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THE MEITHEIS

T. C. HODSON

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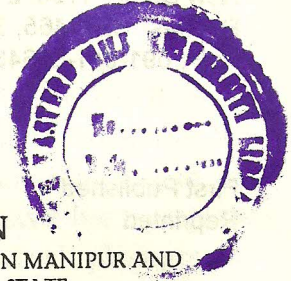
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THE MEITHEIS

BY

T.C. HODSON

LATE ASSISTANT POLITICAL AGENT IN MANIPUR AND
SUPERINTENDENT OF THE STATE
FELLOW OF THE ROYAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL INSTITUTE



WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY

SIR CHARLES J. LYALL

K.C.S.I., C.I.E., LL.D., M.A.

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PREFACE.

THE AUTHOR desires to offer his sincere gratitude to those whose help has enabled him to complete this monograph. The chromo-lithographic illustrations are the work of Mr. W. Griggs, and have been prepared by him from designs (based on actual photographs) by Mr. Fred Andrews, Head of the Department of Arts and Crafts at the Battersea Polytechnic, and formerly Principal of the Art School, Lahore, and by Miss Theodora Hodson, of the Slade School of Fine Art, University of London, University College. The coloured illustrations of the Folk-Tale, "Khamba and Thoibi," are reproductions in three-colour process by Messrs. John Swain and Sons, Ltd., of pictures painted by Bhudro Singh, a Manipuri artist.

Last but not least, the copious Index is the work of Mrs. Eileen Mitchell, whose labours are most gratefully acknowledged.

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The translation of the Ningthauröl or Meithei Chronicles, of which much use has been made, is by Babu Nithor Nath Banerji. They have also been translated by Babu Umes Chandra Ghose, but the latter work has been lost.

INTRODUCTION.

A RECENT writer on the tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley * has asserted in forcible language that, "unfortunately for science, no steps are being taken to record the rare vestiges of prehistoric society which still survive here, but which are now being rapidly swept away by advancing civilization. . . This unique mass of material which is available for solving important problems, lying at the very base of civilization and culture, is being allowed to disappear unrecorded. This regrettable fact has been repeatedly represented during the past few years, without practically any result."

The complaint is unjust; the bibliographies appended to the series of Ethnographical Monographs, of which the present volume is one, will show that there exists a large mass of materials dealing with a considerable proportion of the Indo-Chinese tribes of Assam. It is true that some of the most important of these are "buried away" in Gazetteers, Census reports, and contributions to the Journals of learned societies. But those who make it their business to investigate anthropological problems may surely be expected to search among such obvious sources for the information they desire. In India Gazetteers and Census reports are the appointed places for recording the results of inquiries into the characters and institutions of the various elements of the population. Such literature is scarcely likely to command a wide circulation in

* Lieut.-Col. L. A. Waddell, in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Part III., 1900.

INTRODUCTION

any country, and writers who deal with it are necessarily confined to the means open to them of perpetuating the results of their investigations in the official publications of the Government. Nor is it true that "no steps have been taken" since 1872, when Col. Dalton's *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* was published, to extend our knowledge of these tribes. In 1881 Sir Charles Elliott, shortly after assuming the government of the Province, issued instructions for the compilation, not only of grammars, vocabularies, and phrase-books of the languages of all the leading tribes of Assam, but also of records of their customs and institutions. The result is a series of works dealing with the tribal languages of which the Province is justly proud, and records of customs and usages which, though doubtless capable of further extension (which they are now receiving), are of great anthropological value. The linguistic work done is indeed the principal fruit of the orders of 1881; but this is by no means, as Lieut.-Col. Waddell asserts, "of secondary importance." Without an understanding of the language of a tribe there can be no adequate investigation of its institutions; the speech is the expression of the mind of the people who speak it, the measure of their culture and outlook upon the world around them. It is, moreover, more especially in Assam, with its vast diversity of ethnic stocks, the only safe index to the affinities of a tribe with its neighbours, and, in the almost complete absence of historic record or remembered tradition, to the migrations which have brought the various units to their present sites.

So far as concerns the subject of the present monograph, the Meithei or dominant race of Manipur, Lieut.-Col. Waddell is least of all justified in his complaint of insufficiency of record. We first became well acquainted with the Meithei in the Burma war of 1824-26. On the conclusion of hostilities, the inhabitants of the reconstituted State of Manipur (which had been overrun and annexed by the Burmese, and recovered

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its independence as the result of our operations,) were carefully described by Captain R. B. Pemberton in his excellent *Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India*, printed at Calcutta in 1835. A dictionary of English and Manipuri, compiled by Captain Gordon of the Manipur Levy, was published in 1837. But the most exhaustive presentment of the State and its peoples is contained in the *Account of the Valley of Munnipore, and of the Hill Tribes, with a comparative vocabulary of the Munnipore and other languages*, by Major William McCulloch, printed at Calcutta in 1859. Major, afterwards Lieut.-Col., McCulloch was a man of culture and literary ability, and his work (of which Lieut.-Col. Waddell makes no mention in his brief notice of the Meithei*) has ever since its publication been the chief authority on its subject. Col. McCulloch, who was the son of the well-known political economist Dr. J. R. McCulloch, was born in 1816, and went to Manipur as Assistant Political Agent in 1840; he became Political Agent in 1845, and held that post, with a year's intermission, until 1867. In this long period of twenty-seven years he acquired a most intimate knowledge of the State and its inhabitants; he married a Manipuri lady, of the family of Raja Nar Singh; and he exercised supreme authority over the Kuki tribes subject to the State, who inhabit the hills to the south and west of the valley of Manipur. After his retirement he settled at Shillong, where I enjoyed the privilege of his acquaintance, and died there, in his seventieth year, in 1885.

Colonel McCulloch's account of Manipur is not unknown even to British anthropologists. It is referred to by Mr. J. F. McLennan in his work on *Primitive Marriage*, and has been cited by Lord Avebury in his book on *The Origin of Civilization and the Primitive Condition of Man*. He was succeeded as Political Agent by Dr. R. Brown, who was the author of a *Statistical Account of Manipur*, printed by Government at

* Pp. 60-61.

Calcutta in 1874. This work incorporates most of McCulloch's information, with useful additions by Dr. Brown himself. It is an accessible book, and was widely distributed by Government on its publication; Lieut.-Col. Waddell does not mention it. Another contribution to the ethnography and history of the State was made by Mr. G. H. Damant of the Indian Civil Service, whose papers were published in the Journals of the Asiatic Society of Bengal and the Royal Asiatic Society.* Mr. Damant was greatly interested in the archaic literature of Manipur, and in the problem of the relation of the various Indo-Chinese races one to another. He met his death at Khonoma in the Naga Hills in 1879. The terrible events of 1891, which brought the little State prominently before the British public, led to a fresh development of descriptive literature in the books of Sir James Johnstone (for several years Political Agent in Manipur) and Mrs. Grimwood. These are not important contributions to scientific ethnography, but they—especially the former—contain interesting information as to the characteristics of the people.

It will thus be seen that the Manipuris have received no small share of attention in the past, and that the interest shown in them by investigators compares favourably with that aroused by the inhabitants of many other more accessible parts of India.

The author of the present monograph has wisely taken as his basis the accounts of Colonel McCulloch and Dr. Brown, and has noted where they need supplementing and completing, and the changes which have occurred during the past half-century. From his practical acquaintance with the administration of the State and its subject tribes, and his intimate knowledge of the Manipuri (as well as of the Thado Kuki language, he has been able greatly to enlarge the field of our information; and the latter half of the book, dealing with the

Bibliography.

traditions, folk-lore, and folk-tales of the Meitheis, and with their linguistic affinities, will be found to contain a mass of new and interesting matter.

It was my fortune to visit Manipur only once (in February, 1888) during my service in Assam, and I am thus acquainted with the subject chiefly by hearsay. But I have always taken a lively interest in this singular oasis of comparative civilization and organized society, set in the midst of a congeries of barbarous peoples, over whom its rulers exercise an authority which, if scarcely approaching the settled polity of more advanced communities, is at least in the direction of peace and order. The valley of Manipur in several respects resembles in miniature its neighbour, that of the Irawadi. In both the civilized people who occupy the central settled and organized region are nearly akin to the wild folk who inhabit the hills which enclose the alluvial plain. But while Burma has accepted the mild and gentle religion of Buddha, and thus profoundly modified the original animistic cult, Manipur has been taken into the pale of Hinduism, and has imposed upon itself burdensome restrictions of caste and ritual from which its greater neighbour is happily free. In both countries, however, the older religious ideas still survive beneath the surface of the philosophical systems borrowed from India, and in reality sway to a large extent the lives and sentiments of the people. The State has recently, after sixteen years of British administration, been committed to the government of the Prince who was chosen to fill the vacant throne after the events of 1891; and it is greatly to be hoped that its future may be happy and prosperous, and that it may exercise an increasing influence in winning to civilization the wilder tribes which recognize its authority.

C. J. LYALL.

May, 1908.

The valley of Manipur in several respects resemble in miniature of India. In both the civilized people who occupy the central region of the State settled and organised the area are nearly akin to the wild folk who inhabit the hills which enclose the alluvial plain. But while its neighbour, Burma has accepted the mild and gentle religion of Buddha, and thus profoundly modified the original animistic cult, Manipur has been taken into the pale of Hinduism, and has imposed upon itself burdensome restrictions of caste and ritual from which Burma is happily free. Since the advent of orthodox Hinduism, the Meitheis, dominant race of Manipur are claiming descent from Arjuna, one of the Pandavas.

Manipur was once a princely State and later became one of the 26 States of the Union of India. It remains economically backward and politically unstable due to lack of political maturity and poor relationship between the hills and the valleys. Manipur remains an unknown area to most Indians and one reason for this may well be the absence of good books about the people and problems of Manipur. This book has filled the void.

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