

**Marriage, Family
and
Kinship among
the
Paite Tribe
of
Manipur**



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Grace Don Nemching

This book makes an in-depth study of the system of marriage, family and kinship among the Paite tribe of Manipur. Discussing the geographical features of the state, it traces the origin and history of the Paite tribe.

Taking into account the pre-Christian social customs and traditions of Paite community, it discusses at length the various existing rituals and practices related to marriage, family and kinship. It also examines their traditional political structures and ways of control to contextualise the concept of marriage, family and kinship. The impact of Christianity on the lifestyle of the Paite tribe has been reviewed as well.

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1

Introduction

Manipur literally means the “Land of Gems” and has been referred to by various connotations like “Jewel of India”, “Kashmir of Eastern India”, as the “Switzerland of India” as depicted by Lord Irwin.

Manipur is a small hilly state in North-Eastern region. Its total area is 22,356 sq.km. Manipur is bounded by Nagaland in the north, Mizoram in the south, Myanmar in the east and Cachar district of Assam in the west (Fig. 1.1).

Manipur came under the British Rule in 1891. It was merged with the Indian Union in October 1949. Manipur became a full-fledged ‘State of India’ on the 21st January, 1972 as the 20th state of the Union.¹

Manipur is sharply divided into two cultural zones, the valley and the hills. The climate of Manipur is pleasant and healthy. The main crops in the state are paddy, maize, yam, millets. The hills which cover nine-tenths of the total area are inhabited by 33 tribes and the valley by the Meiteis, who are in majority.²

All the tribes of Manipur can be roughly placed under two sections—the Kuki-Chin-Mizo and the Nagas. The term Kuki-Chin-Mizo covers a large number of tribes and sub-tribes other than the Nagas.

Manipur, is essentially³ an agrarian state and the population is mostly rural in character. Cultivation of crops is the dominant economic activity in Manipur. The main method used is *Jhum cultivation or slash/burn cultivation*.

Manipur is essentially a mountainous state. Physiographically, it can be divided into three well defined regions:

1. The Manipur Valley.

2. The Manipur Hills comprising about 91 per cent of the state area.
3. The Barak plains, on the western border of the state is the smallest physiographic region of Manipur state, it comprises only about 1 per cent of the state area.

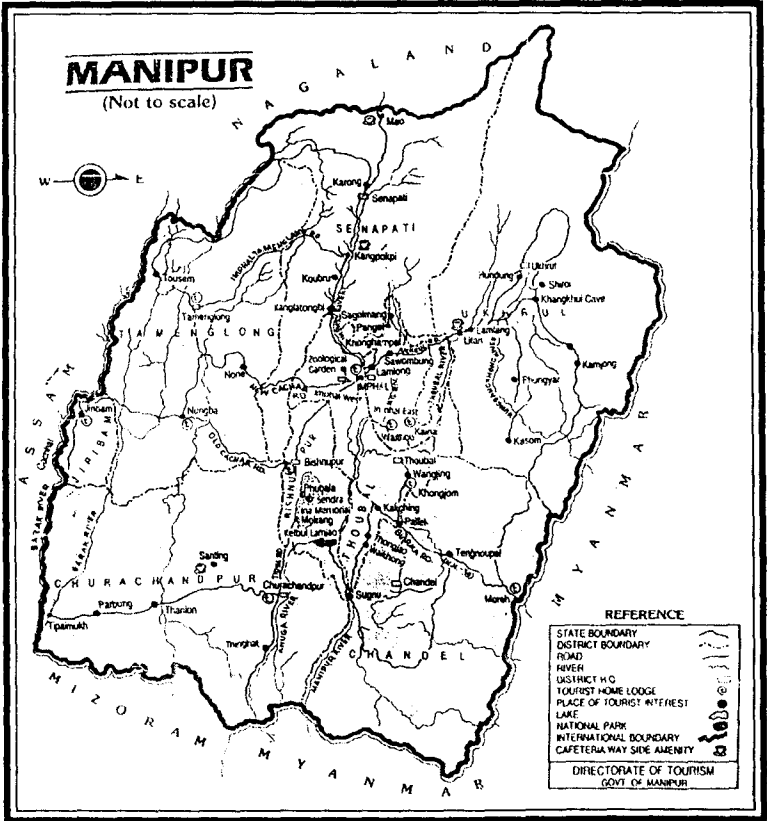


Fig. 1.1

At present the total population of Manipur is about 18,37,149 persons. Out of which the Tribal community constitute nearly 34.4 per cent, i.e. 6,32,173 persons out of which the *Paite tribe* constituted 2.22 per cent which is around 40,792 persons out of the total population.⁴

The *Paite Tribe* constitutes the fifth largest tribe in Manipur, out of the 33 tribes recognised as Scheduled Tribes by the Government of India.

The origin of the word 'Kuki' is not known,⁵ Horatio Bicker Staffe Rowney writing on the wild tribes of India with a few paragraphs on 'Kookies' records that the application 'Kookie' is equally unknown and given to them by inhabitants of East Bengal (now Bangladesh), they are known by different names at different places. In Burma (now Myanmar) they are known as 'Chin'. In India and Chittagong (in Bangladesh) they are known as 'Kukis'.

According to Sir Major General James Johnstone, he talks of the Kukis as a wandering race consisting of several tribes. They were first heard of as Kukis in Manipur between 1830 and 1840.⁶

According to popular mythology⁷, the Kukis believed that they have emerged from 'Khul' the sub-terranean of the Earth. S. Bartaki has noted that the Kukis originally belonged to a place called *Sinlung* in South-West China.

Their Chinese origin may also be supported by their musical instruments common with the Chinese. A great famine (according to some, a great flood) forced them to leave China and to search for a new land down the Chindwin valley to the Chin hills of Burma (now Myanmar).⁸

Their salient characteristics were accorded by Bertram S. Carey and H.N. Tuck as the slow speech, the serious manner, the respect for birth and the knowledge of pedigrees, the duty of revenge, the taste for and the treacherous method of warfare, the curse of drink, the virtue of hospitality, the clannish feeling, the vice of avarice, the filthy state of body, mutual distrust, impatience under control, arrogance in victory, speedy discouragement and panic in defeat.⁹

Sir James Johnstone in his observation, recollected that the Kukis are strictly monarchical, and their chiefs are absolutely despotic and may murder or sell their subjects into slavery without a murmur of dissent.¹⁰

Some writers were aware of the fact that the people whom they called by different names such as Kuki, Chin etc. were but the same. Carey and Tuck mentioned that the Kuki of Manipur,

the Lushai Hills of Bengal and Assam and the Chin originally lived in what we know as Thibet (Tibet) and are one and the same stock; the form of government, method of cultivation, manners and customs, beliefs and tradition all point to one origin.¹¹

The Kukis belong to the "Burmese-Kuki-Chin-Kachin-Lolo" group of Tibeto-Burman Mongoloids. The tribes belonging to the Kuki group are believed to be descendants of one common ancestor. The belief that the common ancestor they share is called 'Man Ma Shi Nao' which means mortal. All the Kuki-Chin tribes lived in a nomadic state for some centuries and gradually they migrated to places like Manipur, Burma (now Myanmar), Mizoram etc.

In 1956, under the list of tribes recognised and scheduled by the Government of India in Manipur, the tribes who were known as 'Kukis' petitioned to be known according to their own distinct tribe name, which was granted to them, so in all 33 tribes, with their distinct tribe names came into existence, the Paite tribe was one of them. The Paites are the fifth largest tribe in Manipur (Fig. 1.2).

The name Paite, according to M.C. Goswami and H. Kamkhenthang (1972 : 21), comes from two words Pai and Te which refers to 'people moving towards different places'.

The Paites inhabit mainly the Churachandpur District of Manipur. They speak Paite dialect which belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family of Kuki-Chin group.¹²

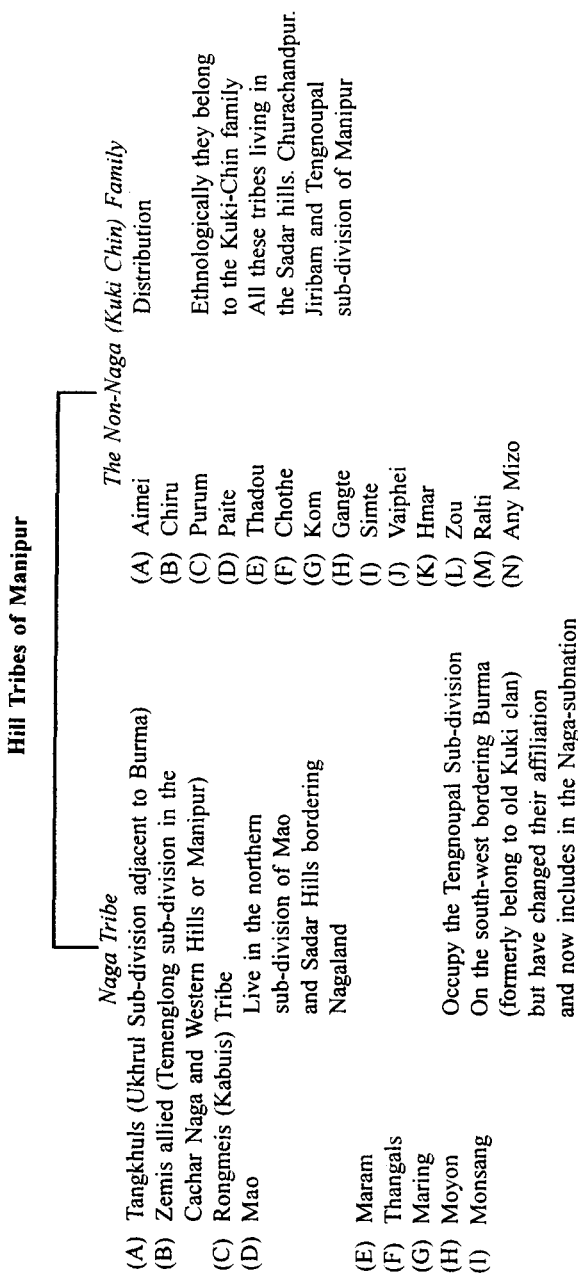
The Paites are a distinct tribe having their own customs and traditions and rules regarding succession, marriage, descent etc.

Prof. J. Roy¹³ wrote about the Paite, observing it is interesting to note that, the meaning of Paite, one of the Kuki-Chin tribes is a people in the process of going or immigration. They are Tibeto-Burmese in speech and Mongoloid in physical characteristics.

A one time noted diplomat of Burma, U Vum Ko Hau identified the Kuki-Chin people as follows:

The Chin Hills Gazetteer recorded the fact that Zo (Chins) and the so called Kukis (among them the Paite tribe) were one and the same race.

The Paite according to their traditional story originated either in Tibet or in China from where they entered India via Burma (Fig. 1.3).



Source: *History of Manipur*, Roy (1973).

Fig. 1.2

In his article "Chin" in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Christopher Von Haimendorf recounts the stories that "white Chins came from a man and woman that fell from the clouds." How and when did the *Paite* come to Manipur is still obscure. It seems there were times when Manipur experienced several foreign invasions.

Prof. J. Roy writes: "the fertile valley of Manipur witnessed the invasion of different tribes from time immemorial. At different periods, the Nagas, the Kukis, the Shans, the Chinese came and settled in the land and merged themselves into the Manipur community."¹⁵

The name and the tribe Paite was not officially known in the days the British were in control of Manipur, as the Paite tribe were clubbed together with other tribes under the term "Kukis". Hence, the Paite people became restless, since, the attainment of Independence by India on 15th August, 1947, for the recognition of their tribe as a distinct one, which finally they succeeded in attaining in 1957, when the term "Paite" was included in the Scheduled Tribes list of Manipur released by the Government of India.

The *Chin*¹⁶ have much in common with the *Kuki*, *Lushai*, and *Lakher* people and speak *Tibeto-Burmese* languages. At some places, the 'Chin' is used to refer to the *Kuki tribes*. *Chin*, a group of Tribes of Mongol origin, occupying the southern most part of the mountain ranges separating Burma from India. Their History from the 17th to the late 19th century was a long sequence of tribal wars and feuds.

The first British expedition into the Chin Hills in 1889 was soon followed by annexation and British administration ended raids by the Chin on the Burmese plains. Chin villages, often of several hundred houses, were traditionally self-contained units, some ruled by Council of Elders, others by Headmen. There were also hereditary Chiefs who exercised political control over large areas and received tribute from cultivators of the soil.

Agriculture is the basis of Chin Economy, land is cultivated in rotation, consecutive for several years being followed by reversion to forest. Rice, Millet and Corn (maize) are the main

crops. Domestic animals are kept for meat not for milk nor used for traction. Chief among them is the Mithun, a domesticated breed of Indian wild ox.

Prowess in Hunting has religious significance of the Chin, the slayer of much game is believed to enjoy high rank in after life. Status in life and presumably in, after life, is achieved by providing feasts. They practice *Polygyny* and trace their descent through the paternal line. Young people are expected to marry outside the Paternal clan. Traditional religion comprises a belief in numerous dieties and spirits, which may be propitiated by offerings and sacrifices. Christian missions have made many converts. The tribes have retained their Identity, however and Burmese influence has remained limited.¹⁷

Objective of Study

My objectives to study the Paite tribe are as follows:

First, I belong to the Paite tribe, no books have been published or study conducted by a female sociologist about this tribe.

Second, as I belong to this tribe it will give me the advantage of collecting information and conducting interviews, if necessary in the Paite dialect.

Third, having studied in Delhi for more than 20 years, it will give me an opportunity to go back to my roots and know more about my tribe.

Focus of the Study

The main focus will be on the study of Family, Marriage and Kinship and also Religion which has played a very significant role among the Paite tribe. There is a description of the Paite's place of origin, from where they have come to settle down, and how they got their name. The Paite's Kinship relations, rules of descent, marriage, familial relations, Kinship terminology and also political organisation and social control are discussed here.

Methodology

Personal documents would be used, these documents would be in the form of solicited personal documents, *i.e.* documents that are produced at the request of the researcher and unsolicited personal documents that are created by the subject either for his or her use *e.g.* a personal diary etc.

Published and unpublished written materials would be used.

If necessary, Unstructured Open Ended Interview of the elder members of the Paite tribe would be taken up, this type of interview would be useful in getting an indepth insight to a person's experiences, lifestyles, the various stages of his life etc.

NOTES

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