

Totemic Cult of the Meiteis :

A Historical Study

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The Meitei as a distinct ethnic, linguistic, cultural and social group was formed in Manipur valley. Immediately before they settled down in the valley, they must have lived in the surrounding hills as indicated by the clan genealogies and chronicles. Originally the ethnic term 'Meitei' meant only one of 'salais'¹ in Manipur. Hodson interpreted *Salai* as 'tribe'. It is well known that the local historical documents record the existence of a number of tribes, namely Khuman, Luwang, Mangang (Ningthouja), Angom, Khaba, Nganba, Sarang, Leishangthem, Heirem-Khunjan, Thangal, Makhel, Kambong, Lokkha, Lokha-Haokha, Lera-Khongnang, Ningol-Laiton, Thanga-Kambong, Urok-Ushai, Haorok-Konthon, etc. Among these several tribes, Mangang (Ningthouja), Angom, Khuman, Luwang, Moirang, Khaba, Nganba, Sarang and Leishangthem became prominent. Later Khaba and Nganba grouped into one known as Khaba-Nganba. The other two groups of Sarang and Leishangthem were also bound to form one group known as Sarang-Leishangthem of 'Chenglei'. These powerful seven tribes absorbed the remaining tribes. Haokha-Lokkha had been absorbed into Mangang or Ningthouja², Lera-Khongnang and Ningol-Laiton, into Angom³, Haorok-Konthou, into Chenglei⁴, Thanga-Kambong and Urok-Ushai, into Nganba⁵, and Heirem-Khunjan, into Luwang⁶. Thus, in the later period only seven salais came to be recognised in the history of Manipur.

The tribes or salais, before they settled permanently in the territories now occupied by them, were nomadic as evident from *Laithu Naophallon*. According to the text "the salais of Meiteileipak were originally living together in a *Yunjao* (a traditional dwelling house of the Meiteis which is partitioned into nine rooms). From there they moved to different places. The Ningthoujas shifted to Oksang Salangmei. The Angoms proceeded to Kontha, and then the area beyond the river. They settled at Senshenthong.

The Luwangs lived at Kekrupan, then, shifted to Langkon and from there they moved up the hills, known as Luwang ching. The Khumans shifted to Kumshang. Then they moved to Yairipok and from there to Mangkhu. From Mangkhu, they settled at Leikoi. Khaba-nganba shifted to Sanglamei and there they dispersed. It is perhaps at this stage of society that these salais traced their origin in the animal ancestors. In Khagemba Yimlep⁸, It is stated that "Leikak Layarel Chanu embraced literal meaning of 'Konba' Pakhangba and gave birth to Ningthem, Layipiti Ahumnu embraced 'Nonglum' and gave birth to Angom, Nangwaipiti Tonthangnu embraced elephant and gave birth to Khuman, Tungwai-piti Thoinu embraced goat and gave birth to Khuyonthem, Sachipiti Chitlu embraced deer and gave birth to Moirang and *Langkapiti There-Longpam Chanu* embraced tiger and gave birth to Ngampa". The same source describes Pakhangba who was also known as Taoroinai, as having the appearance of snake. T.C. Hodson⁹ writes, "In the case of the ancestor of the Ningthouja clan, Pakhangba, we have the curious superstition that he still sometimes appears to men, but in the form of a snake.." Further, Louise Lightfoot¹⁰ describes that "the snake-type used in the Pakhangba design, curiously enough, has teeth and two horns and is unlike the snake or python of the present day". The identification of Pakhangba with snake is corroborated by further evidence from Cheitharol Kumbaba. The Royal Chronicle or Diary¹¹ mentions that Pakhangba transformed himself into 'lai' in the day time and into human form at the night time. The term 'lai', though in the later period it generally carries the meaning of god, here it connotes the animal ancestor. Further, the same chronicle¹² refers to the first seven kings of the Ningthouja salai beginning from Pakhangba as 'lai'. About the animal ancestors of the other salais except that of the Angom, nothing can be said as it lies far beyond our powers of historical examination. As given above, 'Nonglum' was associated with the Angom Salai in the Khagemba Yimlep. In one myth¹³ Pakhangba was described

as coming out from the 'Nonglum' brought by Puleiromba, the ancestor of the Angom Salai. As regards the ancestor of Angom,¹⁴ it is however referred to in Meihoubarol Shakok that Pulsiromba transformed himself into 'lai' or Python¹⁵ in a lake called Leiyon. Louise Lightfoot says, "In Manipur the snake is the king of the forest, feared even by the tiger; so it certainly was a suitable symbol for the king of the Meiteis". But this is precisely a totem. This was a clan mark, then a clan name, then the name of the ancestor, and lastly something worshipped by a clan. The clan totem was revered by a body of men and women who called themselves by the name of the totem, believed themselves to be of one blood, descendants of a common ancestor, and were bound together by common obligations to each other and by a common faith in the totem. Various magical and religious purposes were served by dances in which all clansmen imitated its movement-Lairen Mathek or the coiling design of the snake or python. Lairen Mathek, a most important item on the programme of *Lai-Haraoba*, a traditional ritual festival of the Meiteis, is the depiction of the coiling design/pattern of Pakhangba in dance by the congregation, participating in the service of the *lai*, in single file led by the maibi or the traditional priestess. The group ran in and out beneath a cloth of white cotton held by four men at four corners. Each of the four men held a *chong* or huge white umbrella on a pole on the ground. The coiling pattern of the python or lairen was beautifully curved, twisting above and below, forward and backward. In short, this is the imitation of the behaviour of the snake or python. In doing this, the group or the community expected to receive protection and care from the animal totem and they are seeking to stress their identity with it.

The most important aspect of this totemic tribal organisation consisted in the fact that it evolved certain norms of custom regulating the intercourse of the separate groups with one another. Of these norms, those governing marriage

relations were of first importance. The tribal organisation of this period was bound up with an important institution, exogamy. Frank Byron Jeevon⁴⁶ writes, "... from the beginning, religion was not an affair which concerned the individual only, but one which demanded the co-operation of the whole community; and a religious community was the earliest form of society".

The salais or clans, in course of time settled in the valley. This made the political unification of the Manipur valley possible. This resulted in the formation of the Meitei nation. With it, the alliance of a salai or clan with an animal species was also dissolved. The dissolution of the animal totem of the salai is mentioned in Cheitharol Kumbaba that in the year 1074 A.D., during the reign of Meidingu Loiyamba, lallup, (lal-war, lup = club) was attached only by 'mee' (Human being), as the 'lai' (totem-god) was dominated by 'mee' and thus the lai had disappeared. This statement signifies that by the expansion of society beyond the narrow bonds of blood-relationship, the germ of higher religious belief is enabled to burst its sheath and man's conception of deity sloughed off the totem-god.

Notes & References

1. T.C. Hodson, **The Meitheis**, Reprint, Delhi, 1975, Footnote, p. 77.
2. Yengkhom Bhagya (ed.), **Leithak Leikharol**, Imphal, First Edition, 1967, p. 111.
3. Khymallambam Yaima Singh, **Meihourol Pukok**, First Edition, Imphal, 1972, p.25.
4. **Leithak Leikharol**, Op. cit., p.111.
5. **Khumallambam Yaima**, Op.cit., p.25.
6. Ibid, pp. 36,33.
7. **Leihou Naophamlon**, (MS).
8. Khagemba Yimlep, (MS); Kh. Yaima Singh, **Mei-hourol Pukok**, Op.cit., pp.21-22, and **Leithak Leikharol**, Op.Cit., PP. 109-110.
9. T.C. Hodson, **The Meitheis**, Op.cit., p.100

10. Louise Lightfoot, Dance-Rituals of Manipur, India, (An Introduction to Meitei Jagoi), Hongkong, 1958,p.23.
11. Lairenmayum Ibungohal Singh and Ningthoukhongjam Khelchandra Singh(ed.), Cheitharol Kumbaba, First Edn., Imphal, 1967,p.1.
12. Ibid., p.2.
13. N. Manijao, Sandrembi, **Chaishra**, Imphal, 1978,pp.12-14; and O. Bhogeswar, Ningthourol Sheireng, Imphal, pp. 135-140.
14. **Meihoubarol Shakok**, (MS).
15. Louise Lightfoot, Op.cit., p.23.
16. Frank Byron Jeevon, **The History of Religion**, Reprint, 1985, Delhi,p.101.
17. **Cheitharol Kumbaba**, p.5.