



**PROCEEDINGS OF  
NORTH EAST INDIA  
HISTORY ASSOCIATION**

**SEVENTH SESSION**

**PASIGHAT : 1986**

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NORTH EAST INDIA  
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## PREFACE

It gives us great joy to find that the Association has been growing in strength over the years as the premier research organisation in North East India. Our strategies of grass-root research, inter-disciplinary approach, and group orientation for an objective understanding of the nature of socio-economic developments and social formations at different points of time have started to yield the cherished results. The membership of the organisation has been steadily increasing. Our more than three hundred members today are the researchers from the Surveys and research departments and the teachers in the Universities, Colleges and Schools spread over all the seven States in the North-East, besides a few from outside the region. Our members are not from History but also almost all the Social Sciences and Humanities streams, and this is because of our faith in the study of history as a science for socio-economic development. Our annual sessions are major academic gatherings in the region, attended on an average by hundred and fifty delegates from all over the region. A large number of research papers are presented and discussed in the annual session each one of which is a substantial addition to the existing literature. Our proceedings volumes are acclaimed as major references on North East India. We get requests for copies of current as well as back volumes from all over the country and even abroad.

We have also been able to create some enthusiasm about research in the history of the region. The researches in the history of North East India are going on in all the Universities in the region. A large number of M. Phil. and Ph. D. candidates are working in regional history. There are on-going individual research projects by teachers and professional researchers. The seminars are occasionally organised in various institutions. A fair number of research publications have come out in recent years and many more must be in the pipe lines. The under-graduate and post-graduate level courses in the history of North East India are offered in the Universities in the region. Some of the State departments are planning to introduce the study of the history of the concerned State in the schools, and some of our members are cooperating with the SCERTs in preparing the text books. The emerging important functions of this Association are to coordinate the on-going researches, to design a perspective for research, to develop appropriate tools and methodologies, and

to create literature in the history of the region so that it may be possible to prepare a Comprehensive History of North East India in the next few years.

The present volume is the Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Session of the North East India History Association held at the Jawaharlal Nehru College, Pasighat on November 11-13, 1986. Professor J. B. Ganguly, Director, Calcutta University Post-graduate Centre, Agartala presided over the Session which was inaugurated by Shri Khapriso Krong, Minister of Education, Government of Arunachal Pradesh. Shri B. K. Kakoty, Principal, and Dr. S. Dutta, Head, Department of History, Jawaharlal Nehru College, Pasighat did us great honour as Chairman of the Reception Committee and Local Secretary of the Session respectively. Besides its high academic contents, the delegates shall cherish the fond memory of the session for warmth of the reception extended by the organisers and the colourful entertainment programme. Our thanks are due to the authorities of the Jawaharlal Nehru Colleges Pasighat and the Government of Arunachal Pradesh.

I am personally thankful to my colleagues Dr J. P. Singh, Dr. O. P. Kejariwal, Dr. Milton S. Sangma, Dr. D. R. Syiemlieh and Mr. Abhijit Choudhury for the help in editing and publishing this volume. We are also thankful to the Indian Council of Historical Research and the North Eastern Council for financial assistance.

Shillong

The 25 September 1987.

(J. B. Bhattacharjee)

General Secretary,

North East India History Association.

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## Manipur - A Ritual Theatre State (Coronation Model and Concept of Welfare in Meitei Ethno-State System)

Lokendra Arambam

Clifford Geertz originated the term Theatre State to denote the nature of maintaining political organization through an integrated pattern of ritual relationships between the centre of power and its subordinate areas.<sup>1</sup> Regional or local units imitated the style and pageantry of the centre in terms of religious celebrations and ritual practices over and above normal conformity to territorial-administrative arrangements of control. This ritual unity between various peripheral units and the core domain was exemplified through the integration of folk traditions, symbols and beliefs of the local areas by the centre which was later developed into a cult manifested in systematic organization of religio-political ceremonies.<sup>2</sup> The interesting aspect of this phenomenon was the achievement of an organized form of socio-political order based on constant incorporation of such rites where the political authority takes part as a protagonist. The coronation rite was one such category. In South-east Asia such cultural practices were part of a royal cult at the base of ancient statecraft. The Devaraja cult of the Khmers was a classic model.<sup>3</sup> Here, in this article, an attempt is made to study the *Phambal-Kaba* (Phambal - Throne ; Kaba - To climb or Accession)- the accession rite of ancient Meitei kings as a variant in South-east Asian kingship categories. Attempt is also made to study the ideational bases or the development of such rites as working principles of governmental control in human formations rooted to a common culture.

The act of accession to the throne of the Meitei king, like its counterparts in Southern-Mongoloid South-east Asian kingdoms, was not simply a political act of affirming the ruler's right to get obeisance from the ruled. It was to be a serious invocation to the ancestral spirits to help secure the life-power for affecting the welfare and prosperity of the realm.<sup>4</sup> The growth and prosperity of the state was however homologous with the biological fecundity of the king and queen in ancient Meitei beliefs.<sup>5</sup> Hence deliberate ritual coition between the two was part of the elaborate coronation rites. The representatives of the realm were to be an organic witness to this primeval state ritual, which itself would help re-confirmation of their roles in the homogenous social order. The en-

the ritual of coronation was built upon traditional cosmogonies embellished by the cult of veneration of ancestors and belief in the fertility principle. The cult of the placenta was also deeply embedded into this principle. The coronation celebrations revealed therefore deep socio-cultural layers in structured relationships between the ancestors, the ruler and his people, encapsulating the past, present and future in one solid time frame, and generating in one huge theatrical exercise the governing ideology of the state.

The peasant and tribal communities of Manipur were consolidated through a prolonged struggle covering nearly a thousand years.<sup>6</sup> It emerged as an organized state in the fifteenth century, during the reign of Kyaamba (1467-1508 A. D.) when its sovereign status was internationally recognized by the Shan princes of upper Burma, along with mutual demarcation of frontiers.<sup>7</sup> The state was in fact formed out of the proto-historic fusion of seven cognate clan principalities spread over the wet agriculture areas of the 1520 sq. km. valley. The hills with its heterogenous slash and burn tribal populations were accepted into the political order in a lord-subordinate relationship with annual presentation of tributes and participation in a cyclic friendship ritual in the capital. The ritual was known as *Mera Haochongba* (Dance by Hillmen in October). Sacrifice of a mithum, fraternal wining and dining, and games and merriment pervaded this acknowledgement of plural co-existence. In the fertile sedentary cultivation areas in the central state structure under the Ningthouja ruling lineage (with Nongda Lairen Pakhangba as head 33-156 A. D.), were some of the most sophisticated lacustrine village organizations like the Moirang and the Khuman, who resisted integration into the Meitei political system till the fourteenth. These village organizations became part of the areas of actual control later in the fifteenth century, with acceptance of regional rule through their own kingships, and the state emerged as a supra-village political organization.

The regional or clan principality units were ritually linked with the centre of Meitei power at Imphal through their imitation of styles of palatial structures in their peasant capitals - Kangla - the model of the central Kangla at Imphal.<sup>8</sup> They also accepted the integration of their ritual systems in the worship of ancestors during the *Lai-Haraoba* (merry-making of Gods) festivals, with regional variants finding a place in the total uniform pattern.<sup>9</sup> There were, as part of the common culture, periodic propitiation of spirits during specific days in the agricultural cycle (*Lamda Thangja*, *Kumlak Lamtaiba* etc.).<sup>10</sup> The king's participatory role was seen

in many other important celebrations like the state ritual of *Cheiraoba* (Announcement of New Year), performed in Sajibu (April) at the centre and in individual households of the state. It was a sort of communally acknowledged coming to terms with the changing seasons, propitiation of spirits governing the destinies of the sick and dying, prayer to the ancestors for the benefit of the realm in the new agricultural year. Here the king took part in the community feasting, merry-making etc. at the capital. The entire population observed work taboo for five days during the celebrations.<sup>11</sup> In August, the king also took part in the annual boat races (*Heikru-Hidongba*), a festival of much fanfare, pageantry and spectacle. During the month of October, synchronous with the Haochongba festivals, were organized the *Kwaak-Tanba* (Crow Hunt) rites, where elaborate arrangements were made for the king's public appearance, examination of portents for the year and the very flight of the crow was read for divining the fortune of the state. The same ritual was co-terminous with the remnant of a tribal rite known as *Ukai-Kaappa* (Shooting of Wooden Body Image), where arrows were shot at a huge anthropomorphic wooden construction and belomantic signs were read on the mark of the arrows for the prosperity of the realm.<sup>12</sup> The practice continued in post-Hindu times during the Dassehra festivals, with the wooden image being shaped to represent Ravana, the enemy of Rama. Thus a series of ritual acts pervaded the commonalty, with the king taking part in certain specific proceedings integrating relationships with the ruled and organizing the social good of the state. The most significant, however, was the coronation rite itself, which provided the ideational base for Meitei kingship. For his task in the upkeep of the realm depended on the successful assurance from his ancestor spirits about his moral and spiritual capacity to the throne, which was ritually affirmed by the estates of the realm. The affirmed power and capacity of the ruler was again to be compulsarily substantiated by a ritual was (*Phambal-Laan*) waged by the king against a hostile tribe or nation, immediately after the coronation. It was in itself a test of the efficacy of the ritual act, and a spiritual confirmation of the boon of the ancestors. Even ritual hunts (*Phambal-Shaatanba*) were organized as a minor variant to the ritual practice.

### **Kangla (The Ritual Centre)**

The historic capital and local centre of the state was Kangla, the control of which lay at the root of all political and religious

power. The site of coronation was at a sacred spot at this capital. Topographically, Kangla incorporated adjoining stretches of land from the traditional four divisions or Panas of the state, namely, Laipham Khapham, Ahallup and Naharup, with Imphal forming a separate administrative territorial unit inclusive of the capital Kangla. Kangla was earlier a vast piece of sprawling land, originally a mound or hill east of the Nambul river. It included the ancestral abode of the ruling clan, their burial places, areas of worship with a host of sacred shrines and thatch-roofed houses spread over its territorial complex. There were also megalithic structures of ritual importance. Geomorphologically, Kangla was the first piece of dry land that emerged after prolonged submersion of the valley under water in probably upper pleistocene times.<sup>13</sup> The word Kangla emphasizes the fine spread of dry earth at the centre of Kangleipung, the area of freshly emerged dry land. It was indeed a piece of life from the cosmic vastness of the embryonic watery void. In fact the Loktak lake, which lies at the southern side of the valley near Moirang, had its shores right upto Imphal, where the present General Post Office stands. It is still known as Loktak Maru (Seed of Lokta). Incidentally, Kangla also signifies the central architectural construction or palace, where the king sat for the transaction of his public duties. The big palatial house was constructed with utmost ritual attention and care, with materials for its construction being supplied from different regional areas of the state.<sup>41</sup> The present Kangla historical complex, with a moat surrounding it and which had been garrisoned by the Assam Rifles after the defeat of the state at the hands of the British in 1891, is a much smaller replica of the ancient ruler's seat.<sup>15</sup>

The capital Kangla became organically related to the physiogeographic setting of the state in a special manner. It occupied the ritual centre in Meitei cosmogonic thought. Pre-Hindu Meitei belief systems provide a biological homology of the physical state functioning like a human organism where Kangla occupied the navel, the hollow in the belly left by the detachment of the umbilical cord.<sup>16</sup> In the bio-physical structure of the state, the Koubru hills in the north-west, the early settlement area in pre-historic times, is regarded as the head; the three rivers - Iril, Imphal and Nambul are regarded as the main arteries of the body, and the Loktak lake as the pelvic zone. The drain at the Chindwin beyond the Sugnu Nungthong (Stone Door of Sugnu) was regarded as the rectum. Kangla, therefore, occupied a strategic area in the body structure which was the energy receptacle in the human organism.

It was indeed the seat of the placenta, the vital connection that gives life-blood to the child. It was the reservoir of that organic germ plasm which spread vital and intellectual powers to the entire physical system of the child. An ancient manuscript Leihou-Naofamlol, treating Kangla, its functions and ritual connections gives itself the amazing title of the origination of the earth and of the placenta bracketted in similar symbolic connotations.<sup>17</sup> Kangla, therefore, performs a very vital function in the human organism of the state transmitting energy and life-power to all parts of the system.

Another circle in the belief system was that Kangla being also the microcosm of the state, the miniscule representative of the macro-organism of the body, had within its geographic confines the macro-representation of the entire body symbolized by specific allocation of ritual areas. The macrocosm was present in the microcosm itself.<sup>18</sup> The Koubru hills or the organic head was represented by the physical presence of the shrines of the first creators the Asceba (Sanamahi), and Pakhangba temples along with the Okshang (Pig's house ?), slightly north-west of the coronation seat. The breast of the organism was represented by the Sanathong (Golden Door) and the Kangla Utra (House of Public Duties) at the south-east of the coronation site. The main arteries of the body were now represented by the Khongs (rivulets) - the Laikhong, Khakhong, Marongkhong etc., which washed the central areas of the historic site in a semi-subterranean drain system. The coronation seat (*Pham-moimit* or *Phallangmei*) which was a stone at a cave or Surung was regarded as the eye - the all-seeing, light emitting centre in the human organism. This symbolic representation of the coronation seat as the eye or light (*Nongmoinu*) was, however, to be intermixed later on with the seed giving placental and serpentine homologies. For according to Phampallon (Book of Coronation), the coronation seat was where the placenta of seven ancestral fathers were buried.<sup>19</sup> Again the book Leihou-Naofamlol gives the place of the coronation seat in the cranium of the ancestral father (an ancient serpent - dragon with nine horns), the two sides of the seat being placed in the area between the two horns of the deity.<sup>20</sup> The significant fact, however, is that biological principles and spiritual systems in their interrelations in pre-Hindu Meitei cosmogonies are layered with considerable complexity and subtle ambiguities, and a single symbolism could be interpreted in various levels of context and meaning without contradiction and conflict. Any ritual area of Kangla, therefore, was simply pregnant with

meaning. The place indeed had been connected with the never ending cycles in human actions since the dawn of Meitei consciousness. A host of struggles, fights, deaths, births and dramatic happenings had centered at Kangla from immemorial times. In these areas were associated physiognomic revelations or mythic memories of creation, of the birth of the creator gods and goddesses and deeds of many supernatural cultural heroes of the ancestral past. These actions at some future date became myth material and around these events were woven fresh strands of tales of wonder and awe. In the pan-animistic tradition of the ancient Meiteis, every living thing, plant, tree or water were imbued with thriving spirits, to be venerated and honoured. The small semi-subterranean rivulets themselves became in the consciousness of the Meities the living veins capable of birth, regeneration and reproduction, and that they connected the ritual centre with far-away civilisations and trans-frontier areas. Even the rivulet Khakhong gave birth to seven living river systems connecting the land with many areas beyond the conscious frontier. Appeasement of any single rivulet would give long life and happiness to the worshipper. The rivulet Laikhong gave birth to the nine gods of creation, and sacrifice with human heads near the bank of this rivulet would secure the vital life-soul to the worshipper. And the rivulet Marongkhong took the form of the ancestral serpent-deity, with its tail in the mouth, in a form capable of giving ever-renewing cycles of generative power, with blood like colour of the waters, that it connected itself with the waters of the pond Nongjeng, where the ancestor-snake Pakhangba dwelt. Pumsaikhong, the mother rivulet of the three streams were associated with eternal acts of creation and of struggles for the first throne etc.

Such were the myths woven around the historic site of Kangla.<sup>1</sup> Every area in the waters, or in the mounds of the hills, or in the sacred spot at the foot of the tree could be conceived the coiled state of the ancestor serpent dragon, vitally spread and guarding its domain.<sup>2</sup> The ruling lineage Ningthoujas, conceived various patterns of the coiled deity, manifest in various ritual areas, with exotic, dreamlike motifs, known as *Paphal*, sometimes the dragon heads shaped like pigs, with horns, mane, wings and tails like that of whales. Various designs of the serpent-dragon were visualized in as many as 364 forms, and most of the major motifs were associated with Kangla. These ancestor snakes were chthonic in character, manifesting below the earth-surface, sometimes in the waters, sometimes in the vaults or caves. They were no doubt fertility

giving powers, the veneration of whom lay at the core of Meitei religious belief, for protection, growth, abundance, grace and power.<sup>23</sup>

### Phamballon (Coronation Ideology)

The coronation seat termed Phammoimit or Phallangmei lies some steps in the interior of the central mound, enclosed within the compound of the capital. The two words have their own meanings. Phammoimit is the agglutination of two words - Pham (Seat) and Moimit (Eye). It, therefore, means Seat-Eye. Phallang is perhaps the locked-bond, and Mei is fire. It represents an elemental energy, a radiating fire lying in concentrated, locked form. It perhaps explains also the present worship *Phambal-Iratpa* (Worship of Throne) by a certain section of revivalist Meiteis, representing the throne as a red concentration of fire-energy.<sup>2</sup> Again traditional beliefs associated with the coronation seat were reported by western as well as modern scholars. T. C. Hodson wrote - 'In the recesses of Kangla, was a chamber in which was a pipe leading, so I was told, to a chamber below, wherein dwelt the snake Pakhangba. The longer the Raja sat on this pipe and endured the discomfort of the unaccustomed pose and the torture of the fiery breath of his ancestor below, the longer and the more prosperous would be his reign.'<sup>25</sup> Dr. Chongtham Budhi, writing on the ethnogenesis of the Meitei people referred to the existence of two oppositional ritual areas - Nongjeng (Water pond), and Surung (Cave). The Surung - 'the mouth of a dead volcano, is the dreaded and, at the same time, revered as the mouth of Pakhangba. The fiery vapour emanating from the cave is supernatural'y associated with the exhalation of this snake deity. Many important myths and legends, and for that matter, ritual complexes of the Meitei royal families, including the royal coronation, centred around these two sacred spots'.<sup>26</sup>

The unpublished manuscript Phampallon (Book of Coronation), probably written in the eighteenth century, describing three coronation events of different periods, of Taothingmang (4th century A.D.), Naothingkhong (8th Century A. D.), and Pamheiba (18th century A. D.), maintains that the coronation seat was the area where the *Naofam* (Placenta) and *Naoyom* (Amniotic Membran) of the seven ancestral fathers 'Lairen Peenaitaba Taret' were buried. Lairen Peenaitaba Taret were the seven mythical fathers who were born without a mother, being drawn from the body of the Great Father. They were present at the act of creation (Leisemba) of

this world. Sitting at the very place where their placenta were buried would give the person 'life-power' to give welfare and prosperity to the realm. The Luwang clan elder who advised Naothingkhong on the arts of government in the eighth century is quoted by Pham-pallon thus - 'The Naofam (Placenta) and the Naoyom (Amniotic Membrane) of the seven ancestral fathers are inside that cave. Its features are like a humped tortoise made of stone. For its existence there it is called 'Men'. Remember all this and pay obeisance to it by circling it anti-clockwise seven times. Sit on the 'Men' inhaling the images of the 89 kings of the past within you. If you do this, the state will remain calm and prosperous.'<sup>27</sup>

Throughout the primitive world, and especially in South-east Asia, much ritual attention is paid to the placenta as the life and intelligence giving source in the human organism. G. Elliot Smith, in his studies of this cult wrote, 'When it is recalled that the first deities in all the ancient civilizations were originally women, identified with the moon, and endowed with powers of life-giving, with healing sickness and promoting agricultural prosperity, one can perhaps realize the role attributed to the placenta (the Egyptian Ka, the Iranian Fravashi, the Kelah of the Karens, and perhaps the Ngarong of the Ibans of Borneo) as the 'secret-helper' to afford assistance in times of crisis or difficulty. Recalling the fact that this earlier deity was identified with the poisonous serpent it is not surprising that the helper is given the form of a naga'.<sup>28</sup> Traditional Meitei practitioners of indigenous medicine believe the human organism being inlaid with intricate patterns of the serpent-dragon, that *Taoroinai*, the vital serpent is at the core of the navel.<sup>29</sup> The arteries and veins in the organism itself are the coils of the serpent. *Khoiree-Linsang* (navel cord and intestines) has thus its own serpent-symbolism, which are probably sophisticated motifs built up on the placenta cult. Tantric influence too is not, however, ruled out.<sup>30</sup>

The accession of the king to the throne drew so much of attention among ancient Meiteis that it generated a huge number of socio-political myths around it. The elite literati in the later historical periods were perhaps aware of the political tensions for rulership, the necessity to impose the credibility of the ruler before the masses, and the sanctity of the throne that many politico-religious myths were told and retold, which led to the emergence of multiple number of stories, often confusing, about the throne. The influence of Hindu Puranic legends and lore later in history also helped to create more myths and add confusion to the same.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps these

confusions helped to add more charm and dread to the atmosphere and enhance greater credibility of rulership in an expanding society with different social strata and with varying levels of consciousness. More and more elaborate ritual dimensions were added to the coronation act with the passage of time.

The first dialectical struggle for the throne was alluded to the two creator brothers Sanamahee (Aseeba) and Pakhangba (Konjin Tuthokpa), which resulted in the circum-ambulation of the earth by the former and of the throne by the latter. The younger brother, who was weaker and closer to the mother (Leimarel), went around the father's throne seven times and got the realm for himself, while the elder, more powerful brother, was thus deprived of the opportunity to secure the rulership. This myth had some interesting parallels in a different context with that of the Puranic lore about the Ganesha-Kartikeya conflict.<sup>32</sup> But the local story was important in the sense that it strengthened the value-systems of the patriarchal Meiteis in an ancestor-worshipping culture, where one who understood the father (Pakhangba means Father-knowing Figure) stood to gain in the inheritance to filial possessions in a peasant society. The act of political possession of the state could be eased for one who understood the way of the ancestors. The proto-historical ruler Nongda Lairen Pakhangba of the first century A. D. also assumed the title of Pakhangba.

Another interesting detail about the inheritance to the throne is told in a much more striking myth, which was nearer to the customs and cultural traits of the early Meiteis.<sup>33</sup> The Great Father Atinkok assumed the shape of a dead cow and floated down the rivers for learning who was his most trusted son amongst three brothers. The eldest brother Atiya (Sky Father), did not notice him at his own river bank Nongjeng. Neither did the second brother Aseeba (Sanamahee) at Yucheng. Only the third brother Konjin Tuthokpa (Pakhangba) did notice him at Pheitenbi, pulled him up the river and gave him a decent cremation and burial. The Father then reverted back to his original shape, gave the last son the title of Pakhangba and allowed him the possession of the seven days and twelve months (probably the use of the agricultural cycle). This myth emphasizes the rightful inheritance of filial property or political rulership of the clan village to one who followed traditional practices of the fathers and paid ritual attention to their deaths, or to the one who was chosen by the father for his qualities. This is in consonance with Meitei laws of political inheritance, for

neither primogeniture nor ultimo-geniture were the dominant principles in political succession.<sup>34</sup>

What is of interest to us is a further detail added by the book Phampallon to the above story. In the earlier portions of the book, the importance of the spiritual connection with the Father's burial is given, 'From the nine horns of the Great Father, the solid earth was made firm. The horns were made into the coronation seat. One horn was kept tightly bound into a concentration of undisturbed vital principle (*Phampi*) or elixir (*Yai*). The priests and priestesses, did arrange for the appeasement of the earth and its subterranean depths and layers. Begin from this seed-elixir or *Yai* and take control of the four direction. Then one can conquer nine worlds'.<sup>35</sup>

This allusion to the coronation seat as fire (*Mei*), as the seed elixir or *Yai* in the placental zone, which has a radiating energy capable of transforming the possessor into achieving the nine worlds, therefore, lies at the base of the governmental ideology of the Meiteis. The virility, the power and strength of the ruler to destroy enemies lay in ritual perfection of the coronation act. Hence, the Phambal-Laans which followed the coronation event. Again, the vital principles affect him to secure productive regeneration of his physical and genetic potential, that procreation resulting from his union with the queen was equivalent to the physical well-being of the state and the cosmic fulfilment as well. Allusion to the vital principle or *Yai*, the elixir capable of giving life power, constant intermixture with the horns of the Great Father, of the placenta of the ancestors, the serpent-dragon etc., were all of phallic significance. Here the phallic logic applied not only to biological phenomena, but to spiritual and political energies. Even the humped stone at the coronation seat could also have been a phallic stone itself, generative of biological reproduction which is synchronous with nature's productivity and welfare of the realm.

The coronation rite of the Meitei kings, therefore, must definitely be at the core level, an entry into the placental world of the ancestors by the crown-incumbents, thereby imbibing within their pweron and the seed-energy, the radiating fire which generates the vital strength and power to effect the regeneration of the body realm. This was made possible through the belief in the powers of the departed ancestors to influence the future lives of the living, acting on fundamental forces of reproduction and procreation supplied by the fecundity principle. The whole concept of the state's welfare was to be derived from the interpenetration of these beliefs.

Following the Phampallon, we could describe the accession rites of an eighteenth century ruler Pamheiba (1709-1749 A.D.) who was one of the most powerful rulers of Manipur. The entire accession rite took eleven days. It involved the segregation of the husband from the wife for the first five days, preparation at the Sallangmei (an outhouse near the coronation site), visit to shrines of fertility mothers at a far away place, return and visit to age-organization houses for praying to elders, the coronation act, ritual union between husband and wife for five days at the Yimchao (Big House), and then, finally, ablution of the two and prayer to ancestral gods for long life and happiness. Ritual actions followed the event, with the waging of war against recalcitrant tribes or hunts for game or trophies. The Maibas or priests, the Yoirel or Maibi, and the Ashei or pena singer were essential ritual functionaries. Estates of the realm, the clan elders, officials and nobles performed their appropriate well laid out tasks. The huge social processions were extremely theatrical, with the king and queen being taken on a palanquin, and musical instruments, drums, trumpets etc., play at appointed moments to heighten the romantic aspects of the public action. The entire ritual movements were based on deeply ingrained religious principles, and the procession routes were charted out through tradition.

### **Meitei Sana Leibak (The Golden Country of Meitei)**

A word must be said about the concept of welfare in the Meitei state and its relationship with the coronation rites. The Meiteis term their state *Sana Leibak*, a golden country, which was not simply a self-laudatory, self-deceptive title to appease communal ethno-centrism. It had a vital connection with the concept of welfare, of the state of blessed and golden existence in terms of collective growth, satisfaction of wants and distribution of even justice. Gold, the value precious metal has also a certain characteristic of wealth, power, shine, weight, poise and fulfilment which the state envisages in its ontological existence. To the understanding of an enlightened Meitei, the golden state was what was free from death and disease (*Asee Ana Leitaba*), where the doors for war and for beasts were closed (*Shatong Lanthong Thingba*), where there were happiness, prosperity and abundance with plenty of food, fish, meat and vegetables (*Ahong Achao Thokpa*) and where the minds of men and women were free from care and tension (*Nupee Nupa Pukning Lousing Thokpa*).<sup>36</sup> The state was a social collective, where individuals found the realization of their persona-

lity, not in the pursuit of their own particular interests, but in contributing to the collective existence.

The social collective was also part of the cosmic equilibrium to whose maintenance the ruler and his subjects were ritually bound. For in Meitei thought the human, the state and the cosmos act under the same organic laws and principles and were inter-related. The concept of welfare in human and social collective terms do incorporate the state of equilibrium and golden satiation in the cosmic world. It should not only be the concepts of human justice that motivate a ruler, that he looked into the physical needs of the state by sitting at the Kangla gate and distributing rice and paddy to the poor, or by going out into the public market and throwing coins to the people, or by effecting mass cremations at the capital at times of human tragedy through war, or by actively supervising the institutions of welfare and justice at the central Kangla, but that he should enter into the cosmic world of the eternal forces and be a part in bringing about that equilibrium and peace.<sup>37</sup> For cosmic balance was interpreted in the dialectic relationship between the nine strands of the sky (Wonglon Mapan) and nine layers of the earth (Leinol Mapan).<sup>38</sup> In fact the entire universe of the Meiteis was a product of the cosmic union of the sky as Father and the Earth as Mother (Atiya Sidaba and Leimarel) which was probably a proto-Austroloid belief base, familiar in South-east Asia.<sup>39</sup> This was conceptually maintained with the belief that the nine strands of the sky were continually copulating with the nine layers of the earth - a generative principle.<sup>40</sup> Again in Meitei cosmogonic thought, the whole expanse of the sky is the Teel (Worm or Concentration of Energy or Phallus) and the procreative earth is the *Lai* (Yoni), where the Teel merges into the layers of the earth below, and the *Lai* rises into the nine strands of the sky above.<sup>41</sup> Here man has the function in smoothening that cosmic action, by effecting that action, and by being part of the action. The physical man has an organic role too in the cosmic architecture, for in the midst of the eternally copulating earth and sky, man is the *Paring-Langsung* (Steadying Poles and Ropes).<sup>42</sup> He is thus the enervated nexus between the cosmic forces. In this cosmic action, man also performs the role of Maiba, the ritual functionary, facilitating the union between the cosmic parents.<sup>43</sup> The king and queen as rulers therefore have the same cosmic responsibility, for it was the job of the king to soothe the nine strands of the sky (Nonglon Mapan Taiba) and of the queen to ease up the nine layers of the earth (*Leinol Mapan Taiba*).<sup>44</sup> This is symbolically represented in the

ritual coition, where the wife is below and the husband on top.

The cosmic equilibrium concept is further strengthened by some other related patterns in the belief system, like the *Chup Ngakpa* theory, where the world is believed to be guarded by nine creator gods - Muwaningthou, Lainingthouhalpa, Chakhapa, Kouparel, Khamlangpa, Luwangningthou, Marjing, Wangpren, and Thangching, who are believed to have kept the sky eternally fastened on the earth, like tent-pegs fixed into the ground.<sup>45</sup> The guardianship of the four directions alluded to the gods Koubru, Marjing, Wangbren and Thangjing for the north-west, north-east, south-east and south-west respectively are developments from these thought patterns with influence from the sophisticated Hindu religion. This is also related in a dynamic manner with the *Usoi-Karan* (Criss-crossing of the tree Grama Walichi as skeletal frames of the roof structure).<sup>46</sup> Here the gods of the directions are believed to have taken their respective seats in eternal composure and fixity in a body-house structure. The four corners of the house are guarded as Kings of the Earth by the above gods assuming different names. One corner (north-west) represents the creator father taking the title of Leiphurel Kingnaiba, protected from the western direction by Kontinglen. The north-east is taken by Lainingthou Apanba (Nongpok Ningthou), guarded from the east by You-Ngaiba. The south-east of the house is taken by Lainingthou Soralel (Wangbren). The south-west is of Lainingthou Aseeba, taking the title of Sawang Nongfurel Khing Khing Kingnaiba (Thangching). These two latter sides are simultaneously guarded by the southern deity Tho-Ngaiba. Right in the centre of the body structure then is the seat of the Great Father (Nungnganglel Awangba) and his son Lainingthou Apanba (Pakhangba). Thus it strengthens the Chup process by fixing the cosmos on to the earth, the directions and on to the body-house organism of the whole, which all goes into the concept of equilibrium in the welfare state.

The aspect of the equilibrium and satiated peace after the cosmic dialectic is also represented by another instance of the king's role in the state's welfare in an intriguing space-time relationship concept.<sup>47</sup> This concept is represented by the word *Tan-thong-Lemthong*. Tanthong literally means the bridge of time where time had a spatial characteristic in its daily round, that while passing from midnight to noon, it assumes a narrow longitudinal shape, a length-dominating principle. Lemthong is the bridge of the breadth of the afternoon in its passage from noon to night, where it proceeds in a latitudinal perspective, with the

breadth principle dominating. So when the citizens of the state, in wishing the ruler long life, happiness and sound government include the words '*Tanthong Mayung Kuiba Lemthong Mara Pakpa*' it means 'let the realm's morning's length be long, and evening's breadth be broad'. This is the basic understanding of the equilibrium situation, the state of balance between the length and breadth, between longitude and latitude that long mornings and broad evenings in their dynamic relationship provide, which the ruler should enjoy in his role as keeper of the realm. Even this word *Tanthong Lemthong* was used to denote the name of the realm during the rule of an early proto-historic peasant chieftain Moriya Phambalcha where there was comparative peace<sup>48</sup>. The word *Tanthong-Lemthong* therefore manifests an interesting similitude of the length-breadth equilibrium dynamics.

The Meitei concept of the country's welfare, epitomized in the title of the state as *Sana Leibak*, therefore, signifies a host of meanings other than the simple physical well-being of the individual citizen in relations to his country. It includes the sound corporeal strength of the body polity in active relationship with man and the cosmic forces. The coronation rites are indeed the preparation of the ruler for enabling him to serve all these forces. Indeed the king shall have to exercise all his spiritual and moral faculties to attain such a state i.e. an initial entry into a germinal situation, from where his absorbed energies can transcend into enervated realms for reaching out to all dimensions, both cosmic and mundane. The whole of these processes grew from generative principles of fertility, overlaid with strength given by belief in ancestors and support from the elements which are products of nature. The association of the element 'Yai' is relevant, for it represents the vital secret helper which could enable the king to secure the required power. It must also be noticed that the said *Menkhom* and *Yai-khom* were carried during the rituals by a chosen favourite of the king, who was of the same age and build of the ruler<sup>49</sup>. The king used to keep along with him during his rulership certain precious metals and amulets, regarded as *Yai*. Among the said value precious elements mention may be made of *Sana* (Gold), *Pithrai* (Brass), *Koree* (Copper), *Tampha* (Ruby ?), *Charik* (Beads), *Nong-hrei* (.....), *Pohan* (Cornelian Beads ?), *Hee* (Amulets), *Yai* (Elixir). These belong to the heritage of the sun. The other group that belong to the moon are-*Lupa* (Silver), *Kongou* (Aluminium), *Misee* (Lead), *Liklai* (Crystal), *Nungshen* (Mercury Pasted Glass), *Yotngou* (White Iron Ore ?) *Longang* (.....),

### Notes & References

1. C. Geertz's model of the theatre state was dealt with in his book 'Islam Observed' (New Haven, 1968). The above reference is from Kenneth R. Hall's article 'An Introductory Essay on Southeast Asian Statecraft in the Classical Period' in Michigan Papers on South and Southeast Asia. No. 11, 1976 Ann Arbor, 1976.
2. Kenneth R. Hall, Michigan Papers, pp. 8.
3. See Nidhi Aeusrivongse - 'Devaraja Cult and Khmer Kingship at Angkor' - Michigan Papers, p. 107 - 138.
4. Ibid, pp. 112.
5. In his attempts to explain biological events and natural phenomena, the primitive animistic Meitei explained the world by an uncritical analogy to himself. In course of time this theory was built up into a systematic truth. For animism, see Wilhem Dupre - Religion in Primitive Cultures-Mouton, 1975, p. 35.
6. Nongda Lairen started the consolidation of the clans for formation of the Meitei ethnic group. 7 clans, some 16 tribes in the valley and more than thirty in the hills were incorporated into the state by the end of the 18th century.
7. *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, ed. by L. Ibungohal and N. Khelchandra 1967, p. 10.
8. The special character of the Kangla architecture was a crossed horn-shape like X in the front portico known as Kai. The Kangla was regarded as the seat of Pakhangba in all regional areas. Kuchu, the seat of the judiciary was also similarly named after that at central Kangla.
9. Three main variants of the Lai Haraoba are recognised-Kanglei, Chakpa and Moirang. Kanglei is the central Meitei ritual. The other Haraobas include uniform items like Laipou, Wakol Laoba, etc. Meitei gods are also worshipped in celebrations of different regional areas.
10. Lamda Thangja is the first and last Saturdays of the month of lunar March. Women elders perform propitiatory rituals to appease evil spirits of the village on these days. Kumlak Lamtaiba is another propitiatory act performed in June-July in certain regional areas.
11. Irom Amubi, *Leihou-Naofamlol*, 1980, Int. p. 3.

12. The author is indebted to his colleague L. Ashokumar of Manipur State Kala Akademi for detailed information of the Kwak-Tanba rites.
13. Hamlet Bareh in his *History and Culture of the Khasi People* referred to the submersion of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills under water in the tertiary age. G. Gyaneshwar Sharma, a local Geographer also read a paper 'Geomorphological Analysis of Manipur' in the All India Science Congress 1977.
14. For Legend of Kangla Hongba (consecration of Kangla), see N. Khelchandra - Ariba Manipuri Sahitygi Itihas 1969, p. 67.
15. Manipur Legislative Assembly paper, 'Fact Finding Committee on Extension of Kangla Pat' 1982.
16. Conversations with traditional Meitei elders at Khongman Ibudhou's Laibung - a non-Hindu Meitei Religious Establishment at Khongman, Imphal.
17. *Leihou Naofamlol*.
18. Khongman Laibung. A ritual map of Kangla from the Mutua Museum Imphal also corroborates this distribution of ritual areas in a biological homology.
19. "Phampallon", unpublished manuscript, Manipur State Kala Akademi Archives.
20. *Leihou-Naofamlol*, p. 12.
21. Ibid. pp. 1-20.
22. Paphal Lampuba is a collection in paintings of the various motifs of the ancestor snakes-MSKA collection.
23. In China, the dragon is the earliest mythological best symbolizing fertility of the earth and power of the emperor. See G. Elliot Smith, *Evolution of the Dragon*, 1919.
24. Apokpa Marup was started by the late Naoria Phullo (1888-1941) of Cachar in 1930. After his death, the organization remained as a distinct non-Hindu group concerned with the establishment of the traditional Meitei religion based on the worship of Sanamahee. They maintain that the throne is a blood concentration which has the qualities of fire.
25. T. C. Hodson, *The Meitheis*, 1908, B. R. Publishing Corpn. Reprint 1975, p. 125.
26. Ch. Budhi, 'The Ethnonym Meitei', *Journal of Manipur University*, Vol. I, 1984, p. 29.
27. Free translation by the author from Phampallon.
28. G. Elliot Smith, 'Animal Standards in Indonesia', *Year Book of Oriental Art*, Ed. Arthur Walley 1981.

29. 'Maibaron', an unpublished manuscript dealing with indigenous medicine.
30. Tantricism and its relations with traditional Meitei religion are yet to be scientifically studied. A host of literature of the eighteenth century contain tantric expressions. Leithak Leikharol, Leihou Naofamlol, Leimarel Naoyom are probably some examples.
31. Manipur of the Mahabharata, the story of Chitrangada, Arjuna and Babrubahana are interesting examples.
32. W. J. Wilkins, *Hindu Mythology*, Rupa, 1983, Siddhi Budhi Story - 'As the two brothers fell in love with two ladies named Siddhi and Buddhi it was agreed that whoever first travelled round the world should have them. Ganesha proved by his logical talents and aptness at quotation that he had done this, and obtained the prize long before his brother returned from his weary pilgrimage, to the disquiet of both families when Ganesha's sophistry was discovered. p. 341.
33. *Leihou Naofamlol*, p. 9.
34. Dr. Budhi mentioned that primogeniture was the recognized principle in Meitei succession. The author's findings are however on the contrary. Choice of the father, physical and mental qualities of the candidate and acceptance by the elders were important considerations. Vide Naothingkhong Phambal-kaaba Ed. by N. Khelchandra.
35. Free translation from *Phampallon*.
36. *Loina-Shillon*, p. 26.
37. *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, the royal chronicle of the Meiteis referred to the above acts of Pamheiba.
38. *Loina-Shillon*, p. 25.
39. The Meiteis share this belief with primitive Indonesians of South-east Asia, notably Djakudn and Mantra of Malaya, Funan, Bakitan, Taghanua of Borneo and Phillipines, Lubu, Namek and Orang Laut of Sumatra etc. Batak of Sumatra, Dayak of Borneo, Igerots of Luzon etc. are some of the Paleo-Indonesians who share this belief in the most sophisticated manner. See Wilhem Dupre, *Religion in Primitive Cultures*, p. 82.
40. *Loina-Shillon*, p. 25.
41. Ibid, p. 25.
42. *Khongman Ibudhou Laibung*.
43. *Loina-Shillon*, p. 5.

44. *Loina-Shillon*, p. 70
45. *Lai Khuntalol'* unpubilshed manuscript.
46. *Leihou Naofamlol*, p. 11.
47. *Khongman Ibudhou Laibung*.
48. *Leihou Naofamlol*, p. 9.
49. *Phampallon*.
50. *Loina-Shillon*, pp. 5-6.