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## Reflection of Mythological Motifs and Cultural Contours in Manipuri Folklore

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### Abstract:

*The cultural heritage of Manipur is steeped in mythology and cultural contours, which have been passed down through generations as folklore. This paper investigates the multifaceted realm of Manipuri folklore, shedding light on its creation myths, deities, folk heroes, traditional dance forms, sacred sites, and festivals. We can gain a deeper understanding of the culture by exploring the significance of cosmic forces and the power of creation in Manipuri folklore through deities such as Sanamahi, Pakhangba, and Leimarel Sidabi. Moreover, examining the values of bravery, devotion, and leadership deeply ingrained in Manipuri culture through folk heroes and legendary individuals like Khamba-Thoibi, Chinglen Nongdrem, and Ibudhou Pakhangba adds to our understanding of the culture's rich heritage.*

*In Manipuri folklore, dance forms like Manipuri Raas Leela, Pung Cholom, and Thang-Ta have significant cultural importance. They represent love, celebration, unity, and discipline. These dances are valuable artistic expressions that carry the essence of Manipuri traditions. By exploring mythological motifs and cultural contours, we get a glimpse into the diverse beliefs, traditions, and values that shape the cultural identity of Manipur.*

**Keywords: Culture, Mythology, Folklore, Narrative, Manipur.**

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**Introduction:** Northeast India is a region that boasts a rich cultural heritage, diverse ethnic communities, and a vibrant tapestry of folklore. Situated between the eastern Himalayas and the plains of the Indian subcontinent, Northeast India includes eight states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. Each state is home to various indigenous tribes and communities with unique cultural practices, languages, and folklore. Northeast Indian folklore profoundly connects to the oral tradition, with stories, myths, and legends passed down through generations. These narratives often draw inspiration from the region's natural landscapes, wildlife, historical events, and local customs, reflecting the communities' lived experiences and collective memories.

Nestled among the lush hills and valleys of the Eastern Himalayas, Manipur is located in the north-eastern part of India. It shares its borders with Nagaland to the north, Mizoram to the south, Assam to the west, and Myanmar to the east. This state is renowned for its natural beauty, rich cultural heritage, and diverse ethnic communities. Manipur has numerous ethnic groups with unique traditions, languages, and customs. Among the significant communities are the *Meitei*, *Nagas*, *Kukis*, *Pangals* (Manipuri Muslims), and several smaller tribes. This diverse cultural mix has contributed to Manipuri society's vibrant and pluralistic nature.

Manipur has diverse ethnic communities, including the Meitei, Nagas, Kukis, and Pangals. Each community's unique culture, language, and traditions contribute to the region's cultural heritage. The study of cultural history investigates customs, popular culture, and the cultural significance of historical experience. As Peter Burke denotes:

“...the rise of cultural history to a wider cultural turn in political science, geography, economics, psychology, anthropology and cultural studies. There has been shift in these disciplines, at least among a minority of scholars, from the assumption of unchanging rationality to an increasing interest in the values held by particular groups in particular places and particular periods...” (Burke 2)

Manipur has a rich cultural heritage and is known for its traditional performing arts, such as Manipuri Raas Leela and Pung Cholom. These dance forms exhibit the region's grace, elegance, and cultural ethos. Traditional music, folk dances, and indigenous games are essential in Manipuri culture. Religion is an integral part of the people's lives in Manipur. The Meitei community largely follows Sanamahism, an indigenous religion that worships various deities and spirits. In addition, different communities within Manipur practice Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam.

Manipur's cultural diversity is evident in its cuisine, handloom, and handicrafts. The state boasts ethnic communities with unique traditions, languages, and customs. Manipur's varied heritage adds to its richness, showcased in its colourful festivals like Yaoshang, Lai Haraoba, Kang, Ningol Chakouba, and Kut. Manipur's traditional attire showcases its cultural diversity. Each ethnic group has unique clothing and jewellery. Language and literature, particularly Manipuri, are vital in preserving the state's culture. Literature includes poetry, plays, and folklore and helps pass on stories, legends, and historical narratives.

Manipur's cultural diversity is further enriched by its geographical landscapes, which boast breathtaking natural beauty, including hills, valleys, rivers, and lakes. These natural surroundings have significantly influenced people's lifestyles, traditions, and folklore, resulting in a deep connection between them and their environment. Manipur's cultural diversity, with its many ethnic communities, festivals, and traditions, has helped sustain its rich heritage and fostered harmony and mutual respect among its people. It makes Manipur a vibrant mosaic of cultures and a treasure trove of cultural diversity.

**Significance of Mythological Motifs in Cultural Contours:** Mythological motifs are essential symbols in cultural narratives, rituals, and art. They embody a culture's essence and provide a sense of shared heritage and belonging. They also offer a framework for understanding a culture's worldview and explaining the universe's origin, natural phenomena, and human existence through symbolic elements and characters.

Mythological motifs convey cultural knowledge and values through storytelling and rituals. They are important in religious and ceremonial practices and contribute to the resilience of cultures over time. Understanding these motifs provides insight into the relationship between culture, symbolism, and human experience. We value myths and tales today for a variety of reasons. They have importance as literature because they present timeless and universal themes, provide us with knowledge of many eras and locations, and assist us in realising how much humanity has in common with one another. As Claude Levi Strauss has marked:

“Whenever we find myths as disconnected elements, this is the result of a process of deterioration and disorganization; we can only find scattered elements of what was, earlier, a meaningful whole. Or we could hypothesize that the disconnected state was the archaic one, and that the myths were put together in an order by native wise men and philosophers who do not exist everywhere, but only in some societies of a given type”. (Lévi-Strauss 15)

**Creation Myths and Deities:** Manipuri folklore contains intriguing creation myths that depict the origins of the world and the emergence of life. These creation myths often involve deities and mythical beings. Here are some notable creation myths and deities found in Manipuri folklore:

- 1) **Sanamahi:** Sanamahi is the chief deity of the Meitei community in Manipur. According to Manipuri folklore, Sanamahi is the creator of the universe and the source of life. Sanamahi is associated with fertility, protection, and prosperity. The deity is revered and worshipped in sacred spaces like temples and household altars. Lord Sanamahi is at the core of pre-Vaishnavite Meitei literature and worship. The Meiteis' native god, Lord Sanamahi, is revered by those who adhere to the Sanamahism or Sanamahi Laining religion. The combination of spiritualism with naturalism is known as Sanamahi. Ancient hymns and pious songs dedicated to the Sun god, Sanamahi, are known to exist. Here is an example of one of the specimens:

“I human being, cannot describe in my way the exhaustive attribute of the Immortal sun-The god of gods. Oh sun, great jewel of daytime, thou art fire giving warmth of Earth's back; give unto me the solar gem, the gift of immortality, that promotes the longevity of life.” (Singh 133)

Another Specimen of the Hymn to the Sun god (Sanamahi) goes as:

“Oh, thou art Heaven and Earth, thou born on the stone, born on the white stone; thy umbilical chord is cut by the leaves of lemchang, thou who lightest the jungle and

water, and who shinest up to the top of the loftiest bamboo. With thy brightness make warm the heat of the sun on the water of rivers, oh Sun-God may thy servants be pure and sinless like thou. To thee we pray.” (Singh 134)

The purpose of this early Meitei poem is to honour a pagan deity of the time. In order to keep blessing his faithful followers, it aims at flattering and revere Sanamahi.

- 2) **Pakhangba:** Pakhangba is a significant serpent deity in Manipuri folklore. Depicted as a human with snake-like features, Pakhangba is associated with water bodies, especially rivers. This deity is believed to possess the power to grant boons, protect devotees, and ensure abundant water resources. Some historical documents, tantric stories, and stone inscriptions have given Pakhangba a credulous aura by glorifying him as the God-king of Manipur who was anointed at Kangla by none other than the Guru Sidaba (the local equivalent of the Hindu Supreme Lord of the Universe). Local pandits still hold strong beliefs that the Guru Sidaba asked all three of his sons to travel to all four poles of the Earth after creating the universe, which was then thought to be limited to Manipur. This act aimed to determine the first person to return and officially crown them at the Kangla coronation slab. This slab is believed to be located above a legendary volcano crater. As per the established regulations, the eldest (Asiba) and the older son (Atiya Sidaba) both left, while the youngest (Konjin Tingthokpa) stayed behind. Even though Guru Sidaba reminded him of the assignment, the youngest paused and said:

“None else can match my exalted father, Guru Sidaba. So I shall circumambulate the four corners of my father's throne.” (Singh)

During the coronation ceremony, the youngest son humbly asked Guru Sidaba for the throne, while the oldest sons arrived much later. As a result, Guru Sidaba crowned the youngest son as Nongda Lairen Pakhangba. The name Nongda means “God-sent,” Lairen means “mythical Snake-empowered,” and Pakhangba means “father,” with Khangba meaning “one who knows the real father.” Due to his extraordinary ability to move like a dragon at night, he is known as Sanahing Pakhangba. Since then, the dragon has been used as the royal emblem of all the Rajas of Manipur. The dragon has a snake-like long body, symmetrically coiled in four loops, with a hooded head rising at the top and the centre square representing the sanctum sanctorum.

Another version of the legendary tradition surrounding Pakhangba becoming Manipur's God-King is widely held today. This version claims that Guru Sidaba had two sons, Yabista and Sanamahi, and that he wanted to test their ingenuity by posing as a dead bull and floating down the river. The younger was referred to as Pakhangba (one who knows one's father), again at the instance of the father-knowing Queen-mother. In contrast, the elder could not identify the carcass.

The creation myths and deities in Manipuri folklore are essential religious symbols that reveal the beliefs about the origins of Manipuri culture and the cosmos. Many religious

systems' mythologies and texts contain moral and ethical principles. Deities frequently act as moral role models; their tales offer advice on leading honourable lives. These lessons have the power to influence both individual behaviour and societal standards. Religion, particularly creation stories, and belief in gods, may offer comfort and hope in trying times. During trying times, many seek solace, support, and meaning in their religious convictions. Belief in beneficent deities might provide a sense of divine assistance and protection. They help people understand the world, natural elements, and the relationship between humans and the divine. The respect for these deities and the retelling of creation myths strengthens the cultural identity and influences Manipur's religious practices and customs.

**Folk Heroes and Legends:** Manipuri folklore is replete with captivating folk heroes and legends that have captured the people's imagination and shaped their cultural identity. These folk heroes and legends are often celebrated through various art forms, including storytelling, dance, music, and visual arts. Here are some notable folk heroes and legends from Manipuri folklore:

- 1) **Khamba-Thoibi:** The story of Khamba Thoibi is considered epic literature by many eminent Manipuri writers, including Nillakanta Singh, Jodha Chandra Sanasam, and N. Tombi. However, it is not widely known due to its remote geographic setting and difficulty understanding the language. It is primarily performative in style, oral in character, and composed of various variants. Numerous works have attested to the historical veracity of these figures and incidents. However, this paper does not focus on the story's integrity but on the gendered expectations, goals, and anxieties that permeate its plot. Many believe the narrative with the protagonists Khamba and Thoibi originated from khulang songs performed while working in the fields. It started as a brief tale about two star-crossed lovers. However, it grew to include several more stories highlighting Khamba's fortitude and bravery and Thoibi's fervour and tenacity over time. The tale is a fundamental component of Manipuri folklore's cultural and historical memory, and the celebration of Lai Haraoba would not be complete without their dance of devotion to Lord Thangjing. The origins of the oral folktale can be traced to the 12th century AD; however, additions and alterations have subsequently been made. Khamba and Thoibi are celebrated as an iconic couple in Manipuri folklore. Their story revolves around their love, bravery, and the triumph of good over evil. Khamba, a valiant warrior, embarks on various adventures to win the hand of Thoibi, his love interest. Their tale showcases devotion, loyalty, and the power of love.

**Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi:** Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi are legendary figures known for their valour and contributions to the welfare of the people. Nongpok Ningthou, a hero figure, is believed to possess supernatural powers and protect the land from adversaries. Panthoibi, his sister, accompanies him in his endeavours and plays a significant role in preserving the welfare of Manipur.

In Manipuri folklore, folk heroes and legends are revered as cultural icons representing values like bravery, love, sacrifice, and resilience. They are celebrated in festivals, art forms, and rituals to ensure their stories are passed down through generations. Manipuri mythology frequently emphasises the coexistence of people and environment. The Manipuri way of life may teach us important lessons about respecting and coexisting with nature. The Manipuri culture's dancing, singing, and artisan traditions are well-known. These artistic disciplines allow for expression and provide discipline, commitment, and inventiveness. In Manipuri culture, integrity and honesty are highly regarded traits. The traditions of the Manipuri people teach us the value of upholding moral and ethical standards despite difficulties.

**Cultural Significance and Symbolism:** Manipuri folklore's traditional dance forms, costumes, rituals, and symbols carry significant cultural meaning and symbolism. They express and reinforce the Manipuri people's cultural identity, values, and beliefs. Some aspects of cultural significance and contours in Manipuri folklore are:

- 1) **Cultural Identity:** The various elements of Manipuri folklore, including dance forms, music, costumes, and rituals, are vital expressions of the cultural identity of the Manipuri people. They help preserve and showcase the unique traditions, customs, and artistic excellence that define Manipuri culture. The Manipuri people maintain a solid connection to their roots and ancestors through these cultural practices, fostering a sense of pride and belonging.
- 2) **Spirituality and Devotion:** Manipuri folklore is deeply rooted in spirituality and devotion. The dance forms, rituals, and festivals are often associated with religious beliefs and mythological narratives. They provide a means for individuals to connect with the divine, express devotion, and seek blessings. The symbolism and gestures in dance forms like Manipuri Raas Leela reflect the deep spiritual yearning and longing for the divine presence.
- 3) **Symbolism in Costumes and Adornments:** The costumes and adornments worn in Manipuri folklore carry symbolic meanings. Elaborate and colourful costumes, intricate jewellery, and traditional textiles play a crucial role in portraying characters, representing deities, and reflecting the cultural aesthetics of Manipuri folklore. For example, the traditional phanek (wraparound skirt) women wear represents femininity, grace, and cultural identity, while the innaphi (shawl) signifies elegance and traditional values.

Manipuri folklore's cultural significance and contours are rooted in preserving cultural identity, spirituality, ecological harmony, community unity, and transmitting cultural knowledge. These elements contribute to the richness and vitality of Manipuri culture, fostering a deep appreciation for the traditions and values that shape the lives of the Manipuri people.

**Conclusion:** In conclusion, Manipuri folklore's mythological motifs and cultural contours are vital to the region's cultural heritage. They reflect the beliefs, values, and traditions that have shaped the identity of the Manipuri people over generations. From creation myths and deities to folk heroes and legends, these elements serve as cultural touchstones, connecting the present with the past. Traditional dance forms, such as *Manipuri Raas Leela*, *Pung Cholom*, and *Thang-Ta*, showcase Manipur's artistic excellence, grace, and cultural ethos. They convey stories, emotions, and spiritual connections, allowing individuals to express their devotion and celebrate unity and rhythm. Sacred sites, festivals, and traditional attire, like Kangla Fort, Lai Haraoba, and the phanek represent Manipuri culture's historical, spiritual, and aesthetic dimensions. They are symbols of cultural identity and serve as reminders of the region's rich heritage.

Manipuri folklore's mythological motifs and cultural contours are crucial in preserving the region's unique cultural identity. They provide a source of inspiration, moral lessons, and community cohesion. By acknowledging and promoting them, the Manipuri people can ensure their rich heritage thrives and is passed down to future generations. By preserving and promoting Manipuri folklore, we can ensure its vibrant cultural legacy remains alive for future generations.

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