

FOLK CULTURE
OF
MANIPUR

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Dr. M. Kirti Singh



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Preface

Folk culture is understood to be the expression of integrated social life as opposed to the urban life. It is a part of the integral culture of a people and as such has a mass appeal on account of its racial memory and historical values.

My humble study relates to the folk tales, songs, riddles, proverbs and rites of Manipur with folk materials and field works available with us. I have related the essays to the disciplines (Indology with special references to History, Philosophy, Culture and Religion) and its allied fields (e.g., Ethnology, Anthropology, etc.). I shall be happy if I could make a small contribution to the existing area of folk culture which hitherto has been mainly neglected despite its growing importance and relevance in national integration.

While pursuing my work I noticed the radical changes taking place in social life of Manipur. I remember the days of my youth when the people heard the ballads sung in still hours of the night and the elderly people and children had the keen desire to listen to the folk tales, songs, proverbs and riddles transpiring around their place.

If the collection and study of these interesting items are not documented, they will be lost hopelessly for the posterity. Again, this study, by its very nature, hardly admits of undue haste as the final word is subject to confirmation in the competent circles. The 13 essays will contribute, I believe, to further the object of promoting

a purposive study of folk culture as additional material for our future history.

Most of the papers on folklore—folk tales, songs, proverbs, riddles, rain rituals, name giving ceremonies, python lore, etc., were presented as my papers at different sessions of Indian Science Congress Association held from 1982 to 1992. The abstracts of these papers have appeared in the proceedings of Science Congress (Anthropology and Archaeology Sections).

An earlier version of the paper on "Ballads of Manipur" was presented by me in the International Seminar on Folk Culture held in Cuttack in 1978 and the same was published in volume III of the proceedings. In the revised form some new points have been inserted in this paper. The paper on "Name and Attributes of God in Manipuri Thought" was presented at the Waltair session of Indian Philosophical Congress in 1984. The paper on "Sun Worship" was read and discussed at the Xth International Congress of Ethnological and Anthropological Sciences held in New Delhi in 1978. I have presented the paper on common agricultural rites in Manipur for the seminar organised by the Institute of Oriental Study, Thane.

Some parts of my paper on proverbs appeared in local magazines titled *Nongpokthong* (a monthly published in Imphal) and the *Meitei Review* (a monthly now defunct). I have edited the paper and improved it considerably in the light of recent discussions.

The present volume is a reflection on different aspects of Manipuri folk culture from a scientific approach. I have been carrying on research and scientific writings on Manipuri Religion, Philosophy, Literature and Culture during the past 30 years. It has been my pleasant duty to present five or six papers on aspects of Manipuri culture at the annual sessions and initiated discussions on them in the national and regional conferences, seminars and study circles. I have been guiding Ph.D. Research students on aspects of Meitei culture. The presentation of Manipur, from the point of a local scholar author's own experience has been the main

purpose in all my books. I propose to bring out some volumes covering other aspects of Manipuri culture.

It is my duty to thank those who have been good enough to help me in my work. My thanks are due to the authorities for allowing me to publish my papers in this volume. I am also grateful to my friends who provided me the stenographic help in the preparation of this volume.

My wife, Dr. Mrs Asha Gupta, M.Sc., M.Ed., Ph.D., D.Sc. (Moscow), has provided immense inspiration to me to bring out this book. Being a foreign trained scientist, she is also my partner in the intellectual adventure. My relationship with Manas Publications, Delhi, is very intimate on many dimensions beyond the mere bond of friendship between the author and the publisher.

Dr. M. Kirti Singh

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Chapter One

Manipuri Folk Tales

Manipur, a state lying in north-eastern part of India, was the original home of the Meiteis and some groups of Nagas and old Kuki groups. The Brahmans, the Muslims and new Kuki groups settled here in search of a new home on political and other grounds from the 15th century till the late 19th century. Most of the Meiteis are Hindus while the tribals of the hilly areas are Christians although they followed the primitive religion before the British period. The Muslims in Manipuri Valley, parts of Assam, East Bengal and Tripura have adopted the Manipuri language although they still adhere to Islamic faith and standards.

Manipuri folk tales are diverse and multiform in view of the existence of different groups, communities, standards, etc. The various tales/fables have the smell of the soil where they originated though assimilable by other groups and regions. They cover not only all aspects of human activity and experience but also the myths, cosmology and cosmogony drawing out obviously from race memory strengthened by a vivid imagination. The Meiteis, who happen to be the predominant community, preserve thousands of their tales from early times till to-day showing their ancestry and elements which they had on account of contacts with India, Burma and parts of China. The Naga tales of early times bridged the chasm between the people of hills and plains and brought also the Nagas of Manipur steps nearer to the Naga groups of present Nagaland. Similarly the Kuki Chin tribals in

some parts of Manipur, Burma, Assam and Tripura were much alike in many ways. The Muslim inhabitants contributed some elements to the folk tales and their tales relate to the wit, wisdom and jokes of two Muslim couples—Jarullah and Meruhllah. These belong to a period not later than the beginning of the 20th century when the Pangals/war captives, i.e., Muslims formed a sizeable community in Manipur.⁴

Folk tale corresponds to Manipuri word "Phunga Wari" (tale associated with the hearth). After day's work, elderly people and children of a family used to gather after sunset and waited for dinner by sitting around the fire palce. Another word is called "Chakngai wari"—for the reason that children satisfy their hunger by listening to the tale of the *Pen*/grandmother while they wait for meal. The grandmother turns the *Kaptreng*/ wheel with the sounds *Neng Neng Kot* and draws out the thread, while all her thoughts and speech are concentrated on the tales or riddles for the children. The *pen's* sound of the wheel is a call to the children for coming to her for religious and moral instruction in the form of stories, riddles and songs. She is an infinite storehouse of such stuff. It was also a pleasant obligation of elderly people to relate popular tales to the children. It was an engaging pursuit of young children to follow the hero and heroine of the fables.

It is known that in later times story telling from the Hindu religious texts became an art by a story teller before an assembly of aged people in matters of religion and recreation. It has become a separate institution in the King's Court.)

Mythological Tales

Tales of this type are too many. The Meitei people took these myths seriously and used these tales in connection with treatment, cure, exorcism, etc. We had myths regarding the creation of the Universe by god Ashiba at the order of Almighty Guru, creation of beings, of human beings, the origin of clans, dynasties, advent of kingship and administration, Man's lifespan, sickness, cure and death and connected stories/rites, etc. The place was the meeting place of different communities whose feelings, lifestyles and culture

enriched its myth. It is the breeding place for the myths of about 400 *Umanglais* (Forest deities—male and female). Most of the myths are incorporated in the sacred texts.

Etiological Tales

Mention can be made of the tales showing us why *Urengkonthou* (Chinese white breasted water hen) does not take the water of the river, why *Nongoubi* (Pied crested cuckoo) takes rain water only, the origin of cricket, parrot, *Uthum* (water cock), cuckoo, etc. Why does the earth incline towards the south? Why there is red colour at the top of the reeds?

Legend/Folk History

Historical bases about the place of Manipur are recorded in such sacred texts like *Poireiton Khunthokpa* (Migration of Poireiton), *Lamilton* (Lore of places), etc. We had well known legends of Lore, Incarnation of Moirang (28 miles to the south of Imphal), legends of important kings of Manipur such as Paikhomba, Charairongba, Garibniwaz, Bhagyachandra, etc. Some of them are better, cultured in connection with the ballads of the Meiteis. The heroic legends of Manipur in the later part of the 19th century inspired the western people of Bengal to create anti-British feelings through their poems and dramas.

Cleverness is shown by the tale of teacher fox and the snake king, *pebet* (a kind of bird), a battle of wits between the prince and the son of Minister, exchange of queen for a beautiful woman, exchange of the liquid of cowdung and juice of sugarcane. Wisdom and folly are the theme of stories as found in those of the sons-in-law and foolish elder brother of the age long past. The wise man exchanges a lump of gold for the *Keirak* (ladder) of the poorman. The Meitei version of the division of paternal property between two brothers is different from that of Assamese.

Wonder Tales

Tales with an emphasis on *tantric* or supernatural element, in *Uper Kotha type* are very popular among the Manipuris. Attribution

of supernatural powers to mortals, exaggeration of human powers, role of nymphs, jewels etc., are illustrated by those of Kabui Keioiba, Makok, the widows' son, tales of gods and spirits, etc.

Humorous Tales

Human elements predominate the tales of foolish son-in-law, Lengbiro Madhob (goodbye Krishna), driving of the tiger by the monk, Tapta's tale, fable of the deaf, Stammerer, etc.

Vrata Katha Tales

Generally fasts and various kinds of worships with mantras came to be widely cultivated after the introduction of Hinduism in the 18th century. The stories of fast or festival (embodying certain values of observation of rites and disasters for not observing them) are not new to them. It is believed that no evil can come to those who observe the *vrata* with the help of *Amaiba* and *Amaibis* (priest and priestess) and fiddle players. They made it a point to listen to the recital of lores of Panthoibi (Earth goddess), Phaoibi (corn deity), Imoinu Ahongbi (goddess of wealth), Queen Penuleima, Soubon Lairema (counterpart of Durga) and lores of other gods, (Mera) about Karttika is particularly sacred to them for these vows. These vows are connected with a good family life, good progeny, a good match for the sons and daughters, Hindu *vratakathas* of Nala Damayanti, Savitri, Sivarati, etc., are conducted by the Brahmans.

Gita Kathas

By this type we mean tales interspersed with songs. It implies nursery tales told by a chorus under the leadership of an old widow for the edification of ladies of high rank during the days of their confinement.

In my estimate the term *Pengi Naoroi* (tales from the grandmother) roughly corresponds to this type. The Maibis (the midwife) and Mayoknabi (helper to the maibi) assume the role of the old widow in educating the mother of the lore of the land. The Manipuri tales are specially meant for the moral edification of

children through the story telling of grandmother. Most of the tales assume one form or the other.

Other Types

The value of co-operation is shown by the tales of *Natollao* (wide nosed), *Khubamjao* (big handed) and *Ningdumba* (pointed buttock) in a boat. The tales of *Sar Machi Yenba*, *Thokchao Siki* etc., show the significance of the advice of elderly people in times of adversity. Any satisfactory account of the tales will take a big volume. In this article, I am touching some of the typical Manipuri stories in a brief way.

The Step-mother in Tales

There are four well known tales around the themes of the step-mother's treatment of her step-daughter or step-son— (i) *Uchek Langmeidong* (a kind of bird), (ii) *Haosi Nameinu*, (iii) *Kuthap Leima*, (iv) *Kunjamala*, etc.)

Uchek Langmeidong

There was a girl named *Heiyaniu* (*Nongdam Atombi* in another tale) whose mother left her while she was too young. Her father married another woman who had another son. The father went to *Kabow* (Burmese side) for trade. There was natural affection between her and her younger brother as she used to take him on her back in walking, playing, etc. But the step-mother abused and beat her mercilessly for no fault of hers. She was sent to the field for collecting materials for curry, to the hill for fuel and to the lake for fish. She was kept under the step-mother's rigid clutch for all time and humiliated by beating her in the company of her friends. She deliberately avoided in providing her cooked rice. She was kept outside the house for her lamentations.

Later *Heiyainu* went to the field with her knife. As suggested by her late mother in a dream she decided that it would be better to turn herself into a *Langmeidong* bird than to be maltreated by a cruel step-mother. She requested the birds to drop their feathers daily. She used to gather the fallen feathers. She flapped the

feathers for some days, planted them on her body and one day flew away like the birds in the presence of her beloved younger brother who felt the pangs of separation.

After some time the father came with money and clothes for the marriage of his daughter. On getting evasive answer from his wife about Heiyainu he became furious. The young boy narrated the tragic story to his father. When groups of langmeidong birds came flying over the house the father called her with rice and curry. She came down straight to her father and told him that she had eaten the best fruit and had crossed Mount Koubru and drank water of the Ocean. Then she bade good-bye to her brother and flew away.

The tale has a parallel in the Khasi story of the ground shunning Longwarkhen and the ballad of Kamal, the merchant of Bengal.

Haosi Nameinu

A story of Pleids tells us that the fifth Youth of the Luwang clan could not go to heaven with his beloved Lousikon Chanu on account of her weak constitution. They lived as husband and wife after some time in the mortal world for a short period. After giving birth to a daughter, Haosi Nameinu, she left the world. The husband married another lady to look after the family. The step-mother was so cruel as to burden the unfortunate girl with all types of work. She was forced to go to the terraced field for collection of fuels and paddy from her father who was working there. She was obliged to carry a basket of rice, arum and pumpkin during the night from the field to her home so that she could not join the feast of her friends.

Hardly had she reached home with the heavy basket when the step-mother asked her to husk the paddy. She had some quarrel with her. The evil woman beat her and again insisted on her cooking food. For the trick of cooking in an improper way she struck the innocent girl with the iron ladle. She became senseless and blood oozed from the wound. She told the step-mother that her soul would change into Hari Nongnang (a kind of chirping insect) which would stay in every cave rather than bearing the

pain of ladle from the step-mother. Its chirping to this day marks the advent of a new year.

The heart rending tale of the unfortunate lady is still being sung with the help of *pena* (fiddle) by the *Asheibas* of Manipur.

Kuthap Leima

In olden days there was a tailor named Namoi Hongba who lived with his daughter Kuthap Leima and young son called Roma as his wife had died when the children were too young. He married Chingya Nganu Leima as his second wife who took an insane hatred to the children. She made their lives a misery by her cruel treatment. Not satisfied with this she blinded Kuthap Leima by sorcery.

At her evil bidding the two children were driven out of the house. They lived in a hut in the course of their wandering in the forest. The forest was the abode of god Koubru, the presiding deity of the North. Seeing the children's pitiable plight he attacked the evil spirit which had blinded Kuthap Leima and forced him to leave the young lady. With the blessing of god Koubru she regained her normal eye-sight. They were growing into adulthood day by day. Once the king who was out on hunting in that forest saw the lady when the boy was away. She was made the queen of that place. Boy Roma succeeded in discovering the place of his sister by finding the pieces of cloth thrown over by his sister.

Later the step-mother was invited to a royal feast by Kuthap Leima. They gave her a sealed pipe containing honey. She put different types of bees into it which she was going to drink on the way. On her return journey Chingya Nganu Leima drank the pipe closing her eyes. She was mercilessly stung to death by the bees. Thus she was punished for her cruelty towards the innocent children.

Kunja Mala

The episode occurs in the great epic of Khamba and Thoibi of Moirang. The step-mother sneered at the innocent girl and forced her to do all household work. She was eaten up by a ferocious

tiger at Khoirentak while she was plucking vegetables. The villagers requested the king of Moirang for protection against the beast. It was decided that Khamba and Nongban, the two rivals for the hand of Princess Thoibi, have to kill the tiger and to save the people. The victor of the encounter with the tiger will be rewarded with the hand of the princess Theibi. Nongban was killed by the tiger. Khamba, the hero of the epic, killed the wild tiger and won the princess.

The Son-in-law in Meitei Tales

There are as many as five well-known stories concerning the wits and foolishness of the son-in-law. There is also an Assamese version with parallel incidents.

In another tale a son-in-law is invited by his mother-in-law for a lunch. She served the hottest of rice and hot curry of *Chagempomba* (a kind of dish prepared from broken rice and vegetable). The food was too hot for him to swallow. Distraughtly he looked upwards and asked his mother-in-law about the place from which the bamboo materials of the house came. The witty mother-in-law replied that they were from Chaksabi Yakarok (a hillock suggesting hot rice and the mouth opening). The witty son-in-law retorted that this is why, they are all *wamittang* and *warukhoi* (bamboo having curled and jointless pieces) and thereby suggesting the curled hair of the mother-in-law.

In another story the son-in-law asked his mother-in-law about the name of curry served to him. She replied, "Phakchet chagem". This phrase means the curry made by boiling a piece of mat made of reeds. After reaching home, he asked his wife to prepare the curry of mat reeds. On taking the curry he was almost choked to death because a piece of mat blocked his throat. The word *Phakchet* means a herb which is edible when cooked with boiled rice and some vegetables.

Hentak Kangsoi

In a similar tale a foolish son-in-law is served a kind of delicious *hentak* (a kind of dried and rooten fish) curry by his

mother-in-law which he happily consumed as tasty food. He inquired into it and got a lump of *hentak* so that he could prepare the same in his house. On his way back home he was restless and beside himself with pain and wanted to answer the call of nature. On seeing a pool he concealed the packet of *hentak* by the side of a small bush and relieved himself. By mistake he picked up a lump of dung of dog (very similar to each other) and returned home. At his instance his wife prepared the curry from the dung but the taste was horrible. He had a hunch of his mistake but could not tell anyone. Next day he went (following the advice of his wife) to the same place to check whether he had left behind the packed food. The lump was in tact. Thus he understood his folly.

We cannot help being struck by another tale of an extremely foolish son-in-law of a widow.

Strangely enough this foolish man was made the son-in-law of a widow although he did not know anything of family life. Once he relieved himself on a tortoise on the bank of a river. When the tortoise moved he thought it was his dung that did so. Hoping to see it moving he answered to the call of nature in the cooking place and when he found it motionless he struck it with his stick to the admiration of his wife and mother-in-law. Once he was detailed for duty to guard the paddy field to drive away the birds and insects. Mistaking the crops for bees he thrashed them with his stick from morning till evening. Later he narrated what he had done to his mother-in-law. The mother-in-law asked him to buy three tasty sweet bananas from the market for offering to the deity. He ate one to test the taste and the second one to see its sweetness. He reached home with only one banana. On being asked why he came with only one he ate the third one too and answered that he did so in order to check its sweetness and taste. The clever mother-in-law laughed at this and slowly trained him by degrees.

The widow's sons and of fate

The Meiteis have the following tales connected with the adventures of widows' son: (i) three stories of Chandrakangan,

(ii) Makok (head without any parts of the body), (iii) Mairel Phampret (a body in the shape of a pumpkin), (iv) Jatra, (v) Frog marrying a princess.

Chandrakangnan's story

In one version it is said that a widow had a son whose name was Chandrakangnan. Being extremely poor he went out with his axe to try his luck. He cut a tree out of which he prepared a four-footed bedstead which could move on its own. His mother went to the market to sell it. Having learnt of the wonderful bedstead the king sent for the lady and agreed to purchase it on the condition that he would pay for it the next day. On the very night, Selungjao, the king's favourite servant, slept on it. On touching it by forehead, he heard conversation among the four stands. When one foot went out the remaining three legs kept guard at night. One of the legs divined that the king would face untimely death on account of snake bite the following day. The only remedy was to kill the snake well in time. In order to save his master, Selungjao hid himself in the king's room. When the appointed hour came, the snake appeared in the sleeping bed of the king and attempted to bite him. He killed the snake with his dagger. At first the servants were angry with Selungjao, and caught him. Later, the king impressed by the loyalty of his servant rewarded him. The widow's son was also rewarded profusely for his wonderful act.

In another story, the hero Chandrakangnan, picked up gold lotus which floated down a river while he was angling. His grandfather offered it to the king of the place who demanded another gold lotus for his queen. The desire to get the lotus for saving the life of his grandfather seized Chandrakangnan and after many adventures he went to the nether world where he got three daughters of Indra, king of gods, along with a tank of gold lotus. Chandrakangnan's grandfather could offer the said flower to the king for his queen within the stipulated time. In order to destroy their good fortune the king ordered him to pick up every night paddy which he dropped in a water tank and mustard seed on a dusty ground. As instructed by his two wives Nganu Leima

(presiding deity of duck) and Khunu Leima (presiding deity of Pigeon), the heavenly ducks and pigeons finished the task of collecting the paddy and scattered mustard seeds before day-break. The king knew nothing about the mystery behind it and was determined to unlock it. He gave a third test to assess their miraculous power. He would give half of kingdom to Chandrakangnan if he could survive the ordeal of being buried underground and later making a bonfire at the spot with ghee, oil, etc. By the help of his third wife Sabi (an animal with sharp teeth) Leima, an underground tunnel in that place was dug during the night. It enabled Chandrakangnan to escape undetected. The king had in the meantime told that he could see his forefathers if he subjected himself to the same treatment. The king agreed to this and later perished in the fire.

In another story with the same hero, Chandrakangnan tried his luck by becoming the proverbial king for one day. A country was without a king. On seeking to know why there was no taker for the throne he was told that on ascending the throne, all the kings were found dead the next morning but not the queen. When he was made a king for a day he kept a night vigil in the bedroom and a snake appeared from the nostrils of the queen. Thus he found out the secret of mysterious deaths of the kings. His blow struck the neck of snake and it fell down dead. Early in the morning contrary to the expectation of the people he was found alive. They were very grateful to him for ridding them of the problem. Out of shame the queen wanted to take her own life but was prevented from doing so. Then she revealed her past. Her former husband, the snake king, was killed and she was forcibly made queen by the king of the place. As a revenge the snake king killed all the former kings of that place.

Jatra's Story

Jatra, the widow's only son, went for merchandise with his uncle (two maternal uncles in another version) to a far off place. He kept awake while his party was sleeping. He saw two beautiful girls playing cards at the foot of a tree. When they heard his approach they disappeared after leaving behind a glittering (gold)

mat which he picked up. After narrating the same he sent to his mother the plate and asked her to leave him with the purpose of trying his luck.

He saw a big hole with steps below by the side of a rock resting on a hinge. Going down the steps he reached *patal* (the nether world) where had seen Patal Leima whom he had seen the previous night. He learnt from the lone girl that a female giant had killed all the people including her father. The girl was kept alone as a prisoner to oversee her house when the giantess was away for her food. Taking advantage of her absence they considered a secret plan of elopement. By his magic Jatra changed himself into a golden fly which hid inside her body. As already planned Patal Leima pretended weeping on the ground that she would be alone after the death of the female giant. She extracted the secret of her life that so long as the bow, the dry wind of gourd, five *urits* (tailor bird) representing her loins, head and five souls were intact, there could be no death for her.

No sooner had the giantess gone (she lived on pythons, elephants, buffaloes), than Jatra assumed his human form and broke the objects into pieces one by one and put an end to the life of female giant, and they came out of the hole in the same jungle.

In another variation of the story Patal Leima suggested to his lover to touch the hand of her friend Minu Leima, daughter of god Sararen (Indra), who appeared on the scene. Both the ladies agreed to live as his wives; and they returned home and met the widow who was happy to see them. With the help of her magic ring Minu Leima produced beautiful buildings and servants in the house of Jatra. The family lived together in great happiness everafter.

Another story was that of Makok with deformed body with head intact. Makok was dropped in a river by his maternal uncle while going for trade as the head could not perform any work. He met a dragon of the Luwang Clan long with honour having a gem in its mouth. He bit the dragon in the naval. The dragon said to Makok, "Choose what you would like to have, best of all from me, but release me." Makok replied "Give me the wish of giving gem

of yours." The dragon gave up the gem (magic ring) on the condition that he must not divulge the secret. Makok reached the bank with the help of the dragon. With the help of the magic ring he came back home in human form. He met his mother in his usual appearance and narrated his experiences.

Makok sent his mother to the palace for purpose of seeking the hand of, the princess. Twice the proposal was turned down and the king's men had beaten her, black and blue. At last the king agreed to give his daughter in marriage on the condition that he would construct her a place, like the palace, in a week's time. This was fulfilled with the help of Makok's ring. Marriage was performed with pomp befitting the occasion. In another tale, the head is presented as looking like a frog or a pumpkin.

After a while, the princess pretended to be sleeping when her husband took his meal in the shape of a lad. The princess fell upon him and caught him which prevented him from turning into Makok (head), pumpkin, etc. To the great joy of all the widow's son (deformed structure) lived as a handsome youth for the rest of his life. Champavati's story is similar to this story.

The tale of magic ring is similar to that of the Tsangkhol, the conch of Gautam Muni among the Kabows (Burmese), and magic flute of Manipuri tribals.

Animals and Birds in Manipuri Folk Tales

In the Manipuri animal tales the tiger is the most ubiquitous character. Tiger tale is found in connection with the tales of human beings, frog, fox, etc. The tiger's strength, unalloyed love of the tigress for its young ones, etc., are proverbial. In most of them the tiger is presumed as dull and foolish. It is also required to punish an evil person. In real life in olden days, the people had encounters with tigers in their villages, fields and woods. When the threat became serious they developed the idea of forming a tiger club to protect themselves against the fell animal. They rather preferred the strength of a tiger to the timid and weak animals. The royal elephant used to go out to pick up a fit man to

be the king in some stories such as widow's son, Sana Yairangchan, etc., (variation of the theme exists in Assam and Burma).

Kabui Keioiba (Half man and half tiger)

One day the half man and half tiger came to the house of a widow for his prey. The old woman suggested him to eat Thabaton, the youngest daughter of seven brothers, and not a poor widow like her. Taking advantage of the brothers' absence in a far off place they came to Thaba's house and the widow imitating the voice of the younger brother asked her to open the door. When she did so the Kabui Keioiba carried her away in the jungle. Since there was nobody to help her, she put up a sham show that she was his wife. Inwardly she was upset because she was eager to see her brothers.

Meanwhile her brothers returned home and searched her in the very jungle where she lived with the beast man. Thabaton could see signs of her brothers for her rescue. She gave a bamboo tube with open ends to Kabui to fetch some water.

She ran away with her brothers and reached home in no time. The man tiger could not fill the tube in spite of his repeated attempts. A crow told him that the tube was hollow and his beautiful wife was gone. He came back and found what the crow said about his foolishness. He could not go after Thabaton in the presence of her brothers.

One night when she came out for collecting some firewood the tiger man coming out of the bush and tried to kidnap her as before. Then her brothers put it to death instantly.

In another version the tiger man kidnapped two sisters, Sana (Sajik) and Lupa (Thaba). Little Thaba wept bitterly to see the tiger man who devoured her fingers. The elder sister flattered him to save her sister. The tiger man was sent to fetch water in a hollow bamboo. They put on the dress of old woman and escaped from the hut. A pigeon saw everything and warned him. The tiger man attacked the bird by throwing the pipe for intriguing and went home. He chased the sisters but could find no trace of them.

Meanwhile the crown prince and his party were out hunting and came to the place and saw them. The party went in their search but could not find them.

The disappointed crown prince asked his father to arrange the bride selecting ceremony from the assembly of ladies of the land—old and young. This was done as requested. To the amazement of all ladies, the prince selected the two girls who were disguised as old women.

The tiger man could instantly turn himself into a tiger and bring forth another by his incantation. He is the Nara Vyaga as described in the *Valmiki Ramayana*, with tantric significance. The same theme and allegory is to be found in another tale of *pebit* bird and folk song known as *Mayang Crow (Kwak Kwak)*

Tapta

Once a mother tried to pacify a weeping child by threatening him, giving sweets and singing lullaby. The naughty child did not stop by the mention of tiger, elephant, bear, etc. At last it got frightened and stopped crying by the use of a meaningless word *Tapta*. A thief who came to steal one of the horses entered into the stable and wondered who this *Tapta* was; a tiger which came to eat the horse thought that *Tapta* must have been more powerful than itself. In darkness the thief selected the tiger as the smartest horse and rode out it by pulling it by the ear. The tiger for fear of detection did not show any sign of resistance. At day break the thief examined the striped colour of his horse and realised that his horse was nothing else but a tiger. In great fear he climbed up a tree and threw himself away into a big hole in it. The tiger told of its discomfiture to a bear for identification of *Tapta*. The bear went to the tree and stirred the hole with its tail. The thief caught hold of the tail as best as he could when it tried to escape. The bear ran away and argued with the tiger that it considered the same to be puller of tail and not *Tapta*.

The bear told the problem to the elephant and they went to the tree for discovery. Thereupon the elephant used its trunk for purpose of revenge. The thief cut a part of the trunk with his knife.

The elephant considered it to be the cutter of trunk, or beater of trunk and not otherwise. Then they told the lion about their experiences; and spoke of the consequent dangers. All the animals of the forest came to the tree. The thief had escaped by this time. Nothing was found in the hole after verification. The experience of the tiger was taken as more reliable than those of the bear and the elephant, in the verdict of the lion.

In a variant of this tale the tiger narrated his fear to the jackal which wondered what Tapta was. Both came together to the tree. On seeing the man's head sticking out of the hole they cried and ran as fast they could. After running some distance the jackal died as he could not pace with the tiger.

The Meitei story of Tapta bears some analogy to those of the long-legged one, Rati-bi-Yali of Assam Valley, and of a stronger creature called *Kong Kong* in Karbi lullaby. Tapta as mentioned in this tale (not in the form of a cradle song) frightened the child and put him to sleep.

Teacher Fox

In this tale cunning fox appears as a learned teacher. A python king sent his seven sons to the scholar fox for education. They served for the light refreshment one by one for the cunning fox. When the fatherly care made the king anxious about them from time to time, the master dispelled it by flimsy excuses. At last, the king was informed that the young ones had gone for higher education. Realising the crime he took a vow of retaliation and he caught the tongue of the fox while it was drinking water. But the wily fox said: "You have grasped the dirty clothes full of stool and urine of children". It escaped when it loosened the grasp. In the second time the python king caught it by the tail. The fox shouted, "O python king, you have caught of *toura* (reeds) and not my tail". The python relaxed and the fox escaped. The third time, the king threw his spear at the jackal. The jackal scholar already gave signal to his wife to make passage in the den. Later they fled in all haste into the depths of the forest.

This story has a parallel in the stories of Siyal Pandit among the Assamese people of the plains. The fox in charge of the tortoise's sons current among the Bengalis or of a hare and a fox among the Negories. In all of them it is the fox which escapes from the foolish crocodile (Assamese) or tortoise (Bengali) through the presence of mind.

The Fox and the Tiger

Once a cunning and lazy fox, Bhallop by name, was required to build a good house for the security of his pregnant wife. When the time of confinement was at hand he took his wife to a tiger's den saying that it was the house he had built for themselves. They lived there and ate the small tigers. One day the fox saw from the top of a hillock the tiger coming to her den with the dead body of a big deer. He said: "Wife, a tiger is coming here". "Make the child cry when it comes nearer. When I ask the reason you simply say that it desires to eat a fresh tiger and not the dead body of tigers" Getting the signal they enacted the scene for the sake of threatening the tiger. The tiger overheard their conversation and thought some one more powerful than it was occupying the den. At this moment the fox said to his wife "Look! here comes a tiger, I will catch it for you". Utterly puzzled, the tigeress took a sudden turn leaving behind the dead body of the deer and plunged into the deep wood. The fox and his wife then ate the dead body.

In another tale the fox appeared as a cheat in the company of the tiger, bear, lion, rat, etc., in a jungle and showed its superiority to all by playing its trick. One by one, they ran away leaving the dead bodies carried by them. The fox ate them and hid itself in an underground tunnel.

The Tiger and the Heron

Once a tiger went in search of something to eat. Seeing an old man in his bamboo pavilion he cast ferocious glance and threatened to eat him up. He said, "Grandapa what good in eating me. I am too weak. Your king is to be too weak." The tiger went away. Later the old man sent his son Kumleina (one suffering from

disease for many years) to guard the field against the birds. The same tiger growled and came near to eat him up. Here also the deformed man repeated what his father had told the tiger earlier. The tiger left him.

Then the tiger joined the heron in scooping out water with a type of pot with a long handle for catching fish. It was agreed between them that they would equally share the fishes caught. The heron became furious on seeing the headless fishes kept by the tiger in the pot. A fighting ensued between them in which the heron attacked the tiger with its wings. The sick man enjoyed the duel as a witness.

The following day the defeated tiger came and threatened to take the life of the sick man. He mocked at the tiger which became furious and tried to pounce upon the sick man. Trembling with fear the sick man fell down from the bamboo platform. He lost consciousness when he fell down before the tiger. The impure air came down from his belly; the sick man said: It is yesterday's heron which I will set on you. My father caught it yesterday near the field. The tiger replied "wait, wait, sick man, I will run as swiftly as I can". Thus by his wit he saved his life.

Elephant in Folk Tales

We have some stories of the royal divine elephant. The royal elephant (vehicle of Lord Vishnu) is made to choose the king when the throne of Manipur falls vacant. The white elephant figures in the lore as the charger of god Koubru, the supreme lord of the North. The story of a widow who possessed an elephant is as follows. In Moirang (west of present Bishenpur district) there lived Chaoba with his wife Kiyangchaibi in the later part of the 19th century. Children they had none. After the harvesting season, Chaoba went with some friends to None, a Kabui hill Naga village, for collecting betel leaf. After taking food at night some of his companions had made arrangements to sleep under the tree. Some sat by the side of the fire made by them.

At this time the divine elephant of Koubru was mating with his partner. The she-elephant got herself trapped in her path. A

sou (spike/thorn) has entered her foot. The male elephant tried to remove it but could not succeed. He thought of finding out human beings who could remove it and moved towards the very place. All persons except Chaoba made good the escape. The divine elephant carried Chaoba in deep slumber to the place where the she elephant was trapped. When he woke up, he came to know why he was brought there. And with the help of the male elephant he removed the *sou*.

Chaoba's wife, who heard the fate of Chaoba, thought that her husband had been killed, and was full of sorrow. Arrangements were made for his funeral ceremonies as per the tribal custom.

In the midst of all this noisy activities the divine elephant brought back Chaoba to his place and blessed both Chaoba and his wife. Chaoba wished to have a child as skilled as the elephant. Chaoba narrated the strange incident to his wife. The funeral rites were stopped accordingly. But he died after a year. The elephant gave birth to a baby elephant. The three came to Chaoba's house to see him in due course. Not seeing him, the divine elephant opened the door and kept the baby elephant inside the house and then left for the jungle.

The baby elephant came to be known as *Moirng Sha*/elephant of Moirang nurtured and kept by the widow. The tame elephant gave joy to all passers by in the night when they gave food to him. It was ready to obey and carry out whatever the people wanted it to do, to guard them against tigers, to escort them in the jungle, to engage in *Kheda* operation. Eventually Moirang Sha became the chief mount of Maharaja Chandrakirti Singh (1850-1887).

The British officials were thrilled to see its intelligence and loyalty to the master. The divine elephant met a tragic death. *Takhen Sha* (elephant from Tripura, another elephant of the king) attacked it while in chain in the night during the *kheda* operation in Koubru Mount conducted by order of Maharaja Shurachandra. The story and tragic death got immortalised in the ballads and *Vijay Panchali*/ stories of Manipur.

The Daughter of a White Elephant

A widow tasted a few leaves of a plant grown in a place, among the heap of the dung of the elephant. Later she gave birth to a female child after signs of pregnancy. She was embarrassed at her fate and nursed her daughter. In due course she grew into a beautiful girl. Everybody ridiculed her as a bastard child since nobody could know her father. From her mother she learnt that her father was the white elephant in the jungle.

The daughter and the white elephant met and lived in the jungle. The white elephant built her hut and provided her with all necessities of life. She grew up into a beautiful young girl of exception when a prince saw her and proposed to her. The girl agreed to and made arrangement for leaving the place. When the elephant came back, the prince managed to escape by changing himself into a needle (some say a golden fly). During the absence of the white elephant he resumed his human form. The white elephant could detect the smell of human body but the girl replied that it was her own smell.

They set out for the palace for the marriage ceremony. The prince rode the chariot and the girl followed him on foot as she was habituated. In the meantime the white elephant returned and chased them. The white elephant stopped them and cursed his daughter that she would not be able to live with her lover because of her ungratefulness to her own father.

After reaching the palace the prince suggested her to stay for sometime on the branch of a tree (by the side of a tank) and to wait for him till he returned from his father's palace for the due solemnisation of marriage due to a prince. Meanwhile an ugly woman came to the tank for drawing water. On seeing the image of the girl on the surface of the water she was glad since she mistook the same for her. Then she saw the beautiful girl on the top of the tree. Receiving an unpleasant shock she asked the girl why she was there. The widow's daughter narrated her story. The ugly woman made up her mind to marry the prince by a plan. She requested the girl to come down and help her in lifting up the heavy pitcher of water on her head. The girl did as requested. No

sooner had she come near her than the jealous woman pushed her into the water and thus killed her. The dead body was buried in the swamp. Then she sat on the same branch and waited for the prince.

The prince came with his attendants with the permission of the king. The sight of the ugly girl was disappointing to him. Since nothing could be done, marriage was duly performed. The widow's daughter appeared in the dream of the prince and told him all that had happened to her. She thought out a plan for regaining her human shape and suggested. "I am now taking the form of a lotus plant and keep me carefully for seven days". The prince tried thrice but the wicked woman got the flower and destroyed it thrice after stealing even from the prince's pocket. Thus, the beautiful girl, as a consequence of her father's curse, suffered.

Birds in Folk Tales

Interesting tales of the birds are those of bird Pebet, going to her parental house by Khambrangchak (partridge), grand feast of Soibol or pigeon, Tokpa Lanaba (war with the wild Tokpa/cat), stories about men turning into Uthum (a kind of bird), cuckoo, (water wild fowl) and parrot. The tale of Uchek Langmeidong is discussed in connection with that of a step-mother. In the story of Puraba Purabi Waba was trapped by a boy for eating his rice. As advised by his sister the boy got the jewel from Waba instead of killing it. He became more prosperous with its power.

Pseudo-monk cat and bird Pebet:- There are two tales connected with monk-cat. In some versions both tales are treated as the first and second part of a larger story of monk cat. In the first tale we find how he pretended to be a monk begging alms, counting beads and uttering god's name and preached non-violence among the mice. One day seven young mice approached him to become his disciples whom he ate up in his room. The mice realised their folly. From that moment they never gave alms to him and never went to him.

In the second part the monk-cat took advantage of eating little babies out of the clutch of mother Pebet/bird. Mother Pebet did not provoke fight with him before her young ones were able to fly. She taught them to eat with their beaks and fly from one courtyard to another, from one tree to another. The monk-cat used to visit them and asked how he looked like. The mother Pebet pacified him saying that he was as beautiful as the pitcher full of water, as a basket full of paddy, symmetrical garland of *Ngari* (rotten fish) fascinating fruit of *tayal* (having red flower) tree, the rising sun etc. When the monk-cat again asked the mother bird about his appearance, having grown bold because of familiarity, she replied in an amusing way that a cat is a cat. In an angry mood the cat tried to catch all the nestlings. Getting the hint from the mother all flew away except the weak and youngest one. The mother pebet advised the cat to bath the dirty pebet in the morning at sun rise and to feed some grains of rice and threw away three times so that it would be palatable and relishing in eating. While doing so, it flew away after defecating on the cat. The cat licked the dropping and looked at it in great despair.

✓ *Cumulative tales of Khambrangchak Pidonu*

A partridge goes to bath before going to her parental house. It throws water on the back of a woodcock. Being angry it curbs the bird which all of a sudden it takes its seat on a hog plum plant full of ripe fruits. The hog plum fruits falls on a wild ant which gives an old woman a bite. The old woman breaks the nest of bats. The bird flies off and enters the ear of the royal elephant. The elephant does not take anything for many days. It undergoes medical treatment. The bat comes out because of the effect of the medicine. In some version the wild ant having been hurt gave a sharp bite to Abhiram, the pig, which crossed the cowshed of Thapa who pursued him with a spear. The pig sought the intervention of the elephant which tried the case. In most cases of this nature the matter goes to the king for trial. In the above version the verdict was that all were found innocent except the woodcock. The woodcock was let free by the king. Parallel to such types are

Assamese tales of the Ant and the Frog, the Crow and the Tipse and Mikir version of the story of an egg.

Feast of Pigeon

Once the pigeon sent invitation to four birds, i.e, a crow, an egret, an owl and an *Ushai* (the eastern heron). On the day and time fixed for the feast they came there. The host asked them to take their seats in order of seniority. They would seek the blessing from the senior-most bird for their progeny. Out of hunger the crow attempted to take the first seat. The egret was cut to the quick and encountered with the crow. The heron's attempt to take the same was challenged by the owl. The dispute was brought to the notice of all birds. They looked upon the vulture as the judge. After scrutinising their age the owl proved victorious. In his statement, he said that he was the father-in-law of Atiya Guru, the Almighty Father, as his name suggested. Later Iku (father-in-law) was changed into *Maku* (owl) as its name.

Stories are current among the people that an unfortunate girl Songri Loungakpi transformed herself into a parrot as she could not remain as human being on account of her own promiscuous relationship with her father. Kacheng of Heirem Khunjan clan became *Uthun* (a bird which lived on fresh fish) out of fear of losing life at the hands of his attackers after hiding himself in a *Shoi* (fishing area).

Shanlou, the hero, cursed his beloved second wife, princess Upimnu of Kabow (Burmese part) that her first son by her unlawful lover Laphong Laonba might change into cuckoo. Ever since this time the son remained as cuckoo and transformed himself into butterfly in the Burmese border.

Tokpa Lanaba (War with the wild Cat)

The tale tells us how a small cock or *waba* finished a wild cat with the help of of an egg, a *padum* (pin made out of bamboo), Ngakra fish (*Magur*), a knot of rope and a hammer of tamarind tree (Pastle).

Waba (bird) or the cock took revenge for the killing of its father (mother in another version). The interesting story has its Lakher parallel the wild cat, the hen and the egg where we find the spirit of the winter the red ant and the chaff in addition to the common items, each insisting on accompanying the cock and helping it in its attempt to avenge its mother's death after devising a fool-proof strategy.

The latter part of Kachari tale is called the story of Yaojama (the armless Demon). Here an old man killed the demon (who killed his wife) with the help of the ants, bees, egg, a packet of stool, a razor, a snake, his sword and a tiger.

The bat partaking the character of bird and animal

The animals and birds of a big jungle had a quarrel for a reason. Each side put the blame on the other. At last the bear and the owl intervened in the dispute on the condition that the animals should pay their taxes to the concerned group. They discovered in the bat, a hybrid form, which refused to pay taxes to both sides. To the animals it said that it was a bird. To the birds it said that it was an animal. Both parties excommunicated the bat and charged it with causing trouble to both sides.

The bat did not seek food in the day time nor did in the night but it did so at daybreak. What we see the bird in a hybrid form is because of this fact.

Divine and Demonic Nature : Story of Shanarembi and Chaishra

In the Haya age, Treta Yuga, there reigned a king called Sentreng Apanba in Manipur. He had a court scholar called Khulenganba who had two wives, the senior being called Sangkhureima and the junior Yaibireima. By the grace of the Guru/Immortal, the elder one had a daughter and also a boy (in another version) and the younger one had only one daughter. The father died after some time. The two widows used to pluck vegetables and go to Shilem lake for catching fish. The younger widow thought always of ways to harm the elder one. One day while catching fish it so happened that Sangkhureima caught all

types of fish but Yaibireima caught some snakes and reptiles and not a single fish. Both of them took rest under a fig tree. She grew envious of the fate of the elder one and climbed up the fig tree for plucking the fruit. Once or twice she dropped the fig fruits to the elder one who partook of the juice. At last the latter was made to close her eyes and open her mouth to swallow the fruits. Then she dropped the reptiles and insects from her fish basket. The poor woman swallowed them and died on account of snake bite. She came down and pushed the dead body into the deep water of the lake. It got transformed into a tortoise. Everybody was shocked to hear from the younger co-wife the tragic death of the elder widow by drowning

The younger widow and her daughter Chaishra began to maltreat the step-daughter, lovely Shanarembi. One night the tortoise mother appeared in the dream of her daughter, Shanarembi, and revealed the crime committed by the step-mother. She further instructed Shanarembi to keep her in a pitcher for five days without any break so that she may assume human form. Both the step-mother and half sister were annoyed to oversee the phenomenon.

Chaishra pretended to be ill in her bed. When Yaibireima came to her daughter she said tortoise flesh would cure her. "Get that tortoise from the pitcher of their house. Boil it for cooking." The step-mother forced poor Shanarembi to boil the tortoise. When she tried to take away the fuel stick (on hearing the mother's words from the pan) but could not save her own mother before them.

Chaishra and her mother ate the tortoise flesh to their heart's content and threw away the bones in the verandah. Again the tortoise mother told Shanarembi in her dream to keep the bones of tortoise in a basket after covering it by a piece of cloth. It must not be opened for seven days. Out of her anxiety Shanarembi opened the basket and thereby disturbing the normal process of coming to human shape. The tortoise mother assumed the shape of a sparrow and flew away.

Both Shanarembi and Chaishra grew up in course of time. Shanarembi was beautiful and accomplished but not nicely dressed up. Chaishra had an ugly face although properly dressed. Once king Sentreng Apanba went for hunting with a large retinue, horses and elephants. The king saw the two girls by the side of a river. Realising the quality of Shanarembi the king made her the chief queen after a ceremonial marriage. She spent her life with her brother in a joyous mood. A son was also born to Shanarembi, the boy was named Mechi Sana Melei Khomba in Manipuri sacred lores.

Yaibireima and her daughter Chaishra gnashed their teeth in anger and were planning to kill queen Shanarembi. They invited her for a dinner in the house. Shanarembi came with her bodyguard to the stepmother's house with the permission of the king. She in her good mood asked the servant to come to the house after one month. Meanwhile Chaishra, out of jealousy, dropped the queen's dress in a hole. When queen Shanarembi went down to bring it up, the wicked step-mother poured the hottest water over queen Shanarembi's body. Poor Shanarembi got transformed into a pigeon and flew away.

On the appointed day the retainers arrived at that place to bring back the queen. Chaishra in the queen's dress behaved as if she was the real queen. They suspected the false design but could not verify the false queen as planned by Yaibireima.

The king told her in anger, 'You are not my queen whose face is as fair as the lily. You are disfigured.' Chaishra replied that she contracted mental and physical agony when she wept for her son. The king again continued, "You are not my queen for your nose is too long, your eyes are very deep and the hairs of the eyelids are bushy. Chaishra replied, 'I missed you so much, I cried rubbing my eyes all the way'".

In spite of his suspicion the king wanted a suitable opportunity in order to detect the false queen. In the meantime the pigeon flew into a branch and addressed to Meingangba (some say Muslim grass cutter), the royal servant in charge of cattle, concerning the forgetfulness of the king about queen Shanarembi, animal

epidemic, grievance of the prince, loss of his own sickle, etc., along with a warning for reporting these words to the king. The king on getting the report went in search of the pigeon with the grains of paddy. The king caught it and kept it in the palace. Even as a bird, she took away the dirty things from the prince's eyes. Chaishra killed the bird with a stick and prepared a nice meal for the king. The king refused to taste the flesh of the pet bird and threw it away and buried it behind the kitchen. But it was the age of truth and there grew a luscious fruit plant there and it was full of fruits overnight. Chaishra made enquiries but none could throw light on it since the servant did not express that the plant was growing out at the place.

A big luscious fruit came from the plant. The king did not ask his members to give away but the false queen gave the same as gift to a monk. The monk kept the fruit in an earthen jar since the same was not yet ripe enough to be eaten. Later it so happened to the monk that the fruit disappeared when the knife was available and vice versa. Early next morning the monk went out for alm. Returning home he was surprised to find that his cottage had been washed, the meal cooked. The monk kept the mystery concealed for some days and was determined to solve it by all means.

Long before the first streak of daylight came, the monk got up and had gone some feet secretly in the darkness and entered the cottage silently and watched the door. At sunrise he saw a handsome woman coming out of the jar and roaming in the kitchen for house work. "It is a fruit maiden" muttered the monk. Recognising her as the queen the monk took her to the king. There was a quarrel between Shanarembi and Chaishra on the issue of identity of the real queen. The obstinate Chaishra denied the whole story and called Shanarembi to be a fruit girl.

At long last the king decided to settle the case by appealing to a divine ordeal. The parties had to fight a duel with swords. As per the code the defendant was allowed to use a bright and sharp sword but the plaintiff (Shanarembi) had to use a rusty knife for on her part laid the burden of proof. It was thought that if justice

was really on her she would win in spite of using a rusty sword. Chaishra had no belief in the trial by ordeal and was hopeful that she would be able to kill her rival with one stroke. Her demand for use of the bright sword was a legitimate one. The blunt and rusty sword was given to Shanarembi for she had to prove her own case. Shanarembi had the faith in her. "If I am innocent, may Chaishra's sword become harmless to me." In the arena while Chaishra hewed and hacked at her with the sword, she remained unhurt. Suddenly the blunt sword of its own accord, slipped out of Shanarembi's hand and chopped Chaishra's neck. In another variant theme there was no fighting between them. Shanarembi pardoned Chaishra. Both of them lived together as Chief Queen and Rani in great happiness.

The story can be categorised as a wonder tale, a tale of legal type, of the stepmother, etc. It is surprisingly like the Burmese tale, i.e., "The big tortoise" with a moral lesson with the following differences: (i) in the Burmese version, we find in place of Sangkhu Leima, the first wife, a lady killed by her husband, fisherman while fishing. He married after some time a hateful spouse who gave birth to a step-sister of the first daughter. (ii) The heroine of the tale in Burmese version is given as youngest mistress who in the form of a paddy bird flew in the weaving room of the false queen and seizing the spindle in her teeth wove a cloth of wonderful pattern. (iii) The Burmese tale is longer than Manipuri tale in as much as the king cut the dead body of Chaishra into pieces and sent them in a jar to Yaibireima as a gift. (iv) The emergence of Shanarembi in her true shape was initiated by a monk, said to be an incarnation of god Ashiba in Manipuri version, but in Burmese version it was done by a woodcutter and his wife. (v) The Manipuris take this tale to be a folk history or legend having historical base about the reigning king in the Haya Age (Treta age) such as Sentreng Apanba, Mechi Sana Melei khomba (Shanarembi's son), Sillenpat, modern area near the Shyamasakhi Girls' school. (vi) Some of the songs associated with this tale are being immortalised in the *Lai Haraoba* dance ritual (merry making of gods). The more popular ones are given in English renderings (a) "Oh king forgetter of thy wife, Dost thou really forget her,

Thou hast forgotten intentionally, Oh, Fie, Fie, Thy loin's belt is cut (Bird's address to the grass cutter); (b) Come out Shanarembi, we shall build your warm net, and shall gladden you by divine clappings (The monk, said to be the incarnation of god Ashiba, addresses the fruit girl to come out with this song. The same is sung by fiddle players). (vii) Scholars have given allegorical and philosophical interpretations of the tale. Shanarembi and Chaishra are the personification of Divine and *Asuri Sampad* of the *Gita*. The fishing lake is treated as the field for work/action, etc. Such is the story of Shanarembi who endured long years of sorrow and suffering in Manipuri mind.

Tales of moral and legal type

Another folk tale is that of Prince Sanamanik, claimed of true mother between Sangna Nari and a false mother, the *mali* called Kundo Leisangbi. Both had to prove their chastity and motherhood by spurting milk from the breast through seven layers of white cloth. Sangna Nari, the true mother, proved her motherhood. The tradition of Yoirangchand (a Manipur prince who became the king of Burma) is contained in the same text in addition to his divine birth of god Pakhangba.

The fable of Chaoba, the son of a Katal, the laziest man, is an apt illustration of legal, reverie and chance types. He was wrapped up in the contemplation of his prospect from the oracle of a *maibi* (priestess) and his future good luck. Suddenly there emerged a great horse rider of the court and he let the pitcher of liquid sugar on his head break to pieces to the great annoyance of his friend.

Both of them were coming to the court for the damages. On the way, the owner of a horse asked them to detain the running horse. The lazy man pelted stones at it and hurt the eyes of the beautiful horse and put it in serious trouble. On the third time the lazy man dared to commit suicide and actually took the fatal leap into the river and thereby killing an old fisherman. Cases against him came in thousands.

In the court the king postponed the trial and kept him in the palace. He was fed by the princess who was under the influence

of bad planets according to the prediction of court astrologers. Another visiting king challenged the king of the court with a riddle on the condition that he would be a tributary if he knew the head and tail of a stick which was covered with pieces of gold. On getting this from the princess the lazy man agreed to solve the riddle in the assembly after the swearing in ceremony. He took out the sword from the golden stick and dropped it in a pond and thus succeeded in finding out the clue. This was agreed to and the king won and persuaded him to marry his daughter as he saved the kingdom. Thus everything ended happily for Chaoba, the laziest person. This tale is associated with a well known proverb "You, rich people, be prepared to study grinding and husking of paddy; you poor people be prepared to study horse riding."

Belief in evil spirits, ghosts and demons

Such beliefs surviving from primitive times have been the source of tales, rituals and taboos. Here are some tales.

Henjunaha and Lairourembi

The first Saturday of the Manipuri month of Lamta called *Lamtai Thangja* is a dreadful day. A ritual known as *Saroi Khangba* is performed by old women and maibas in the morning by the offering of vegetables. The night is believed to be the time of the assembly of evil spirits/Saroi said to kill Henjunaha who went to the house of his beloved Lairourembi with his divine polostick. He was warned by his mother not to go out on that night for playing *Likon* (indoor game of small shell) in the house of Lairourembi. In the dream of Lairourembi the goddess had come and warned her about the death of her lover at the gutter of house. She committed suicide. The two lovers went hand in hand to the land of the death. Like the story of Savitri and Satyavan, the god of death restored the life of both since they had not completed the life span. Thus death did not separate the lovers. It is one of the stories of *Moirang Shayon* (epics).

Lai Khutsangbi (fairy with long hands)

There was a lady with her husband and a child. Her husband was away for some purpose. Their house was close by a dense

jungle where a fairy with long arms lived. In her search for the prey in that area she used to thrust her long arms through the crack of a wall and pulled out the innocent people. She had struck terror to all. She came to the lady's house and asked her whether her husband was inside. She trembled in fear and informed the fairy that her husband was there. The fairy left the house without much enquiry. For some time she visited the house asking her in a terrible voice, in the dead of night. After some time her husband returned and knew from his wife about his presence as a measure of their safety. He determined to have revenge on the fairy for her cruel deeds. He sharpened his sword and told his wife to tell the fairy that he was out when she came next time. As usual the fairy came and asked the question. Having got the sign the wife said 'No he is out.' In spite of some doubt the fairy peeped through the hole and saw the husband with a sword in hand. She fled from the scene as fast as she could though the long arms obstructed her swift motion.

Finding that the fairy did not thrust her arm as before, he chased her and cut the arms with his sword. She cried in pain and uttered "You liar, you said, your husband is out." She ran faster and disappeared in the jungle. The husband was a bit disappointed but from that day onwards there was no threat to the people from the fairy.

Lai Khadang Pandabi

At one time there lived a couple. The husband was industrious. He did other trading business in addition to his agricultural work. Unfortunately the wife was greedy, lazy and was in the habit of eating whatever that was good and tasty without thinking of her husband. There was no improvement in the house as the husband was being made a henpecked one.

The husband thought of checking the character of his wife. Once he left home on a trading venture under a pretext and hid himself in a *Yengai* (a part of the house above the wall). In his absence the wife cooked and took a satisfactory meal with all types of dried fishes and vegetables full of vitamins. She dropped

many things while eating and gobbling. The place was full of fishbones and residual things. She uttered "who will clear these waste materials from the dining place." This was an unpleasant sight to him when he saw from above. He had no other way but to reply "Your father will do that." The wife was an expert in convincing her husband and made a strong defence of her wicked behaviour. The husband could not make any comment on her and submitted to her will. The Meiteis believe that this cheekless woman who controlled her husband is *Lai Khadang Pandabi*, a fairy without cheek.

Role of Astrologers in Manipuri Tales

We have tales connected with astrological calculations and rituals and processes as in other tales. Chengba was a poor villager with a hard time. He tried his luck by dropping a sheath fish in a pond and informed the people to test his calculation. This surprised the villagers who talked highly of him. At one time he stole one's pot and kept it in another place. When consulted he pointed out the place from where it could be traced. Meanwhile the king of the place lost his gold ring. He went to Chengba for his calculation and divine powers. He had not the capacity for the necessary predictions. However, he had a deep knowledge of human psychology and the problems concerning royal court. By taking permission from the king, he began to keep watching for the aspirants of the throne in the night. It was a relief for him to know that Khwairakpa, the kings' younger brother, was attempting to revolt against the king with his force. Arrangements were made for feeding them. Next day he came and bowed to the king for checking the suspected prince. Accordingly the king revenged on the rebels and succeeded in recovering his lost ring. In appreciation of his prediction Chengba was given many rewards.

Tales of Soirels (Satan)

There lived two brothers of whom the elder one was a noted astrologer with no issue. The wife of the younger one was pregnant and gave birth to a child. The astrologer advised his brother to bury it alive in a box by the bank of a nearby river. The

second and third child were also buried alive at his suggestion. Later twins were born to the very lady. The bodies were placed in an earthen pot along with some pieces of stones, some boiled peanuts and buried on either side of the nearby river in a pit about some feet in depth. This was too much for the mother. Seeing this unhappy situation she fancied that the younger brother tried to kill his elder brother with his *dao*. The elder brother pacified the angry brother and advised to find out the reasons for burying them alive after keeping watch of them from the burial place in the night. In the night he overheard the conversation among the buried babies that they were born as their children in order to torture the parents through their *soirels*/ because satanic babies had not received their due share of food, and so thought of causing further trouble to the parents.

Getting at the truth behind the mystery he reproduced the same to his elder brother, the astrologer. As demanded by them the elder brother went to the corpses and performed the ritual with the materials of stones and dried peanuts, small water pot and dried sticks. At the grave he uttered these words; "you, devil children, you are not allowed to return to your former parents till the fried peas became a plant, till these sticks became a big forest. Drink water from the pot." Some magical lines were drawn with the *dao* with the idea that the entrance had been closed forever. It was interpreted that a child happened to die during first two years or in unnatural ways the deceased babies were regarded as *shoirel*/ satans. The ritual was observed so that there might be no occurrence until the stone had taken roots, and the boiled peanuts had germinated. This entrance was closed forever. After this ritual the sorrow stricken couple had no further problem. A son was again born to them. All the members settled down to live happier lives.

Fate's favour

There lived a poor man with his family members. He spent his time very sadly. He went to the royal astrologer to learn his future. After deep calculations he said with a smile, "your sorrows will be over now. Your star is ascending. You will be as big as the reigning king from tomorrow at this time." He was annoyed with

the astrologer who gave taunting remarks and threatened to kill him with abusive words. The astrologer calmed him and advised him to see what his fate would be on the following date. Then he consulted another astrologer who confirmed the former prediction. He agreed to wait as advised by them.

After spending that night with his family members he came to the palace for trying his luck. Praying to god Pakhangba, the divine ancestor of the king's clan, he entered the Darbar with the permission of the authority and waited for his chance. The time for doing plenty of wealth was about to be over. The idea came to him that he would rather die than live in such a miserable way. He planned to kill the king and to die himself after trial. Approaching the king's throne he gave him a hard blow by the side of the royal turban. The king fell down unconsciously. His turban fell on the ground. The poor man was caught redhanded and was chastised by the guards. Lord Pakhangba assumed the form of a small snake and appeared from the turban in the presence of all. The king interrogated the poor man and said "Were you panic stricken when you saw the snake from my turban." Now the poor man wanted to save himself when he heard the king mentioning the divine snake. He admitted having beaten the king in order to save him from the snake. The king was pleased with him and gave suitable rewards of dhoti, bangles, etc., after making him Nongthonba, one of the titleholders of the king's Darbar. Who can bypass what fate has decreed him.²

Later, one of his intimate friends visited him and persuaded him to reveal to him the secret of his rise. He too wanted to follow the example for his fortune. But he was arrested and killed by the guards. They tied his hands and feet and threw him into the river.

The Vaishanava period has certain tales which are concerned with the monk's life, wrong interpretation of abstruse Vaishanava themes in Manipuri with humorous results, restructure of old stories in Hindu garb and love themes between the new arrival of communities (Hindus, Brahmans, Muslims, etc.)⁹. We shall touch one or two.

Tonsija's Trap

There lived one attractive and accomplished girl called Tonsija whom a certain Akham loved very much. The youth could not get the approval even after five years of love affair. She spent most of her time welcoming the prospective youth, serving them with pipes of tobacco and preparing *chilums* in her place according to the custom. She thought of engaging them in her work by a strategy. She told them one by one to prepare her *Naonkhok* (a kind of stick for her loom) from the hill. She supplied a packet of rice with curry and some pieces of fried Ngakra fish to each. By chance the seven youth came to a hill stream for their food. They realised that the food was prepared by the concerned lady and the fried Ngakra fish with oil was cut into seven pieces equally divided among them when linked together the pieces represented the size of the fish. This attitude threw them into fury and they hastened to her place and threatened to kill her. She politely calmed them and implored them to take a dish prepared by her hand before her death. She secretly poisoned the dish and made them take the meals at the same time. By doing so seven youth perished in her house. She kept the dead bodies in concealment. Meanwhile Akham became a monk on account of his disappointments and came to Tonsija's house for begging. She addressed the monk "Agya Babaji, please stay in my place to-day and help me in cremating my dead husband." The monk remembered his past relations. After keeping her begging bowl and bag near the *tulasi* mound he was ready to cremate the dead bodies with an axe and spade. As the monk was not permitted to enter one's house, Tonsija was obliged to bring the dead bodies up to the courtyard. He cremated the bodies on a nearby hill after carrying the same and putting them to the pyre. Akham returned to that place but he was informed by Tonsija that the dead men came to life and had been just back from the cremation ground. In this way the monk cremated seven persons and was tired of work and felt asleep on the said place.

It so happened that two boatmen arrived and moored the boat. They needed fire for smoking tobacco and contacted the monk for lending fire. Thinking the boatmen to be the dead

coming to life Akham attempted to push them into the fire. The two challenged him like anything. Akham thought of turning back homewards and never thought of taking his begging bowl, bag (jhuli) and koupin (dress) from Tonsija's place.

Who is fated for Khogendra must be for Thabi

An interesting story is told of a Brahman youth and his marriage with a Muslim lady by adhering to the predictions of astrologers and role of fate in determining one's life. In later Manipuri social context there was every chance of one being excommunicated from Hindu Manipuri society should one violate the social code. A certain Brahman youth Khogendra by name consulted an astrologer who informed him "you will surely marry an outcaste girl whose name begins with the word Th." A Muslim girl was living on another side of the river. He used to see her in the bathing ghat and his eyes set on her beauty. Once the youth met her and narrated the astrologer's prediction. In order to finish the consequent evils he beat the Muslim girl with a stick and thinking her to be dead, pushed her into the river. She drifted away. She was, however, all right after some time and an old Brahman couple adopted her as their daughter as they were childless.

Later Khogendra developed his relations with her. Thabi was in the know of Khogendra's attitude to her. However, both were keen for marriage with the counsel of the foster father. The ceremonies were done and they lived happily for some time. One day Khogendra happened to touch the injured and healed up part in the head of his wife. On enquiry she narrated what had happened earlier. Khogendra was not to be dissuaded by that event at this stage. They yielded to the fate. Thus the above maxim originated in Manipuri society.

(As per the social and customary code, there are certain restrictions of marriage among the groups of Hindu Manipuris. However, instances of marriage among the prohibited degrees may be easily multiplied. Instance are there of Manipuri kings or nobles taking tribal, Burmese, Assamese, Tripuris and Cacharies

women in the folk literature before the coming of Hinduism. The conduct of high class ladies offering their heart to a lover of inferior caste/community was not normally permitted. The king as the customary head assumed power to issue the permission to the parties with the approval of his *Pandit Loisong* (office of the customary experts). The customary restrictions of pre-Hinduism and Vaishnavism and their jurisprudence proved a bar to the marital affairs of lovers.

Conclusion

The following observations may be made by way of conclusion.

- (1) The tales discussed are a good sample of the old ones narrated by men or grandmothers from age to age through a hundred generations. The narrator always used to begin every story with the words "*Thaina Thokhiramboire, Thaina Thouramboire*" (It so happened in the past). The reference is to the hoary past with unmentioned names of the people. Morals are purposely inserted at suitable places by the elderly people to convince the children.

Such practices of the age of truth seem to be a forgotten chapter in view of rapid changes in environment and lifestyles of the people. However, it is to be noted that modern creative writers of Manipur have collected materials from folk literature and used them in their works.

- (2) The origin of tales are found but the names of authors are not given in them. The stories are the creation of untutored elderly women of Meitei society. The materials are mostly taken from articles of every use, nature, extraordinary events and above all experiences of the race and the land.

However, evidences are on record that only a few of the folk tales are reduced to writing, being found in the works of court scholars of the kings. The greater portion was till recently only in the oral lore of the masses living in the villages near the hills, jungles, etc.

- (3) A comparative study proves that the half-naked folk in the far off hill areas is a cousin (of Kirata group), albiet a hundred

remove to the well-dressed and cultured gentleman of the city. However, the sacrifices of swine, buffalo, cattle and consumption of rice-bear are not recorded in the typical Meitei tales.

- (4) Some of the characters referred to in the tales such as father of queen Sanarenbi, husband of Sanarembi, fishing in the lake, Prince Yairongchan, Elephant of Moirang, were not imaginary but real ones who bore the same names and carried out the same activities in actuality.
- (5) Some of the tales are current after subsequent alterations with the passage of time. Reference to the use of Sanskrit, Hindi and Bengali words are noticed in the different versions of one and the same tale. The tale of what fate decreed for Khogendro seems to be an echo of a part of *Ratnabali* (in Sanskrit).

Such tales as (*Hari nongnang* / cricket, Katal's son Chaoba, the lazy person) have modern additions on account of their unduly lengthy nature and many other characteristics like the boxing or linking of stories.

- (6) Brevity and home spun expressions are the set features of most of the folk tales.
- (7) Such features as the trading relations with Assam, Kabow and the border areas, agricultural operations in the country-life, mention of crafts like weaving, field-work against tigers, birds, etc., position of the king, nobles of the court, jealousy of co-wives in a male dominated society etc., will be fascinating to students of History, Sociology or Anthropology. As such the materials are of far greater value to us than the manipulated dates and achievements of some exaggerated individuals in the dry history of Manipur.
- (8) The Meitei tale is full of episodes where chance, fate, biodata, etc., are responsible for the ascent of the widow's sons, genuine foolish persons and poor men. As in Greek thought the role of predestination, divine decree and oracle of the *maibis* make a people an insignificant creature utterly helpless

in the face of a good chance or destiny. The foolish ones become the sons-in-law of the King through a minor chance happening.

- (9) Father-daughter relationship that we find in the origin of cuckoo is an instance of Oedipus complex.

Notes and References

1. Smt. R.K. Tamphasana Devi, *Manipuri Loka Sahitya*, Imphal, 1974, pp. 21-57,
2. The attempt at a classification along with examples of identification is the author's own observation.
3. S. Bormani Singh, *Chingtang Phunga Wari*, Imphal, 1969.
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6. Elwin Verrier - *Myths of North-Eastern Frontier of Assam*, Shillong, 1958.

Scholar, critic, philosopher, journalist, cultural anthropologist and social worker — that has been the career of **Dr. M. Kirti Singh**. He was the first Manipuri to secure Ph.D. and D.LITT. in Philosophy. He is the recipient of Padma Shri (1991) for his contributions in the field of educational and social works in Manipur. He took his M.A. in Philosophy, LL.B., Ph.D. degrees from Gauhati University, and D.LITT. from Ranchi University. He began his career as a lecturer. He has been associated with Indian Philosophical Congress, All India Oriental Conferences, Indian Science Congress Association, the Asiatic Society and Institute of Oriental Study.

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Folk culture is understood to be the expression of homogenized social life as opposed to the multi-layered urban life. It is a part of the well-integrated culture of a society and has a mass appeal on account of its racial memory and historical values.

This study concerns particularly with folk tales, songs, riddles, proverbs, and rites of Manipur (situated on the north-east corner of India). It is a careful collection and edition of research papers read and discussed at various regional, national and International conferences held from 1978 to 1992. This research study is based on the critical examination of different aspects of Folk Culture of Manipur carried out painstakingly by the author during the past 30 years.

The volume furnishes considerable information on the beliefs and practices, legends and tales, lyrics and songs and customs and traditions of this part of India, an area manifesting the unity in the Manipuri communities and different stages of their cultural development. It also includes English renderings of Manipuri folklore materials and dwells on points which the researchers can draw upon profitably.

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