal tribe possesses a unique cultural heritage, including distinct rituals and social practices that reflect their historical identity and responses to current circumstances (Singh, K. S., 1995). Their administrative system is democratic: each village has a village chief called Khullakpa (Gongba), along with a council of elders representing various clans.

The Thangal community preserves its cultural heritage and social identity through strong family bonds, a clan system, and village governance. Despite of being small population, the community continues its cultural and economic practices through agriculture and traditional customs, which support their way of life.

Objectives

To examine the traditional social structure of the Thangal tribe, focusing on family, clan, marriage and village administration.

Research methodology

A Qualitative method was used for this study. Both primary and secondary sources of data were adopted for data collection. Primary data were collected through face-to-face and telephonic interviews of key informants, such as village elders, community leaders, and local residents from selected villages of Thangal: Thangal Surung, Tumnoupokpi, M. Ningthoupham. Secondary data were collected from books, research articles, government reports, and reputable online sources. Ethical considerations were maintained by obtaining informed consent from the participants and maintaining the confidentiality of their responses.

Traditional Social structure

Social structure as we know is an established pattern of relationships and roles in a society, which governs how people interact with and relate to one another. According to Majumdar, a tribal social structure is one without specialization of function, that works inherently as a kinship, a territorial and hereditary authority system.

The Thangal tribe has a social structure that is patriarchal in nature and based on clans system. The eldest male has authority within the family and is important in village leadership. The community is organized around kinship and clan. The Khullakpa, or village head, along with a council of elders, oversees village matters. Traditional customs, festivals, and oral laws shape daily life and keep social unity intact.

Family

A family is a basic social unit in which the members are related either by blood, sex, or law (Oxford University Press, 2014). According to David, k (2022), a family is the group of people who are based on blood relations and are therefore members of the same community.

The traditional family structure of the Thangal tribe is patriarchal in nature (Anth, k. 2018). Large joint family structure is common in the Thangal community consisted of parents, grandparents and unmarried children (Lungrila, 2025). Thangals believed that large family promotes peaceful and harmony and most of the family responsibilities goes to the elder son after the death of the father.

Father is the head of the household, he is responsible for making all major decisions and took part in hunting and gathering food and Wife obeys the decision of the husband. The mother also play an important role in managing all the daily household activities, such as taking care of the children, doing housework, fencing water, gathering firewood from the jungle. In fact, women generally does most of the work, even more than men. While the son accompanied the father during hunting, farming whereas the daughter assisted the mother in doing household tasks (Thangmi, 2025).

In matters of inheritance, the eldest son was expected to take care of the parents (Anth, k. 2018). However, in reality, the responsibility often falls to the youngest son (Thangmi, 2025). The younger son usually stays with the parents, while the elder son move out of the house and live on their own (Khangba, H. 2025). There was no strict rule as to which son, financially stable and established, could take care of and support their parents (Thangmi, 2002; Thangmi, 2025). The eldest son was given the first choice to select the property from the parents (Khangba, H. 2025). Women were generally excluded from the inheritance of property, except for the bride wealth given to them at the time of marriage (Thangmi, 2002). In some cases, parents give a small share of property to their daughters (Iris, 2025).

Clan

In a tribal society, a clan is a subdivision of a tribe made up of members who connect through a lineage from a particular ancestor. There is a shared identity; members practice the same set of traditions, and tend to be in proximity to each other. Tribes in India regard clan affiliation as a significant aspect of the rules of marriage and descent, as well as other customs and culture (Singh, 1994, p. 213).



The Thangal community practice patrilineal descent, where the clan name passes from father to son (Anth,k. 2018). The clan structure continues to play an essential part in the social organization. For example, in Thangal Surung village, the hereditary leadership roles of Gongba (Khullakpa) and Luklakpa are held by Kadekemi and Anth Thangmi clans, respectively. Other village council members are selected through a voting process. However, at

the village of Yaikongpao, there is only one clan, Manphungmi, which is both Khullakpa and Luklakpa who runs the village together (Thangmi, 2002; 2025). According to the Thangal Naga union records dated 26th October 1985, the Thangal tribe used to have nineteen clans. Now, there are 18 clans present in the Thangal tribe according to Thangmi (2021).

List of Thangal Clans are :

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|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------|
| 1. Anrakhangmi / Rakhangmi | 2. Anthangmi / Thangmi. | 3. Anggumi |
| 4. Kadeikeimi | 5. Phakpuinaomi | 6. Dibungnaomi |
| 7. Maguipuinaomi / Mbuipuinaomi | 8. Houmi | 9. Lengpuinat |
| 10. Angkai Songpuinaomi | 11. Puipami | 12. Anjangmi |
| 13. Pampuinat / Mpampuinat | 14. Sagongduimi / Sagongduimee | 15. Manphungmi |
| 16. Ambenpuinaomi / Ambinpuinaomi | 17. Thoinaomi | |
| 18. Payotnaomi | | |
| a. Bunglungtou Kara | | |
| b. Yangdenglungtou Kara | | |
| c. Rangnaomitou Kara | | |
| 19. Sarangnaomi | | |
| a. Pajeinaomi | | |
| b. Kampanaomi | | |
| c. Sangeipuinat | | |

Marriage

In tribal societies, arranged marriages are encouraged. Serious taboos concerning marriages exist in various tribal cultures. For example, marriage between close relatives is considered incest, and marital unions within the same clan are forbidden. Among the many things that one may find significant about marriage in tribal society, clan considerations are among them. A clan comprises many families that trace their descent to a particular person or family.

According to local informant, Thangals mainly practiced arranged marriages in the past and intra clan marriage was strictly prohibited (Thangmi, Th. Founding Father, TNBA, 2025, April). Inter tribes marriage were famous during those days. They married to neighbouring tribes like Liangmai, Mariam, Zeme, Rongmai, etc. (Singh, 2001). When the boy reaches the age of marriage, parents look for the girl who is good in household chores. The boy's parents would visit the girl's house to formally ask for her hand in marriage. If both families agreed, they would set a wedding date. During those days, boys and girls did not see each other. They were completely strangers (Thangmi, 2025).

There was an old custom regarding the wedding arrangement. When the boy's family visited the girl's home for the marriage proposal, they would take a small piece of cloth from the girl and on the

same night, the boy would place that cloth under his pillow and sleep. If he had a pleasant dream, the marriage would proceed; however, if he had a bad dream, the marriage would be called off, as interpreted by Lungrila, Former President, Thangal Sanui Jonlong (2025).

Once the marriage date was fixed about 10 to 15 days before the ceremony, the bride-to-be would invite all her friends, including young boys from the village, for a snack gathering. She would request the young boys to help her during the marriage ceremony and to accompany her journey to the groom's house, as wild animals were common in the mountainous area at that time. The boys would come armed with bows and spears to protect the gathering from any danger.

An exchange of gifts was also part of the tradition. Before the wedding, the groom's family would inquire about the number of shawl (phi) expected by the bride's family. Usually, the girl's family requested about 10 to 15 shawls (phi), along with a small iron slab. The gifts would be distributed to her uncles, relatives, and mother's brother. They give "karouphi" (shawl) to the elders and "white shawl" to the maternal uncle. Each type of shawl (phi) has a unique design that symbolizes its purpose (Iris, 2025).



According to Chand (Former President, Thangal Union, 2025), some wealthy families give more phi to show off their wealth and status, in exchange, girl's uncle would also return gifts in terms of livestock, typically cows and buffaloes, given to the groom's family.

On the day of wedding, the bride would travel to the groom's house accompanied by her family, relatives, young men and villagers. After reaching the groom's place, the bride would enter the house by stepping on a small iron slab placed in front of the main door of the groom house. stepping on the iron slab was believed to ensure peace and happiness in the household and acceptance as a daughter-in-law, Until she stepped on the iron, she was considered a stranger to the groom's family (Khangba, H. 2025).

Throughout the day, both families engaged in friendly competitions like mukna in day time (traditional wrestling). The function continued throughout the night. Both side of the family would enjoy the night with singing competitions, dancing, and feasting shared by both families. The next morning, they would have breakfast and bid farewell to the bride, and returned to their villages (ibid).

About one month after the marriage, it was customary for the bride and her husband to visit her father's house for blessings. They usually stay for 2 to 3 days. During this visit, the newly bride and groom would bring hens, ducks, and curry dishes to share with neighbours as a gesture of goodwill and celebration. And in return, the bride's parents and neighbours would present them with various eatable items, such as hens, ducks, and singju (a traditional Manipuri salad) according to khangba, H (Former President, Thangal Union & Former ADC member, 2025).

However, elopement was strictly forbidden by the community. It was considered a dishonourable act. If a young couple eloped, society would not accept them and would exile them from the village for minimum two years. After their return also, no formal wedding ceremony would take place, and they would live without formal recognition of their marriage.

According to customary law, intra-clan marriages and elopements were strictly prohibited in the past. For example, Anth Thangmi clan in Thangal Surung can not marry to same Anth Thangmi clan, according to Thangmi (2025). If a marriage occurred within the same clan, the couple would be exiled for seven years (Ambition, 2025). It was believed that such a union would lead to abnormalities in their children (khangba, H. 2025).

Earlier in the Thangal community, parents send their children to a dormitory around the age of 12 or 13 years before they get married. For boys when they admitted to the dormitory (Morbung) they give a black cock to the incharge of the dormitory. Boys and girls have separate dormitories, and a caretaker looks after them. Khaanglong was the incharge for boys dormitory and Laalong was the incharge for the girls dormitory (Anth, k ; Thangmi, Th. 2025). Many villages have multiple dormitories, usually located in the Tan household (khangba, H. 2025). At the dormitory, girls learn household chores like cooking, cleaning (Iris, 2025), while boys receive training in hunting given by the experts. They also learn important cultural skills like singing, dancing, folk stories, and discipline (Anth, k ; Thangmi, 2025). Children stay in the dormitory until they get married. Once they get married, they are not allowed to stay in the dormitory (ibid).

Village Administrative council

Every Thangal village had its own village council, though the council varied from one village to another (Thangmi, 2025). The council includes clan elders, with the Khullakpa (Gongba) acts as the leader. Next to khullakpa is Luplakpa, who served as the second-in-command and both received support from clan representatives during decision-making. The total number of council members depend on how many clans were in the village. The Tan (clan elder representatives) were chosen based on their moral character and ability to manage. The council dealt with social, religious, and legal matters in the village. Women were not allowed to take part in village administration (Thangmi, 2002; 2025).

Role and Selection of the Village Head (Khullakpa)

Earlier, when a new village was formed, the Village Head (Khullakpa) was traditionally chosen as the first person to start a fire and however make the smoke to rise higher was considered as the founder of new village. The selection of khullakpa was not by wealth or clan membership rather it was on the basis of trust of the communities. The Khullakpa live simple and disciplined life. He had to maintain a close relationship with the divine by fasting, isolating themselves, and performing sacred rituals prior to significant community events. Since wealth accumulation may make a leader less sensitive to their responsibilities, humility is viewed as being extremely important (Thangmi, Th. 2025).

The Khullakpa (Gongba) is the village chief of every Thangal villages. Khullakpa's position is



typically hereditary and handed down through the generations from father to son. If the eldest son was too young, the youngest (brother of the father) would temporarily take over until the son was old enough to become khullakpa (Devi, 2002; Thangmi, 2025). If the eldest son was unfit, the role would go to the second son. Different villages had specific lineages for the Khullakpa position; for instance, khullakpa is from the Kadeikeimi lineage in Thangal Surung and the Sagongduimi lineage in Tumnoupokpi (Thangmi, 2025).

Khullakpa exercised both executive and judicial powers, maintaining law and order, security, and the overall well-being of the community (Thangmi, 2002). With the help of the Luplakpa and clan members who assisted in decision-making of the governance. In addition, the Khullakpa serves as the village's spiritual guide and healer, according to Johnson, S (Village Chief from Mayangkhang, 2025). No festivals or ceremony could take place in the absence of khullakpa (Khangba, H. 2025).

Role of the Luplakpa and Tan (Clan elders)

In Thangal Community, Luplakpa, or Mantri, is the second highest authority in the village after Khullakpa. Luplakpa is responsible for the overall development of the village. There was no connection of ritual and religious duties of the Luplakpa (Khangba, H. 2025). The position was hereditary, normally passed upon the eldest son like the Khullakpa (Thangmi, 2025). The Luplakpa will preside over the village council in the absence of Khullakpa. Upon employment as Luplakpa, community feast would be held to receive blessings of village elders (Kabui, p.81).

In every Thangal village, tan was appointed from elder member of each clan. He acts as a messenger and carry out the Khullakpa's decisions. The Tan shared important news, settled disputes, and made sure the council's decisions were communicated and followed (Khangba, H. 2025). When a new Tan was appointed, the Khullakpa presented him with a sword to symbolize his authority. The villagers built a house for him and brought rice beer to honor his role. The Tan was in charge of his clan's welfare, overseeing religious duties, community services, and other administrative tasks (Devi, 2002). He also announces all decisions made by the Khullakpa and the village councils to the community (Khangba, H. 2025).

II. Conclusion

The traditional social structure of the Thangal tribe is deeply based on a patriarchal system whereby the father is the head of the family and the power goes from one male to the next. Family structure is strongly tied to the clan and its rules, with the practice of exogamy being the most important one which keeps harmony and enriches the ties between different clans. At the communal level, the Khullakpa holds the leadership position, supported by the Luplakpa and the clan elders who are not only village administrators but also leaders of rituals and upholders of customary laws. All these institutions help to preserve their traditional cultural identity and maintain unity and order, keeping its customs and cultural practices alive.

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