

## Evolution Of Sanamahi Religion Of The Meiteis (From the earliest to the 17th Century A.D.)

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An outstanding feature of the indigenous Meitei religion, which is still prevalent among the Meiteis, is the worship of *Sanamahi* as a household and public God along with *Leimaren*, *Phunga*, the *Apokpa of the Yeks* (Ancestors of the clans), the *Naikei-Ngakpas* (Protectors of the Directions) etc. This is generally known as *Sanamahi* religion. The origin of *Sanamahi* is still shrouded in mystery.

This paper makes an attempt to give the origin and development of *Sanamahi* religion, as far as possible. In our opinion, the cult might have been probably originated at a much earlier period. In *Hayi Chak*, which is the earliest of the four *Chak* (Jug or Era), namely *Hayi*, *Hayalangba*, *Khunung* and *Konna Chak* of which the first three are considered to be the period before the Christian reckoning, *Sanamahi* was worshipped as the Sun-god.<sup>1</sup> 'Ningthou Kangba Kangkhan of *Leishangthem Salai*,<sup>2</sup> a king, who reigned in in the *Hayi Chak* introduced *Sanamahi* worship.<sup>3</sup> Ningthou Kangba worshipped the stone image of *Sanamahi* in a temple on the top of a hill.<sup>4</sup> Another reference to the worship of *Sanamahi* in the *Hayi Chak* is given in *Shakok Lamlel*; it is stated that 'In the *Hayi Chak*, the worship of the Absolute was the path of the faith and the Absolute was *Sanamahi*.<sup>5</sup> In *Hayalangba Chak*, *Sanamahi* was worshipped under the name *Achiba*.<sup>6</sup> The reference to the worship of *Sanamahi* in the *Konna Chak* (in the Christian era) is given in 'Ningthourol Sheireng.<sup>7</sup> that 'Sanamahi appeared in the dream of all the people and told them to worship Him for their prosperity and also instructed *Kanglei Piba* (Chief of the Ningthouja clan), Nongda Lairen Pakhangba to cast bell-metal coins as His symbol and allow the people to worship it (coin) in their *Sanamahi Kachin*, the south-western corner of the main room of Meitei house. On this basis, it may be supposed that the present worship of *Sanamahi* in the *Sanamahi Kachin* of every Meitei house might have continued from the time of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba,

the chief of the Ningthouja clan, who ruled over the central portion of the Manipur Valley with its capital at *Kangla*, the present area occupied by the Fourth Assam Rifles, in the first century A.D., representing Him by a bell-metal coin which is placed on a shelf made of bamboo.

Now, it may be presumed from the above references that in the early period, the worship of Sanamahi was confined to a particular clan. The king of the Khuman principality did not worship Sanamahi until the Khuman were completely subjugated.<sup>8</sup> Whether Sanamahi was a deity of the Ningthouj Clan or not, His worship spread through the whole of the Meitei Confederacy.<sup>9</sup> The penetration of Sanamahi cult into the other clans might have been facilitated by the subjugation and annexation of the different principalities in the valley, which was started by Nongda Lairen Pakhangba<sup>10</sup> in the first century A.D. and more or less completed, excluding Moirang, by Kyamba in the 15th century A.D.<sup>11</sup> This breaks up the traditional Clan-centred society of the Meiteis and thus the ties of kinship lost their force. As a result of it, new relations were to be established in a broader framework based upon a sense of cultural uniformity. The new form of society caused by changes in the political system and the social life of the people was reflected in religious thought and in the structure of the religious systems. The apex of these changes in all aspects of society is seen in the Meitei myth of creation of the Universe, in which Sanamahi occupied a distinct position and was regarded as the incarnation of the Supreme-God, and also as the creator of the earth, creatures, plants and men. With it, the *Apokpa of the Yeks*,<sup>12</sup> the ancestors of the clans, and the *Maikel Ngakpa*, the protectors of the Directions, namely *Kaubru Marjing*, *Wangbren*, *Thangjing* etc receded into the background and became His allies. The story of the creation of the Universe is given in *Letthak Leikharol*, *Leishemlon*, *Wakoklon Thile! Salai Amailon Pukok Pyya* etc and also represented in dance form in the *Lai Haraoba*, the ancestral ritual, which is, according to Shakespear<sup>13</sup> the pleasing of the God. The ritual consists solely in recollecting the past and in a way making it present by means of a veritable dramatic representation of the creation of earth, creatures, plants and men. The *maibee*, officiants or conductresses or priestesses are the actresses playing the role. They put the mythical history of Sanamahi into 'Jagoi' or dance. It is doubtful whether any other form of Jagoi in the world exists for the same purpose as the 'Jagoi does'<sup>14</sup>. Such developments contributed a good deal to the propagation of Sanamahi religion.

The initiative towards the assimilation of ancestral cults of the other clans to that of Sanamahi might have been taken as early as the 15th century A.D. by some progressive *maichou*, Pandits or learned men to form a common religion and culture ; but the stimulus might have also come from the need of the political unity and cultural uniformity caused by the threat of the Burmese after the annexation of the major portion of Kabaw valley and the invasion from Cachar.<sup>15</sup> To restore the social equilibrium after the subjugation of the various clans in the Manipur Valley and to establish the sanctity of the Meitei way of life, Sanamahi had to be identified with the Supreme God in the Meitei myth of creation. Thus the creation myth might have been composed and revised time to time according to a precise plan for a set purpose. Undoubtedly the work played a formidable role in propagating the Sanamahi religion among the people of various clans. It served as a highly effective weapon for removing clan or regional segregation and unifying the Meitei Kingdom under the leadership of the Ningthouja kings.

Nonetheless, under the royal patronage of Lainingthou Khagemba in the 16th and the 17th century A.D., Sanamahi cult reached the climax of its popularity. It is believed that the son of Lainingthou Khagemba was the incarnation of Sanamahi and His bell-metal image was installed in a temple at Wangoi about 10 miles from Imphal and publicly worshipped. We have reference of this in *Khagemba Langjei*,<sup>16</sup> a religious text of the Meiteis. The summary of the story is given below.

'Lainingthou Khagemba was a staunch devotee of Sanamahi. As such, Sanamahi was pleased to incarnate Himself as the son of Khagemba, Sana Wapihan. When Sana Wapihan was eight, he died, because He was destined to be so in His human incarnation. Sanamahi had a Will that His father, Khagemba should cast His bell-metal image and house it in a temple for public worship. In order to convey His Will to His father, He communicated it (Will) to Thoinu Ahongbi, a widow of Wangoi, who was spinning the cotton thread at dead of night, through the sound of the spinning wheel. The next day Thoinu Ahongbi went to the palace and accordingly conveyed the message of Sanamahi to Khagemba. Khagemba could not believe it. Then Sanamahi called at the house of Leishangthem Khomma of Wangoi, while the latter was deeply meditating upon Chingu Sidaba (Sanamahi) and suddenly appeared before him and expressed the same will to be conveyed to His father. As Khagemba could not believe the message brought to him by Leisha-

ngthem Khomma, for the second time, a voice from Heaven announced the will and asked him to keep a bodysize mirror at an appointed place and to see His shadow on the mirror at the dawn of the following day. Khagemba did everything accordingly and saw his son on the mirror. Now, he was convinced of the will. Then, Khagemba cast a bell-metal image of his son, Sana Wapihan (Sanamahi) and constructed a temple at Wangoi where He was publicly worshipped'.

This bears the testimony to the growing popularity and prestige of Sanamahi religion which spread from one end of the valley to another ; and it enjoyed full support of the common people irrespective of clan, the Maichou (learned men) and the members of the royal family<sup>17</sup> as shown by the reaction against the breaking of the bell-metal image,<sup>18</sup> of Sanamahi, mentioned above, in the 18th century A.D. by a Hindu missionary. However, it was again cast and the temple was shifted, according to His will, to the present Manipur Rifles' ground.<sup>19</sup>

Initially Sanamahi was a deity of a particular clan. Later on, He was developed into a Supreme God, and beliefs and practices around Him became the religion of the State before the 18th century A.D. Thus in Manipur, particularly, in the valley, Sanamahi religion solved the problem of political disunity, which was caused by the subjugation of the various clans and the annexation of their principalities, through Sanamahi myths and legends, by accommodating polytheism within the framework of monotheism, and ultimately it served as a powerful integrating force.

### References

1. O. Bhogeshwor Singh, *Vaisnav Laining Changlaktri-Ngetge Laining*, Khongthang, Oct./Nov., 1980, Imphal, p. 26.
2. Leishangthem Salai is of the clans of the Meiteis.
3. *Leithak Leikharol*, Ed. by Yengkhom Bhagya, 1960, p. 86 and 107.
4. Nongthombamacha Angou Luwang, *Ningthou Kangbalon*, Imphal, 1976, p. 2.
5. *Shakok Lamlel*, Ed. Ibohal Meitei and Rajen Meitei, Imphal, 1973, p. 3.
6. O. Bhogeshwor Singh, *Vaisnav Laining Changlaktri-Ngetge Laining*, Khongthang, Oct./Nov., 1980, Imphal, p. 26.
7. O. Bhogeshwor Singh, *Ningthourol sheireng*, 1967, Imphal, pp. 174-178.
8. T. C. Hodson, *The Meitheis*, Delhi, 1975, p. 108.
9. S. N. Parratt, *The Religion of Manipur*, Calcutta, 1980, p. 24.

10. R. K. Jhalajit Singh, *A Short History of Manipur*, Imphal, 1965, p. 37.
11. *Ibid*, p. 85.
12. "The name of the tribal deities is given as Luang pokpa, or ancestor of the Luangs, Khuman pokpa, ancestor of the Khumans, apparent exceptions to this being the tribal deities of the Ningthouja and Angom clans, which are Nongpok Ningthou, or the king of the east, alias Pakhangba, whom we know from other sources to be the reputed ancestor of the clan in question (the Ningthouja), and Pureiromba. The aliases of the other tribal deities are Poiraiton, for the Luangs, Khamdingou, for the Khabananbas, Thangaren, for the Khumans, and Ngangningsing, for the Moirangs ; and Nungaoyumthangba, for the Chengleis". T. C. Hodson, *The Meitheis*, Delhi, 1975, pp. 99-1000
13. J. Shakespear, 1913, *The Religion of Manipur*, Folk Lore, p. 24.
14. L. Lightfoot, *Dance-ritual of Manipur*, 1958, Hongkong, p. 20.
15. R. K. Jhalajit Singh, *A Short History of Manipur*, Imphal, 1965, pp. 76-77.
16. *Khagemba Langjei*, Ed. O. Bhogeshwor Singh, Imphal, 1967.
17. Hodson, p. 95.
18. *Ibid*, p. 66.
19. *Khagemba Langjei*, p. 141.