

**A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF MEITEI CREATION MYTH  
WITH REFERENCE TO SANAMAHI BELIEF SYSTEM**

*Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the award of the Degree of*

**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

**LAISHRAM NIRANJANA DEVI**



**Centre for Linguistics  
School of Language, Literature and Cultural Studies  
Jawaharlal Nehru University  
New Delhi – 110067  
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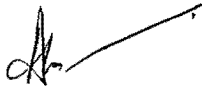
**CENTRE FOR LINGUISTICS**  
**School Of Language Literature & Cultural Studies**  
**Jawaharlal Nehru University**  
**New Delhi- 110 067 (India)**

July 27, 2015

**CERTIFICATE**

This Dissertation titled “**A Semiotic Analysis of Meitei Creation Myth: With Reference to Sanamahi Belief System**” by Miss. Laishram Niranjana Devi, Centre for Linguistics, School of Language Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.

This may be placed before the examiners for evaluation for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy.



**Prof. Ayesha Kidwai**  
**(Chairperson)**

Chairperson  
Centre for Linguistics  
School of Language, Literature & Culture Studies  
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi-110067



**Prof. Franson Manjali**  
**(Supervisor)**


Prof. Franson Manjali  
Centre for Linguistics  
School of Language, Literature & Culture Studies  
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi-110067

**CENTRE FOR LINGUISTICS  
School Of Language Literature & Cultural Studies  
Jawaharlal Nehru University  
New Delhi- 110 067 (India)**

July 27, 2015

**DECLARATION**

This is to certify that the M.Phil Dissertation entitled “**A Semiotic Analysis of Meitei Creation Myth: With Reference to Sanamahi Belief System**” submitted by me for the award of the degree of Master of philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any degree or diploma of any university or Institution.

  
(Laishram Niranjana Devi)

Centre for Linguistic  
School of LL&CS  
Jawaharlal Nehru University  
New Delhi - 110067

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Laishram Niranjana Devi

New Delhi

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## *Introduction*

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The research is an attempt to explore the text of Meitei Creation myth through the lens of the semiotic analysis. The Meitei has been preserving their culture and traditions through writings of these manuscripts called *Puya*, ancient literature of the Academics in various historical period by the traditional literati known as Maichou. These are written in the Meitei script known as *Meitei Mayek*. The scripts have its own philosophy of origin from the human body parts and is reflected in the old literary book known as *Wakok Lol Hilel Thilel Amailon Pukok Puya*. There are substantial body of literature on art, culture, history, medicine, religion and cosmology. There are various *puya* on cosmology telling the story of Meitei Creation myth namely *Leithak Leikharol*, *Pudin*, *Mahou Yangbi*, *Sanamahi Laikan*. Though these texts are different and narrated in different styles and forms, the content and the plot of the story remains the same. I focus my study particularly on the text *Leithak Leikharol* (The Lore of Heaven and Nether World) as it is published and accessible being transliterated in Bengali script.<sup>1</sup> The transliteration of the text itself is embedded with interpretations that bears the cultural history of Manipur.

*Leithak Leikharol* gives four sub periods of the *Chak* (Human Ages/Era) i.e. *Hayi Chak*, *Haya Chak*, *Langba Chak* and *Konna Chak*. These *Chak* are the mythical period that present the time sequence of the creation and the Meitei civilization. *Leithak Leikharol* begins from the *Konna Chak*. The creation myth of the Meitei is an effort to understand the origin and development of the universe believed by the Meitei. Each significant events in the Meitei creation myth are enunciated through a language of cosmological stories. The significance of the events/stories is that it is assumed to be taken place in history. Knowing or recollecting the creation myth allows the society to contribute themselves essentially in the real time and space. It also locates the myth in

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<sup>1</sup> Because people of my generation are not familiar with the Meitei script, I have read the text transcript and rewritten by Ch. Hemchandra (2010) in Bengali script. The Meitei used Bengali script since the imposition of Hinduism and Bengali script in 1714.

various activity that helps them in defining their cultural life in a specific manner. The *Leithak Leikharol* text interprets the meaning of various divine deities associated with the daily life of Meitei people. By critically analyzing the text, the research will attempt to discern how this text is manifested in the ritual, festivals and everyday life activities of the Meitei.

The interpretation of the text is possible only when we know the social structure and the culture of the people. By analysing the text as a means of communication we can say that the text serves as an important vehicle for imparting spiritual values and creates a community of belief. The present analysis is to examine the relation of myth to its nature, role and function. It helps us to understand the relation of creation myth with the society. Different aspect of the creation myth is to be identified and trace the connection with the Supernatural deities and the society. The rituals which are expressed in the coming chapters are being discussed showing the relation to the greater community and the divine deity. *Leithak Leikharol* and other religious puya recognized Sanamahi as the creator of the world and mankind. This deity holds a strong position in the Meitei Pantheon and is connected with different Gods such as the guardian deities. The Sanamahi worshipped is the pre-Hindu Meitei religion which came to be known as Sanamahism.

The current dissertation's concern is with the Sanamahi belief known as 'Sanamahism' and its relation to the creation story. But the question is how Sanamahism and the creation myth are related. To understand this, I focus on the relation of culture with the creation story and its association with the rituals. Different aspects of the story are identified so that they are connected with the ritual and festivals. Each of these rituals is being addressed and shows the relation between the society and the divine deity. There are historical, cultural, moral and ethical aspects in the story but a definite classification cannot be carried in this manner. The best way to classify is in relation with the Meitei cosmology. In the Meitei cosmology the gods created humans and the natural environment. They indeed made a place in the society as divine deity. This is clearly reflected in Sanamahism which is the traditional belief.

It is important to note that the culture and tradition is related to the creation myth. The veneration and commemoration of certain *Lai* (God) in the past have been passed down as the tradition of the Meitei from generation to generation. The myth and rituals which have been evolved over ages of the people's existence and transformation, has crystallized the essence of the Meitei society.

The attempt of this study is to understand the significance of the creation myth through their communication of desire and response to traditional belief, at the ideational level. The study explains the forces of nature, articulating the explanation in mythical form. Before the advent of Hinduism in Manipur, Sanamahism as a religion were mainly confined to the people. The ideas of this religion are crystallized in the Puyas which are treated as original and ancient as compared to Hindu religion in Manipur. The religious practices give a mythical reference and description with an imagination inspired principally by nature. It creates an idea that the Meitei belief in divine deity is the power of nature and the myths are woven in the natural phenomena. Among these natural phenomena, if one of them is chosen then it is taken as the center of mythological system.

The significance of Sanamahism can be seen through a universe of sign where nature is transformed into culture through the society's attribution of ideas to forms. The Sanamahism cult shows the symbolic way about the origin and life of mankind that is considered as divine by the society and accepts it as authoritative.

The matters of myth can be seen as part of life and belief of the Meitei that deals with the involvement of large social group in public performances and festivals leading to a kind of social folk to which the terms festivals and religious celebration apply. It is based on religious and secular traditions. This religious aspect of social belief covers the modes of worship that lie outside and inside the established place of worship.

The belief is never an isolated thing. It is invariably wrapped in a social sphere and derives its significance only when it is placed in its context. A myth or a folk song, has nothing to tell on its own. The Significance and generation of meaning from myth happens only when it is practiced within a culture. And if one fails to look a narrative



from its socio-cultural political context it will only result in compressing its significant power. So, the text of folk narrative is not only a linguistic expression but it also functions in the socio-cultural sphere of its society. It operates in relations with other expressions such as cultural practices, social attribute etc.

The semiotic approach of the creation myth considers the written text as a message carrier which the author tries to spread the idea of creation. The underlying system of convention is analysed by keeping in the context of culture. The written narrative provides a cultural psyche that is generated by the author. They serve as a key to the past knowledge of the culture and tradition and reflect the present since they are condensations of historical, mythical and synchronic discourses.

The study of the written text so far has been inclined towards collection and dealing with the translation and dealing with historical and anthropological point of view. The early collection and recordings of Meitei customs and folklore has much been attributed to the efforts of British administrator like T.C Hodson, J. Shakespear, who produced seminal works covering different aspects. T.C Hodson wrote monographs on various tribes of Northeast region wrote *The Meitheis* which gives an insight view of social status, customs and traditions. Saroj Nalini Paratt, explained about various rituals and religious festivals in Manipur. Her book *The Religion of Manipur* explains various myths associated with the Supernatural deities and there variant forms. N.Vijayalaksmi Brara, in her book *Politics, Society and Cosmology in India's Northeast* explains the social structure and significance of the Supernatural deity. Another significant work is carried out by Reena Laishram *Early Meitei History: Religion, Society and Manipuri Puya* discusses the ancestor belief base on various Puya. Although this writers have made great contribution in dealing with the social structure and their significance from the Puya, the main focus on my research work is on the creation myth Puya particularly the *Leithak Leikharol*. This research work will show how the text serves as a mode of communication in the society where the people depend mostly on the oral tradition to signify their belief. Being a linguist researcher, I will focus on how the text creates meaning as a myth. With this in mind the dissertation is divided into three main chapters.

The first chapter broadly draws the cultural history of Manipur then focuses on Sanamahism and its history to map the terrain of my dissertation. Focusing on the historical and religious development of the Meitei in Manipur, the chapter explicates the early traditional belief and the historical changes that occur after the coming of Vaisnavism and its influence in cultural life of the Meitei. In this chapter, I trace the people and its mode of belief. As the main focus is on the creation myth, I have elaborately discussed the creation myth as found in the Puya, the narrative technique of the creation myth and how this myth like tales have travelled temporally, spatially and experientially. Thus, the first chapter provides a general discussion of cultural and religious history of Manipur, the Meitei faith, the creation myth and cosmology in order further explore and complicate in my later chapters.

The second chapter is about the cultural significance of Sanamahism and its pantheon. The chapter tries to build on from the idea that Sanmahism is a system of signification thereby this chapter tries to unravel the shared system of signification in order to understand the norms and roles associated with this traditional belief system. I also further complicate the significance of Supernatural deity in the society. Focusing on the cultural paradigms that shape the religion, the chapter further complicates using the religious dogma as a tool to explain the structure of Sanamahism. It further explores the various cultural significance that falls into the paradigm of creation myth. The chapter also focuses on the role of various rituals and religious rites that are associated with the creation myth.

Having established these, the third chapter exhibits the semiotic analysis of the written narrative of *Leithak Leikharol* puya using the structuralist frame of analysis in order to understand how meaning is constructed and conveyed in the society. The chapter brings out the messages generated by the text and tries to understand the complex nature of the Meitei cosmology. Largely drawing from Ferdinand de Saussure's idea of langue and parole, the analysis of the myth is done by keeping it in the cultural context. The chapter also explains how not only the creator of the texts have internalized these deep structures but also the readers and practitioners. It also points out the possibility potential of interpreting the text in plurality of meanings. The chapter

highlights that the narrative text is itself a sign having connotative and denotative meanings and thus further study is carried out in order understand both. However, the text is primarily contextualized in its historical and cultural context to which the sign system is significant. The message in which the code is hidden is manifold, complex and obscure because it is communicated through the medium of highly symbolic communication language. One cannot neglect the importance of oral and performative text which I feel a large chunk of research is necessary to carry out on this area because the knowledge of the puya is propagated through the rituals and performances associated with the beliefs and traditions of the Meitei. The iterability of the cultural performances in some important festivals every year is significant in embodying the knowledge, culture, beliefs and traditions of Sanamahism. In addition to this how the Vaishnavite performative elements have been assimilated and indigenized, finally creating a syncretized culture which is unique in its own right. I admit that there are lacunae in these areas in my dissertation but I have given pointers for my further research in the future.

## **METHODOLOGY**

As far as research methodology and descriptive reality go, it may sometimes seem easier to distance oneself from the values ingrained in one's own society when working or living in a society not one's own, than for an academic who studies the phenomena of his own society. The problem of correctly perceiving the socio-cultural phenomena in their synchronic dynamics is complex enough for both as it stands in a given web of complex concreteness.

Keeping in mind the problems of ethnography and diverse ethnographic approaches, attempts were made to develop a firsthand, contextualized, naturalistic, hypotheses-generating, systematic orientation to the study of the text through the study of culture, history and its polity. Historiography is one of the tools for my research. The research interests of historians change over time, and in recent decades there has been a shift away from traditional, economic and political history towards newer approaches, especially social and cultural studies.

I must admit that the research is a preliminary examination of the creation myth text *Leithak Leikharol* as I struggle to contextualize and interpret many of the poetic imagination that the text provided and explored. I came to realize in the course of my work that it needs years of dedicated research on the text. However the work is an attempt to focus on specific area and it is at two levels – descriptive/interpretive approach and also critical approach or convergence of both. Largely drawing from structuralists, the study explore the semiotic analysis of this text. Regarding the collection of materials, the research approach may also be phenomenological, in the sense that interviews were mainly conducted with the traditional scholars and experts in order to understand the text and its nuances.

Cultural anthropology has always been dependent on translation as a textual practice, and it has often used 'translation' as a metaphor to describe ethnography's processes of interpretation and cross-cultural comparison. Questions of intelligibility and representation are central to both translation studies and ethnographic writing - as are the dilemmas of cultural distance or proximity, exoticism or appropriation. Similarly, problems of representation arise during the cultural 'translations'. However, as yet there has been remarkably little interdisciplinary exchange: neither has studies of historical text kept up with the sophistication of anthropology's investigations of meaning, representation and 'cultures' itself, nor have cultural studies often looked to such studies for analyses of language difference or concrete methods of tracing such texts. This project is an attempt to fill the gap.

## *Early Meitei Belief and Vaisnavism*

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### THE LAND MANIPUR

Manipur, the land of Blue Mountains and green Valley, was an ancient Asiatic Kingdom. It was known as “*Kanglei* or *Poirei-Meitrabak*” before the coming of Vaisnavism in the beginning of 18<sup>th</sup> century A.D.<sup>2</sup> Manipur is known by various names to her neighbours – the Burmese called her *Kathe*, the Assamese called her *Meklei*, the Cachar called her *Monglei*, and the Shan called her *Kassay*.<sup>3</sup> Some traditional poets eulogized her as *Sana-Leipak* (the golden Land) and the Japanese described her as “A Flower on the Lofty Heights.”<sup>4</sup> These names entail different meanings and perceptions of the land from the ancient time. The names themselves have diverse connotations and thereby opening multiple semiotics which is in accordance with the perceptions of the community that gave names to this land.

The immigrant Brahmins patronized by the monarchs in order to convert the Meitei into Hinduism created myths to link the origin of the land and its inhabitants, the Meitei with the Indo-Aryan myths.<sup>5</sup> There have been contestations and contradictions in regard to the origin of the term ‘Manipur’. The present word ‘Manipur’, literally the land of gems, was most likely coined after the sanskritisation of Manipur. Regarding the origin of this word ‘Manipur’, it draws its antecedent to the legend of Shiva, Parvati, Ananta; according to which Shiva and Parvati performed the *Ras Leela* in this place after draining away the water from the valley through a hole made by Siva’s trident (*trisula*). The serpent god Ananta overjoyed and danced by putting the sprinkling gems

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<sup>2</sup> Kabui, G., *History Colonial Period*, 1991, p. 1

<sup>3</sup> W. Dun, *Gazetteer of Manipur*. p.1 and also see R. Brown, *Statistical Account of the Native State of Manipur and Hill Territory under its Rule*. 1975, p. 2

<sup>4</sup> Kabui, G., op.cit, p. 24

<sup>5</sup> Bijoykumar, Kh., “Sanamahi Movement Among the Meiteis of Manipur: A Sociological Study of a Socio-Religious Movement”. 2005, p. 11

over his head. Then the whole valley was sprinkled with this gems, hence this land was called Manipur (*Mani* means gems and *Pur* means land).<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, on the basis of the historical account *Ras Leela* was introduced in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by King Bhagyachandra. Therefore the name Manipur cannot be related with the pre-historic time. But it may come along with the introduction of Hinduism in the 18<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The attempt to connect the origin of Manipur to the Hindu puranic stories is the myth created by the scholars of Brahminical school in order to give puranic derivation of ‘Manipur’.

Another legend refers to a Kingdom named Manipur in the great Indian epic *Mahabharata*. While describing the adventures of the Pandava hero Arjuna, it refers to his marriage to Chitrangada, a princess of Manipur who gave birth to Babhrvahana who became the King of Manipur.<sup>7</sup> However there are different versions of this legend. According to Wilson, Manipur of *Mahabharata* was situated by the side of the sea and cannot be identified with the present Manipur which is far away from the sea coast. Supporting this view, Gait also wrote, that “Manipur mentioned in the Mahabharata was the capital of Babhrvahana the King of Kalinga in Orissa.”

Thus, an analysis of the above views clearly shows that the name Manipur came along with the introduction of Hinduism in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Hinduism was accepted as state religion in the year 1717 A.D, when King Garibniwas enforced it on all his subjects. If the Manipur of *Mahabharata* be the same as the Manipur of today, then her civilisation must have existed earlier than 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. when the Mahabharata was written. But the royal chronicle *Cheitharol Kumbaba* shows her existence only from the 33 A.D. Till the end of 17<sup>th</sup> century, in the royal chronicle, the words of ‘Manipur’ and ‘Babhrvahana’ which are purely Sanskrit names are never found. The indegenious name of Manipur was called *Kangleipak* or *Poirei-Meitrabak* as found mention in the royal chronicle.

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<sup>6</sup> Kabui, G., (1991) op.cit. p.2.

<sup>7</sup> Singh, L. Bhagyachandra, *A Critical Study of the Religious Philosophy of the Meiteis before the Advent of Vaisnavism in Manipur*. 1991, p. 57

Thus Manipur's alleged Aryan connection is the exploded myth of the immigrant Brahmins who were trying to bring a cultural connection with the Hindu cultural world. So it can be viewed as an aspect of Sanskritisation which is an attempt to gain respectable status in the Hindu social world when this people were newly converted into this religion of Hinduism.

While the Brahmin scholars attempted to draw the connection of Manipur to the Hindu epic like *Mahabharata*, there has been a resistance voice countering to this. The revivalist movement in Manipur is so pervasive and prominent today. The revivalist movement is known as Sanamahi movement. The basic objectives of the movement is the revival of their language, scripts, religion, culture and tradition. Interestingly in Manipur, the Sanamahi deity is worshipped not only by the Meitei community but also by the communities like *Bamon* (Manipuri Brahmins), hill tribes and *Pangan* (Meitei muslims). Among the Meitei communities, there are Vaishnavite followers known as "Gourya Meitei" and non-Vaishnavite followers who predominantly follow the religion of Sanamahism, commonly known as "Sanamahi Meitei". Captivatingly, one will find a space of Sanamahi in the western corner of every house of both Hindu Meitei and Sanamahi Meitei and others like *Bamon*, hill tribes and *Pangan*.

## **THE PEOPLE**

The valley which is highly fertile is inhabited by the dominant community called the Meitei, and the Hill areas are inhabited by various tribes such as Nagas and the Kukis, and other small tribes most of which are Christians at present. These two groups of the Meitei – Gourya Meitei and Sanamahi Meitei in the plain and different tribes in the surrounding hills had been living together in this small land called Manipur today.

There are also, many immigrants in this valley. This valley with its great fertility and favourable topography had always attracted people from different parts of the world both in pre-historic days and in the later ages. This society comprises many communities like Meitei (the dominant community of Manipur), the Lois (degraded section of Manipur), Nagas and Kukis (hill tribes), the Brahmins (the representatives of

Hinduism), the Pangals (Manipur Muslims). Therefore, Manipur society can be viewed as Ethnic and Multi-Cultural Society.

### ***The Meitei***

The origin of the Meitei is obscure and the study on this subject is greatly influenced by the religious and political ideologies of the Meitei themselves, thus making the problem highly speculative and controversial. “From the most credible traditions the valley appears originally to have been occupied by several tribes, the principalities of which were named *Khuman*, *Luwang*, *Moirang* and the *Meitei (Mangang)*, all of whom came from different directions. The *Agoms*, *Khaba-nganba* and *Chenglei* or *Sarang-Leisangthem* were the names of other tribes/clans that inhabit the plain.”<sup>8</sup> They together formed the seven clans of the subsequently integrated Meitei society. After a series of inter-tribal conflicts the Mangang established control over these tribes, as well as over the other hill tribes and by gaining political supremacy also established cultural and social supremacy.<sup>9</sup> The conquered tribes were subsumed under the clan.

The ethnic name ‘Meitei’ according to B. H. Hodgson, was a combined appellation of Kochin Chinese ‘Moi’ and Siamese ‘Tai’ (Moi-tai = Meitei) and that the Meitei belong to the Moi section of the great Tai race.<sup>10</sup> But this suggestion of Moi-Tai origin of the Meitei was rejected by several Ethnographers and Linguists on the basis of the Meitei language belonging to Tibeto-Burman family and the Tai being the Siamese-Chinese linguistic family. So, T.C. Hodson, a renowned British Ethnographer cum Political Agent, wrote, “it is difficult especially on linguistic ground to group the Meitei with the Tai race where the structure and the vocabulary of the Meitei languages agree with those of Tibeto-Burman.”<sup>11</sup> G.A Grierson, a famous Linguist, in his linguistic survey of India has also grouped the Meitei in the Kuki-Chin sub family of the Tibeto-Burman Languages. The Kuki Chin languages is closely connected with all the

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<sup>8</sup> R. Brown, *Administrative Report of Manipur* (1968-69), The Record of the Govt. of India, Foreign Department, No – LXXVIII, Calcutta, p. 26.

<sup>9</sup> Vijaylakshmi Brara, op.cit. p.3

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in T.C Hodson, op.cit., p. 10

<sup>11</sup> T.C Hodson, op.cit. p.10



surroundings group of the Tibeto Burman Family.<sup>12</sup> But Captain Pemberton in his 'Report on Eastern Frontier' says, "we may safely conclude them to be the descendents from a Tartar colony from China."<sup>13</sup>

From the linguistics and cultural affinities between the Meitei and the surrounding hill tribes of Manipur, W. Mc. Culloch, another British Ethnographer cum political Agent, expressed the view that the Major tribes and clans of the Meitei appeared to have been the descendants of the Naga tribes. He wrote, "From the most credible tradition, the valley appears originally to have been occupied by several tribes, the principalities of which were *Khuman, Luwang, Moirang* and *Meitei (Mangang)*, all of whom came from different directions. By the degrees, the Meitei subdued the whole, and the name Meitei has become applicable to all. For this, I can see no reason, and think there is far more ground to conclude them to be descendants of the surrounding hill tribes."<sup>14</sup>

Besides the above historical evidences, the stories of their ancestors show that before the introduction of Hinduism in the State, they retained all the custom of the hill people of the present day. According to T.C. Hodson, "two hundred years ago, in the internal organization, in religion, in habits and manner, the Meitei were as the hill people are now. The successive waves of invasion by the Shan, Burmese, the Chinese and the Hindu have left permanent marks on the civilisation of the people." From this, R. Brown, another Ethnographer cum British Political Agent, concludes, "Should it be a correct view that the valley of Manipur was at no distance period almost entirely covered by water, the origin of Manipuris from the surrounding hill tribes is the proper and only conclusion to be arrived."<sup>15</sup>

Thus the fact that ethno-linguistically the Meitei are Tibeto-Burman family of Mongoloid stock. Therefore, Meitei by the degree of their society have absorbed various foreign elements and completely integrated them in their social structure. Thus,

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<sup>12</sup> G.A. Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*. Vol. III.1905, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> R.B. Pemberton, *A Report on the N.E. Frontier of British India*, Calcutta, 1935, p. 36.

<sup>14</sup> Mc Culloch, *An Account of the Valley of Manipur and Hill Tribes*, Selected from the Record of the Govt. of India, No. – XXVIII, London, 1859, p.4

<sup>15</sup> R. Brown, op.cit (1868-69), p. 28.

Meitei as a distinct ethnic, linguistic, cultural and social entity was formed in the Manipur valley, which was a melting pot of culture. They are a cultural community of many tribes.

### ***Hill Tribes: Nagas and Kukis***

The Nagas and Kuki-Chin groups mainly constitute the hill people of Manipur. There are more than 30 tribal groups in the hills of Manipur. They all speak the language belonging to the Tibeto-Burman group. The Kukis-Chin groups are the more recent immigrants who mainly inhabit the southern and western part of the state. Before the coming of Hinduism in the valley of Manipur there was a close relationship between the hill people and the Meitei of the plain. The only difference was that of language and facilities of the communication and agriculture.

In the field of belief system also the hills and the valley had much a common in time of yore. The non-Christian tribals are animists, the forefathers of the Meitei were also animistic in the past. There are gods and goddesses that are commonly recognized by both the hill people and the Meitei. Though the hill tribes have largely converted into Cristianity, they still worshipped Sanamahi, Leimarel (household deity) and the Soraren (the sky God).<sup>16</sup> The offerings to these gods consisted of meat, fish, and wine, which are similar to the practices of the Meitei in the past. The valley and hill also had the same food habits. The offerings made to forest deities by the valley folk in certain areas till recently are evidence of this.

But the process of Hinduisation brought about a divide by which Hindu Meitei started feeling ritually superior and categorized all the tribes as untouchables who according to them lead lowly lives by eating meat, drinking wine and offering the same to their gods, which the Meitei themselves used to do before becoming Hindus. Then these two groups were further alienated when the hill people again adopted Christianity in the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, a major example of social distance came in between these two groups of people. But there was apparently no racial difference

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<sup>16</sup> Kh. Bijoykumar Singh, "Hinduism Among the Meiteis of Manipur: A Study of Continuity and Change", 2000, p. 32

between the valley dwellers and the hill people.<sup>17</sup> Many of the British anthropologists also said that there are so many evidence that Meitei are descendant of the Naga tribes. But the successive invasion from the east and west had left a permanent mark on the population of the Meitei.

The above factors provided for a great cultural difference between two peoples. The cultural and linguistic difference coupled with the geographical isolation and political conditions determining the relationship between the groups were responsible for a distance wider than ever when the Meitei became Hindu and hill-men became Christians. There are also many phrases and idioms in the Manipuri language to indicate that they were meat eaters and used wine as one of their essential food habits.

### **HISTORICAL AND RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT OF THE MEITEI**

We will begin by looking into the historical and religious development of the Meitei. For this, we need to look into its culture which is the complex whole that includes knowledge, belief, moral customs acquired by man as a member of society. It is a particular unit that contains elements such as religion, art, and custom. Thus, the elements are firmly connected to each other and form a single existing thing.<sup>18</sup>

The Meitei have structures and patterns that fix a particular social norm, everyday experiences, beliefs and attitude shared among the people. These features constitute the culture and tradition that is protected and preserved by the public. The relationship of Meitei with the old traditional belief becomes the basis of culture. It is the foundation for the social structure and shapes the behavior of the individual towards the religion. The organized structure such as belief, and social norms control each behavior of the individual.

The Meitei before the advent of Vaishnavism had its traditional belief. The traditional view connects with the creation myth stories. The creation myth stories

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<sup>17</sup> K.B. Singh, "Social Stratification and Mobility in Manipur", in S.M. Dubey (ed.), North-East India: A Sociological Study. 1978, p.62

<sup>18</sup> Bernado Bernadi (ed.), 1977. *The Concept and Dynamics of Culture*. p.10-11

became the source that systematize the social relations and signify the old religion. The stories are the expression of cultural ideals that is passed down over time and gives a form according to social rules and cultural concepts. Culture serves as a means to construct reality through various symbols and meanings that conveys certain messages about the essence of the humankind. However, can this understanding of culture and religion explain the complex and influential arrival of Vaisnavism during the time of King Garibniwaz?

Now, the focus is on the change of religion in various aspects of social influence and maintenance of the old traditional belief among the people. For the purpose of our study, we will use the term 'religion' to bring out the essence of knowledge among the Meitei.

In a broader sense, religion is shared by all the group of people because they have a standard system that they make use in their daily life and shares the common belief. Geertz idea of religion "as a cultural system" indicates a group of symbols that holds meaning and helps us in constructing the reality.<sup>19</sup> It explains that religion consists of symbols that have a meaning and transmits individual messages about the real meaning of life. The importance of these religious symbols establishes a code of moral and ethical value towards the existing religion.

Defining religious belief includes supernatural beings toward which group of people direct sacred attitudes. Also, it attaches religious significance with particular objects and places for example symbol of a priest or a dwelling place of a deity.<sup>20</sup> The symbolic elements are "tangible formulations of ideas, concept from experience fixed in perceptible forms, concrete embodiments of ideas, attitudes, judgements, longings or belief"<sup>21</sup>. They in turn become the objects of worship with a sense of deep ethical and moral significance.

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<sup>19</sup> Greetz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Culture: Selected Essays*. P. 89

<sup>20</sup> Richard, M. Dorson (ed.).1972. *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*. p.218

<sup>21</sup> Greetz, Clifford. (1973). Op.cit. p.91

The people set up their belief from the old traditional religion. Despite the influence of Vaisnavism, the people exhibit a sense of association to their old religious belief. With this, we will displace the traditional notion of knowledge with a broader one and shall simultaneously focus on the narratives and social history. As well as to the history of cultural and political contact between Sanamahism and Vaisnavism. Sanamahism relates to the attitudes towards Sanamahi belief in Meitei society during various periods of Meitei history and after the coming of Vaisnavism. It will also focus on the semiotic means by which these particular attitudes towards Sanamahi belief indicate as necessary for the Meitei people. Thus, the study is connected with the history of Meitei culture and the worship of Gods and Goddess as sacred which belong to the sphere of religion.

Therefore for a better understanding of Sanamahism, we need a deeper knowledge of the Meitei faith. For this matter, we need to know the Meitei within linear historical perspective without which it will be difficult to render justice to the discussion of Sanamahism. For one reason among others, Sanamahism bases its origin in the distant past of the Meitei.

## **SANAMAHISM**

The Meitei belief in Sanamahi is a living and historical religion of the Meitei people. T.C Hodson mentions that the folk and other primitive elements as well as ancestor worship describes Sanamahi.<sup>22</sup> The belief has its traditional religious faith known as Sanamahism. The traditional religious belief is closely related with Lainingthou Sanamahi in every respect and as a religious practice the Meitei worship him as the most revered one among others like Pakhangba and many other deities i.e. known as *Umanglais*.

Such statement supports the view that the people constituting the Sanamahi belief takes it as a traditional belief with respect and sacred feeling towards the deities giving its significance as ancestral deities. Reena Laishram writes, “the ancient religion

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<sup>22</sup> T.C.Hodson. (1908).*op.cit*.p.98

of Meitei is the cult of ancestor worship from which the whole religious system and the entire Meitei philosophy of life and the society is founded.”<sup>23</sup> In the words of N. Vijaya Laxmi Brara, “the Meitei psyche perceives history by going back to the very origin of the Meitei being and considers their god as supreme ancestors”<sup>24</sup>. Thus, the Meitei belief reflects religious dogma that relates to the origin of Meitei being.

The meaning of Sanamahi religion implies the cult of Sanamahi, the creator and protector of Meitei being, the immortal trinity God which is in extensive use in ancient literature known as Puya. It is a religion that foregrounds its belief in a Supreme Being *Taibang Panba Mapu* having various manifestations along with *Sanamahi* and *Pakhangba*. The Sanamahi religion comprises of many god and goddess. It incorporates features such as the worship of ancestors known under *Apokpa Lai (clan Deiteis)*, *Lamlai (lam-land, lai-god)*, *Yumlai (yum-house, lai-god)*, *Ningthou Lai (Ningthou-King, Lai-God)* and *Umanglai (Umang-forest, lai-god)*. It is related with a distinct cosmology and festivals such as Lai-haraoba and worship of individual house deities and clan deities.

According to M. Kirti, Sanamahism is a “religion of antiquity” as it is related with the history of the origin of Meitei people.<sup>25</sup> With the study of folklore and religious text various other scholars point it out as creator and tutelary deities, controlling deity of progeny and continuance of lineage. There is reference to the worship of *Sanamahi* and other deities by the Meitei. The *Cheitharol Kumbaba* writes about the beginning of Manipur from 33 A.D. and Nongda Lairen Pakhangba is the first ruler. During his period till King Kangba, the worship of *Sanamahi* perished (we will discuss in the historical development). In fact the religious system revolves around Sanamahi. He is the most important Lai venerated in every Meitei household.

Another important aspect of the religion is that it has its own myths and legends, gods and goddesses, priest and priestess (*maiba* and *maibi*), rituals and sacred places of worship. The myths and legends of this religion is preserved as manuscripts and

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<sup>23</sup> Laishram, Reena. (2009). Op.cit. p.66

<sup>24</sup> Brara, N. Vijayalakshmi. (1998). Op.cit

<sup>25</sup> Sanatomba, Sapamcha, ed.2012. *The Sanamahism: History of Sanamahi Religion and its Philosophy*.

narrated in ritual text. The manuscript provides a religious significance for the people of Manipur believing in Sanamahi and other deities. Similarly, the ritual text that is produced on oral form is narrated by the priest and priestess during the *Lai-haraoba* performance and it mirrors the entire culture of Meitei. The ritualistic text reveals the beliefs and superstitions, and perhaps also the charm and happiness of the Meitei.<sup>26</sup>

## **SANAMAHISM AND ITS HISTORICAL ACCOUNT**

The religion in its various stages has certain features which are as follows:

### **1. *Beginning of Sanamahi Religion***

The *Puya* reveals the emergence of Sanamahi belief from the time of Nongda-Lairen Pakhangba, the first ruler of Manipur during 33 A.D. After him till the time of Maharaj Budha Chandra there were 78 kings who have ruled Manipur. King *Kangba* is the first king of the *Hayi Chak*<sup>27</sup>. He is mentioned as the first king to introduce the worship of Sanamahi as a religion. In *Ningthou Kangbarol*<sup>28</sup> Puya mentions about the King making an idol of *Lainingthou Sanamahi* and worshipping it for the betterment of the society. *Gangumei Kamei* in his book *History of Manipur* mentions that the people worships *Lainingthou Sanamahi* because they believed that in worshipping him one will get the true value of life (p.15).

There are stories of *Lainingthou Sanamahi* bestowing his blessings to people who have truly worshipped him. One of the stories is about *King Khagemba* who worshipped *Lainingthou Sanamahi* and was eager to see his face as during that period, there was no image of Sanamahi. After some time *Lainingthou Sanamahi* is born as a son to *Khagemba*. One day the baby was missing and after searching for him *Thoinu Ahoibi* and *Leisangthem Khoma*<sup>29</sup> came to *Khagemba* and told him that his son is born to him as *Lainingthou Sanamahi*. At first *Khagemba* did not believe to the words of both

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<sup>26</sup> Arambam, Paratt. Saroj and Paratt John. 1997. *The Pleasing Of the Gods: Meitei Lai-Haraoba*. p.17

<sup>27</sup> Chak= Human ages of the Meitei Tradition, the *Leithak Leikharol* Puya mentions about the four *Chaks*. They are: *Hayi, Haya, Langba and Konna Chak*.

<sup>28</sup> Luwang, Nongthonbam Angou, trans. *Ningthou Kangbarol*. Imphal, 1976.p. 4

<sup>29</sup> Thoinu Ahoibi and Leisangthem Khoma are Maibi of that Time period.

*Amaibis* and he told the two to let him see the face of *Lainingthou Sanamahi*. Thus, the face of *Lainingthou Sanamahi* is seen through a glass and *King Khagemba* felt blessed. By seeing the face he started making an idol of *Sanamahi* out of 'saiom amundo'<sup>30</sup>. The idol is worshipped at *Wangoi* since the time of *King Khagemba*.<sup>31</sup>

## ***2. Coming of Vaisnavism and its Influence in the Cultural Life***

From *King Khagemba* onwards the idol worship of *Lainingthou Sanamahi* began which in the course of time became the State deity starting from the reign of *King Paikhomba (1666-1697A.D)* to *King Charoirongba (1697-1709 A.D)*. This shows that before the coming of Vaisnavism in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the *Sanamahi* as a religion was followed and worshipped from the beginning of Manipur till 1700.<sup>32</sup>

Vaisnavism in Manipur came during the period of *King Garibniwaz (1709-1748)*. During his reign the *Sanamahi* religion started declining as he made efforts to spread the Hindu religion. In 1717 *Santidas Gosai*, a Hindu priest came to the Manipur of traditional belief and started to spread Hindu religion by instigating *King Gribniwaz* to do away with the old belief. Under his influence of spreading the Hindu religion, *King Garibniwaz* order to destroy the *Umanglais* of the Meitei people.<sup>33</sup> T. C Hudson mention that people of Meitei who follow *Sanamahi* religion were force to convert themselves in Hindu religion and those who did not do so were given severe punishment.<sup>34</sup>

The *Sanamahi* religion was at the stake of losing its identity during his reign. Scholars have mentioned about the burning of Puya. It not only changed the religion but also the Meitei script into the Bengali script. *King Garibniwaz* under the instigation of *Santidas Gosai* destroyed the image of *Lainingthou Sanamahi* made by *King Khagemba*.<sup>35</sup> And after destroying the image, his queen and son became seriously ill.

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<sup>30</sup> Saiom Amundo= probably a copper metal

<sup>31</sup> Sanatomba, Sapamcha, ed. *Sanamahi Religion*. 2007 p.7

<sup>32</sup> Arambam, Paratt. Saroj and Paratt John. Op/cit. p. 64-109

<sup>33</sup> Achouba, Pandit. Trans. Moirangthem Chandra Singh. 1978 p. 42-67

<sup>34</sup> T.C. Hodson, *The Meithei*. London: 1908 p.95

<sup>35</sup> Sanatomba, Sapamcha, ed. (2007). Op.cit.p.7



When everyone fail to diagnose the cause of illness, *Moirang Maichou Lalhaba*<sup>36</sup> came to the King and told him that the illness was due to his destruction of the image of *Lainingthou Sanamahi* and asked him to reinstall the image. Obeying the advice of *Maichou*, King *Garibniwaz* reinstalled the image of both *Sanamahi* and *Ima-Leimaren Sidabi*. A temple was erected for the two deities and the image was worshipped again. This particular act of the King reveals that although the people were forcibly converted into Hindu, the old religious belief did not totally vanish. The effort of the King and *Shantidas Gosai* to destroy the old religious faith of Meitei was accomplished but the traditional belief of *Sanamahi* and other deities still continued. So, the King after acknowledging the supreme power of the traditional faith accepted *Lainingthou Sanamahi* as distinct and important deity. Therefore, the old religious faith was accepted though the Hindu forms were enforced outwardly. Thus there was a religious accommodation and compromise rather than the total annihilation of the old traditional Meitei belief.

With the passage of time successive kings carried out activities to sustain the old religious faith. The Royal Chronicle mentions about various activities of different Kings such as King Chandrakirti who went to Leishangkhang to worship *Lainingthou Sanamahi* and enjoyed the recitation of *Sanamahi Laihui*.<sup>37</sup>

The coming of Hindu religion resulted in construction of the *Shri Shri Govindajee* temple in 1780 by King *Bhagyachandra*. King *Bhagyachandra* is also popularly known for introducing the dance form *Ras lila* and dance drama *Ram lila*.<sup>38</sup> The *Ras lila* and the *Ram lila* are still performed today in the temple. People live in a 'mix culture' or in other words an amalgam of both Hindu and *Sanamahi*. Although the Meitei have faced a great change in the religion they still belief in *Sanamahi* religion and other God and Goddesses. The religious festival of *Lai-haraoba* and the keeping of *Sanamahi* in every household thus signify the existence as well as persistence of the belief in the heart of Meitei. The Meitei never lost their belief and their significance had increased more and more in the daily life.

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<sup>36</sup> Maichou: Meitei mythological legends who are the priest scholars. They were seven.

<sup>37</sup> Paratt. *The Religion of Manipur. Op.cit.* P.114

<sup>38</sup> Sanatomba. *Sanamahi Religion. op.cit.* p.21

The initiation of *Vaishnavism* by the Meitei has changed every aspects of life. It is interesting to note how far *Vaisnavism* has influenced the daily life of the Meitei. The people started worshiping *Krishna* and *Radha*, *Rama and Sita*, *Hanuman* and other Hindu Gods. Prior to the advent of *Vaishnavism*, the Meitei according to their customs buried the dead body. However, cremation became the norm after the consolidation *Vaishnavism*. The Meitei Hindus painted sect mark at their forehead. It consisted of two perpendicular lines drawn on the forehead. The devotees recited the holy names of 'Rama' or 'Hare Rama' as initiating mantra. *Sanamahi Laikan* records the introduction of 'Gotra' to the seven clans of Meitei. They are given as *Shandilya Gotra for Ningthouja Clan*, *Koushik Gotra for Angom Clan*, *Kashyap Gotra for Luwang clan* and so forth. Hindu festivals which were becoming prevalent were given Meitei names e.g. *Yaoshang* for *Holi* and *Kang Chingba* for *Rath Yatra*.

### **3. *Sanamahism Revivalism after 1930***

The period beginning from the reign of *King Garibniwaj* during 1700 till 1930 marks a significant change in the religion and cultural life of the people with the convergence of Meitei people to Hindu. From 1930 onwards *Naoriya Phullo*, a revivalist of old religion from *Cachar* (a district in Assam) started the revivalism of *Sanamahi* religion. He founded *Apokpa Marup*<sup>39</sup> consisting of 8 members. He wrote books on different subjects in relation to rites and rituals, origin, custom and culture of Meitei. The formation of *Sanamahi* temple board and the reinstallation of the idol of *Sanamahi* during the Chief Ministership of Late *Yangmaso Shaiza* anticipated the revivalism of the old religious belief. The idol of *Sanamahi* is still present at 1<sup>st</sup> M.R ground, Imphal. Festivals of *Sanamahi* religion is becoming more popular and is being observed by an increasing number of people. With the establishment of many religious organizations inclined to *Sanamahism* several interpretations of ceremonies, functions and prayers have come up.

## **PUYA AND THE SCRIPT**

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<sup>39</sup> *Apokpa Marup*: The name of an Organization for the *Sanamahi* revivalism

The Meitei speaks *Meiteilon* which is a Tibeto Burmese language. The language has its own script known as *Meitei Mayek*. The Meitei has been preserving their culture and traditions through writings of manuscripts known as *Puya* (literature of the Academics). It is written in old archaic Meitei script having its own philosophy of origin from the human body parts and is reflected in the old literary book known as *Wakok Lol Hilel Thilel Amailon Pukok Puya*. The archaic Meitei script occupies a significant place in the activities of the old literati before the influence of Bengali script. The *Puya* mentions about the origin of 18 alphabets from the body parts and the other remaining 9 are derived from them. The origin of the script has its own religious philosophy referring to body parts. The use of the script was interrupted during the coming of Vaishnavism and replaced by the Bengali script. The original use of the Meitei script was rejected and Bengali script was used instead in writing the Meitei literature. This indicates the Meitei syncretic acceptance of the two religions.

Having its own literature, the history of Meitei literature with its own scripts marks a milestone on its path of progress of civilisation and culture. The *Cheitharol Kumbaba* mentions about the written literature in Meitei script during the period of King Khagemba.<sup>40</sup> Manuscripts found written in the old alphabet covers different subjects such as traditional faith, mythologies, rituals, administrative codes, chronicles, description of nature and other imaginative work. It is found written on indigenous paper known as *tengna* or *agarbak* (the bark of agar tree) with a carefully prepared black ink. They were used to be collected by the *Amaiba Loisang* (an institute of scholars in royal palace) and also by the individual custody of pundits. From the number of copies of each individual's work by a writer, it was further copied out and circulated among a selected society of scholars. So, many copies of the manuscripts generally believed to have been destroyed in the historical bonfire known as *Lairik Mei Thaba* prepared by King Garibniwaz in the 18<sup>th</sup> century at the instance of his percept

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<sup>40</sup> Paratt, Saroj Nalini, trans., 2005, p. 5

Shanti Das Goswami are still found intact. However, interruption or omission of words and passages cannot be said to be entirely free from the transcribed text.<sup>41</sup>

The pre-Hindu literature of Meitei is upto 17<sup>th</sup> century that may be said to form its early period. All the works were carried out in an institution of writers and scholars so the songs and hymns composed or written down are anonymous and bore no date of inditing.<sup>42</sup> The ritual songs, hymns and religious work in Meitei are not really on the lips of every man and woman. They are actually sacred songs or tales which are meant for particular ceremony, rites and festive occasions. The Meitei worship of clan or local deities and Umanglais as their sanctuaries are carried out by Amaiba and Amaibi. They communicate with divine beings and perform the ritual and religious ceremonies. The hymns and songs are associated with worshipping them and indeed the sustained practice of faith produces a number of religious works. During the period of *King Khagemba*, the concept of Supreme God credited for creating the earth and the living beings was ushered in. And the divine deities play important roles in the religious life of the Meitei. Among such works we will be discussing some religious work such as *Leithak Leikharol*, *Pudin*, and *Sanamahi Laikan* which is believed to have been written during the period of King Khagemba. It is written in such a way that it is incoherent and padded with extraneous songs and anecdotes. It is the core of the Meitei faith.

On the one hand the oral narratives present a ritual text and have been observed as a means of building up a religious and social possession. These religious events are a significant form of existing religious practice in the Meitei cultural world. The study is mainly with the written text and its role in providing a religious action. It also provides the source of all the structure and content of the event. It will also focus on the variety of social and cultural practices and ritual that contribute towards the validation and empowerment of discourse relating to Sanamahi.

The concept of the past of the society and of the underlying essence of the universe is one of the basic forms of human knowledge. This particular human

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<sup>41</sup> Singh, Ningthoujam Khelchandra. 2004. *Ariba Manipuri Sahitya Gi Itihas ( The Early History of Manipuri Literature)* p.27

<sup>42</sup> Singh, Ch. Manihar. 2003. *A History Of Manipuri Literature.* p.12

knowledge in case of Meitei is preserved as oral narratives in the form of hymns and songs and later it is preserved in written forms. The explanation of mythical knowledge codified in both written and verbal form is evident for interpreting it as a mythical or historical event. The mythical history of Meitei shows the history of deities as ancestors.

The written and oral forms of narratives include the structure of text as well as the expression, gesture and acting of the narratives. Moreover, the people and the environment of the process play an important role. In the written form, the creativity and the open ended nature of the story give way to the variety of readers' interpretations.

The myth narrative provides a key to validate the belief, ritual and conduct perform by the folklore. Similarly, among the Meitei, myth narration and chronicles relates the history of the origin from the divine deities. Sanamahism is related to the distant past of the Meitei history. The tales have been written down in the distant past of the Meitei History. The writers are the literati of that particular period of time. However, they are anonymous. There is no addition in the tale except the occurrence of modification and alterations in the act of telling and writing. As for the Meitei it has its own way of reading Sanamahism in different aspect under the context of religion.

Myth in this context can be seen as a form of narrative in which the Supreme and mythical beings have their origins and meanings around the world. Each and every society has a reason to explain their origin and similarly the Meitei explains this particular theory of origin through written or verbal forms. These stories are about creation of human explaining the metaphysical knowledge system and phenomena in the world. The mythical stories are symbolic forms that connect the past and present. It reveals an imaginative and a symbolic way of fundamental truth about human life. They serve as a means to impose moral and ethical value through divine sanction. It is indeed a story describing the contact between the man and the spiritual beings. It gives a symbolism and focus on some particular spiritual truth about the society and its connection with human life.

It exists in every culture and can be seen as the cultural creation of an embryonic society, as a collective, social form of culture.<sup>43</sup> It is considered as truthful accounts of what happened in the past. They are accepted on belief and it shows the early sign of religion, followed by religions as organized bodies of thought and with institutional structures.<sup>44</sup> The Meitei creation myth chiefly consists of origins and creation. It expresses unspeakable ideas and messages.

## **SANAMAHI AND NARRATIVE**

Narratives in society like Meitei, a society of rich traditional belief have myth of creation stories term as *Leisemlon* (literary translation is “language of creation”). The narratives of creation is both in written as well as in oral form. The written text is known as sacred text presenting a symbolic element in signifying the cultural belief and value of the Gods and Goddesses. Whereas the oral text presents a kind of ritualistic text and usually it is performed by both male and female priest during Lai-haraoba. The sacred text of Meitei creation stories provides a discourse that presents a kind of variation and interpretation. The sacred text and the religious festivals can be studied as a text as it connects a link between semiotics and study of Meitei literature, history and culture. In studying both written and the oral as a text we can trace the integral meaning and function of the text in the society. The meaning and message of the text will presents a view of the Meitei culture.

Every society comes up with a story to explain their origin and belief by means of narratives in the form of verbal or written. Narratives explain the stories about god and supernatural beings and become an important part of culture. They are not only stories of imagination but they represent a culture which can be seen as a “web of significance” and by analysing it, we can present a kind of interpretation in search of its meaning.<sup>45</sup> Thus, stories about creation plays an important role as they represent the cultural system of the people, its value and norms, social organisation of the people (who believe in the stories), its customs and objects, its institutions and histories.

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<sup>43</sup> Bagshaw, Hilary B.P. 2013. *Religion in the thought of Mikhail Bakhtin: Reason and Faith*.P.43

<sup>44</sup> Ibid p.65

<sup>45</sup> Greetz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Culture: Selected Essay*.p.5

With the combination of myths and historical events the religion still exists through religious practices and rituals. The religion is rooted with “myths and legends and it specify the supernatural entities believed to exist, describe the origin of things, explains the nature of reality and asserts the proper organization of values.”<sup>46</sup> The Meitei refer the religion for defining their modes of existence. Both the written and ritual account gives the idea of ethical, moral value and permissible sanction towards these accounts.

The creation myths of the Meitei give an account of their origin and the origin of their belief in the Supernatural Beings. It signifies the early Meitei society and religion whose base lays on the ancestor worship, the central of Meitei religion and rites upon which the society is founded. The traditional rites and rituals are connected with the story of creation signifying the origin of mankind, nature and belief.

Among the Meitei, the story of origin is told within a strict ritual setting. Within this myth telling context rituals such as Lai-Haraoba, Cheiraoba, Apokpa Khoiramba are cultural modes of symbolic expressions that form levels of the origin of realities. There are ritual process encoded in the story and are identified and interpreted with respect to the environment.

Now, question arises of how can we interpret this particular belief? How did the tradition originate? Is it related with ancient and if so, how the traditional belief of the gods and goddesses exist besides the influence of Vaisnavism? These question demands answers which we will first start by looking into the narratives of Sanamahi belief.

Narrative as Roland Barthes defines is the first prodigious variety of genres themselves distributed among substances as though any material were fit to receive man’s stories.<sup>47</sup> It is found in every society under different forms such as myths, legends, fables, history, epic, painting and cinema. From the above narratives, myths are

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<sup>46</sup> Richard, M. Dorson (ed.). 1972. *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*. p.220

<sup>47</sup> Barthes, Roland. 1977. *The Structural Analysis of Narratives*. p.79

the founding narratives of a culture. They are the key to human understanding of activities ranging from psychoanalysis to sports events such as wrestling.<sup>48</sup>

The society represents and relates themselves to the outside world and to each other through various system of signification. A narrative of a society is a collection of smaller signifying unit. These units in concord derive its meaning with respect to their adaptability in the society. However, it is known that the rules of natural language control the signification of a narrative expression but in effect the narrative expression function as an independent system at the significatory level. The basic units of narrative expression can be of diverse systems of language. The language of narrative does not confine itself to a particular medium of expression. These expressions are embodied and communicated through the structures of relationship in the society. The communication system has language of different forms like gestures, physical objects, space and time which are employed to construct or re-construct the structures. Thus, it is the form of language which represents the composite ideas that exist in communication.

Likewise, narrative of Meitei society has nothing to tell on its own. It is invariably enfolded in a social sphere and derives its signification only when it is placed in its context. The signification and generation of meaning is practiced within the culture. And without knowing the socio-cultural-political context of the narrative one could not reach its significatory power.

Myth comes under the genre of narratives. It explains the beginning of cultures identity and significance. It is believed to be true by the members of the society holding the cultural identity of a community, its values and ideas. Every culture observes such narrative and show attributes to them with symbolic truth. At the obvious level, the story shapes the particular cultural understandings, environment and social condition. At a deeper level, they trace the various discourses that shape and condition the community at their existential plane.

The narrative is retold orally from generation to generation or is preserved in sacred collection or scriptures, often believed to have originated from a deity. They are

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<sup>48</sup> Danesi, Marcel. 2004. *Messages, Signs and Meanings: A basic Text Book in Semiotics*. 3rd Edition.p.141



found in both oral and written forms. The method of delivery and emphasis of each is different. The oral form of the narration performs the role of religion and ritualistic text which is laden with meaning. It includes gestures and memory to describe and sustain the ideas. And in written form, the concrete nature of words provides the necessary pause to reflect and recognize the thought process. The words are subjected to a variety of combinations to formulate the object of discourse from a vast universe of signification. The creation myth story considered for our study is transliterated from Meitei script to Bengali script.

The transliteration of the text does not modify the mythical value of the myth. In Roland Barthes words, mythical value of the myth is preserved even though worst translation. Even though one might have the lack of knowledge of the language and the culture of the people but a myth is still felt as a myth by any reader anywhere in the world. Its substance lies in its style which it tells.<sup>49</sup>

The nature of myths reveals the high significatory power that marks the culture of its people. The narratives give symbolic power and significance of live and in movement through space and time; the characters are specified as divine deities. Moreover, the sacred narrative of a culture is taken to be true of a culture because they are embedded in its psyche and its physical narratives. About the sacred narrative in Mircea Eliade puts it, myths explains the irreducibly religious and irreducibly mythic ways that human being symbolically express their experience of the sacred through the creation of narratives.<sup>50</sup> The traditional ancient culture can be seen through his idea that myths are structurally related revealing the reason of its existence as sacred realities and establishes a world and its human and they provide believers with exemplary supernatural or sacred models for all truthful and meaningful existence.<sup>51</sup>

The Myths of Meitei like any other tales travelled through time and space gradually developing into highly crystallized ideas. The narratives of myth are in fact

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<sup>49</sup> A.Segal, Robert. 1996. "The Structural Study Of Myth." *Structuralism in Myth: Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Dumézil, and Propp* (1996). p.430

<sup>50</sup> Eliade, Mircea. 2014.*Myth, Religion and History*. Ed. Nicolae Babutus.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid

the very condensed forms of abstractions. The presence of supernatural beings in the story is “static” adding to the timeless quality of the tale. The characters are static and lie attached to the culture as their ideological references become ancient. They are activated through their juxtaposition and relations with new resemblance of significance, thus churning out a multiplicity of meanings.

The quality of myth is transparent as Barthes puts it in such a way that, the narrative of myth as cultural expression stands as ‘natural’. It is taken as a factual system.<sup>52</sup> This quality of being natural points to the complex relationship of significance giving rise to ambiguous nature. The ambiguity is due to the nature of construction. Thus, myth is to be taken in a semiological view and if one takes it in the view of ideology it will make the same fallacy of the ideological system that tries to dominate and direct meaning.

In terms of Psychoanalysis, dream is understood as an individual myth and myths is a social dream, an idea ushered in by the findings of Freud and Jung. The focus of our understanding is on myth as social dream but we cannot study them without being aware that each individual dream contributes to the construction of the social myth. Carl Jung sees myth as dream of a group accompanying symptomatic archetypes urges within the depths of the human psyche.<sup>53</sup> Freud’s contribution to mythography suggests the layers of meaning by which humankind is immersed in reality that relates to a kind of interpretation of dreams and myths. Myth according to him is likely an unclear remnant of the desire-fantasies of whole nation that is the age long dream of young humanity. Consequently, we can think of myth as cultural dreams.<sup>54</sup>

Structuralist approach of Saussure to narratology is not in the analysis of any particular narrative. But, it was a general science of narrative. Like language, narratives are all pervasive and structuralism extended the linguistics concept of ‘sign’ and ‘system’ to analyze various level of text. For the structuralist, the main concern is how the text transmits meanings and structuralist narratologist look into the multivalent

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<sup>52</sup> Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers. P.130

<sup>53</sup> Sugg, Richard P., ed. 1992. *Jungian Literary Criticism*. p.135

<sup>54</sup> William, G. Doty. 2000. *Mythography: The Study of Myth and Ritual*. p. 164-165

meaning that can be read into any narrative text. Thus, the form of text envisaged meaning as the product of the rules and conventions of different signifying system.

The oral narrative form of Meitei gives a ritualistic text that does not have the idea of author. But the written text presents an ultimate source of reference that is capable of providing all possible interpretation of the world. The considered reality of world can only be accessible through what is frozen into the text, which is inevitably interpreted and when distorted through the prism of writing as it has arisen based on the foundation of a sacred text.<sup>55</sup> The reader of both the text provides a story of desire that arouse and make use of desire as dynamics of signification.

In the Meitei, the oral text is more prevalent as it depicts the creation myth in every traditional ritual. The ritualistic text is produced by the collective psyche of the community to evoke their ancestors. The rules of narrative discourse here are conditioned and controlled by the rarefaction of the speaking subject. The ritualistic narrative discourse such as gesture, behaviors and the whole set of signs of religious and even political discourse is inseparable from its ritualistic framework.

Meitei society maintains its religious tradition by the technique of its own discipline and diffused power. The pattern is that it is maintained at individual and settlement level with the head of the family, head of Sagei (Sagei Piba) and a ritual Shaman (Maiba and Maibi). They decide the movements, functions of their everyday life except for religious ones that is decided by the Shaman. The ancestral worship of the Meitei by an individual or by the Maiba or Maibi designs the entire life pattern.

The method of analysis of the narrative takes a close reading of the structure that defines the discourse. The text is understood to have knowledge in its own perspective. The analysis of the Sanamahism from cultural knowledge point of view will enter to depth of insight by addressing the human discourse through the dialectics of a cultural system.

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<sup>55</sup> David, Abraham. 1997, *The Spell of Sensous: Perception and Language in More than Human World*. p.186-187

Religion and culture in the context of Meitei undergoes a phase of transformation but it still persists as the early Meitei religion. Sanamahism plays an important role for it is the 'text' of eternity and knowledge. It also provides the best elements of culture at the same time. It is a historical and religious truth that nobody can deplete and therefore it is passing down from one generation to another through rituals and religious festivals.

### *Sanamahism and Cultural Significance*

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The principle function of a society or culture is to signify, to produce or to be the occasion for the production of meaning.<sup>56</sup> The social and cultural phenomena are objects and events with meaning and hence signs. In studying myth, we can find the human signifying practices in specific cultures and tries to explain the meaning making process as social practice. Understanding the signification of a given system is integral in understanding the sign system. The sign systems are components of a network of relations where the meaning of individual signs has to be found in co-relation to other sign in the structure. The significance of any entity cannot be perceived until and unless it is integrated into the structure of which it forms a part. Therefore, studying the structure of any element in any given situation is determined by its relationship to all others elements involved in that situation.<sup>57</sup>

The structure of a society has its own processes of producing messages and meanings as the proper stand point from which the analysis of making up a system can be studied. Meaning resides in other system of meaning, they are inter-related, in cultural behavior and other codes that leads to the understanding of social structure and its processes. Every culture has its own sets or form of communication that is to be understood in terms of a common set of fundamental rules or principles.

Sanamahism is a system of signification that is a shared system preserving certain ideas about what is sacred. It contains norms and roles associated with sacred and Supernatural beings, together with regular patterns of behavior that reappear in space and time. This patterns when place in a context a conceptual system is developed by the relationship between the behavior and the environment. Every society acquires a

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<sup>56</sup> STOREY, John. 1993, *An Introductory Guide to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*. p. 2

<sup>57</sup> Hawkes, Terence.1997. *Structuralism and Semiotics*. p. 17.

particular way of understanding the behavior in terms of more encompassing system. These understanding represent the entire cultural system that is acquired through their participation in the culture or through the experience or knowledge that have become wired to the human nervous system.<sup>58</sup>

The cultural knowledge of Meitei is based on understanding its movement in time and space. The tradition and observances of festivals marks its history. The people participate in the construction of faith along with the cyclical movements through rituals and other religious activities. The concept of religion in space and time is evolved. It occupies a certain place in the life of the people. Such concept is the idea of sacred place in every house of Meitei. The significance of sacred in such a concept makes to understand the vigorous relation among the mythical story and the people. Consequently, the myth and mythical consciousness were the precursor of religion, followed by religions as organized bodies of thought and institutional structures.<sup>59</sup> To view Sanamahism without the tale will not give the holistic and relative view of culture and tradition.

It is clear that Sanamahism lead to the explanation of various religious phenomena including the belief system and the system of classification distributed among the people. Out of it a conceptual discourse of the Meitei arises that is based on understanding their spiritual and devotional aspect in its religious sphere. The festivals and celebrations mark its history of religion. Man participates in the religious rituals and preserves the ancient culture with importance. The festivals are moments of special significance to the society. It shows the relationship of the Lais (gods) with the nature and the society. The important concept is Lai-Haraoba which is seen as an interaction of the world of Lais (gods) with the human world and to embrace both within the wholeness of sacramental universe.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Chafe, Wallace. 1994. *Discourse, Consciousness and Time: The Flow and Displacement of Conscious Experience in Speaking and Writing*. p.10

<sup>59</sup> Bagshaw, Hilary B.P. 2013. *Religion in the thought of Mikhail Bakhtin: Reason and Faith*. England: In *New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology, and Biblical Studies*. p.65.

<sup>60</sup> Arambam, Paratt. Saroj and Paratt John. 1997. *The Pleasing Of the Gods: Meitei Lai-Haraoba*. p.17

We can say that, cultural and social concepts are shared by members of the society. It is similar with a speech community where they develop a system of shared cultural knowledge and are organized systematically in a series of conceptual relations known as cultural models. These cultural models are employed to interpret embodied experience and it determines the meaning of an experience within the community.<sup>61</sup> The meaning of the experience becomes the basis from which the society sets its codes and it directs to the dynamism of culture. The code becomes relevant through the belief system- the rituals and the cosmology fortify the meaning. The relationship of social life with the environment is drawn out of an ethical system that is in congruence with the belief system as well as with the pragmatic idea of securing his individual and social survival. A self-sufficient order is evident from an overlapping of the belief system, the ethical system and the pragmatics of the society.

Now, we can attempt to understand Sanamahism and its cultural significance through a study of their belief system and social structure. The rituals explain the existence of deities and their influence in the society. The nature of the myth itself supports the functional role of mystifying the conceptual.

## **MEITEI BELIEF SYSTEM**

The Meitei belief in Sanamahi and other traditional God and Goddess are connected with the society expression of preserving them as ancestral deity. The Meitei consider Sanamahi as the power that control the life and nature of every human being. The social anthropologists Sir James Frazer view religion as different from both magic and science as it is about expiation of powers superior to man that is believed to control the nature and life of human.<sup>62</sup> Between man and supernatural being there are two elements that defines religion i.e. belief and behavior. They can be seen as belief in the Supernatural beings and the power which is higher of all man.

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<sup>61</sup> Mischer, James J. 2013. *Metaphor Across Time and Conceptual Space: the Interplay of Embodiment and Conceptual Space*. Vol. 3.p.8

<sup>62</sup> Bohannan, Paul. 1963. *Social Anthropology*.p.318

The traditional setting of the society plays a vital role in the signification of Sanamahism. Here, the cultural and traditional belief among the people's various experiences becomes the directing force of signification. We have the narrative text and the culture as the necessary components of significations. The sign of the text and the indication of faith in the tale in the process of narration are inherent to signification. Also, the response of the society or the people in terms of rituals and traditional faith go together in a constant act of contact with the narrative in the process of signification of the creation story.

The creation myth serves an important place in the society as it produces 'meaning' and 'messages' shared by the whole society giving a sense of importance. Meaning is produced through various forms of behavior such as ritual, religious festivals. Myths relate man with the supernatural beings through rituals. The Meitei Creation myth explores the customs, rites, institutions and beliefs and explains the socio-cultural situations and natural phenomena.

For the people following the traditional belief there is a High God who is the creator and protector. He is regarded as the source of origin of Meitei being, a generous figure who endures nature and all its inhabitants. He manifests himself through a kind of spirit dwelling in every house of Meitei society. The worship of Sanamahi and other gods are not only worshipped as High God but they are worshipped as the ancestors. Thus, the worship of ancestral traces the objects and elements of creation and retaining the cosmos in the religious practices and belief.

The belief in Sanamahi permeates into the life of Meitei society through customs and religious practices. It shows the significance of the creation myth as part of the culture and religion. Although, the coming of Vaishnavism in Manipur have made a huge impact on the Sanamahi belief but still Sanamahi is worshipped at every household placing at the sacred place. However, the concept of accepting Sanamahi as the household deity and other God and Goddess is explained but it is necessary to understand the entire process of belief in the physical world. The belief needs some explanation so that the accepting of Sanamahi and Leimaren Sidabi along with other



God Pakhangba is held alive. The stories are interlinked to one another not letting to separate from each other. It provides as explanation about the ‘present’, which is the result of creation that made the entire society to set up its codes.

Similar to other myths of creation, the Meitei creation story show a divine theory of creation of the sky, earth and the man. It supports the very idea that supernatural being created the earth covering a whole universe of God and human. In the story there exists nothing before the creation except *Taibang Panba Mapu*. The story says that how things and creatures, including the gods, perished, and how ultimate lord created the world anew with the commencement of new cycles of another *Chak* age.<sup>63</sup> The condition in the starting of the story indicate that *Taibang Panba Mapu* producing an invocative sound ‘Hung’ created a halo which is the seed of the universe. He bought *Atiya, Atingkok and Amamba*. He entrusted *Atinkok* to start the creation and further the creation is carried out by *Asiba*. The place where Meitei being exists is created by High God. They belief *Asiba (Sanamahi)* is the creator and has a connection to *Leimaren Sidabi* regarded as Mother Earth. In every house, *Ima-leimaren Sidabi* is venerated with *Sanamahi* and in every traditional ritual an invocation is made for the protection of the family, state and the earth. This particular believe shows the attitude of respect and responsibility towards the ancestors and brings forward its dialectics a moral and ethical system that defines the boundaries of the culture.

The story provides construction of a religious space by all the deities, though each deity has their own ability and power in the creation process. Every man in the society takes the responsibility of maintaining this relation by forming certain spaces and by giving proper maintenance in the form of rituals and religious festivals. Through, rituals and festivals the people consigns an identity to the deities.

I will focus on various cultural paradigms that shape the religion. The religion itself can be said to be concerned with the expressions of ideals and moral value of the Meitei, which safeguards them by bestowing them with divine sanction. The Meitei acknowledge the supernatural beings as their ancestors whom they claim to be

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<sup>63</sup> Laishram, Reena. (2009). *Op.cit.*P.69

originated. The conceptual schema depicts the cultural production of belief especially toward ancestor deities. The schemas articulate about initiating the process of construction of a belief in the name of Sanamahism and bring out the quality that can be transformed into a significant culture. Possessing of this quality attributes high status to the complete dogma. The religious dogma is spread around the entire family and the society. I will use the religious dogma as a tool to explain the structure of Sanamahism. Now, we will look into different cultural significance that falls into the paradigm of creation myth. They interpret the cultural construction of the deities by bringing out the socially accepted religious belief. The deities are accepted as if supernatural elements are innate to it. Religious rites play an important role in creating the relationship between the divine deities and the human. The *Maiba* and *Maibi* play a vital role in the religious space of festivals and rituals, especially during Lai-Haraoba Festival.

### ***The Concept of Mother Earth in Ima Leimaren Sidabi***

*Ima Leimaren Sidabi* is the household deity placed near *Sanamahi* in every Meitei House. Every Meitei society considers *Ima-Leimaren Sidabi* as the Mother earth and occupies a place in the sacred place of every household with *Lainingthou Sanamahi*. According to *Ningthourol Seireng*, during the time of creation *Sanamahi* was given the status of Supreme Being to rule every house and be the king of *Taibang Panba* (Living Being). *Atingkok Sidaba* declared ‘You are into me and I am into you’ and be the ruler. With *Asiba*, *Ima Leimaren Sidabi* who is the mother is declared to live with *Asiba* as ‘*Tengban- Mamma*’ of every household. Thus, in Meitei Society *Ima Leimaren Sidabi* signifies the mother earth known as ‘*Malem Ima*’ guiding and blessing every human being.

The Meitei household keeps a vessel made of mud known as ‘*Isaiphu*’ filled with water symbolizing *Ima Leimaren Sidabi*. The vessel is covered with a clean cloth or a banana leaf and neck of the vessel is tied with a string of leaves taken from banana leaf or is tied with ‘*Paya*’ (bamboo string). On the occasion of Cheiraoba, the female head of the family fills the vessel with water. *Ima Leimaren Sidabi* is

worshipped every day with *Lainingthou Sanamahi* and regarded as the mother of all human being.

A story is associated with *Leimaren Sidabi* placing her with *Sanamahi* in every household. It has been mentioned that *Ima-Leimaren Sidabi* has three sons i.e. *Atiya*, *Asiba* and *Konjil tingthokpa*. But there is another myth that indicates *Ima- Leimaren Sidabi* as the wife of *Sanamahi*.<sup>64</sup> The story is:

*The Supreme Father asked his sons Atiya, Sanamahi and Pakhangba to circumambulate the universe seven times and whoever completes the task first will be crowned as the king. Sanamahi and Atiya set forth to take round the universe seven times but Pakhangba who is young and weak could not move forward and took the advice from his mother and he took the round of his father's throne seven times. From this, he was named Pakhangba (Pa-father and khangba-Knowing) as the Supreme Father Atingkok was pleased with his act. After returning, Sanamahi and Atiya found Pakhangba sitting on the throne and learned that Pakhangba took the throne by merely going round his father's throne. Sanamahi became furious and declared that whoever has helped Pakhangba in acquiring the throne will be punished by him. If it is a man then he will kill him and if he is a woman he would marry her. In seeing the furious Sanamahi, Atingkok Sidaba came out and told him that he will rule in every household and the king of human and Ima-Leimaren Sidabi will be with him. As Sanamahi has made a promise, he marries his own mother Leimaren under such condition. Thus, until today in many religious occasions Sanamahi is worshipped along with Leimaren Sidabi and is venerated along with Sanamahi in every household of Meitei Society.*

### ***Sanamahi as the Creator and Protector of Mankind***

*Sanamahi* is the most important and widely worshipped deity in the Meitei Pantheon. He is the household deity and is valued by the entire community. In the creation myth, *Sanamahi as Asiba* created the earth along with all the animate and inanimate objects.

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<sup>64</sup> Saroj Nalini Paratt. Op.cit.p. 26

As taking advice from his father, *Atingkok Sidaba*, he created human being and became the ruler of mankind as a deity in Meitei Pantheon. Thus, *Sanamahi* is the creator of the world and mankind.

The Meitei society reserves a place in the south-west corner of the house for Sanamahi. This specific corner in Meitei house is known as '*Sanamahi Kachin*' and is the sacred dwelling for the deity. Sanamahi is symbolically represented by a ball-melted coin called (*senmit*) is placed on a shelf called '*lubak*' which is made of bamboo. Along with Sanamahi an '*Esaiphu*' is placed symbolizing the mother earth Ima Leimaren Sidabi and is represented with an earthen pot which is filled with water. The *Sanamahi Kachin* is made sanctified by *Maiba* (male priest) before keeping the sacred object.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, in today's society not every household has the '*senmit*' or '*lubak*' or the *Esaiphu* of Ima-Leimaren Sidabi but the south west corner of the house is kept signifying the presence of Laininthou Sanamahi and Leimaren Sidabi.

The significance of Sanamahi in Meitei society can be traced from the concept of belief that he guards and watch over the whole house and mankind from any evil forces. So, he is believed to reside at the gate of the house, the back and front of the courtyard, the place where '*Phunga- Lairu*' is kept and in the northern verandah of the house.<sup>66</sup> Sanamahi is known by different names under different occasions. The "*Sanamahi Mingkhei*" presents 168 names of Sanamahi and again in "*Laininthou Sanamahi Mingkheiron*" there are 217 names of Sanamahi. He is called '*Ongthi*' when the earth as filled with water and he is brought to create the earth.<sup>67</sup> When he comes out from Atiya Sidaba, he is known as '*Soraren Mahi Sana*'. While he scatters his body and creates different things, he is called '*Ung Set*'. Sanamahi is known by different names such as *Asiba*, *Ongthi*, *Ungset*, *Taobiroinai*, *Ung kal*, *Leilanglel Leitakpa*, *Ngaltumleng*, *Sanahing Wansoapung*, *Apanba*, *Sana Mahirel* and *Sanamahi*.

Although with different names, Sanamahi is worshipped and items are offered in specific days which are auspicious for the rituals. The worship of Sanamahi is carried

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<sup>65</sup>Saroj Nalini Paratt. *Op.cit.* P.76

<sup>66</sup> Laishram, Rena.(2009) *op.cit.* P.97

<sup>67</sup> Kangjiya. 1994. *Sanamahi Mingkhei Chammaga Humphunipan.*p.18-36

out every day both in the morning and evening and is obligatory during the New Year festival of Manipur known as Cheiraoba. Other offering is also made during the birth or death of a family member, sickness or misfortune in the family.

The *Leithak Leikharol* and other Puya of creation myth recognized Sanamahi as the creator of the world and mankind. This deity holds a strong position in the Meitei Pantheon and is connected with different Gods such as the guardian deities. The *Sanamahi* worshipped is the pre-Hindu Meitei religion which came to be known as ‘*Sanamahism*’.<sup>68</sup> It is significant that the main reason for regarding *Sanamahi* as the important deity is that he is the creator and protector of the Meitei household. He is the Supreme deity who takes care for the well-being of the family. Thus, he is accepted by the entire community and gives the status as a divine deity. The Royal Chronicle *Cheitharol Kumbaba* supports the fact that the worship of *Sanamahi* is being followed and is perhaps the most important deity repeatedly mention in the Chronicle.

### ***Pakhangba as the Ancestral Deity***

Pakhangba appears as a significant God in the Meitei Pantheon during the Konna Chak i.e. the last of the four human ages.<sup>69</sup> The stories mentioned above clears that Pakhangba is the title given by His Father Atingkok and it literally means ‘knowing the father’.

There is an important concept of Meitei about Pakhangba. The creation myth implies that Pakhangba was assigned to rule the kingdom, he is regarded as the important figure of Meitei Kingship. He is identified as the human image of divinity formed for the purpose of creating and ruling the social world. The Royal Chronicle of Manipur, “*Cheitharol Kumbaba*” states that his personality is both celestial and human. He is describes as ‘god during day and king during night’. He is symbolically represented in the form of a snake biting its own tail. Vijayalakshmi Bara writes about the symbol that it presents the balance of creation and destruction. It is believed that Pakhangba sits in the middle of four directional deities who are symbolically

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<sup>68</sup> Laishram, Rena. (2009).*op.cit.* p.102

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*

represented in the structure of coiled snake where the tail is inside the mouth. It is known as '*Paphal*'. The symbolism of four directional gods and the character of *Pakhangba* with relation to the origin myth connect to the structure of Manipur State and forms the foundation of the specified norms for the whole society.<sup>70</sup> He is regarded as the ancestral deities and worshipped in relation to Sanamahi.

According to the story from above *Pakhangba* is assigned to be the king. In *Cheitharol Kumbaba* (The Royal Chronicle), *Pakhangba* is recorded as the first king of Manipur who have reigned for 120 year and married to *Poireiton*'s<sup>71</sup> sister '*Laisana*'. *Pakhangba* is also regarded as the creator of '*Ningthouja Clan*'. *Saroj Nalini Paratt* states the *Pakhangba* is the 'snake god' and *N. Vijayalakshmi Brara* has pointed out that the symbol of *Pakhangba* gives a 'monistic concept' of the universe, with the head of the tail biting its own tail.<sup>72</sup>

There is also another concept of relating *Pakhangba* to the seven colors of the seven clans. The seven clans have specific colors signifying the clans. 1) Yellow symbolize *Ningthouja or Mangnag* 2) black symbolize *Khuman* 3) white- bluish symbolize *Luwang* 4) white symbolize *Agom* 5) violet symbolize *Kha-nganba* 6) brown symbolize *Moirang* 7) green symbolize *Chenglei*.<sup>73</sup> The different colors assigned to these clans have their symbolic meaning. For example: black color for *Khuman* signifies stubborn and aggressive. Yellow color of *Ningthouja* signifies gentle and generous soul. The colors and meaning assigned with relation to *Pakhangba* gives the idea of social and ritual relation associated with different clans.<sup>74</sup> The concept of *Pakhangba* is related with the representation of the ideal values and beliefs of the society. The worship of *Pakhangba* is incorporated into the rituals and belief and regarded as the '*Piba*' or head of the six clans in the Meitei society.

This very idea of '*Piba*' (head of the *Sagei*) is still followed in Meitei Society where the head of the '*Sagei*' is called '*Piba*'. During the festival of '*Lai-haraoba*', the

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<sup>70</sup>N. Vijayalakshmi Brara. (1998). Op.cit.p.59-61

<sup>71</sup> *Poireiton*: as mentioned in *Poireiton Khunthok* brought fire in Manipur.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid* p.64

<sup>73</sup> N. Vijayalakshmi Brara. 1998. *Op.cit.P. 68*

<sup>74</sup> *ibid*

*Sagei* head plays an important role in performing several rites. The worship of seven *salais* is performed in different place in different days. They have strict prescribed forms of worship for their ancestors. The worshipped of the ancestor includes the worship of other deities such as forest deities, *Sagei Apokpa*, Lainingthou Sanamahi and *Pakhangba*. The worship to the ancestral deities' signifies that they are part of the respective Salai and through their blessings one can achieve prosperity.<sup>75</sup>The ancestral worship in Meitei society is called as 'Sagei Apokpa Khoirumba'<sup>76</sup>. Apokpa is the name of the ancestral deities and are worshipped according to the prescribed norms.

## **THE MEITEI PANTHEON**

In the Meitei Pantheon, Taibang Panba Mapu along with Sanamahi and Pakhangba occupies the supreme position. Other deities such as Sagei Apokpa, Ima-Leimaren Sidabi, Panthoibi, Emoinu are female ancestor. Altogether they form a religion signifying the ancestors. In fact, the entire traditional ancestor worship is the root upon which the society is founded. The deities play an important role in the day to day life of the people and hence become powerful deities, sometimes fear occurs if one does not follow the correct norms during rituals. There is a story<sup>77</sup> that reflects such fear to occur.

The story goes:

*Atingkok Sidaba declared Sanamahi to be the King of every household and should stay at south west-corner of every house. At the beginning of every year<sup>78</sup> the family should clean the place and offer him 108 seasonal vegetables. And whoever eats the seasonal vegetable without offering him the family will face death. So, till today at the beginning of every year the south west corner is clean and offering is made before him.*

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid p.86

<sup>76</sup> Sagei Apokpa Khoirumba= Sagei- CLAN, Apokpa- God of the Clan, Khoirumba- Pray

<sup>77</sup> The story is narrated by Pena Guru Kh. Mangi to me on an informal conversation on 3<sup>rd</sup> March, 2015.

<sup>78</sup> Meitei New Year falls during April every year.

During rituals the female priest and male priest performs a strict rule and norm to appease them. The strict rule and regulation are mainly followed during Lai-haraoba festival.

The Supernatural beings in Meitei characterized as ancestor Lai are designated as 'Umanglais'<sup>79</sup>. The Umang Lais are large in number and it is originally nine in number. Reena Laishram writes, the nine Umanglais are the nine divine youth who assisted Asiba in leveling the earth in making the earth habitable. The Puya *Lai-Khunta Lon* and *Nunglon Puya* mention about the directional Gods and their characters. They are characterized as Umang Lai and that they should be worship with annual offerings. However, the number of Umanglai is mentioned as nine in original and is described as the manifestations of Taibang Panba Mapu who is the Ultimate father.

Broadly, among the various numbers of Umanglais it can be divided into three groups. Saroj Nalini Paratt have classified Umanglais into four groups: they are

- 1) Ancestor deities such as Pakhangba, Nongpok Ningthou and Poireiton
- 2) Lais associated with particular Salai
- 3) Domestic deities which are termed as 'Yumjao lai'
- 4) Tutelary deities that is the directional gods.

The deities are term under the word 'lai' and the Meitei belief to have one hundred and eight god in addition to the main deities. Vijayalakshmi Brara classified the Lai into three groups:

- 1) The Lai guarding the four direction such as Wangbrel, Koubru, Nongpok Ningthou, Thangjing and Marjing
- 2) The household deities such as Sanamahi, Phunga lairu, Ima-leimaren Sidabi
- 3) The Sagei lai which are ancestral deities.

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<sup>79</sup> Umang lai literary means umang - grooves and lai - god



From the above we can observe that all the 'lai' fits in to the religious sphere of Sanamahi belief. Through the combination of these deities the society sets up its idea of belief and observes them with reverence and providing a space for sacred worship.

## **RITUALS AND FESTIVALS**

In every religious ritual, the Meitei's remember or worship their God as the Supreme Being from whom they proclaim their source of origin.<sup>80</sup> Every man has the notion that the Supernatural Being has power to control nature and life of every human being. Man in turn exercises this concept of Supernatural being and came to have belief about the power and evolved special modes of behavior called rituals.<sup>81</sup> With the mythical belief in Supernatural Being and the association of rituals creates the religious organization of the people.<sup>82</sup> The customs and rituals associated with Sanamahism in-co-operates a huge amount of knowledge about the creation of universe, human beings and the life and death of human being. It is the source of worship of nature like fire, water and ancestor worship.

The cultural identity, values and ideas of the society is kept alive by the rituals and beliefs. Since the concept can be gauged only through manifest material culture, much emphasis is laid on ritually expressing it. Some socially sanctioned methods of expressing the belief are:

### ***Cheiraoba (New Year Festival)***

It is the New Year festival of Meitei society that takes place during the first day of the month of March (Sajibu). Cheiraoba means '*Chei-stick and laoba-shout*'. Saroj Nalini Paratt has pointed out that Cheiraoba in earlier times; the heads of the four *Panas* wore the different colour of their *Panas* and ride on horseback carrying a bell attached to the top of the sticks. During the time of King Kyamba a man was chosen to be the head of the four *Panas* and became to be known as Cheithaba. Cheithaba is the man chosen by

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<sup>80</sup> Brara, N. Vijayalakshmi. (1998). Op.cit. P 47

<sup>81</sup> Madan, D.N. Majumdar and T.N. 1986.*An Introductio to Social Anthropology*. p.158

<sup>82</sup> ibid

the king to hold the responsibility for any misfortune or evil befalling the state in that year.

The Cheithaba has to be a Meitei and no Brahmin. Every year a Cheithaba is selected and the Cheithaba of the previous year gives his duty to the Cheithaba of the year by bowing in front of the king saying:

*Lainingthou (lai-god, ningthou-king), the coming year is my friend's year. Let the king and the queen live long, let it be more prosperous than the past year in the production of rice, fish and other foods, and salt and let it be richer in everything.*<sup>83</sup>

The new Cheithaba then kneels down before the King and takes oath:

*Lainingthou, from today onwards I bear my head all your sins, disease, and misfortunes, shame, mischief, all that is aimed in the battle against you, all that threatens you, and that is bad and harmful and hurtful for you and your kingdom.*<sup>84</sup>

Selecting the Cheithaba in earlier times symbolizes that any disaster in the society whether nature or man-made is made responsible of the Cheithaba. Currently, due to the end of the rule of king this practice of choosing a Cheithaba came to an end but the Cheiraoba celebration is still preserved. Celebrating Cheiraoba involves cleaning the house, utensils, the kitchens and the sacred place where Lainingthou Sanamahi and Ima Leimaren Sidabi are kept. Such kind of activity brings out the complete overhauling of the house, symbolizes the taking over of a new Cheithaba over the old one'.

On this very occasion Sanamahi and Ima Leimaren Sidabi are worshiped. The sacred place of both the Lais is cleaned and seasonal fruits and vegetables with uncooked rice as offered known as 'Athenpot Katpa'. The vegetables and the rice are cooked and three portions of the cooked rice and cooked vegetables are placed at the compound of each house. The offering of cooked rice and vegetables are said to be for the Cheithaba of previous year and for the coming year. The ritual is still carried out by

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<sup>83</sup> Brara, N. Vijayalakshmi. (1998).op.cit.p. 180

<sup>84</sup> Ibid p.180 (original: T. C. Hodson, The Meiteis p.105-106)

every Meitei Society signifying the faith and belief that a person will absorbed all the misfortune of the family and the state.<sup>85</sup>

The festival of Cheiraoba is concluded with a family feast and the rituals performed in this particular festival shows that they are basically carried out for the protection of the household and the community from evil spirits. The performance of such rituals shows the main features of Cheiraoba. This shows the period of changeover from the previous year to the coming year. The woman of every household collects vegetables and offer to the Sharoi-Ngaroi (evil spirits) them at the junction of the three roads. The offering made to Sharoi-Ngaroi symbolizes that on this particular day evil spirits are most active and eager to take hold of any individual in the household, if the house is not cleaned properly and not offered proper food. The eldest woman of the household offers the cooked food at the four corners of the house so that no evil spirits could harm the members of the house. Thus, the rituals carried out in Cheiraoba signify that the Supreme Being are not only auspicious but also protects from any evil spirits i.e. they are protective and valuable.

### ***Sanamahi Chenghongba***

It is a ritual for the people who belief that Sanamahi is the creator of human beings and in worshipping him with truth would give happiness and prosperity to the society and to the family. The ritual is organized during the month of *Inga* in Meitei calendar, which falls sometime during May. Worshipping Sanamahi for the well-being of the society is carried out by Maiba (male priest), Maichou, Pandit, Pena Khongba and Maibi (female priest). The Maiba and Maibi will sing Sanamahi Ahonglon. The Maibi will organize the offerings brought by the people in-front of Lainingthou Sanamahi. After, the offering is done Maibi will perform a ritual known as ‘Khayom Lakpa’ consisting of two earthen pot which contains one basket cup of rice, two duck egg, a piece of gold and silver and a leave known as Langthrei Maton ( it is a leave used in many rituals). The process of Khayom Lakpa is carried out by a song by the Maibi. The whole ritual is

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid 181

carried out with songs and rituals to please Lainingthou Sanamahi and protect the whole society.

### ***Shingshatpa and Ushil***

The program me so-called *Shingshatpa* and *Ushil* is held in the evening in a family. The number of members of a family is replaced by ngamu (mudfish) and this program me is held on the first Saturday of *Lamta* (February-March). People worship and pray to God *Lainingthou Sanamahi* by offering mudfish with green leafy vegetable, fruits and flowers during this *Shingshatpa* programme. The mudfish are let free in the water since they are the substitution for the human beings. This programme *Shingshatpa* is mainly performed at the *Heibok Ching* by the priest (physician) in the evening of the first Saturday of *Lamta*.

### ***Saroi Ngaroi Khangba***

The *Saroi Khangba* is performed on the first Saturday of the month “*Lamta*” (February-March). It is performed in the border of an area according to the size of the colony big or small by the elderly females of the locality (Saroi-the evil spirits, Khangba-propitiation). This is the rite of propitiation and appeasement of the *Sarois*, the evil spirits. From each home edible item such as rice, vegetables, sweets and others are collected and offered. The elderly females assemble in a house before going for Saroi Khangba. They worship the Lainingthou Sanamahi and Ima Leimarel Shidabi residing in the home of which they assembled with the materials and pray “not to face or come across the bad evil spirits on the road”. After the end of Saroi khangba they don’t go to their homes. Again they return to that house they assembled before and worship Lainingthou Sanamahi and Ima Leimarel Shidabi reciting by the words that they have returned without any obstacles and that they keep away all the diseases, sickness, bad evil spirits, rubbish, and *laithung- tinthung* (a kind of disease given to someone by God for doing sins). They further worship to give the grace to perform the awe of *Saroi Khangba* in the next first Saturday of *Lamta* and so to give the wealth and prosperity to the locality.

## *Ancestor worship*

Meitei society maintains the religious tradition by the technique of its own discipline and diffused power. The pattern is that it is maintained at individual and settlement level with the head-of family, head of *Sagei (Sagei Piba)* and Shaman (*Maiba and Maibi*). They decide the movements, functions of their everyday life except for religious ones that is decided by the Shaman. The ancestral worship of the Meitei designs the entire life pattern.

The worship of ancestor is basically a family matter. But it also includes the worship of the community's goods. The family is a comparatively late institution in the history of society, and therefore, it is probable that the family imitated the community's rituals than the other way round.<sup>86</sup> Among the Meitei, the deities worshipped in the house and at the community are all ancestral deity. The only difference between them is the performance of ritual i.e private and public. At the private level, the worship can be performed only by the family members and at the public level clans or sub clans for whom the ancestor ritual is initiated.

The Meiteis evoke their ancestors for almost every event that take place in their everyday lives. Worshipping of ancestors with appropriate rituals is term '*Apokpa Khoirumba*' meaning to bow or to pray in-front of the ancestors. The worshipping of such ancestors is carried out as a private ritual by the Clan members. The descendants of the clan worship them in a fixed time period. They take blessings for prosperity and well being of the whole clan.<sup>87</sup>

There are three types of clan worship:

- 1) *Salai Apokpa Khurumba*<sup>88</sup> for clan progenitors
- 2) *Sagei Apokpa Khurumba*<sup>89</sup> for Sub-clan Progenitors

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<sup>86</sup> Singh, Ningthoujam Khelchandra. *Ariba Manipuri Sahitya Gi Itihas ( The Early History of Manipuri Literature)* 2004. p.131

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. p.40

<sup>88</sup> Salai-Apokpa Khoirumba: worship of the ancestor by each seven Salai

<sup>89</sup> Sagei-Apokpa Khoirumba: it is worship by the seven Salai but when there is a huge number of families for worshipping the Sagei Apokpa is evoked along with Salai-Apokpa

3) *Phunga Apokpa Khurumba*<sup>90</sup> for family progenitors

### ***Lai Haraoba***

The religious belief and ritual practices associated with Lai-haraoba serves an integral part in knowing the ancient belief of the Meitei. Lai Haraoba is regarded as the most important festival in which the deities are worshipped by all the people in the particular place and symbolize the creation process of human in the world. It is the indigenous festival of Manipur that explains the culture of Manipur before the coming of *Vaishnavism*. It mirrors the indigenous belief of the Meiteis. The religious significance of this festival lies in the worship of Lainingthou and lairembi that is the manifestation of male and female supreme deity in the creation myth. It marks the living tradition of Meitei. The word Lai-Haroaba literally means ‘lai-god and haraoba-rejoice that is express with joy’. The Lai-Haraoba is classified into four types: *Kanglei Haraoba*<sup>91</sup>, *Chakpa Haraoba*<sup>92</sup>, *Kakching Haraoba*<sup>93</sup> and *Moirang Haraoba*.<sup>94</sup>

The customs and practices adopted by the society correspond to the individual’s connection with the community. The relation between the individual and the society is important because any practices and customs adopted by the individual directs to the society’s acceptance. In Meitei context, there are rituals and customs associated with Hinduism which are then mixed with the traditional rites. But there are still such practices such as Lai-haraoba that can be regarded as the traditional festival of Meitei in which the whole creation process is depicted with dance forms. Other rituals such as *Epan-thaba* (ceremony after a birth of a child), *Luhongba* (marriage), death rituals have its own Meitei traditional rituals but due to the influence of Hinduism can be seen in such rituals.

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<sup>90</sup> Phunga Apokpa: this particular is a private affair of a family. It occurs inside the house where Phunga (the fire hearth) is kept.

<sup>91</sup> Kanglei-Haraoba: it is patronized by the royal clan and takes the name of Kanglei (the seat of the Ningthouja).

<sup>92</sup> Chakpa-Haraoba: Chakpa have maintained their own traditional culture till now. Their Lai-Haraoba is regarded as one of the oldest form. There are four forms of Chakpa Haraoba= Andro, Leimaram, Phakyeng and Sekmai

<sup>93</sup> Kakching Haraoba: This particular Haraoba is for the Lois of Manipur

<sup>94</sup> Moirang Haraoba: The people of Moirang worship Lord Thangjing (one among the four directional god) for whom the festival came.

The rituals and practices in Meitei Society serve a key in understanding the tradition of Meitei culture or provide a social mooring to the individual. An individual knowledge of the culture and religion is incorporated into the mechanism of two religious practices such as *Vaisnavism* and Lainingthou Sanamahi belief. Though, the rites and rituals derived from Lainingthou Sanamahi gives meaning in building up a social sphere of traditional belief, the Hindu belief in one way diverts the meaning by mixing their very concept of Hindu religion.

The Meitei holds their concept of origin from the divine beings. The concepts are developed as a result of contact with the divine being thus leading to mystify the objects of culture. The Meitei creation or origin myth shows a sense of moral values and directs the relationship of man with the nature around. It is the rituals and rites that embody the ideas and concept of Supreme beings with relation to human being. The socially approved practices such as *Cheiraoba*, *Sanamahi Latpa*, *Ima Leimaren Sidabi Latpa*, *Phunga Lairu-Latpa*, and *Lai-haraoba* promote and preserve the tradition and culture. It thus, symbolises and imposes the concepts that support a distinctive culture.

### *Semiotic Analysis of the Text of Creation Myth*

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In this chapter I shall conduct a semiotic analysis of the written narrative by using the structuralist frame of analysis in order to understand the meaning of ancestor belief and how meaning is created and conveyed in the literary text. Largely drawing from Ferdinand de Saussure's idea of *langue* and *parole*, I shall study the text of creation myth.

Structuralism assumes that all human activity is a form of communication, whether written or oral communication. Communication is affected by the behavior pattern that are themselves culturally grounded. Therefore, communication occurs under the influence of culture<sup>95</sup> and is based on subconscious set of rules and conventions. The creation myth of the Meitei is communicated within the cultural pattern of the Meitei in order to reach out to the people who would understand the communication inside the same culture. They produce multiple texts within a particular culture asserting a culturally significant message to the society.

Randolph Tate argued that Structuralism is based on the assumption that all human activity is the manifestation of underlying systems of abstract rules and conventions which govern the way human beings order their existence into meaningful structures.<sup>96</sup> These structures exist on a subconscious level and structuralists believe them to be mostly universal in nature. Furthermore, Structuralism focuses not what the text means but focuses on how the text generates meanings.

The structuralist views all social and cultural practices, in a range including mythical narrative, literary texts, fashion in cloth pattern, etc. as combination of signs

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<sup>95</sup> W.Randolph Tate. *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach*. London Bible College. Hendrikson Publishing. Peaboy Massachusetts. 1991. P.28

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* p.187



that have a set of significance for the members of the particular culture. Furthermore, they undertake to make explicit the rules and procedures by which the practices have achieved cultural significance. Also, it specifies the significance by referring to an underlying system of the relationships among signifying elements and their rules of combination.<sup>97</sup>

The underlying system is analogous to Saussure's 'Langue' which according to Saussure is the underlying system of convention and relationships. Parole on the other hand, is the individual, meaningful act of speech that is based upon the subconscious system of literary conventions and relationship. If one assumes that all human activities are governed by a basic system of subconscious roles and if all the activities are actually a form of communication one can rightly assume that literature is a form of communication which is then also governed by a set of basic conventions or rules.<sup>98</sup> While analysing a written text one comes across basic underlying convention which are common to all languages and therefore these underlying conventions form the basis of communication especially in narratives. Parole is based on individual speech, and on the underlying enabling system of langue, a narrative text is therefore a specific manifestation based on the enabling system of narrative. This means that only a limited set of conventions of the narrative text transcends cultures, literary traditions, time and space. All narrative traditions share the same basic conventions. It is the explicit task and goal of structuralism to uncover the basic underlying conventions with individual narratives, which produces what is referred to as a meaning-effect upon readers. Since all narratives communicate through a shared system of conventions these basic underlying conventions operate at levels of writing and reading alike. Not only have authors of narrative texts internalized these deep structures, but competent readers have also internalized them. This is the only means possible for understanding a narrative text.<sup>99</sup>

According to Structuralists, a text actually has three meaning effect levels which correlate to types of structures. The first level is the structures of 'enunciation' which

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<sup>97</sup> M.H. Abrahams. (1999). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. p.300

<sup>98</sup> *ibid*

<sup>99</sup> W.Randolph Tate. (1991) *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach op./cit.* p. 188

are determined by features such as authorial intent and audience. Second are structures of culture which consist of the specific codes of a specific people at a specific time. The third level of meaning-effect is determined by the text's deep structures that are universal in all human activity. On the level of any genre of literature like narrative, certain narrative and mythological structures are present. For more conservative structuralists, these three meaning effect levels with their accompanying structures combine to produce a composite meaning effect. Consequently, texts have the potential for a plurality of meaning.<sup>100</sup>

In the case of Meitei the transliteration of the text from Meitei Mayek (Meitei script) to Bengali script gives a dialectics between the original language and the transliterated. The script of the text is not the same as those found in the old manuscripts. The transliteration of the text itself is embedded with interpretations that bears the cultural history of Manipur.

Furthermore, the narrative text is itself a sign and we can assume to have both denotative and connotative meanings. At the denotation level, primary signification or reference takes place and in the connotation level it gives the secondary or associated significance and feelings which it commonly suggests or implies.<sup>101</sup> In the *Leithak Leikharol* Puya we can find both connotation and denotation level of meaning produced by the author. The denotation level helps us to find the manifestation of authorial intention and on the connotation level we can trace the cultural meaning or the signifying signs. For example: in the creation myth story we find the author expressing the word '*Lelphu*' (top of the head) as a place where Taibang Panba Mapu (Supreme God) resides and therefore on the subconscious level it is express as '*sacred*'. Here, '*Lelphu*' is the denotation and at the connotation level it is regarded as a '*sacred*' place because it is culturally codified that Taibang Panba Mapu resides on the '*Lelphu*'.

Every text is created within some context.<sup>102</sup> Since almost all the puya have no authorship<sup>103</sup>, interpretation of the text is possible only when the text is analyzed

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<sup>100</sup> W.Randolph Tate. (1991)*Bliblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach. Op./cit. p. 189*

<sup>101</sup> M.H. Abrahams.(1999). *A Glossary of Literary Terms. Op.cit. p. 47*

<sup>102</sup> W.Randolph Tate.(1991). *Op./cit. p.25*

according to the historical and cultural context. The written narrative text expresses itself as comprising of sign systems. The text provides meaning and principles of interpretation of the Meitei cosmology. An attempt of interpretation of the text will give an overview of the physical and symbolic instances. Signification at the former instance is obvious. The creation myth reflects the Meitei cosmology and the existence belief.

Although, the writer are anonymous they have expressed the conceptual and ideological categories of their time. The conceptual framework is evident in the religious and philosophical expression found in the society. And the ideological category is evident from the history describing certain periods of political, cultural and religious beliefs.<sup>104</sup>

In terms of studying a literary text, we can venture into the production and interpretation through mediation of generic codes as well as through the language itself.<sup>105</sup> Interpretation of the text can be seen as an object of knowledge by looking into how the literary text provides meaning for a reader. With this idea the Meitei literary text of creation myth can be taken as the literature that provides a mode of signification and communication.

The myth in the text of the creation myth is a cultural product in as much as it is the dream of the Meitei culture. Therefore, it is necessary when a myth is analyzed structurally, it is imperative to have intimate knowledge of the myth and the cultural setting. Moreover, the “language of the myth” (the language in which the myth is narrated or written down) is far crucial to analyze. The message in which the myth is coded is hidden, and contains the cultural consciousness, and is communicated through the medium of highly symbolic communication language.

The social message with which the myths are very much concerned gives two important views in Meitei society. It gives one very important aspect of social belief that Meitei being is originated from the ancestors. The mythic message is compulsory

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<sup>103</sup> Puya has no author. Some argue that the floating mass of oral literature began to be codified from about the 15<sup>th</sup> century. While others argue that the ownership of the Meitei literati were given to the community and the Monarch.

<sup>104</sup> W.Randolph Tate. (1991) *Op.cit.p.33*

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, p.34

for it performs the function of supplying some clues of social behavior. It gives a rich repository of cultural norms and social conduct that lie hidden. Exposing these hidden properties of a society that is the discourse the myths presents is an important part of analysis. The coded messages in Meitei creation myth is in many fold. The ideas of Mother Earth, Supreme deities symbolize the nature and proper norms for the culture.

A notable reflection on the Meitei culture is the advent of Vaisnavism. There are various norms and regulations that have been changed in the life of the Meitei people. Even the myths have been interpreted with Hindu Gods. The changing power and concept have affected the whole society. That today the old traditional believe is facing a revivalism.

When an individual seeks to witness the creation one needs to have more knowledge of that culture. An expert knowledge of the environment is in large part a matter of experience. The knowledge seeker is bound to master the organizational principles of the culture and the social inductively, that is by experiencing the different kind of rituals and festivals and inferring the common rules. Appropriate idea of a given culture derives above all from the knowledge of the environment. In case of Meitei, the signification of the creation myth is present in the religious rituals and festival. Thus, in order to know the detailed and the underlying objective of the environment it is necessary to find the relevant relations. The ritual and festival of the Meitei is liable to draw upon any cultural and political references assuming various kind of representation on the part of a knowledge seeker.

Since the Meitei people largely depend on the oral and the performative text rather than the written text. Therefore the knowledge of the Puya is propagated through the rituals and performances associated with the creation myth. The festivals and rituals are repeated every year while its subject and topics of discourse remains the same. It is through the repetitive process that such knowledge is embodied by the society. The iterability of the cultural performance particularly the Lai Haraoba, Saroi Ngaroi Tanba, Sanamahi Chenghongba, Cheiraoba etc. (as described in the previous Chapter) every year is significant in embodying the knowledge, culture, beliefs and traditions of Sanamahism. Within this, the influence of Vaisnavism brings the biggest thought and

emotion of their fear of losing their tradition. Nonetheless, Sanamahism today in their cultural practices have very much incorporated Vaishnavite elements and motifs. In a sense it has indigenized some of the Vaishnavite elements that has been practiced in Manipur. I leave this to the sociological and anthropological studies. Nonetheless I shall make a point that cultural practices is not fixed but changes over time. This is a tension in my study that when the myth and stories are fixed or codified through the writings of puya, one witnesses the changes of cultural practices over times. The fixity of the text like puya and the fluidity of the cultural practices is one of the challenging task that I shall rigorously take up in my further research.

In addition, the Meitei view of human life is one of the important factor in Sanamahism. The Meitei view has two significant implications. 1) it provides the intellectual as well as the emotional ground for faith in the worth and value of the individual. 2) The worshippers of ancestors continued to live the householder's life that sanctifies all labour, duties and action of life and turns it, by leaving it with right attitudes, into service of mankind which is therefore also service of the Lord. The myth functions as a message. The messages conveyed in the myth make us think that however primitive the society is, it is very complex one and it needs a special code to understand them.

Thus, the Sanamahism plays a special role in securing regeneration to provide the path to ongoing life. The rituals and festivals provide happiness for the community, and acts as a means of remembering the ancestors. Man and the supernatural beings are connected through symbolic form which are entrenched in the performativity of the cultural practices.

On the other hand, sociological condition of man became an important aspect. Complex issue of the human conditions, the realities of the human world, like the meaning of life is dealt expressively by human characters. The depths of human emotion are realized through an inter-subjective understanding of their expressed situation.

The written text, in the case of Meitei myth of creation presents a human discourse. The text is not very familiar among the society because of its inaccessibility. The text being anonymously written in the past and due to the influence of Vaisnavism the society only remembers their ancestors through the oral text. Although, the text gives certain messages of the Meitei being, the society only depends on the oral text. The thematic units present in the creation myth in a syntagmatic order can be analysed to bring out the meaning of the text. The meaning of the text can be interpreted by placing it into the cultural context. Now, we can venture into the text through the analysis:

The action of Supernatural being can be seen as a set of signs which when placed in the context gives meaning. The oppositions that we will find in the text are:

- 1) Unity, strength and divided
- 2) Creation and destruction
- 3) Mother and Brothers relation
- 4) Truthfulness and deception
- 5) Failure and Success in creating human beings
- 6) Assisting *Pakhangba* to take the throne by the Mother and *Sanamahi* on his own starting the journey
- 7) Idea of tussle between *Sanamahi* and *Haraba*.

### ***Action 1***

The opening situation of the text presents the status quo, a formation of unity among the Supernatural beings created by *Taibang Panba Mapu*. The first set of action gives the idea that *Taibang Panba Mapu* is the High God who brought forth *Lai* such as *Atingkok*, *Atiya* and *Amamba*. The Meitei belief that all *Lai* are the manifestation of *Taibang Panba Mapu*, he is above all *Lai*. The above mentioned unity can be seen from the creation of *Ima-leimaren Sidabi* as the mother earth embracing all the three sons *Atiya*, *Asiba* and *Konjiltingthokpa*.

The creation myth of Meitei supports the idea of *ex nihilo* as before the creation there was nothing except the High God, *Taibang Panba Mapu*. He consciously thought

of creating the universe with an invocative sound ‘Hung’. The creator owes something to his personality to the ancient role of father god who creates the universe.

This very idea of High God teases the human mind and leads to an inevitable questions about where and how the creator come from and come about in void? And what was there before the creation. These are unanswerable question as the human mind is a product of existence and inevitably fails in its attempt to imagine pre-existence. Here, in the context of Meitei the written text gives an idea that the creation started in the *Konna Chak* that is the last of the human four ages. *Taibang Panba Mapu* after uttering the invocative sound creates a cocoon round shape regarded as the seed of universe. The cocoon became the seed of the universe and breaking the seed into two parts he created *Layingthou* that is the king of all Gods and *Lairembi* that is the queen of all Goddess.

Even among the gods we can find a hierarchy created by *Taibang Panba Mapu*. *Atingkok* become the source of all creation given the term ‘*Sanaching*’ (literal meaning is ‘The Golden Mountain’) and *Amamba* is placed below the *Sanaching*. Above all the two Supernatural beings, *Taibang Panba Mapu* is on the top and he is regarded as *Lord of the Universe*.

In this section, we will find another significant creation of *Ima-Leimaren Sidabi* from the right side of *Taibang Panba Mapu*. In Meitei society, she is venerated as the Mother earth. She is the mother of *Atiya*, *Asiba* and *Konjiltingthokpa*. Among the three of them it is believed that *Konjiltingthokpa* later to be known as *Pakhangba* is born by keeping him two months inside *Atingkok* and ten months in the womb. On the basis of, size and strength, *Atingkok* ask *Atiya* and *Asiba* to create earth. Thus, the earth is created under the guidance of *Atingkok*.

## ***Action 2***

The opening situation portrays the effort that is obliterated by the intense wind of Haraba. By, interrupting the creation of the earth, the Haraba creates an atmosphere of tension among the creators. The reaction is a challenge by the Haraba wind in an effort to destroy the whole creation. The impression as destructive force, their point of unity

among the three brothers is removed. Their attention is now upon to stop the destruction cause by Haraba. His presence foreshadows the trouble in their creation.

The relation of the three brothers is emphasized but there is disparity in their character. This difference compels the brothers from each other. Their individual levels of desire act at cross purposes in the story. Each characteristics and natures reveal their attitude towards their duty of creating the earth. Asiba and Atiya try to create the earth in their best possible way seeking their father's advice. But the brother creates an opposing force in the creation process.

As the destruction has turn beyond control there is no possibility to prohibit the formation. The moment generates a tension of discontent among the brothers. For the creator, the task has to be completed whether it continue to destroy. The underlying tension has to find a way out to overcome the strong wind. The father understands the situation and he created a beauty to distract Haraba. The destroyer is provoked to fall in love with *Nongthangleima*.

The significance from this part of the story is the song *Paosha Esei* which is still significant in Lai-Haraoba festival. The *Paosha Esei* in *Lai-Haroba* is performed during *Laibou Chongba*<sup>106</sup> where the performance of *Maibi* symbolise the act of Panthoibi in the field and Nongpok Ningthou while seeing Panthoibi express his love by singing the song. The song in *Lai-Haroaba* symbolise as the expression of love between the Lai.

It is at this juncture that Asiba created the four directional God and created the seven layers of the earth. The four corners of the earth are guarded and Atiya stands in the middle termed as 'Uyung' (u-tree, yung-stand still). The creation of the earth finally came to an end. And the uneven level of the earth was smoothed by nine *Laibung-ningthou* (gods) and seven *Lainura* (goddesses) to make fit for human habitation.

'Uyung' in Meitei society is term as '*Jatra Paba*' (the name is the result of Vaisnavism influence) and in traditional term it is known as '*Wa Yung*'.

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<sup>106</sup> *Laibou-Chongba*: In Lai-haraoba, the Maibi along with the participants performs a dance symbolizing various activity in creation myth



### *Action 3*

The third unit is important because it is at this juncture that human beings are created and other creatures such as *ngamu* (mudfish), *tekpioklen* (pig), *maku* (owl), *tinthrok* (earthworm) etc. Among these creatures ‘*ngamu*’ is used as a traditional fish in various traditional rituals. *Ngamu* in Meitei traditional ritual is regarded as one of the important fish that is symbolised to carry all the worries and misfortune of the family. On the occasion of *Cheiraoba*, a ritual term as ‘*Usinthaba*’ is performed by the *Maiba* or *Maiba* who takes the *Ngamu* in the water and chants. The ritual signifies that the fish takes away all troubles for the year.

In this particular unit, we will find that *Asiba* took the help of his father in the creation of human. Human is created from the image of *Atingkok* and the four directional gods are called upon to give soul and life. After the creation of human being, *Atingkok* orders them to create tonsils so as to speak and move anywhere and *Ashiba Sidaba* draws a line in the middle of the head with the help of his nail. *Asiba* opens the centre of the crown of the head known as ‘*lemphu*’ of the human being and finally the human being utters a word and started sneezing. All the gods were happy when they saw the human being crying and sneezing. In this way human being was created by *Asiba*. The first son, *Asiba* was named as *Namu Pongsengba* (creator of human) because he created human being for the first time. After creating human being, *Taibang Panba Mapu* gave five principles of life and each of them is believed to be located in a specific part of the body. The names of Gods from whom the five principles are derived are *Pothanglen*, *Koubren Apanba*, *Thangjing*, *Marjing* and *Koubru*.

At the cultural level, the Meitei believe in the existence of five souls along with *Mi* (shadow). The term for the soul is ‘*Thawai*’ where all the *Lai* is believed to exist. The *Puya* express the principle of life such as water, fire, sky and earth. One of the examples that gods reside in human body is the companion of *Loinaba* (guarding spirit of soul). It is when he is outside; the human body develops a sort of abnormal mentality.

The manifestation of all *Lai* inside the body gives the interpretation of mind and helps in co-ordinating the experiences. The birth of a child is regarded as partly human

and partly divine. The divinity is expressed in the form of *Mi Lai* (man god), *Mi Ga Laiga Tinnaba* (meeting of Mi and Lai), *Mi Thawai Leiba* (man who has the soul) etc. creation of man in the image of *Atingkok* thrusting the souls and abode of deities in different parts of the body symbolise the relation of an individual with the *Lai* in Sanamahism. The relation is inseparable in the past, present and future. It develops the idea that *Lai* exists for man and vice versa.

Thus, *Lai* embraces every individual, have lives, moves and beings. The connection of God and mankind is expressed through *Laibao* (oracle) in every *Lai-Haroaba* or *Yumlai* ritual. The relation is expressed in term of protector and the protected.

#### ***Action 4***

This particular activity of circumambulating the universe symbolizes the respect towards the Father *Atingkok*. As opposed to the faithfulness of *Asiba* (Sanamahi), *Konjiltingthokpa* took the throne by deception. He with his mother advice circumambulates the throne of his father seven times. *Konjiltingthokpa* came to be known as *Pakhangba* (Knowing his own father) and became the ruler.

Even between the *Lai*, we can see the Hierarchy between the brothers. *Pakhangba* ascended the throne form his father and in seeing this Sanamahi got furious and turn himself into a tiger ready to kill *Pakhangba*. In seeing this, *Pakhangba* became a cock running around to save his life. The nine *Laibungthous* and the seven *Lai-Nuras* cam down and protected the cock by holding their hands together. They utter a song saying ‘no one could try and eat the cock because it is the food of *Lai*’. This action of *Sanamahi* towards *Pakhangba* might have affected the whole process but the father manages to balance the distribution of responsibility. *Sanamahi* and *Pakhangba* symbolize the King or ruler of Meitei being and the land.

#### ***Action 5***

The fifth unit is important because, it indicates the creation of seven clans. The progenitors of seven clan that make up the entire Meitei People are collectively known

by the name of *Salai Apokpa*. The *Salai Apokpa* is the ancestors who are worshipped by the concerned clans. They are created by *Ashiba*. From among the seven Clan, *Ningthouja* Clan is regarded as the clan of *Pakhangba*. He is known as ‘*Piba*’ of the Ningthouja clan.

## MEITEI COSMOLOGY

### The Lai

The Meitei word for both male and female deity is ‘Lai’ if translated it means the ‘female vagina’ which is to be kept sacred. And mentioned above the Lai are categorized as Umanglai. The Meitei do not have the concept of Idol worship earlier, the lai in every ritual is symbolically represented in earthen pot and by ‘*Langthrei Bud*’.<sup>107</sup> In the Lai-Haraoba ritual the female supreme has a significant place and is symbolise by the *Leimaren Chafu* and the Male counterpart is the idle creator god. The nine *Laibung- Ningthou* and the seven *Lai-Nuras* from the creation myth are symbolically understood as the totality of the universe.

In *Lai-Haroaba* festival all the Lai in the creation process are remembered. The society use honorifics to indicate the lai such as ‘*Chingu*’<sup>108</sup> and ‘*Khoiyum*’<sup>109</sup>.

### *Supreme Deities*

The Supreme deity in Meitei is *Atingkok Sidaba*. He is regarded as the manifestation of *Taibang Panba Mapu*. He is also regarded as *Atiya Sidaba* who is the sky God. In every *Lai-Haraoba* ritual he and his spouse *Leimaren* are believed to trace out the pattern according to the creation of universe. The space for the ritual is regarded as the sacred space for the creation to take place. The space is occupied for *Ima-leimaren Sidabi* who is the mother Earth. She is addressed as ‘*Malem Ima*’. Similarly, in every house the place beside *Sanamahi* on the right side is occupied for *Ima-leimaren Sidabi* symbolically represented in an earthen Pot.

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<sup>107</sup> Langthrei Bud: a traditional leave which is use to symbolise the lai in every ritual

<sup>108</sup> Chingu= omnipresent

<sup>109</sup> Khoiyum= the navel part of the body

## ***The Gods of Directions***

The guardian's gods of the Meitei are collectively term as '*Maigei Ngakpa*'. They are associated with the mountains located in the appropriate directions relative to the central valley of Manipur. In *Lai-Haraoba* ritual the four directional gods along with *Soraren*, and the god underneath are remembered with food offerings. The main task of the four guardian in the creation myth is to keep away the evil spirit. The guardians of the four directions are addressed by the name Koubru (north-west), *Thangjing* (south-west), *Wangbren* (south-east) and *Marjing* (north-east).

## ***Sanamahi and Pakhangba***

In the creation myth, both *Sanamahi* and *Pakhangba* play an important role. *Sanamahi* is most popularly worship in the Meitei Pantheon. As mentioned above, *Sanamahi* is the presiding deity of every household. As *Asiba* is the creator of the sky with all its cosmic and celestial bodies and the earth with all the animate and inanimate objects. As, ordered by his father, *Atingkok* he created mankind. He is taken as the creator and protector of the world and mankind. He is known under two hundred and seventeen names. Example: when he resides in the sky he is known as 'Hum Pit Pit' , when he is the king he is known as '*Sameiran*' and when he came out of the nostril of Atingkok he is known as '*Sora Mahi Sana*'.

The Meitei associates various rites and ritual along with him, they are *Sanathong Latpa* (South-west God). In the story we find the furious nature of Sanamahi and so in rituals offerings are made in strict norms and rules. The Puya *Sakok Lamlen ahanba*, *Sanamahi* is mentioned as the highest position as creator and protector of human being. Another Puya *Sanamahi Laihui* states that a number of important lai such as *Wangbren*, *Thangjing*, *Chingu Loiyarakpa*, *Koubru Asuppa* are subordinated to him in the hierarchy of the Meitei Pantheon. So, pervasive is his influence that the pre-Hindu Meitei religion came to be known under the word Sanamahism. It is significant here that the main reason why Sanamahi is assumed as the protector and guardian of every Meitei house. He is the Lai who looks after the well being of the family, the smallest as well as the most-fundamental of Meitei social organisation. As a result he

cuts across specific clan loyalties and becomes acceptable for the entire community. The royal patronage offer to him is perhaps the consequence of this realization so that from 17<sup>th</sup> century he is consistently projected as the most important deity repeatedly mentioned in the Cheitharol Kumbaba.

### ***Pakhangba***

From the creation myth he is the youngest brother who ascended the throne and became the royal family ancestor of the Meitei. Being patronized by the *Ningthouja*, *Pakhangba* emerged as a significant Lai in the Meitei pantheon. As, the son of Atingkok, he knew the secrets of his father and he became the king nominated by his father. The *Puya Wakoklel Hilel Thilel Amailol Pukok Puya* describes that he provides the link between the divine and the human, as he is both the last of the gods and the first of the mankind.

Similar to *Sanamahi* he is referred to by various other names such as *Lainingthou Apanba*, *Leinung Lonja*, *Ningthem* etc. He is regarded as the ruling deity of the *Ningthouja*. He is symbolically represented in a form of a serpent. The coiled snake is term as ‘Paphal’. This serpent is believed to be hidden in the *Kangla*<sup>110</sup>. Serpent worship is common among the Meitei. The coiled snake in which the head of the serpent is biting the tail symbolise tranquility and continuity of life. It is believed that, those which portray the inter-wined bodies of two serpents symbolise the union of male and female as begetters of offspring. The ancestor serpent-dragon residing below the surface of the earth represents the power of fertility, veneration of which lies at the core of the Meitei religious system.

The serpent is not only the form of *Pakhangba*. He is predicted to have a dual personality in many *Puya*. The *Thiren Layat Puya* reveals that the *Pakhangba* takes the form of a lai on Monday, Tuesday and Friday and on Thursday and Saturday he reveals himself as human being.

The written narrative when place in the human discourse reflects the knowledge of the society which they preserve it as ancestor deities. The written narrative serves as

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<sup>110</sup> Kangla: The place where the King lived. It is known as the centre of the Meitei Land

a kind of communicative tool expressing the then culture of the Meitei with the contemporary one. The narrative text, in the Meitei society replies a framework of signification. With the codes and conventions, the static framework of signification reflects the cultural and social value of the deities. The narrative text aims at bringing out a 'galaxy of signifiers' and encourage the reader to produce his or her own meanings according to multiplicity of codes.<sup>111</sup>

The significance of the narrative text emerges out of its author intention. The text produces a cultural model and maintains the boundaries of the culture. 'Boundaries' because the narrative text is written in a space of specific cultural domain that provides an open idea of the cultural history. It creates the encounter of narrative text and culture of the author and the contemporary society. The contemporary comprises of culture, traditions, society and mode of communication. With this idea, the narrative text can be seen in terms of the contemporary mode of ideas.

The narrative text is examined by the contemporary reader which marks the moment of transferring the social codes and convention present in the framework of the narrative text. The contemporary reader itself discovers the knowledge of author and looks into the interpretation. The text provides the reader with multiple connotations, applicable to different cultural perspective. It makes possible for the creation myth to provide the culture, traditions and communities besides the oral narrative.

From the above analysis we can come into the idea of underlying system of convention. The text provides an underlying meaning of the deities that is connected with a series of relationship and making up a whole unit. The meaning of the deities and their actions carried out in each section provides the idea that each behave as set of significance. The significance provided by the text is collective in nature that is they are found in practicing in the human discourse with bestowing them as divine deities.

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<sup>111</sup> M.H. Abrahams. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 7<sup>th</sup> Edition. *Op./cit.* p.302

Now the main thing is how are we to interpret the meaning generated from the narrative text. Interpretation of the meaning can be done if we look into the cultural setting of the Meitei.

### ***Conclusion***

From the previous chapter, we find that the divine deities present in the creation myth are considered as the ancestor being. They have their specific symbols signifying their presence in the society. They provide a generic code for the society in the Meitei culture from which the people generates meaning. The term Lai gives an underlying meaning of all the deities constituting the whole sphere of religion. There are specific places for the Lai in the Meitei. They are attributed high status to the undivided. The action of the Supernatural deities mirrors the life of the people and their social life. They reflect the modal or typical mental contact of the people in a society.

The action generated in the creation myth express the cultural model that infuses them with their authority and explicitly and insistently portrays social reality as driven by the culture. They specify and co-ordinate the private and collective view of the people. We can posit that it is intricately woven in our lives. They are important both for the social and on the cultural level because human beings understand and describe their world through them and helps them situate themselves as individuals and groups in a given space and time. Therefore, on the signification level, the creation myth story tells how to live and value our own live.

With this, we can say that the narrative reflects the Meitei social community. They signify the social behavior and norms within which the society operates. They represent the Meitei culture and society that is present from the time being. The text generates meaning in support to the existing social order. The meaning is delivered in the name of social order and address to all the people.

The main analysis is the message delivered by the narrative text. The message in the story can be seen as ‘cultural or traditional message’ whose meanings are enclosed through different practices. The message contained in the tale help us to understand the

culture and tradition of the existing Meitei community. It shapes the life, traditional behavior and reinforces system of beliefs.



## *Conclusion*

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This is not a formal conclusion to my dissertation rather a vision of openings that I have visualized during the course of this project. I must admit that research has no conclusion but it opens up manifold to visualize and conceptualize in various strata. The concluding part of this dissertation can only give pointers to how various linguistic analyses can be done with the written text as well as oral and performative texts on or related to creation myth. In this dissertation, with the written text of creation myth I have made an attempt to look into the Sanamahism belief system and its cultural significance. The work is culturally grounded and for a linguistic research the main focus is on the significance and meaning of the deities. Other linguistic analysis such as the construction of the text, syntax, morphology, phonology can be analysed to make the work more complete. This work will be carried out in my future research work on these areas.

Here emphasis is made on looking into Sanamahism as a belief system that has survived through certain stages of commotion in the history. The word Sanamahism does not only include the worship of Sanamahi. It covers entire religion with number of deities connected with Meitei cosmology. The Lai associated with the creation myth are worship as Umang Lai in the form of Lai-Haraoba as mentioned in the second chapter. The traditional belief still exists in space and time and the influence of Vaisnavism have spread in the form of contextualization and appropriation within the culture and peculiar space. In other words, newer forms and modes of interpretation arise according to the experience and cultural settings.

The interpretation of the newer form can be seen in terms of the reactions. The reaction of the newer form can be seen by placing the community at large. To the Meitei the reaction is on the religious level. The Meitei involve themselves in both the religious knowledge of Sanamahism and Vaisnavism. It relates the nature and mode of belief among the people. The change of knowledge is in term of individual and community. As discussed in the introductory chapter, the Meitei have accepted the

forces of changes and new mode of experiences. They indicate the contact of Vaisnavism with the traditional belief, the intended purpose of the King to destroy the traditional belief and the reverence of the traditional God after the Kings have experienced the power of the Supernatural deity.

In these various modes of experience the Meitei went through process of changes. The change that take place as a matter of clash or I shall put it as ‘a matter of motivation’ by the Vaishnavism. This arises certain questions of what happens when Meitei religion faces Hindu religion. Vaisnavism in the first chapter was introduced to the Meitei in 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is a religion that is based on the Hindu culture and tradition. The Vaishnavite follower not only converted the script and religion but also it gave certain knowledge and meaning of the Hindu deities. With this, the Meitei script came to be written as Bengali script and the Hindu rituals and festivals become a part of the Meitei people.

The major change that took place was that of religion. The dispersion of the religion has two connotations. First is the spreading in the form of dominating religion among the people. And secondly, it is the dispersal of the Meitei culture through the dominance. However, the main concern is the clash of Meitei culture with that of Vaisnavism which they encounter. They have experienced both the religion in a certain way that every religious festivals relating to Vaisnavism or traditional culture is celebrated with respect. The Meitei with various forces of change still exist with certain values and aspirations in the community. This happens in different areas-education, religion, polity etc.

The reaction of Meitei to Vaisnavism questions about the identity of Meitei culture in the change of religion. The Meitei goes to the past to determine their identity. The past can be seen through the oral tradition of religion. The oral tradition can be seen as a ‘text’ and explore the significance in the society. Most importantly, the Sanamahism as a belief system help us to explore the traditional practices and its significance in the society. The Meitei traditional practices, norms and manners are all

enshrined in the Sanamahism. So, the Sanamahism as a belief system reacts to the issue of identity.

In the case of Meitei, they describe and understand their world through rituals and festivals and more than that the stories present in the written form help to situate the Meitei as groups having common origin. More significantly, the written text is born out of religious view and focus on the history of our ancestral beings. It signifies the existence of ancestors as Supernatural beings and generates meaning-tells us the root of origin.

Sanamahism basically responds to the past. It is interesting to note the existence of written text of the past of Meitei. Here, the text seems to engage with the historical facts and basically with the cultural knowledge. Knowledge in this context covers a broad sense of the ways of life, attitudes, mode of thinking and understanding. The beliefs and customs also becomes a part of it. But, the knowledge as we know is not still in the case of Meitei religion. With the change of religion, the knowledge of the traditional belief undergoes enormous change. It changes significantly and transforms the knowledge. Here, the religious knowledge got changed and the way of life change. This seems to puzzle the significance of Sanamahism at a level of knowledge.

During the past the Meitei had a common reaction to the Vaisnavism but after the revivalist movement the people have started to focus mainly reviving the old traditional religion through certain ways. It shows the shared experience and ideals of the Meitei people. It tries to denounce the then present religion and try to accept the ancient Meitei religion and make an effort to popularize and develop the Sanamahi religion.

This movement as mentioned in the first chapter establishes many religious organizations disposed to Sanamahism several interpretations of religious ceremonies, functions and prayers have come up. Scholars have focus on the written text by the old literati and transliterate the text in the common script.

As a purpose of this work, the transliterated text is seen as a ‘text’ of Meitei relating to moral, ethics, behavior and norms of existence. The text tells us the nature and action of the Supernatural deity from whom the Meitei being originated. Now, looking into the text it generates certain messages but the main focus being Sanamahi belief I have focus only on the part of how Sanamahi and other deities have created the things around us and human beings.

Interpretation of the narrative text depends to some extent on the meaning of the phrase *Leisemlon* (language of creation). In this sense the creation myth can be understood as an act of creating on the part of the human discourse that means to provide a proper place for the Lai. The creation myth serves as a communicative tool for the people of Meitei. The actions of the Lai in the creation myth portray the creation of various deities that are significant in the society. The presence of the Lai is symbolized in many forms in the society. The implication of these symbols is that the Lai are present in every place, house and in life of the people.

The Lai interpreted in terms of ancestors can be seen as the relationship of human and the supernatural world. The ancestor worship shows the social and religious character of the society. The society structures, the relation with the ancestors through a coded message. The message is transferred to every individual and group of the community. The message behaves as an underlying system of convention for the people. Thus the ancestors worship signifies the origin and organization principles of the society.

The Sanamahism as a believe system have sustain the cult of ancestor worship. This belief system can best be understood as a vast network of member, families living and death that are related by blood lineally and collaterally. The smallest unit of Sanamahism is represented by the southwest corner of every household known as “*Sanamahi Kachin*”. The ancestor worship and *Sanamahi Kachin* are linked by the society’s behavior of accepting it as the place for Sanamahi who is the creator and protector of human being. The ancestor beings both divine and human are designated as Umang Lai.

Every human society does believe in religion in various modes. Religion had its impact on human activities which is permanent, universal and pervasive in the history of mankind. Sanamahism as a religion in Meitei society pervades with endless diversity of religious beliefs and practices. It is a religion with a particular system that contains doctrines such as myths and rituals. I have made an attempt to understand the belief by looking into a particular context-that is held together by the rituals and other festivals. The context in which the ritual is performed attains a symbolic meaning in the mind of every society.

The rituals and festivals present the set of values and norms that are self-evidently real. It can be seen as 'bedrock of a society'. It can be seen as the base structure of human being and constitute a communicative and surrounding world. Thus, rituals have a unique characteristic both as a stage and functions as a medium of transferring message. The message is a common conceptual idea that links the society with the creation myth through the rituals. This kind of rituals is a special communication sequence relating to the human discourse. Thus, it becomes very important to identify the coding of the message conveyed during the rituals and festivals. Similarly, in the written narrative identifying the coded message become important because in order to understand the Meitei society we need special codes to understand the culture and tradition.

The message provides happiness for the community, but at the same time it behaves as a means of attaining regeneration. The mystery of creation is conveyed through the rituals because ritual is the obvious symbol relating to the creation myth. This is recited and celebrated by all the people. Thus, man and Lai are connected. The Meitei society commemorates the creation myth as historic events in the life of the people. These are commemorated and kept alive in memory, as traditions that foster the continuity and uniqueness of the group. The groups and communities express celebrations, congregation, dedication and commemoration. The celebrations are dedication and communication that take place in a larger context, and affirms shared purposes of greater significance in the community like Meitei.

The written narrative provides a composite idea of creation which has been preserved over a long period of time. And on the other hand it is through ritual that the creation myth is interrelated in various traditions through different groups within the Meitei society. This would indicate that both the narratives provide a single meaning to the society. It was also suggested that the creation myth is related to the ancestor worship and it's the ultimate rational thinking that provides a means of addressing the interrelationship between the Lai and the humans.

Interpretation of the Meitei creation myth can be done in two main classes of opinion that can derive the meaning of the myth:

- a) The myth can be taken as the expressive value from which the meaning of the supernatural deities is derived.
- b) The meaning can be traced from the substratum of the narration that is in the subconscious of the myth.

The text carries meanings of various deities associated with the daily life of the Meitei people. It interprets the etymology of Taibang Panba Mapu, Atingkok, Ima Leimaren Sidabi, Sanamahi and Pakhangba. Various other Puya has interpreted the names in various ways such as Taibang Panba Mapu as Lainingthou Asuppa, Atinga Sidaba. In *Leithak Leikharol*, Taibang Panba Mapu is interpreted as the highest of all ancestors and the immortal lord of the universe.

Etymology in the case of Sanamahi and Pakhangba can be taken as a basic concept that goes with the mythical ideas of both the deities. The *Leithak Leikharol* interprets them as brothers with Ima Leimaren Sidabi as their mother. The description of the two brothers goes well with the concept of the scholars defining them as the ruler of every household and the king of Meitei land. Thus, it indicates that the interpretation includes such reality of accepting them as divine deities.

On the Meitei context, the attempt to search for the meaning of myth has been started after since the scholars started to interpret the Puya from the archive sources. By the coming of revivalist movement of Sanamahi, the scholars have contributed to bring

forward the pre-Hindu belief before the coming of Vaisnavism in Manipur. As, for Meitei mythology, *Leithak Leikharol* and other text helps in the interpretation of the meaning associated with the divine beings. The Meitei Pantheon as presented in *Leithak Leikharol* gives a meaning to the present belief but there are certain inconsistencies in the text as the names of the divine youths and the guardian directions are overlapped.

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## *Glossary of Meitei Words and Terms*

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<i>Amaiba Loisang</i>	Department in charge of royal archive
<i>Apokpa</i>	Ancestor, progenitor
<i>Chak</i>	cycle of great tying order; age
<i>Cheithaba</i>	person appointed by the King to bear all calamities of the year; the man after whom the year is named
<i>Chingu</i>	omnipresent
<i>Isaiphu</i>	earthen pot use for symbolizing mother earth
<i>Konyai</i>	gold and silver coins
<i>Lai</i>	god; deity
<i>Laibou-Chongba</i>	a dance sequence symbolizing various activity of the creation myth by the <i>maibi</i> accompanied by penakhongba and community participants in Lai Haraoba festivals
<i>Laibunghou</i>	divine youth
<i>Lai-Haraoba</i>	festival of ‘pleasing god’
<i>Lainura</i>	divine girls
<i>Laining</i>	way of worship
<i>Lainingthou</i>	god king, used for both god and kings
<i>Lairemma</i>	goddess, female Lai
<i>Langthrei</i>	plant used for religious rites, ( <i>eupatorium birminiacium</i> )
<i>Lubak</i>	a bamboo basket
<i>Maiba</i>	male shaman priest

<i>Maibi</i>	female shaman priest
<i>Maigei Ngakpa</i>	Guardian of Direction
<i>Malem</i>	mother, earth
<i>Ngamu</i>	mudfish
<i>Paphal</i>	symbolic diagram; coiling serpent forms representing Pakhangba
<i>Phunga</i>	Hearth
<i>Piba</i>	male head of a sagei or salai (clan)
<i>Puya</i>	a particular kind of old narratives in Manipuri literatures
<i>Sagei</i>	sub-clan, group bearing the family name
<i>Salai</i>	clan
<i>Senmit</i>	act of divination
<i>Sidaba</i>	immortal
<i>Umanglai</i>	literally forest deities, used of ancestral deities in wider context
<i>Yek</i>	name of Salai
<i>Yumlai</i>	household deity

### **1. Beginning of Creation**

Creation of the universe started with the beginning of new Chak i.e. Konna Chak<sup>112</sup>. The creation story begins from the three Gods Taibang Panba Mapu, Atingkok and Amamba who are belief to exist before the creation. Taibang Panba Mapu is the almighty God who decides to create the universe by uttering the invocative sound 'hung' followed by a hymn. Once, the hymn is uttered, there appears a cocoon round shape which is regarded as the seed of the universe. The cocoon now is developed into seven colours known as Chumithang (rainbow). Taibang Panba Mapu breaks the rainbow into two parts from which the right side becomes the Layingthou i.e. the king of all gods and left side is the Lairembi i.e. the queen of all goddess. Atingkok become the source of all creation termed as Sanaching (literary it means The Golden Mountain) and Amamba is placed below the Sanaching.<sup>113</sup> Above all the two Supernatural beings Taibang Panba Mapu is on the top and he is regarded as the Lord of the Universe.

Taibang Panba Mapu brought forth Ima leimaren Sidabi from him as 'mother earth'. Atingkok Sidaba and Ima leimaren Sidabi has three sons Atiya, Asiba and Konjiltingthokpa (according to oral narratives Konjiltingthokpa is born from the womb of Ima-leimaren Sidabi). Atingkok Sidaba asks to start the creation process to Atiya Sidaba and he came to be known as Siba which means 'one is given a duty or a task'. Atiya Sidaba brought forth Asiba from his right nostril and called as Asipa.

## 2) Destruction of Creation

During this whole process of creation, Atiya and Asiba discuss about the creation of the universe. Atiya and Asiba with the advice of Atingkok Sidaba start the creation process. Both Atiya and Asiba bring lais (god) for different purpose. Both of them created the four directional gods to guard the four corners. On the other hand Konjiltingthokpa took the form of 'Haraba' and destroyed the whole process of creation. Atiya Sidaba created 'KOBIL' and sent as a messenger to Atingkok Sidaba to tell about the destruction caused by 'Haraba'. Atingkok Sidaba then asked to utter 'Lairon Mingkhei Laihingnap Nappa' to stop the destruction. Haraba was ready to destroy the creation process again and in seeing this Atingkok Sidaba created 'Nongthang Leima'<sup>114</sup> to distract Haraba from destroying the creation. She distracted Haraba in destroying the creation by her dance and song. While Nongthang Leima was distracting Haraba, Atiya Sidaba and Asiba created the universe. As Haraba and Nongthang Leima were enjoying together by singing a song known as 'Paosa Eshei'. Ashiba invoked four more gods and made them to guard the four directions, they are, Leisatao in the West direction, Nongsatao in the South direction, Leikhomtao in the East direction, and Nongkhomtao in the North direction and created the seven layers of the earth. The four corners of the earth are guarded and Atiya stands in the middle termed as 'uyung' (u-tree, yung-stand still). The creation of the earth finally came to an end. And the uneven level of the earth was smoothed by nine Laibung-ningthou (gods) and seven Lainura (goddesses) to make fit for human habitation.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Nongthangleima: is created by Atingkok From his Navel and brought forth from the left eye.

### 3) Creation of Human

After assigning their respective duties Atingkok Sidaba advise Asiba to create human being for the settlement on the earth. Asiba chants on water with the sound of ‘hung’ and bubbles appear in the water. Thus, human beings are created from the bubbles. At first, a structure of human being without skeleton is created. The human being is offered to his father, Atingkok Sidaba. In the process of creating human, Asiba created different creatures such as ngamu (mudfish), tekpioklen (pig), maku (owl), tinthrok (earthworm) etc. Among these creatures ‘ngamu’ is use as a traditional fish in various traditional rituals. After all his efforts in making human, realising his inability to make human being, Asiba goes to his father submitting himself of his helplessness. On hearing this, Atingkok Sidaba told him to create man just like him i.e. from his image. He created a human being from the image of his father and offers in-front of him. The four directional gods is call to give life to the human being created by Asiba and all the gods and goddess looks at the human being. After the creation of human being, Atingkok orders them to create tonsils so as to speak and move anywhere and Ashiba Sidaba draws a line in the middle of the head with the help of his nail. Asiba opens the centre of the crown of the head known as ‘lemphu’ of the human being and finally the human being utters a word and started sneezing. All the gods were happy when they saw the human being crying and sneezing. In this way human being was created by Asiba. The first son of Asiba was named as Namu Pongsengba (creator of human) because he created human being for the first time. After creating human being, Taibang Panba Mapu gave five principles of life and each of them is belief to be located in a specific part of the body. The names of Gods from whom the five principles are derived are Pothanglen, Koubren Apanba, Thangjing, Marjing and Koubru.



#### **4) Assigning the Throne**

After the completion of creating the earth and human Atingkok Sidaba asks his three sons Atiya Sidaba, Asiba and Konjiltingthokpa to circumambulate the universe seven times and the throne will be given to the one who returns first. Both Atiya and Asiba move forward for rounding the universe. But Konjiltingthokpa cannot move forward as he was young and weak. Konjiltingthokpa requests Ima Leimaren Sidabi to help him as he cannot move round the universe. With his mother's advice Konjiltingthokpa move around the throne of his father and bows down in-front of his father. In seeing the attitude and respect of Konjiltingthokpa, Atingkok Sidaba gave the throne to him and gave the name Pakhangba meaning 'knowing the father' (Pa=father, khangba=knowing).

Returning from taking round of the universe, both Atiya and Asiba see Konjiltingthokpa sitting on the throne. They are told to bow him but they did not do so. Asiba became furious and try to harm Pakhangba, but Pakhangba is surrounded by seven Lairembi preventing from Asiba. In seeing the furious nature of Asiba, Atingkok came out and convince him that he shall be the king of every household and rule every household. And Pakhangba shall be the king of the Meitei Land.

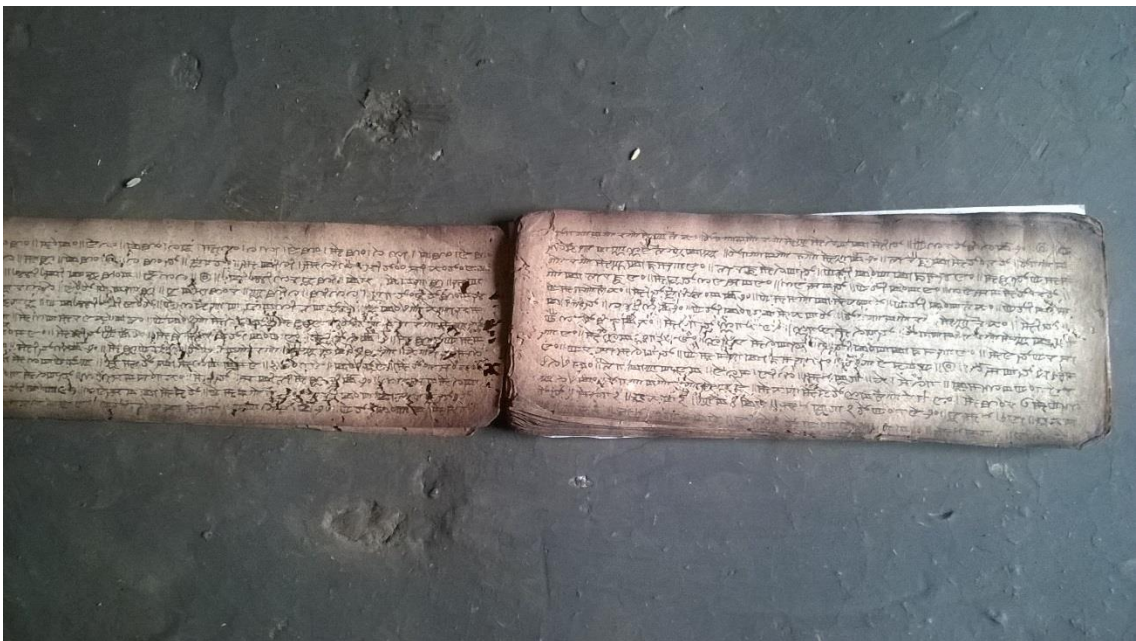
## **5. Origin of Clan**

As mentioned in *Leithak Leikharol*, the source of origin for the seven Salai (clan) are given as: Pakhangba for the Ningthouja clan, Pureiromba for the Angom, Khum Khum for the Leisangthem, Leiphuren Chanu Yucheng for the Moirangs, Poireiton for the Khumans, Taoren Khaba for the Khabas, Nganba Leichik for the Nganaba and Luwang Punsiba for the Luwangs.

## Photographs



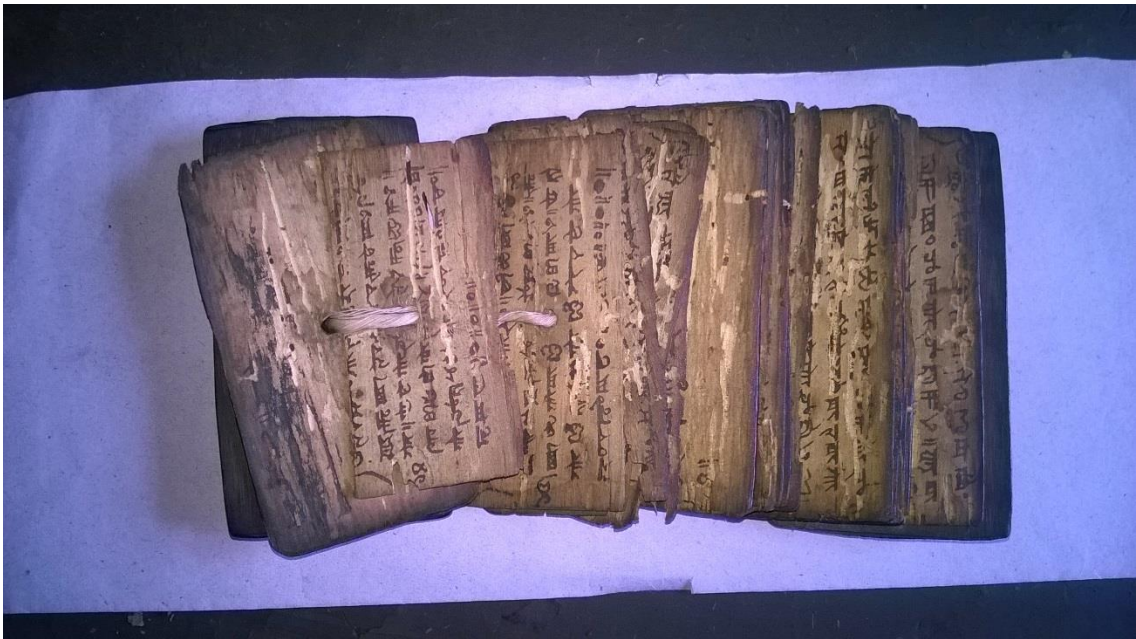
**Fig. 1.** The manuscript *Leithak Leikharol* from the custody of Mayanglambam Kirankumar, Iroisemba Mang Leirak, Imphal West, Manipur.



**Fig. 2.** The manuscript *Leithak Leikharol* from the custody of Mayanglambam Kirankumar, Iroisemba Mang Leirak, Imphal West, Manipur.



**Fig. 3.** The manuscript *Pudin* from the custody of Mayanglambam Kirankumar, Iroisemba Mang Leirak, Imphal West, Manipur.

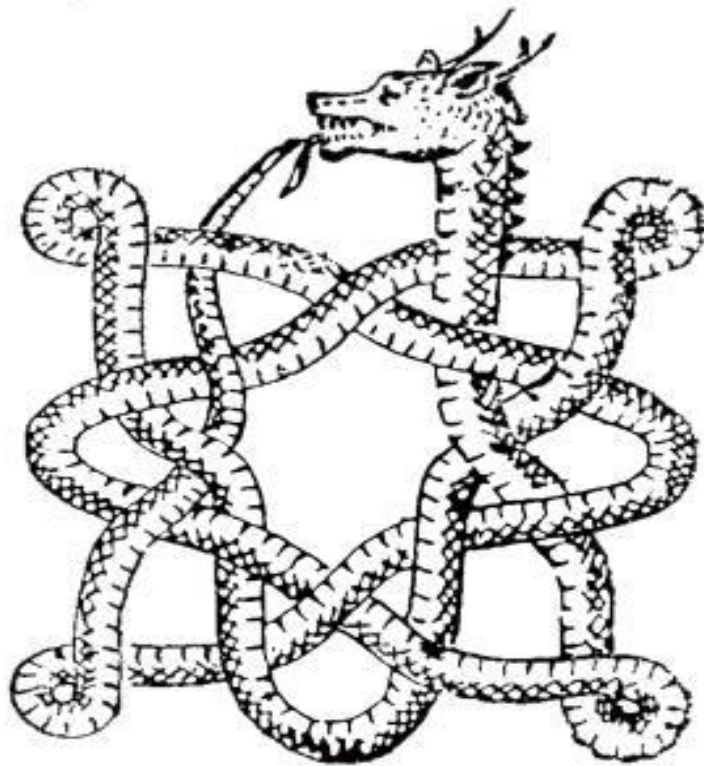


**Fig. 4.** The manuscript *Pudin* from the custody of Mayanglambam Kirankumar, Iroisemba Mang Leirak, Imphal West, Manipur.





**Fig. 6.** The transliterated text of *Leithak Leikharol* in Bengali script with the manuscript, compiled and transliterated by Chanam Hemchandra.



**Fig. 7.** *Yumjao Paphal* (Household *Paphal*) seen on the top of the front door of the Meitei house before one enters.