

Study of Myths in Manipuri Literature and Socio-Religious Rituals

Thounaojam Caesar¹

Soyam Chaningkhombee²

Dr. Reena Sanasam³

INTRODUCTION

Myths and rituals are the stories and practices that define a culture. A myth is a story with symbolic elements that represents a culture's ideals. Each culture has their particular myths and rituals. When a social behavior occurs in a fixed sequence and is repeated periodically, it becomes rituals to that particular culture. This requires a deep knowledge of ancient history of the human race during its formation. During the past few decades, the necessary science, anthropology and sociology, has begin to trace the story of human emotional and cultural growth. A number of researchers have concluded that the source of all creation myths stems back to a common point, probably actual historical events in history. They all come from one early source and are different only because time and local cultural circumstances have embellished or altered them. This is the reason why the details in the creation myths vary, but either the basic outline is similar, or at least they share common elements. In 19th century, myths were regarded as fabricated stories prompted by the obsolete mode of thoughts before the birth of scientific ideas. Some scholars claimed that the primitive mentality is a condition of the human mind, and not a stage in its historical development. The truth content of myth was considered to be higher, in a moral or religious sense, than merely a description of physical reality. So myths are narratives relevant to a particular society in which they had been originated and are often considered to be truthful accounts of the incidents that



happened in the past. The only measure of truth, however, is our perception of truth. Again, in the 20th century a systematic study of the myths has been taken up seriously and scholars have tried to find out the underlying patterns of the myths of different cultures and religions of the world. Whatever our ignorance of the language and the culture of the people where it originated, a myth is still felt as a myth by any reader anywhere in the world. In *The Golden Bough* (1913), Frazer says that man starts believing in magic and then to religion and ritual as it becomes a behavioral concept. He says what the world supplies to myth is an historical reality, defined by the way in which men have produced or used it; and what myth gives in return is a natural image of this reality. According to Frazer,

“This useful art has nowadays unfortunately been almost forgotten, but three hundred years ago it was in full bloom, as we gather from the following contemporary account .”

IDEA OF MYTHS IN MEETEI SOCIETY

The society presented in the creation myth of the Meiteis was a liberal society. *Taibang Panba Mapu* is the overlord of the Universe and is all in all a male personality. *Atingkok Sidaba* who was the mastermind of the creation of the Earth and the Universe was a male. *Atiya Sidaba* and *Asiba* whom were actually responsible for carrying out the work of creation as instructed by *Atingkok Sidaba* were all males. And *Pakhangba* to whom was handed over the just created earth to rule was also male.

The female personalities also played a vital role. In the beginning of the mythical story, we come across a female personality named *Lai Amamba* who



was a conjugal partner of *Atingkok Sidaba*. Out of their union were born *Atiya Sidaba* characterized by primal clouds, *Atinga Sidaba* by air, *Ashiba* by water and *Konchin Tingthokpa Pakhangba* by fire. Another notable female personality in this mythical story was *Nongthang Leima* who was brought forth by *Atingkok sidaba* in order to save the further destruction of creation of Earth by *Harapa*, a male personality.

From these above facts, we come to know that the society reflected in the mythical story of *Leisemba* (cosmogony) was a liberal society. It was male who played a predominant role in the functioning of the social life.

One very interesting story we observed as regard the social life in the mythical story of *Leisemba* is in the context of conjugal relationship. In earlier Meitei society, it seems that there were not many restrictions in the conjugal relationship between close blood relatives. *Harapa* was an offspring of *Atiya Sidaba* and *Nongthang Leima* was brought forth by *Atingkok Sidaba*. In fact, *Harapa* was a nephew of *Nongthang Leima* and *Nongthangleima* was an aunt of *Harapa*. But then, in order to save the further destruction of earth by *Harapa*, *Nongthangleima* enchant *Harapa* with her beauty. Both have conjugal relationship. It therefore seems that conjugal relationship of close blood relation was socially recognised and sanctioned.

Again we encounter the struggle for supremacy amongst various personalities and alliances among certain deities. While *Atiya Sidaba* and *Asiba* were engaged in the creation of earth *Harapa* destroyed it twice. Again in another instance, we come across a kind of struggle for power between *Asiba* and *Apanba* over the possession of Earth. When *Atiya Sidaba* Handed over the just created earth to *Apanba*, *Asiba* exile himself to moon and from there he sent *Samuton Ayangba* (flying horse) on a task to destroy the work of *Apanba*. There was a fierce fight between them. Later there was reconciliation between *Asiba*



and *Apanba* with the will of *Atiya Sidaba*. So based on the above mythical story, it appears that there was already developed some kind of social, cultural and political organization at this time. It also implies that there was an intense conflict between two or more groups of people for the possession and occupation of the land. The symbolical representation in the fierce fights between two mythical personalities namely *Asiba* and *Apanba*. When neither of the groups could win, they had to settle their scores, compromise and reconciliation at the instance of another party represented by *Atiya Sidaba*. This would ultimately suggest a kind of ethnic amalgamation having been achieved at this stage which, as a consequence, led to cultural and social interaction amongst different and varied ethnic crowd.

MYTHS REFLECTED IN THE OLD MANIPURI LITERATURE:

Literature begins with the staging of different stories of the myths, related with religions, rituals and beliefs. Myths are often used to explain human institutions and practices as well. On the other hand, many critics consider myths as the imaginative stories. Myths can no longer be considered as a part of the reality, but regard as the important part of the culture. The origin of the mythical Gods in the stories and the narrative stories, in turn are the integral part of the literature. So we can say that God is the artistic creation of literature. We find a lot of undeniable references to these theories of myths in the remarkable works of ancient Meetei Literature. One of the prominent books of the ancient myths of Manipur is “*Panthoipi Khongkul*” composed in the 17th century which depicts the creation of the universe. However, the legend of *Panthoipi* in Manipuri culture had been in existence right from the beginning of civilization of Manipur. The oral tradition of literature which had handed down to successive generations as a legacy of the cultural heritage of Manipur has been



crystallized in the written form of literature only in the later period of civilization. *Panthoipi Khongkul* a literary text bears a testimony of the creative faculty of the writer. In it the gradual evolution of Panthoipi from a damsel to a nymph and pervading all the spirit of the Divine Mother has been successfully traced with the flexibility of speech and the loftiness of imagination. This book gives us ample account of the early religious and culture of the people of Manipur. The Goddess *Panthoipi* is elaborately woven in our culture as the Vedas has become a part of Hindu culture. Another important cultural and religious festival of Manipur is *Lai Haraoba*, which is, perhaps the only indigenous festival of Manipur. The manuscript also gives an account of the religious and social festival known as the 'Lai Haraoba' where the *Khaba* community paid homage to the deity *Nongpok Ningthou* and his consort Panthoibi. This festival, believed by scholars to be part of the cosmological theory of creation in Meetei myth, is a repository of numerous songs. Significant among these Lai Haraoba songs found in *Panthoibi Khongkul* are the '*Ougri*', '*Khencho*', '*Anoirol*' and '*Lairemma Paosa*'. The pre-vaishnavite festival of Lai-Haraoba is not merely a song and a dance, but a drama, performed adjacent to the playback songs, gestures and movements and a lot of rituals. It is performed in every village of Manipur till now without any peripheral adaptation and it takes place before Rabi and Kharif cultivation starts. It is like the vegetation fiesta of the Greek *Dionysus*. Lai Haraoba is the oldest socio-religious ritualistic ceremony from where the performing arts tradition of the Meeteis including several dance forms had originated. It is the most important social festival of the Meetei faith and still in trend. In short, **old Manipuri culture** and Literature is attached with oral hymns and religious rituals and fiestas. The earliest gem in Manipuri literature is '*Ougri*' composed in verse comparable only to the Vedic hymns in quality and purpose. It was recited at the



time of coronation of *Nongda Lairen Pakhangba* who reigned in Manipur in the 33 A.D. Since then it became an integral part of every coronation. It is a poem of considerable length with an impressive description of the Sun.

It has been said that Meetei script evolves only in the end of 11th century or the beginning of the 12th century. Before writing was done, myth and legends had been preserved by the story teller or the bard in an oral form. This ancient culture finds its expression in the collective institutions, character, manner, beliefs as well as in significant forms like fine arts, performing arts, ethical sports and martial arts.

Khencho is the other archaic composition sung in chorus in *Laiharaoba* festival. Sana Lamok sung to evoke the spirit of Pakhangba, the presiding deity of the Meeteis.

The *Thang Ta* is the Martial art of Manipur emphasizing for ethical value and justice. *Chainarol* (way of warrior) is the art of combat. The inevitable presence of god in the martial arts and the duels, which is very popular among the Manipuri's can be seen in this book.

In *Numit Kappa*, another interesting book, we find an account of how a great archer, Khwai Nungjeng Piba had shot one of the two suns which had been shining in the sky all throughout the day and night. Practically there was no darkness. But it was essential. So it was imperative that one sun should be shot down. Besides, it also gives us an idea of how the art of archery had been practiced in ancient Manipur and India and its importance in war. Perhaps that may be the reason why a number of Hindu gods and goddesses had been adorned with bow and arrow. The killing of one of the Sun gods, Taothuireng by the great archer Khwai Nungjeng Piba has been symbolically presented in the text.



As in Ch. Manihar's translation work *Naothingkong Phambal Kaba* deals with the coronation of King Naothingkhong in 763 A.D. it gives an account of all the religious rituals practiced in Manipur. Some of these rituals are still observed by the Manipuri's with great conviction.

Tutenglon is another important work of literature, where the two brothers started cleaning the rivers of Manipur with the help of the God in heaven. The God *Soraren* who rules the heaven was approached by the brothers Taothingmang and Yoimongba (According to the Royal Chronicle, Taothingmang is the king who ruled Manipur during the 2nd half of the 3rd Century A.D.) to help them in cleaning the rivers. The God agreed and they successfully completed the task. It shows the devotion of the rulers to the Gods.

Even in the contemporary Manipuri Literature, writers often attach myths to express strongly their conceptual experience. The mythical intensions in contemporary poetry make an attempt to reinterpret, modifies, revise and transform myths to articulate contemporary reality.

LAI HARAOBA:

The Umang Lai Haraoba (Merry Festival of the Deities) is the most important ceremony in which the deities are worshipped by all inhabitants of the village as a symbol of the part and parcel of the creation work. Meiteis take every male and female as god and goddess who play the role and deities in the Haraoba. R.R. Marett (*Folklore Society of folklore*) thinks that primitive religion was something "to be danced out." "The religious dance of the savage is both myth and ritual; it combines myth, tale, and worship." Mackenzie in *The Evolution of Literature* says

"Upon festive occasions the chief presides and opens the proceeding with the burning of incense and the chanting of an invocation, which



is usually addressed to tribal ancestors' as well as beasts and demons that attacked the crops. Throughout the night are heard the sounds of dance and songs. The choral dances, some of which are in mimicry of the jungle creatures, appear to be form of productive magic. Some mimetic song-dance are performed by men, who repeat the words of a poem after the tribal chief, suiting gestures to the words.”

In the Lai-haraoba, worship of all the deities such as Thangjing, Marjing, Koubru, Wangbaren, Khamlangba, etc. the rituals are the same except in some items or hymns i.e. ikouba, ikourol, and yakairol at the beginning and mikon thagonba, ngapurum tanba, etc. at the end of the festival. In the performances, the evolution story with the amorous love-affairs of Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi is depicted and played equally in all kinds of lai haraoba.

Lai Haraoba is of six major types. The Meitei Lai Haraoba has been translated variously as The Merry-Making of the Gods or Festivities of the Sylvan Deities or The Merry Festival of the Deities by Manipuri Scholars. British writers preferred to translate as *The Pleasing of the God or Gods*. But, the inner significance and the gist are the same. The difference is in the variations of processes and in cultural aspects and not in the inner wisdom and basis of the philosophy of lai haraoba. The origin of the festival is that the gods held the first Lai Haraoba on the Koubru hill, so that their descendants should imitate them and perform the same as it had been done by the deities so that they will never forget the secret and sacred story of the creation of this universe and the birth of the different lives on this earth. In short, the Lai Haraoba festival is a genuine festival of the Meiteis that has raised this stylized dance to the domain of a very high artistic and aesthetic expression and has produced one of the beautiful and authentic traditional schools of religions dancing in the world.



MYTHS AND ITS UNDERLYING PATTERN:

Myths abound in every culture's literature. Its significance to a culture stems from the innate need for humans to ask questions about life's essence, our origin, the origin of universe. The Sun, the Moon and the Planets can all be observed all over the World. And the figures in the Milky Way are the greatest object in the metaphysical world of imaginative figures. Of course these facts had an influence long before the Earth population was large in number. So people all over the World have had the same basic objects for inspiration which caused most of the similarities. For our ancestors everything was connected. They did not distinguish between anything in the World.

It is because of spiritual experience only, a number of Gods and Goddesses representing the various elemental forces and qualities appeared. The galaxies of deities are the creation of our belief and imagination. They reflect our live; they are the symbols of hopes and aspirations, our miseries and suffering, our fears and uncertainties etc. When we make an attempt to explain the experiences of our life, both the good and the evil things in magnificently constructed and intricately woven stories of Gods and Goddesses, we are actually making art and literature. Gradually, such artistic creations have become the rare treasures of mankind in the form of great religious scriptures. Thus, the abstract thoughts and strange rituals in religion, art and literature were invention. In Manipuri Literature, we have a number of works concerning with the ancient myths and religion. The early history of civilization in Manipur, as recorded in the annals of Manipuri Literature is quite distinct and of great significance. The various myths and legends found in the culture of Manipur clearly show the origin of this ancient land and different groups of people



associated with it in various ages. The early Manipuri Literature is basically a narrative form of Literature where we find many interesting stories connected with the Ceremonies. However, there was no organized form of religion as Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam etc. Nonetheless, there is a basic similarity between most creation myths and Genesis. Among the aspects of the early history of the world found in Genesis which are also found in many or most creation stories are almost the same in their underlying pattern. In addition to Scripture, aspects of Greek festival of *Dionysus* literally linked with the creation stories. In a sense we can conclude by saying that there can be a theory of unity of human mythology in general.

CONCLUSION:

Thus, the origin of God can be located in the narratives and the narratives in turn are part of the literature. In a sense, we can say that God is the creation of Literature. If there were no Vedic Literature, the Hindu Gods might have never been there. In the Bible, the word has been identified with God. God's manifestation in literature has thus been depicted in the Western myths. Similarly, in the East too, there are ample evidences to suggest this very belief. The sacred book of the Christianity, *The Bible*, which is worshiped by the Christian just as they worship their Gods, is the home of the Lord, as the Lord Himself entered into the words of *The Bible*. This is what we call a Grand Narrative in Literature. So in all cultures in the portrayal of God, there are certain elements which are common and significant in the sense that mankind shares one earth, one sky and one sun. And human nature is same irrespective of the caste, culture or creed in all places. However, when we look at a particular aspect of the presence of God in Literature either in subdued or explicit form, it



is the artistic representation, which is more important. Indeed, literature can only artistically present God.



REFERENCE:

- Frazer, J. (1913). *The Golden Bough*. A Study of Magic and Religion. Macmillan and co., Limited, St. Martin's street, London(3rd ed.): pp.281-282
- Hodson, T. C. (1999). *The Meitheis*, (London 1908). Low Price Publication, Delhi (reprinted)
- Hodson, T. C. (1913). *The Religion of Manipur, Folklore*, Vol-XXIV, London: pp. 519.
- Hodson, T. C. (1912). *Meithei Literature*, Vol-XXIII, London: pp.182
- Laisram, Rena (2009). *Early Meitei History*, Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi.
- Mackenzie, A.S. (1911). *The Evolution of Literature*, The Rockwell and Churchill Press, Boston: pp.217
- Ratankumar Singh, Thounaojam (2011), *Myths in Manipur Literature* , 2nd International Conference on Humanities, Historical and Social Sciences IPEDR vol.17, IACSIT Press, Singapore: pp.169-173
- Roy, J. (1973). *A History of Manipur*, East Light Book House, Calcutta, (2nd ed.).



- Shakespear, J (1911). “A Note on The Rain Stopping In Manipur”, *Folklore*, Vol.-XXII, London.
- Shakespear, J (1913). “The Religion of Manipur”, *Folklore*, Vol-XXIV, London.
- Singh, Ratan Kumar. Kh. (2001). *Lai Haraoba of Manipur*, Ph. Pratima, Imphal.
- Singh, M. Chandra (1987). *Panthoibi Khongkul* (Manipuri), Imphal.
- <http://www.en.wikipedia.org>. Dated 22.7.2011.

¹Research Scholar, ²Research Scholar, ³Asst. Professor,
NIT Silchar, Humanities and Social Sciences Department, Email
ID:tsarjam@gmail.com

