

Myths of Thangal Origin from an Anthropological Perspective

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Abstract—Myths may be understood as a special kind of literature though not found in written form. Through myths, anthropologists make attempts to describe a world which members of a literate society can barely imagine. Mythical stories about origin of numerous ethnic and tribal communities have helped in tracing their route of migration and the long journey undertaken before arriving at their present places of settlement. This study intends to highlight the myths associated with the origin of the Thangal tribe of Manipur from an anthropological perspective and interpret the stories in the context of evolution, migration and relationship with other neighbouring groups. Fieldwork was conducted using an interview guide to collect primary data and published literatures were consulted for secondary data. The result show two popular versions of origin myths are found among the Thangal- first is origin from a cave at Makhel located in the Maram area and second is the belief that the Thangal, the Tangkhul and the Meitei are brothers who emerged out of a cave long ago. In conclusion, the origin myths of the Thangal may be confirmed and established through archaeological findings in the form of artefacts. Mention of erection of memorial stones in the second version is a good clue to start an archaeological survey of the sites which are believed to have been once occupied by the people.

Keywords—Anthropology, migration, myth, Thangal

I. INTRODUCTION

MYTHOLOGY which is the basis of all humanities is inherent in every culture. It is the study and interpretation of myths which often deal with the human condition, good and evil, human origins, life and death, the afterlife, and the gods [1]. In an attempt to analyse myth, Elwin [2] makes mention of Tylor who considered myth as primitive ethnology which takes a poetic expression. The beliefs and values about the subjects held by a certain culture are expressed in myths express. As myths metamorphically represent a world picture and insight into life, they may be considered as primitive philosophy and metaphysical thought [3]. Jewell [4] considered myth as a psychological term which is actually defined as part truth and part fiction. Myths can largely contribute directly to anthropological theory while some can provide insights into the anthropological perspective that informs theory [5]. Frazer holds that man's initial belief in magic and later in religion and ritual led to the emergence of myth as a result of religious evolution [6].

The oral literature of North East India is closely associated with myths. The oral tales reflect the history and experiences of life in the region [7]. Like other tribes of Manipur, the stories of origin and history of migration of the Thangal tribe

are found in the oral tradition.

II. AIMS OF THE STUDY

- i. To document the origin myth of the Thangal tribe of Manipur.
- ii. To give an anthropological interpretation of the origin of the Thangal tribe through myth.

III. METHODOLOGY

Data used in this study were collected from Tumnoupokpi village in Senapati district, through interview with well-versed Thangal elders from Thangal Surung, Tumnoupokpi and Tumyon Khullen, and supported by data from secondary sources.

IV. THE THANGAL

The Thangal, formerly identified as Koirao, is a small indigenous Scheduled Tribe of Manipur, a small state located in the north eastern part of India. The etymological meaning and origin of the term 'Thangal' is still obscure and the views of the people are varied. According to H. Khangba (ex-President of Thangal Naga Union, Manipur), the Thangals represent one of the Naga tribes who are found on the southernmost part of Manipur. They are referred to as "Thangkaimi" (meaning the southernmost people) by the other Naga tribes. The name 'Thangal' is believed to have been derived from this term. Physically, they are indistinguishable from the neighbouring indigenous tribes who are of Mongoloid stock. According to census 2011 [8], the population of Koirao now identified as Thangal is 4475 individuals comprising of 2208 males and 2267 females, and it made up 0.38% of the state tribal population. The Thangals believed themselves to be indigenous to their area of settlement. According to their mythological account, they originated from a place called Makhel located in Maram area in Senapati District of Manipur. From Makhel the Thangals moved southward to settle at Angkaipang and dispersed to different places [9]. All of them are now clustered in 11 villages in Senapati District of Manipur. In the wake of the Naga-Kuki inter-ethnic clash of 1990s that spread like a wildfire throughout the state of Manipur, the villagers of Makeng deserted the village and took shelter at safer places. At present, they have clustered in three newly established villages namely Makeng Taphou, Katomei Makeng and Katomei Makeng Chajinba. Table I shows all the existing Thangal villages and their approximate distance from Imphal, the capital of Manipur.

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TABLE I
LIST OF THANGAL VILLAGES AND THEIR APPROXIMATE DISTANCES FROM
IMPHAL

Sl. No.	Village Name	Distance from Imphal (in kms.)
1.	Angkailongdi	60
2.	KatomeiMakengChajinba	66
3.	MakengChajinba	66
4.	Makeng (Taphou)	58
5.	MapaoThangal	15
6.	Mayangkhang	54
7.	MayangkhangNingthoupham	53
8.	ThangalSurung	31
9.	Tumnoupokpi	40
10.	TumuyonKhunou(Yaikongpao)	41
11.	TumuyonKhullen	52

V. THANGAL ORIGIN MYTH

Two popular versions of origin myths are found among the Thangal.

A. Version 1

According to the first version which is endorsed by the Thangal Naga Union, the Thangal, the Tangkhul and the Meitei are brothers who emerged out of a cave long ago. The exact location of the cave remains untraceable though it is believed to be somewhere in the north. The three brothers moved to different directions in search of fertile land and fortunes and the eldest became the progenitors of the present day Thangal, the second and the third became the progenitors of the Tangkhul and the Meitei, respectively [9]-[11].

The three brothers initially lived together in a big house (*Gonkei*). As time passed, the second brother expressed his desire to establish a separate settlement of his own and sought his elder brother's permission. The latter agreed and advised him to carry a basket (*anthop*) filled with pebbles and sand during the journey. He further advised his brother to continue his journey until the basket breaks. Following his brother's advice, the second brother left home and set out on the journey crossing a number of mountains, hills and lakes and rivers. At last the basket which he was carrying broke at the present day Hundung in Ukhrul District. He established his new settlement there and become the ancestors of the Tangkhuls.

As the third brother became old enough to establish a new settlement, he too approached his brother for permission to leave home. But being the youngest and the fondest in the family, the big brother was not willing to part with him. The youngest was not happy with the refusal and continued to nag. Realizing the intensity of the little brother's wish, the big brother agreed and advised him to carry a magical stick of reed (*tou*) during the journey. He was told not to stop until the stick develops root and grows into a plant. After a long journey, the *tou* showed signs of rejuvenation as roots started growing at the place which was named Toupokpi (*tou*-reed; *pokpi*-birth). After spending some years at Toupokpi, he shifted to Kangla (historical site of Meitei kings) which was then surrounded by water on all sides. Despite all odds, he

succeeded in establishing his settlement at Kangla and became the forefather of the Meiteis.

The two brothers, who had made settlements in the hills, visited their youngest brother in the valley every year with their choicest presents from the hills. This tradition later took the form of payment of tributes (*loipotkaba*) to the Meitei king in the valley. The Thangals have a firm belief that the cave at Kangla and that of Thangal Surung have underground connection and had been used by the eldest brother (Thangal) as a thoroughfare through which they moved frequently. After pledging to meet frequently so that they do not forget each other and to seal their relationship the two elder brothers left for the hill [10]. Before leaving, the elder brother asked the youngest brother to erect a tall bamboo pole with a light at the tip to reassure them he is well.

B. Version 2

Another popular version is the origin of the Thangals from a cave at Makhel located in Maram area, Manipur. From Makhel, they came to a place called 'Angkaipang' and stayed there for a short period. From 'Angkaipang' they moved down towards the south to a place called 'Angkailongdi' and settled there for a long time. At this place there lay a large flat magical stone which was believed to possess the divine power of doubling the quantity or number of anything placed on it. Consequently, they become quite prosperous and the population increased considerably. According to narrations the total number of houses during this period reached 999 and there were 799 bachelors and 799 girls. Locals believe that the presiding god of the village did not allow the total number of households to exceed 1000 and the number of boys and girls beyond 800. During this period, the Thangals lived together with the monkeys as cognate brothers born by two collateral sisters. As a tradition the Thangals erect large memorial stones to show their glory and prosperity. To erect a commemorative stone, a large boulder from the stream usually located at the foothills or nearby had to be collected and lifted to the hilltops. On several occasions, the monkeys with whom the people shared a common habitat assisted them in pulling up the stone to the hilltop. The boulders were pulled up with the help of ropes while the monkeys pushed them up from the bottom. On certain occasions accidents occurred crushing many monkeys to death. In a sympathetic gesture, the Thangals promised to bury the dead monkeys with respect and honour. However, instead of burying the dead monkeys as promised, they cooked and ate the meat. The incident occurred frequently and somehow, the monkeys suspected treachery and spied on the activities of the Thangals and caught them red handed. The monkeys lost their trust on man. They were furious and left the village for the jungle where they planned an appropriate revenge. At the time of departure, they sang a song which goes thus:

*"Kajongantou mini sombs puibasanaoamdei
anrumlairengkatak lungkaritangnou, lungkanaotangni
ponni ta nge" Free translation: The stone dragged by the
monkeys was erected for men, Ties of the collateral
mothers broken, The junior one (men) devoured up the*

senior line (monkeys) [10].

The monkeys started destroying the standing crops cultivated by the Thangals; attacked any Thangal who happened to pass in the jungle. Owing to the havoc caused by the monkeys, the Thangal villages became poverty stricken; and famine occurred frequently. In order to escape from the wrath of the monkeys many people tried to flee to other safer places but all attempts were foiled by the monkeys before they could reach the desired destinations. At last they were left with no other alternative but to work out a peace treaty with the monkeys. They ultimately made a promise never to kill and slaughter the monkeys. Since then, the flesh of monkeys has become a food taboo for them.

Citing a Thangal legend, Thangmi [10] narrates the legend of visit of two fortune-tellers (legend from Angkailongdi). He writes “while people were blissfully living at Angkailongdi, the village was visited by two fortune-tellers named ‘Matilula and Anjanglu’ from Maram village. At the time of their visit to the village, the right side of the Angkailongdi’s village gate was dilapidated as well as subsided. The two fortune-tellers on seeing the scene foretold them that “Though you have been living peacefully, soon your village will be split”. The villagers did not believe and paid no heed to the prediction. Instead, they scoffed at the two. Soon after, as predicted earlier, the village started splitting and resulted in the emergence of a Thangal clan who did an unforgivable and mischievous activity against Mayangkhang group, which resulted in shifting of the later clan to a place called

‘Angkailongdi kanakpa’ which means ‘Near Angkailongdi’. Gradually, dispersion of the Thangal people started again from Angkailongdi village towards southern sides. The first dispersion occurred when the clans shifted to the Angkailongdi kanakpa. Though the clans were at Angkailongdi kanakpa, they deserted and returned back to Angkailongdi seven times following frequent raids of Phongkam Tangkhul. In order to repulse warring groups, the clans established a good rapport with the Kachai Tangkhul. Subsequently, the people moved en masse further to a place called Pongong and from this place to Mayangkhang.

After settlement at Mayangkhang, one day, the then Angkailongdi’s chief, Gongkarao came to call on the Mayangkhang people and requested them to return back to the former place. His request was turned down and made him disappointed as the people were living in abundance and leading a pleasant life. In order to please the disappointed chief, he was given plenty of birds as gift by the Mayangkhang citizens, and he went back home with frustrated heart. When the chief reached home he distributed the gifts to the villagers with a message that the Mayangkhang people would never come back again to Angkailongdi. After a short while, the Thangal Surung group had also left Angkailongdi, followed by Yaikongpao, Tumnoupokpi and the rest of the Thangal people, and at last, they settled down at nine different places. It is said that the present Tumuyon Khullen populated by the Maram and Thangal was first established by the Thangal people of Kampuinaomi clan.

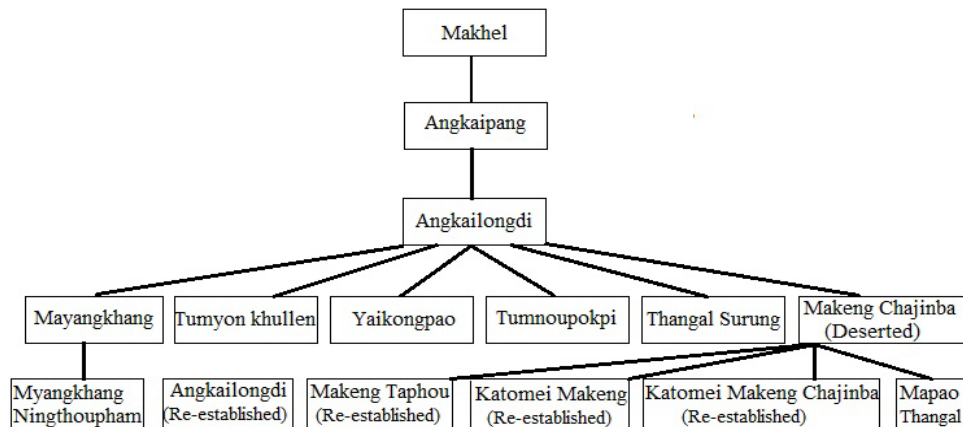


Fig. 1 Possible route of migration of Thangal provided by Rev. Thangmi and H. Khangba

Fig. 1, which is based on the information provided by Rev. Th. Thangmi and H. Khangba, portrays the plausible route of dispersal of the Koirao tribe from Makhel. It is difficult to comment on the merit of such mythical accounts as they have gone deep into the common sentiments and beliefs of the people. It is commonly agreed that the Thangal migrated from Makhel and thence they are dispersed to different directions.

VI. INTERPRETATION

The present day settlements at Mayangkhang, Tumyon Khullen, Yakoingpao, Tumnoupokpi, Thangal Surung, Mayangkhang Ningthoupham, Mapao Thangal, Angkailongdi

(Re-established), Makeng Taphou (Re-established), Katomei Makeng (Re-established) and Katomei Makeng Chajimba (Re-established) substantiate the migration theory as dispersal did not take place in a haphazard way. The spread originated from Makhel and continued in a unilinear direction, where villages were set up until they felt the need to travel farther. The presence of the village sites, even if deserted are signs of settlement at a certain period.

The close association of the people with monkeys in the myth can be taken as an indicator of an immediate link between human and monkeys (or apes) following the evolutionary theory of man in which man is considered to

have evolved from monkeys (or apes).

The second version reveals close kinship relation among Thangal, Tangkhul and Meitei. Though much cannot be said about relation with Tangkhul to substantiate the mythical belief, there prevails the practice of *Mera-wayungba* and *Mera-houchongba* among the Meitei. The Meitei observe *Mera-wayungba* by erecting a bamboo on the full-moon day of *Mera* (October-November) with a light fixed at the top. *Mera-houchongba* is also observed on the same day to mark the hill-valley relationship with the lighting of the lamp as mentioned in the myth.

VII. CONCLUSION

The study revealed objects and sites of archaeological importance in relation to the origin of the Thangals. Erection of memorial stones associated with feast of merit mentioned in the origin myth of the Thangal suggests the importance of an archaeological survey of the sites which are believed to have been once resided by the people. The findings may confirm and establish the origin myths of the people through archaeological findings in the form of artefacts and megalithic monuments. Further research will throw more light on the origin and migration theories as found in the myths and eventually reconstruct a concrete gateway of appearance and a well-defined route of migration.

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