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## **Religion and Life Cycle Rituals among the Meiteis of Manipur**

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**Abstract:** Religion is a system of beliefs in something which we the human beings consider to be beyond ourselves. It is universal in nature. It is a way to channelize human emotions to bind them together. It is also a way to cope the things we cannot control which are beyond ourselves and for those things we do not have the answer. Religion and life cycle rituals are the core elements of culture. Life cycle rituals are the events or ceremonies which marks the important stages of an individual's life. These rituals mark the passage of an individual's life course from one stage to the next. Religion helps to make these rituals functional and meaningful. It interprets and organises these rituals and connects with the way of life of the people. The present paper tries to describe and make sense of the life cycle rituals among the Meiteis of Manipur through the perspective of traditional Meitei religion.

**Keywords:** Religion, life cycle rituals, culture, ceremonies, rituals, traditional Meitei religion.

## Introduction

Religion is generally understood as a system of beliefs in something which the humans consider to be beyond themselves and which binds them together as to organize their lives into some kind of group or community. The term religion owes its origin to the Latin word ‘religio’ which means beliefs about and reverence for the gods. Different scholars give different definitions of religion. Frazer (1890) defined religion as a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and human life. Emile Durkheim (1912) defined it as a unified system of belief and practices relative to sacred things. Paul Radin (1957) defined religion in two parts: the first an easily definable, if not precisely specific feeling; and the second includes certain acts, customs, beliefs and conceptions associated with this feeling. For E.B. Tylor (1958) religion is the belief in spiritual beings. J.M. Yinger (1970) define it as a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with the ultimate problems of human life. Clifford Geertz (1973) defined religion as a system of symbols. It is an organised system of beliefs, attitudes, emotions, behaviour and a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature and purpose of the universe.

Life cycle rituals are the ceremonies or events that mark important transitional stages in an individual’s life such as birth, puberty, marriage and death. They are also known as rites of passage. French Anthropologist Arnold van Gennep coined the phrase ‘rites of passage’ in his work *Les rites de passage*, (The Rites of Passage) in 1909 to describe these events. These life cycle rituals are found in every human society and in every religion although their relative importance and degree of elaboration of the rites may varies.

## Materials and Methods

Anthropological field work has been conducted to collect primary data for this study. Primary data collection was done with the help of

observation, interviews and case study methods. Observation, both participant and non-participant, had been used to collect data on various rituals and ceremonies. Interviews were conducted with the help of schedules with Amaibas (priest), Arangphams (arranger/architect of rituals) and local people who have a good knowledge about Meitei religion and life cycle rituals. Necessary aids have been taken for secondary data collection from the earlier monographs, books, journals, ancient Meitei texts and chronicles.

### **Land and People: Study Area and Community**

Manipur is situated at the north-eastern corner of India. It is one of the seven (eight, including Sikkim) north-eastern states commonly known as seven sister states of Indian union. The state lies between the  $93^{\circ}03'$  to  $94^{\circ}78'$  east longitudes and  $23^{\circ}83'$  to  $25^{\circ}68'$  north latitude covering a geographical area of 22,327 square kilometres. The state is bound by Myanmar (Burma) in the east, Nagaland in the north, Assam in the west and Mizoram in the south. Geographically, the state can be divided into two: the oval shaped valley at the centre, and its surrounding parallel hill ranges. The surrounding hill ranges constitutes more than 90% of the total geographical area of the state. The oval shaped valley in the centre is of approximately 2000 square kilometres.

According to census 2011 data the total population of the state is 25,70,390 out of which 12,90,171 are male and 12,80,219 are females. Sex ratio of the state is 992. Of the total population 67.5% lives in the rural areas and 32.5% is of urban population (Census of Manipur 2011). Literacy rate of the state is 79.21% in which 86.06% is of male and 71.73% is of female population. Population density of the state is 115 persons per square kilometres. Out of 9 districts Imphal West being the state capital has the highest population density (998 per sq.km) and Tamenglong has the least population density (32 per sq.km). The state has 9 districts out of which 4 districts belong to the valley and 5 to the surrounding hills. They are Imphal East, Imphal West, Thoubal, Bishnupur, Chandel, Tamenglong, Churachandpur, Ukhrul and Senapati. Manipur observes a moderate climate. Summer prevails from the month of March to May. Monsoons arrive in the month of June and extend the rainy season up to September. The state receives an average

annual rainfall of 1467.5mm. The winter season extends from December to February. The maximum temperature during summer is recorded up to 32<sup>0</sup> C while in the winter season the temperature often falls below 5<sup>0</sup>C and sometimes up to 0<sup>0</sup>C.

The history of the Meitei people goes back to a very early stage despite the fact that its recorded history came to existence at a much later phase. Manipur was inhabited since Stone Age which has wide cultural affinity in Asia, particularly with the Stone Age cultures of south-east Asia (Singh 1988, 69). The recorded history of Manipur begins from the second quarter of the first century of Christian era when Pakhangba became the king of Meiteis (Manikchand 1988, 149). The state was an ancient sovereign civilization ruled by independent rulers (clan leaders) in their respective areas. This kingdom (Manipur) had been known to different nations of that period and they had trade relations between them as well. It had trade relations with the countries like Myanmar (Burma), China, Indian mainland, Arab and Greek world. Indian trade routes to China and south-east Asia also lay through Manipur (Acharya 1988, 57). Manipur was known by various names to different countries and states in the past. In the past the name of the kingdom was 'Poirei Meitei Leipak' or 'Kangleipak'. The name Manipur came into existence only after the adoption of Hinduism in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Before that, there is not a single word referring 'Manipur' as the name of this kingdom in ancient manuscripts or the royal chronicle. In the first recorded treaty between East India Company and Jai Singh (king of Manipur) in 1762 the kingdom was recorded as 'Meeckley' (Kabui 1988, 3). To the Shans the kingdom was known as 'Kase' and to the Burmese as 'Kathe', a corruption of the same word. The Ahoms called it 'Makeli' and the Cacharis 'Magli', while the old Assamese name for it is 'Moglan'. There are differences of opinion whether the name Manipur is associated with this land from very ancient times or in recent period. Whatever it may be, in view of the old manuscripts it can be safely asserted that the name Manipur of this land became popular only in the modern age (Roy 1973).

There are different opinions on the origin of Meitei people. According to S.K. Chatterji the Meiteis or Manipuris are the most advanced section of the Kuki Chin people (Chatterji 1967). Brian H.

Hodgson in a footnote to a contribution to the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1853 expressed the view that in the Moitay of Manipur we have the combined appellations of the Siamese Tai and the Kochin Chinese Moi. In other words, the Manipuri tribe belongs to the Moi section of the great tribe called Tai by themselves (Roy 1973). From the archaeological perspective it seems highly probable that a group of people from the regions of south China equipped with fully ground and polished stone tools and corded tripod wares entered into Manipur following the courses of Irrawaddy River and its tributaries (Singh 1983). Ethnologically and linguistically the Meiteis are Tibeto-Burman Mongoloid with Australoid, Aryan and Thai admixture (including some Negrito and Dravidian elements). Sociologically, Meiteis have absorbed these foreign elements and completed integration in their social structure (Kabui 1988, 17). On the other hand, the Hindu Meiteis of Manipur strongly believe that they are of western and Hindu descent. This Aryan connection was an outcome of the adoption of Hinduism by the ruling family and the people of the valley in early 18<sup>th</sup> century and the resultant claim of the descent of the ruling dynasty from Babrubhahana, a scion of the Pandava hero, Arjuna of the Mahabharatta (Kabui 1988, 12). But the Manipur mentioned in Mahabharatta was situated near Kalinga and its identification with the modern Manipur is not justifiable (Bhattacharya 1976).

Meitei-leipak (Kangleipak) which has been known in the sanskritized nomenclature as Manipur during the last three centuries had been the cradle of the autochthones which evolved the Stone Age culture, the earliest settlers and the other ethnoses in the early period of history. This process of assimilation of the ethnoses was completed in the pre-Christian era with the integration of seven major principalities, which ultimately emerged into a confederate nationality - the Meiteis (Sanajaoba 1991, 23). The ethnic group of Meitei as we find it today was formed by the amalgamation of seven different but closely knit and allied principalities, once settled in different parts of Manipur, each independent of each other. The components of Meitei confederacy were; the Meitei also known as Ningthoujas, Khaba-Nganba, Chenglei, Angom, Khuman, Luwang and Moirang. Besides these there existed several other tribes such as Mangang, Manding, Chairen, Khende, Heirem Khunja etc., all of whom were, in course of time, merged into

one or the other of the seven major principalities. The seven principalities again underwent an age long struggle amongst themselves till the Meiteis (Ningthoujas) finally established supremacy over the rest and absorbed them one by one in a period that covered several centuries. After this association, the name Meitei became the common nomenclature for all of them (Manikchand 1988, 147).

It is well known that historically, the word Meitei was used during the period of the establishment of Ningthouja dynasty by Pakhangba to mean this clan or dynasty and those ethnic and social groups who were politically and socially integrated within the suzerainty of the Ningthouja (Kabui 1988, 12). Thus, after amalgamation of those principalities the Meitei became their common name. Perhaps it may be pertinent to mention here that different scholars are found using two names, Meitei and Meetei while describing this same ethnic group. But the scuffle among the people over their ethnic name as to whether it is Meitei or Meetei need not linger on; Meitei or Meetei carries the same historical meaning. They are simply free variations of this language like any other language so permits (Budhi 1988, 80).

Manipur continued to exist as the sovereign kingdom of its own till the year 1891 despite an ever increasing British influence in this region. After the Anglo-Manipuri conflict of 1891 which was caused by a strained relationship developed between the British and the Manipuris on account of the murder of five British officers viz. Chief Commissioner of the erstwhile British province Mr. J.W. Quinton, the Political Agent of Manipur, Mr. Grimwood, Colonel Skene, Lieutenant Simpson and Mr. Crossins by a unruly mob at the Manipuri palace, Kangla on 24 March 1891. Manipur lost her independence to the British India on 27<sup>th</sup> April 1891. From 1892 onwards the state became a princely native state under British India. The British Paramountcy continued till 1947. According to a merger agreement signed on 21<sup>st</sup> September 1949 between Maharaja Budhachandra, the then king of Manipur and the Government of India, the state was merged to the Indian union as a part 'C' state on the 15<sup>th</sup> October 1949. On 1<sup>st</sup> November 1956 Manipur became a union territory. It became a full-fledged state of the Indian union on 21<sup>st</sup> January 1972.

## Results and Discussion

Religion plays a very significant role in Meitei community's life cycle rituals, ceremonies and festivals. In fact the very meaning and purposes of these activities are found deeply embedded in the religion. When we remove religious aspects from these activities they become meaningless acts and in some cases they may even cease to exist. Their cause, source, meaning and purpose etc., is religion itself. Religion interprets, makes them meaningful, functional and connects them with life. Life cycle rituals of Meiteis can be discussed into three broad categories viz. birth, marriage and death rituals as described below.

### 1. Birth rituals

Meitei birth rituals are very elaborate in nature. Religion plays a vital role in these rituals. These rituals started even before the birth of a child. The first ritual is performed when the expecting mother attains 3rd month of pregnancy. Then the next one is performed on the 5th month and next on 7<sup>th</sup> month of pregnancy. By the time she attains 9<sup>th</sup> month of pregnancy an elaborate ritual known as 'Kokthok-Chamthokpa' is performed. It is a ritual performed to avoid any unwanted complications at the time of child birth. It was firmly believed that if these rituals are properly performed than no unwanted incidents can happen to the child and mother during childbirth. But nowadays these rituals are becoming very uncommon and most of the households skip these prenatal rituals.

Postnatal rituals are still prevalent among the Meiteis, be it in the urban or rural areas. Just after the birth the new born child is hold by the midwife (Wangon Amaibi) in the case of home delivery or the nurse in the case of hospital. Before cutting off the umbilical cord the Wangon Amaibi calls in the spirit of the child by saying these three times;

*(Thawai 5 makmiga tharaga 6 makchipungba, kon, kon, kon)*

If the child is a girl then;

*(Thawai 5 makmiga tharaga 6 makchibungbi, kon, kon, kon).*



It is the calling in of the ultimate 5 souls and 1 image to the body of new born child. According to Meitei beliefs we the human beings have 5 ultimate souls derived from the fire, water, wind, earth and sky with one image. The image is called thawaimiren (the ultimate supreme image). After calling these souls and image the umbilical cord is knotted by 9 sacred threads (7 threads in the case of a girl child) and cut off. If the child does not cry so far then his or her souls and image is called in again.

Then the afterbirth (the umbilical cord, etc.) is put in an earthen pot with a coin (normally 1 rupee). Prayer is done to the goddess known as Pitai-Khongtaibi and buried at the right side of the house (left side of the house in the case of a girl child). The hole should be in the middle part of the house and it is of around 1.5 feet depth. It should be neither too deep nor too shallow. It is done by the father of the child. While filling up the hole he gently levells and carefully mops with water. It is believed that if the father does this forcefully the child will have hearing problems.

### **i. Heisoi Eepaan Thaba**

On the 6<sup>th</sup> day of birth the ritual known as ‘Heisoi Eepaan Thaba’ or ‘Eepaan Thaba’ is performed. It is some kind of naming ceremony. It has elaborate procedures one in the morning and one in the evening. The ritual is conducted by Amaibi (priestess) and Amaiba (priest). On the morning of the 6<sup>th</sup> day the house is cleaned. It is the ceremonial cleaning. Usually the floor is moped with water.

A Yangkok (a bamboo craft like a big plate used for drying, winnowing, etc.) is placed at the middle of the house near the door. Banana leaf is placed above the Yangkok and thereon placed different items of the ritual like cooked rice, curry, dry fish, fruits, flowers, salt, coin, etc. Then the Amaibi begins her chanting. After finishing this inside the home the Amaibi takes the Yangkok with the items outside the gate and offers them to the deities who dwell outside households. The Amaibi prays for the well-being and long life of the child to the deities.

The second (evening) session of the ritual starts after the sunset. It is conducted by the Amaiba (priest). Maternal uncle of the child, usually mother's younger brother has a specific role in this ritual. Necessary components of this session are a white dhoti (for the deity), dress of the child, lower and upper garments (shirt and dhoti for a boy, and Phanek and a cloth used as an upper garment by females for a girl child), one comb, mirror, necklace, beetle nut and leaf, banana, bow and five arrows, a handful of rice, seven kinds of flowers, seven kinds of fruits, a coconut or papaya, a handful of paddy, earthen pot, a lamp, sacred thread, earthen tray, etc. These items are put in their proper places by the Amaiba. Then he sanctifies the child with sacred water by Tairel, Pungphai and Langthrei (leaves used to sanctify or purify individuals and objects in rituals). Other items of the ritual and people involved in the ritual are also purified by him by sprinkling sacred water. A holy thread known as 'Langhee Meeren' is bound at the wrist of the child by the Amaiba. If the child is a boy, a thread combining 9 individual threads is bound at his right hand. If the child is a girl then it is bound on her left hand with a thread combined by 7 individual threads.

After that the Amaiba calls upon 5 (five) different deities for the ritual to attain and give blessing to the family and the child. First he calls upon the god of fire, then the goddess of water, the god of wind, the goddess of earth and the god of sky respectively. Then he again calls upon the 4 (four) cardinal directional deities with his spells. First he calls upon Koubru, cardinal deity of the north, then Marjing (deity of east), Wangbren (god of south) and Thangjing, who is the cardinal deity of west respectively. Then, the arranged items are offered to the gods by the Amaiba and he seeks for the wellbeing, wisdom, prosperity, and long life of the child from the gods. Next, the father and mother pray to the gods seeking blessings for their child and family.

Next, it is the time for the maternal uncle to play his role. The bows and arrows are put in front of the earthen pot with water. The maternal uncle sanctifies himself with the water from the pot. Then he offer flowers to the bow and arrows. After that he goes outside the house with bow and arrows. The Amaiba offer flowers to the arrows with his spells. After offerings and prayer, the maternal uncle starts shooting the arrows to different directions. He first shoots to the Chingkhei (east)

then second arrow is shot to the Thangjing (west). The third arrow is shot to the Wangbren (south) and fourth arrow is shot to the Koubru (north). The last and fifth arrow is aimed at the sky and then to the earth seeking life of the child. Then he comes back inside the home with the bow and arrow. He pretends and touches the arrow to the front door while entering inside the house. He places the bow and the fifth arrow near the Eeratphu (earthen pot with water) and offers it to the almighty god and goddess (Chingu-Nongdamba and Nongdambi, the supreme god and goddess who determine the fate of mankind). The mother and father offer their gratitude with Akatsen (dakhsina). It is a kind of ritualistic offering of cash as gratitude, usually coins. Then the maternal uncle makes offering to the child with Akatsen. It signifies the offering of blessing and wealth to the child. He is followed by the father, mother, friends and relatives and others who come to attend the ritual. It is the blessing ceremony wishing for long life, wisdom, health, wealth and prosperity to the child. After this, the child is taken inside from the ceremonial place. The Amaiba continues the ritual with his spells seeking the well-being of the child. Then the father and mother pray to the almighty god with all their heart and soul for the well-being of their child. Lastly, the Amaiba prays to the supreme almighty to forgive the misconducts, deficiencies, wrong procedures and processes, if any, in the ritual. With that the ritual of Heisoi Eepanthaba concludes.

## **ii. Yum Sengba (Ritual purification of the house)**

From the very early days this purification ritual has been practiced in the Meitei community. It is held on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the birth of the child. Till this day, not only the parents' family but also the whole clan is considered as unclean (ritually). During this period worship of household deities is a taboo. No religious prayer, offerings can be done inside the house during this period except Heisoi Eepanthaba which is held on the 6<sup>th</sup> day of the birth. Moreover, it is believed that Heisoi Eepanthaba is conducted by the Wangon Amaibi and Amaiba (priestess and priest), not by the family, and offerings are made outside the house at the gate, to be precise. So it is not considered as a ritual performed to the household deities.

The Amaiba sanctifies the mother and child with sacred water sprinkled by Tairel-Pungphai leaves with the spells of the ritual. Then he sanctifies the father of the child and other members of the family as well. Then he purifies the house and surroundings by sprinkling the sacred water. He throws up the remaining sacred water to the roof of the house. After this purification ritual the mother can enter the family kitchen. Before this she was prohibited to enter family kitchen and prepare household meals. During that period she prepares her own meal in a separate hearth. She was separated from the household activities as well. This practice can be seen as a ritual to care for the mother's health and other family members' hygiene. It also helps the mother to regain her strength before she goes back to the family life again.

### **iii. Chaumba (feeding rice, i.e. food)**

This is the ritual of first feeding of rice (food) to the child. It marks the beginning of taking other foods given by Mother Nature in addition to the mother's milk. Before this ritual the child is supposed to rely on mother's milk. The child is yet to introduce properly to other external foods. This ritual formally introduces the child to the unlimited food reserve of Mother Nature. It is performed when the child is 5 to 8 months old. If the child is a girl, the ritual is performed when she is 5 or 7 months old. For a boy, it is performed when he is 6 or 8 months old. It is a tradition handed down through generations. The researcher could not find a solid reason that explains why there is a difference in time period for boys and girls.

The ritual is performed by seeking a good and pertinent day for the child by the elders according to the time of birth, day, etc. Fruits, vegetables, banana, rice, earthen pot, Tairel, Pungphai, Langthrei, utensils for the child (plate, glass, pot etc.) and dress of the child are the necessary components of the ritual.

Each and every item of the ritual is first sanctified by Tairel-Pungphai-Langthrei with sacred water. Then they are offered to the Lainingthou and Leimarel Sidabi (household deities; Lainingthou-supreme of all gods, Lemarel Sidabi-mother goddess, queen of all gods) and prayer performed for the child.

After cooking the meal with offered items it is first offered to the gods. The child is held by the mother on her lap and then starts feeding. The mother feeds five (5) sips to the child. The first sip is to understand the supreme almighty. The second sip is to understand the mother earth, the third to understand and feed five souls of the body, the fourth to understand mother and father, and the fifth is to enhance wisdom. After feeding these five (5) sips the mother can feed the child according to the child's wish. It is a ritual that signifies the shift from mother to Mother Nature for mankind's survival.

## **2. Marriage Rituals**

Marriage is one of the most important life cycle rituals of every human society. It has been prevalent in every known human society since ancient times in one form or another. And Meitei society is not an exception. In Meitei society it is called Luhongba. This term is derived from the two words, Lu and Hongba. Here, Lu means head (of our body) and Hongba is to inaugurate or initiate. So the etymological meaning of the term Luhongba is ritualistic inauguration of human mind and body. Inauguration in this context is like those of inauguration of temples, house, market etc. For instance, in Meitei tradition a pond can be used by the people only after the proper inauguration of it. Likewise, Luhongba is the inauguration of the boy and girl. It is a sacred bond between them forming a single mind and body. In Meitei philosophy, until their marriage a boy or a girl's mentality is considered as that of a child. It is only after their marriage that they are considered as adults and their thoughts (mental dignity) considered valid by the society. After this ritual (marriage) the married couple gets their mental status to the society. Before this ritual they were considered as immature individuals with childish thoughts. It is worth mentioning here that there is no tradition of child marriage in Meitei society. It is also believed that a married couple has learnt the rules and regulations (principles) of the society. From this day onwards the girl has changed her head (mind) to another family, i.e. the boy's family. This ceremony marks the entering of boy and girl's life to a new stage – from youth to matured adulthood, both physically and mentally. Generally marriage is forbidden between those of the same Yek/Salai (clan). There are some exceptions but it is a strong belief of the people that same Yek/Salai

marriage is always followed by unwanted consequences in their lifetime or in their siblings’.

There are three (3) types of marriage in Meitei tradition. They are as follows.

(i) The case in which both the parents of boy and girl come into proper negotiation or they get eloped and then they get married. It is commonly known as Luhongba. In this case the boy and girl may or may not have any prior relationship between them.

(ii) In this case the boy and girl get eloped and stay at the boy’s home. Then after sometime may be months or year later they are finally accepted by the parents and society as a couple after performing this ceremony. It is known as Loukhatpa or Lai tin Thaba. The term Loukhatpa literally means to pick up. In this case it means the formal approval of the couple by the parents and society.

(iii) This type is called Keinya Katpa meaning offering of the bride (to the groom). In this case the boy and girl get eloped with or without their parent’s consent. At the next day of the elopement the bride’s family is informed by the groom’s family about the incident. After formal dialogue and negotiation the bride is brought back to her family at the same day and then with a small ceremony the bride is offered to the groom and his family. Among these three types this one is the shortest and least elaborate.

The first case, Luhongba, has two sub types. In the first case the boy and girl get eloped with or without their parents’ consent and then they get married. This type does not have any preliminary stages or negotiations before their elopement. The marriage ceremony of this type has two phases, Heijingpot or Heijing Kharai Puba and the Marriage (Luhongba) which we will discuss more elaborately in the coming sections. In the second type their parents arrange the ceremony with formal dialogue and negotiation. There is no elopement. It is some kind of arranged marriage. In this case the boy and girl may or may not have prior relationship between them. This type of marriage is generally considered as the most ideal form of marriage in Meitei society. This

form of marriage has four distinct preliminary stages before the marriage. They can be discussed as follows;

**1. Hainaba:** It is the first preliminary stage. In this stage the parents of the boy approach the girl's family seeking the girl to be their daughter in law. Gifts of fruits and other food items are presented to the girl's parents by the boy's family. If the girl's parents regard the union as unsuitable then negotiations stop there. If it is regarded as a possibility then horoscopes of the boy and girl are read and if that prove favourable then a meeting is arranged between the elders of both families to discuss the matter further.

**2. Yathang Thanaba:** This stage is the official giving of consent to the marriage by the girl's parents to the boy's family. The eldest male of the boy's family with some other elders (family or relatives) visits the girl's family, and formal negotiations of marriage are made. A day is fixed to perform the next ritual, Waroipot Puba.

**3. Waroipot Puba:** In this rite the contract is sealed. For this the groom's family approach the bride's house bringing foods and other gift items. Offerings are made to the ancestors of the bride.

**4. Heijingpot or Heijing Kharai Puba:** According to Meitei tradition the girl (bride) is taken to be a full blooming flower in the garden of her parents. As a price of this flower the groom's parents offer fruits and other gifts to the bride's family. The function of this rite is to make the impending marriage known to all the relatives, neighbours and locality, etc. The groom's party brings fruits, sweets and other food items with gift items for the deities. Among those fruits, Heikru (Indian gooseberry or amla, scientific name, *phyllanthus emblica*) is a must. Heikru is traditionally considered to be the chief fruit. There may be other fruits of several kinds but Heikru is a must. Without it the ritual cannot be completed. If the fruits are not available, being out of season, then its branches are used. Those items meant for deities are kept inside the house for the appropriate Lais (deities) and other food items are distributed to the guests, relatives and those who attended the ceremony. Laphoi chang thokpa (Banana, odd numbered), betel nuts and leafs, Heikru, Heining, Heijang (citrus limon), Chungou (white sugarcane), Kabok, some flowers, gift items of Leimarel Sidabi (mother

goddess), Apokpa (ancestral deity) and Lam Lais (deity of the area in which the girl resides) etc., are the main components of this ceremony.

### **(i) The Marriage**

The day before the wedding the groom is formally invited to the wedding. It is called Piba Paotak Piba or Bor Barton toubu. This is done by a boy from the bride's family, usually by the younger brother of the bride or other suitable male member of the bride's family. A garland of Kundo flowers is prepared along with the betel nut and leaf for this rite. The groom is garlanded by the boy and offered betel nut, leaf and flowers. The groom receives the invitation by receiving the gifts given by the boy.

On the day of the marriage, certain rites are performed at the residence of the groom before he starts for the bride's residence. A mat is placed at the 'Peeba ka' (right side) of the Mangol (veranda). In front of that mat an Eeratphu (earthen pot used for offerings), a paddy Tangga (a small container made of banana leaf), a rice Tangga, a Tangga of white flowers, a mirror, a Chaisel (bronze water pot), an earthen pot with water, a Heiruk (fruit) Tangga, a Kwa (betel nut and leaf) Tangga, some incense sticks, some clean (sanctified) water, some flowers, Akatsen (dakshina), etc., are placed. The groom dresses properly for the ceremony on this mat with Pumyat (white kurta), Pheijom (white dhoti), and Innaphi (a white cloth that is wrapped around the upper part of the body). Then the Amaiba (priest) sanctifies the groom with the clean water and pray to Supreme Almighty saying the name and clan of the groom. Then the groom prays to the Lainingthou Sanamahi and Leimarel Sidabi (household deities). After this, the groom prays to his father and mother offering a Kwa Tangga with Akatsen to each of them. The parents bless their son. Then, the groom prays and touches the mat with his ring finger and seat down. He is again sanctified with the water from the earthen pot. The groom touches all five items in front of Eeratphu (paddy, rice, gold, silver and flower Tangga) with his right ring finger and takes a small portion of each of them and then offers them to the Eeratphu. He puts some water drops also from the earthen pot to the Eeratphu using Eerik Kanggan (a small spoon make of plantain leaf). Then the groom prays folding his



hands. It signifies the blessing from the most sacred five elements (paddy, rice, gold, silver and flowers). The groom then puts on his Kokyet (turban). After this the groom cannot pray or bow to anyone until the ceremony is over. He is regarded as the prince in this context. He can only slightly bend to respect or receipt other's prayer or wish. The groom and his party start for the residence of the bride by checking 'Nungsa sor Kanglon' (breathing pattern or sign of nose). If his right nostril proves to be more open and breaths more freely, then he takes the first step with his right feet. Likewise, if he feels more free and open at his left nostril then he starts with his left feet. When they set out for the bride's residence, the father of the groom walks in the front, the groom walks in the middle and mother walks behind her son.

When they reach the gate of the bride the groom is sanctified with three Meiras (burning torches). Kabok Afaba, Mengkruk and flowers are cast upon the Meiras. It is done three times, using nine Meiras at three different places along his path. It is to protect the groom from any evil spirits or which he may have encountered on the way. Then the groom is welcomed by the mother of the bride with two of her companions by offering a Paana Tangga. He bows to the mother in law and receive the Tangga. This is known as Maya Okpa (welcoming the son in law). The groom enters and sits with his friends attended by an expert at the north-eastern side of the ceremonial place before entering the centre of the courtyard where the main rites are performed.

All the preparations brought by the groom's party are received by the bride's party. The preparations of Apokpa (ancestral deity) and Chengluk Nungsang are taken inside the bride's house while other items are prepared for the ceremony. Preparations of Apokpa are meant for the ancestral deities. Its main items are two Heikrus, two Heinings, two bunches of Banana, two pieces of Chungou, Leisang, coconut, Kabok, betel leaves and nuts (7 in number), a tuber of yam, ginger and some cottons, etc. These items are put systematically in a Phiruk (a bamboo basket with cover) and kept at the place of Lainingthou Sanamahi in the bride's house. Chengluk, also known as Chingnung Nungsang, is kept in front of the Fungga Lairu (hearth in the middle of the kitchen of the bride's house where goddess Emoinu resides). The components of the Chingnung Nungsang includes a Phiruk of rice

(uncooked), two Thumpak (indigenous salt disc), two tubers of yam, two tubers of ginger, two Akatsen (dakshina) and a fruit having good smell usually Heijang. This Phiruk is covered with a white cloth and tied very well. It is then kept untouched for the next four days at Phungga Lairu. On the 5<sup>th</sup> day of the marriage the Phiruk is opened and its contents are poured out in a Yangkok (a bamboo crafted winnowing fan) in the presence of three female members of the groom with elders and family members of the bride. The contents are duly observed to read the future of the couple. It is considered as a good omen if ants and spiders were present inside the Phiruk. If they find dead insects it is believed to be a bad omen. Appropriate rites can be performed in the next day to rectify the cases of such bad omens.

In the marriage ceremony, appropriate offerings and prayer are made according to the ritualistic formalities to the primal deities of fire, water, air, earth and sky along with the Lainingthou Sanamahi and Eputhou Pakhangba by uttering appropriate hymns by the Amaiba (priest). Then the groom comes out and sits on a seat in the middle of the court known as Phambal or Luhongphal which is prepared specially for the occasion. The groom sits at the Phambal attended by an expert known as Bor Sennaba.

The Amaiba performs the rite of Eeratphu Latpa (worshiping of Eeratphu) for the well-being of the bride inside the house before she comes out to the main ritual place at the courtyard. Her father prays to the supreme almighty by offering flowers and sacred water to the Eeratphu. Then the father puts a few drops of sacred water at the palm of the bride. The bride sanctifies herself with the sacred water and prays to the Eeratphu by offering flowers. She then prays to her father. Father gives his blessings to the bride by touching at her head. The bride then comes out to the ceremonial place after proper dressing and make up attended by an expert known as Keinya Senabi (the one who look after the bride). While doing so she checks the Swor kanglon and takes her first step according to the omen. She bows when she enters the main ceremonial place at the courtyard. She prays to her father offering fruits. Father gives his blessings and brings in the bride with her maid to the centre of the courtyard. The bride then takes her seat. Amaiba sanctifies her with sacred water. She sits near the groom on his north eastern side.

Then both of them are sanctified by the Amaiba. After this their hands are tied up by the bride's mother with seven strands of sacred thread keeping the bride's hand up and that of the groom's below. Then the Kujapot is placed upon their hands. Kujaba is the symbolic wealth of the bride given by her parents for the new life of the couple. It includes a coconut, a fruit having good smell usually orange or Heijang (citrus limon), a white dhoti, a scissor, a nail cutter, a turban, sacred threads, Tingthou (a ritual purification herb), a comb, a bunch of banana (odd number), a handful of rice (uncooked), a mirror, a germinated betel nut and leaves, a Kambi (earthen tray), a knife, some cloths of the bride, Akatsen (dakshina) etc. These items can be used by the bride and groom only.

While the Kujaba ritual is in progress the rite of Meetam Nga Thaba is performed by three females from the bride and groom's families. For this, two fishes (lata fish) are sent off representing the marrying couple to a nearby pond. The movement of the fishes is closely observed by the women. If they swim together peacefully, a peaceful life of the marrying couple is anticipated.

The Amaiba sanctifies the Kujapot with Tairel leaves (a leaf use for ritual purification) and offer Akatsen to it. After that family members, friends of the bride, groom, and others who attend the ceremony offer Akatsen to the Kujaba giving their blessings to the marrying couple. It is called Dan Thadhaba. By the time those three women who went to a nearby pond for the rite of Meetam Nga Thaba arrives this Dan Thadhaba concludes (or before they arrive). Then the Kujaba is held up by the Bor Sennaba and bride's attendant unknots their hands. She takes the Kujaba from Bor Sennaba and gives it to the bride's mother. The whole Kujaba item is then presented by the bride's mother with due respect and honour to the groom's mother who is sitting just opposite to the groom. The groom's mother receives it with great honour. This is known as Kujaba Yaba (receiving the Kujaba). Every mother considers it as the most valuable and honourable rite in the marriage of their son. It is so valuable to the mothers that in some cases those mothers who have more than one son dedicate the right to receive the Kujaba to the one who has no son. The latter accepts the offer with great honour. In

other words, it is the dream of every mother to receive such an honour in their sons' marriage.

After placing Kujaba to the groom's mother, the bride then rises and walks around the groom seven times in clockwise direction. On completion of each round the bride casts flowers upon the groom and prays with her folded hands. It is called Lei Chaiba. After this the bride places two garlands of Kundo flower on the groom. She then resumes her seat at the Phambal. She sits at the left side of the groom. The groom places a garland of Kundo from his neck to the bride. Then both the bride and groom rise. Their cloths are tied together at the corner of the back. They take the oath and pray to the Lainingthou facing east. Bride's father gives his blessing to the married couple. Then the married couple enters bride's house led by the bride. There they exchange sweets (Kangsubi) and Paana. The bride offers to the groom first and the groom offers it to the bride again after taking some parts of it. It signifies the sharing of their life from this day onwards. The mother of the groom offers Paana to the bride and bride's mother make her offer to the groom. They pray to the Lainingthou Sanamahi and Leimarel Sidabi for long life and prosperity. Then their cloths are unknotted. The groom comes out of the bride's house and bow to the elders in the ceremonial place. He also bows to the elders of the bride's family by offering fruits. Meengkhei (ritual singing or sangkritan) also get finish by this time. Members of the bride's family offer their Akatsen to the Bor Sennaba. Then the groom comes back to his home with his friends. He offers his turban (Kokyet) and nuptial garland to the Lainingthou Sanamahi and prays.

Before the bride sets out for the groom's residence the rite of Ngai Konaba is observe. For this, the groom's father with his two companions sit at the ceremonial place; the bride's father with his two companions also sits at the opposite direction facing groom's father's party. Both the fathers of the bride and groom sit in the middle. Then the bride's father and his companions offer a Paana Tangga to their counterpart saying, "*from this day onwards our daughter is given to you, please mould her in your customs and accept as a daughter in law of your Sagei (clan).*" The Groom's party also offers Paana Tangga to their respective counterparts and then they bow to each other. The same

rite is performed when the bride's party is about to leave the groom's residence after leaving the bride. This time, the groom's party offer the Paana Tangga first, and the bride's party offers back.

After taking blessings from her parents, friends, and relatives, the bride is taken to the groom's residence. She is sanctified with three Meiras (torch) and welcomed by the groom's mother with her two companions. She is embraced by the mother in law with her left hand and bring her inside the house. Then the bride prays to Lainingthou Sanamahi and Leimarel Sidabi of her husband's house. She removes her nuptial garland and offers it to the Lainingthou Sanamahi. Then she collects both the garlands (another one offered by the groom earlier) and keeps them at the Lukhum (head side of the bed). In the next day she prays to the supreme almighty and keeps the garlands to a safe place as their ultimate wealth of life.

On the 6<sup>th</sup> day of the marriage a grand feast known as Mangani Chakouba is arranged at the bride's residence. Both the parties of the bride and groom, relatives and other invitees participate in it. With this the marriage ritual concludes.

In Meitei tradition marriage is not just about the bride and groom. It is a permanent bond between two families, two clans. When a girl is married to a particular Sagei (clan) she is not only marrying her husband. She is establishing a permanent bond with the whole family and their clan. It is beyond just two people and two families. It is the permanent bond of two Sageis. From the marriage day onwards the groom and his family become a part of the bride's family and their clan. Likewise, bride's family becomes a part in any ceremony, ritual or any other social events to the groom's family and his clan. In Meitei philosophy, with the ritual of marriage the social obligations of parents to their children conclude. From the marriage day onwards their married progenies shall take responsibility and care of their parents.

## **(ii) Loukhatpa (Lai tin Thaba)**

Unlike marriage ceremony this ritual is not so elaborate in nature. For this a day is fixed by the elders of both families after checking their horoscopes (bride and groom), or consulting an expert. On the day of

the ceremony the groom's family with their elders and relatives goes to the residence of the bride taking food and gift items, preparations for Apokpa (ancestral deity) etc. All the items are placed in the courtyard. They are sanctified by the Amaiba. Then appropriate offerings are made to the supreme almighty and ancestral deities. Fathers of the bride and groom pray for the well-being and prosperity of the couple. And then the couple bow and pray to their parents and elders for their blessings. After giving their blessings to the couple, sweets and other food items are distributed to those who attend the ceremony. With this the ritual of Loukhatpa also known as Lai tin Thaba concludes.

### **(iii) Keinya Katpa**

This ceremony is normally observed on the next day of the elopement. The groom's family and relatives go to the bride's residence with both the bride and groom. It is their customary obligation to bring the food items and other necessary items for the ritual. After reaching the bride's residence the groom sits at the Phambal (seat) which is prepared for him at the Mangol Pibapham (right side of the open veranda). An Eeratphu is placed in front of the groom and appropriate offerings are made. After this prayer, the bride is brought out and sanctified by the Amaiba. She sits to the left of the groom. Their hands are tied and Kujaba is offered. Then the Kujaba is given to the groom's mother. The bride put two garlands of white flowers to the groom. Then the groom takes out one and garland it to the bride. After this food items and sweets are distributed to the attending mass. After praying to the parents and elders they come back to the groom's residence. On the 6<sup>th</sup> day groom's family is invited for a feast by the bride's family. On this day the preparations are made for the ancestral deities (Apok Asha) and offerings are made.

## **3. Death Rituals**

According to Meitei philosophy/traditional beliefs human body (Hakchang) is made up of five elements – Mei, Esing, Nungsit, Leipak and Atiya (fire, water, air, earth, and sky) and a living principal called Thawai (the soul). Death is the separation of Thawai from its dwelling place, Hakchang. It is called Nongkaba meaning going up to the Nong (heaven) or Lairamlen (abode of the gods). When a person dies, his/her

soul gets reunited as a scent of flower in the garden of supreme almighty (Taibang Mapu or Tengbamba Mapu). It is called Nongtaiba. Here Nong is the heaven or the original abode of the soul and Taiba is reunion. Human body is left by the soul as it is no longer fit to stay. Then the body goes back to its original abode, to where it comes from, to the place where it originates from. It is now buried in the earth (Leipak). This is called Leitaiba – Lei-mother earth and Taiba-union. Thus, when an individual dies all the elements that constitute the mortal body get united with the mother earth again and the soul goes up to its original abode where the supreme almighty dwells.

The Meiteis believe in the immortality and transmigration of soul. Death is regarded as the separation of the soul from the body with a view to transmigrate into a new body. (Kulachandra 1967). After a person dies his/her soul stays with the ancestors in the land of death where the supreme almighty lives. It is called Lairamlan, heaven or abode of the gods. So, the Meiteis perform death rituals in order to give a right path to the Lairamlan and for its deliverance for the departed soul. Meiteis also perform death rituals in order that the departed soul gets a new body in a human birth in the case of natural deaths and rituals to avoid reoccurring in the case of unnatural deaths such as suicides, children died in infancy, women died in childbirth, etc.

Present day death rituals of the Meiteis are different from those of ancient practices. The chronicles and other ancient texts mention existence of four different forms of disposal of the dead. They are (i) Nungsitki Potloi (disposal of death in the air), (ii) Eshinggi Potloi (disposal in the water), (iii) Leipakki Potloi (burial) and (iv) Meigi Potloi (cremation). (Birachandra 2006, 119-120). The disposal of death in the air was oldest of all. During the ancient time of king Kangba the dead body was thrown out to a particular place to be taken over by Kakyen Meengamba, a divine bird who takes the dead body to the land of death. Then came the days of throwing into water. The Kangbalon Puya says that dead bodies were thrown into the river near the sacred place, Heibokching. Then from the time of Tongkonba funeral of dead bodies in a specific place began to practice. Up to the advent of Hinduism this practice was prevailing (Bhagyachandra 1991, 119-121). Cheitharol Kumbaba (Singh & Singh 1967), the royal chronicle reports

that on the 20<sup>th</sup> day of the month of Hiyangkei the king took all the bones of the ancestors to Ningthi for cremation (Singh & Singh 1967, 73).

It is well known that up to the advent of Hinduism, the death were buried and chronicles mention the enactment by Khagemba of a rule that the death were to be buried outside the enclosures of the houses. Garib Niwaz, the then Manipuri king ordered the Manipuris to exhume the bodies of their ancestors, which they formerly used to bury inside their compounds. At a later date in his reign, in the year 1724, Garib Niwaz exhumed the bones of his ancestors and cremated them on the bank of the Engthee River and from that time ordered his subjects to burn their dead (Hodson 1908, 116-117). The body is even today placed in a coffin before cremation, which supports the contention that burial was practiced in pre-Hindu times in Manipur (Parratt 1980, 85).

In the ancient pre-Hindu Meitei society there were two rituals to be performed on the death of an individual. They were Nimtki Mathou Yangkempa (ritual according to the days) and Thaki Mathou Yangkempa (rituals according to the months). The ritual according to the days was called Chupsa Moithem. It was observed on the 7<sup>th</sup> day of the death. It was a ritual performed by the family and relatives of the death in order that the departed soul gets a body in a human birth. All the male members of the clan participate in this ritual. The Piba, chief of the clan wrote off the name of the dead individual from the clan chronicle. Appropriate prayers and offerings were made to the supreme almighty (Tengbanba Mapu) and other dieties, Salailail Sidaba (supreme clan ancestor), Leimarel Sidabi and Lainingthou Sanamahi for peace and happiness of the departed soul. Due prayers and offerings were also made to the supreme almighty to give a new body to the departed soul in a new birth.

The ritual according to the month is called Kumon Phiroi, a practice still continued. It is the last rite for the death of an individual. This ritual is performed on the completion of 12 months (a year) from the death. According to traditional Meitei beliefs life starts from the father. The ultimate life source stays two months in the father's body and then it passes on to the mother who bears the child for 10 months. Altogether a



period of 12 months (a year) is considered to be required for a departed one to get a new birth. The ritual of Phiroi is thus performed on the completion of 12 months from the death by assuming the departed one would get a rebirth after the completion of a year by offering a grand feast in honour of Taibang Mapu, Salailel Sidaba and Salai ancestors.

Present day death rituals of the Meiteis are the composite practices which are synthesised from traditional Meitei religion and Hinduism. There are slight variations in the components, procedures and style of the rituals amongst the people who follow Hinduism and traditional religion. But, by and large, in both the systems we can observe syncretised elements. Here in this study we deal with those practices of the people who follow traditional Meitei religion also known as Sanamahism.

There are four distinct stages in the death rituals of Meiteis. They are (i) funeral rites, (ii) Mangani Leihun (Aasthi sanchay), (iii) Lalna Thouram (shradha) and (iv) Kumon Phiroi.

### **i) Funeral rites**

Normally funeral rite (cremation of the death) is done on the day of the death itself. It is done on the next day if the death occurs in the night or in some special cases like waiting for the close kin's arrival or disputes about the death or death in distant places, etc. In any case, cremation takes place as soon as the matter is resolved. After the death of an individual the corpse is taken out by the close kins outside the house, the leg of the corpse leading the head and kept at the southern side of the open veranda of the house on a mat covered by a white cloth. Preparations are made for appropriate offerings by the attending Amaiba (priest). A small hut called Yathoksang or Khangbok also known as Khangpoksang is made at the Khangenpham (south eastern corner of the courtyard). The corpse then is carried out to the hut through Naktha (northern side of the open veranda) and kept there on a long plantain leaf with the head facing north. Then the body is bathed and dressed with white cloths. The body is then put in a coffin. The coffin is also covered by a white cloth. Cremation takes place at the specific place for the locality or by the riverside. But in present day it is generally done on local crematoriums which are constructed for this

purpose. Some fruits, a Paana Tangga (betel nut and leaf) and a coin is offered by the Amaiba at the cremation place. It is considered as buying that land for the ritual. The funeral pyre is made by piling up seven layers of firewood. It represents the seven clans (Salais) of Meitei. It also signifies seven days in a week. Four bamboo poles are erected on the sides of the fuel logs a little away and a Thakan (piece of white cloth) is raised over the fuel logs as a canopy. These four poles represent lord Thangjing, Marjing, Wangbren and Koubru, four primordial deities of four directions.

The corpse is carried round the funeral pyre three times in the clockwise direction by the family members and close kins. After the completion of three rounds the coffin is laid on the pyre. The Amaiba offers fruits, flowers, rice (uncooked) etc., to the ancestors of the departed soul and prays so that the soul may merge with the ancestors and supreme almighty. Then the Amaiba invokes fire god and worships the deity by offering fruits and flowers with appropriate chants. The pyre is lit and set on fire by the next male kin of the deceased who was also walking around the pyre carrying an earthen pot of water on his left shoulder and a piece of fire lit on his right hand. He also initiates the use of Humai (a fan) to increase the fire by blowing three times. Humai is made from an old Yangkok (bamboo crafted winnowing fan) by attaching a long bamboo handle. Males may stay until the body has been consumed but women, children and immediate family members leave after the fire has been started. This ritual is accompanied by the funeral song performed by the Pung Yeiba and Esei Sakpa (ritual drummer and singer). The funeral song of the Meiteis speaks of the appeal made by the kinsmen and relatives to the departed soul for its return in the next life in the family. They also sing homage to the supreme ultimate ancestor for the peaceful union and stay of the departed soul in the heavenly abode. The remains of the cremation are buried in a funeral ditch on the northern side of the pyre or the direction in which corpse's head was laid. Then the ditch is labelled and watered. Then a handful of mustard seeds are sown upon it. It is for the purification of the funeral place. The place is considered sanctified when the seeds germinate and grow.

All the people who attended the cremation take bath and sanctify with sacred water by Tairel leaves. They are also sanctified by someone carrying fire to keep away the evil spirits at the gates before entering their homes. Only then are they permitted to enter the courtyard and change their wet cloths. It is done outside the house. They cannot enter their houses with their wet cloths even though they are sanctified earlier at the gates. Before the family mourners arrive home it is essential that all the cooking pots and utensils be cleansed and the whole house is purified by mopping with water. The whole family and clan, except for small children, have dietary restrictions until the Lalna Thouram (sradha) which is observe on the 11<sup>th</sup> day. During this period they are prohibited to eat any kind of fish and meat, be it fresh, dry or fermented. They only take simple vegetarian food during these mourning days. It signifies their condolences to the departed soul.

## ii) Mangani Leihun

This ritual is also known as Mangani Thawaimikou Tamba. In general it also goes by the name Leihun or Aasthi. It is observe on the 5<sup>th</sup> day of the death. For this ritual a Phambal (ritually sanctified platform) is made on the northern side of the courtyard. It is a specified seat for the departed soul. In the middle of this Phambal a folded white cloth is placed. Two folded white cloths (Innaphis) are also placed on the left and right sides of the Phambal. Some ritual items including Heiruk (fruits), Kabok, Paana Tangas and five Lakois (round shape plantain leaves) are placed in front of the Phambal. Nine Tanggas (plates of plantan leaf) of flower are also placed in four directions and in four intermediate directions – east, west, north, south, north-east, south-east, south-west and north-west of the Phambal. It is called Maikai 4 Sungdai 8. A Tangga is placed in the middle of the Phambal. A meira (ritual torch) is placed at the right side and Mengkruk (local made scented crystal powder) is offered to the left side of the Phambal. Then the Amaiba sanctifies the Phambal and prays to the Lainingthou and Lairembi.

Arangpham then sanctifies Pungyeiba and Eseisakpa by sprinkling sacred water. Arangpham is the arranger of rites and rituals and ceremonies. They play a very significant role in Meitei socio-cultural

life. Preparation, decoration, designing and arrangement of various ritual items etc., are their role in every ritual and ceremonies. He also offers Paana Tangga to each of them. The Thoubu (host of the ritual, usually the eldest male of the decease's family) enters the courtyard and bows to the Pungyeiba and Eseisakpa. Attending mass is sanctified by the Arangpham offering flowers and sacred water. It is called Leichandan. Then the ritual performers begin their singing. After this, ritual recitation of Puya (ancient text) by an expert is observed. During this time offerings (cloths and money) are made to them by the Thoubu and others who are present.

The family members and relatives then go to the cremation place to gather the departed soul led by the Pungyeiba and Eseisakpa. Amaiba picks up five small pieces of dirt from the Mangpham (burial place) and puts five Tanggas. Then he offers Heiruk Tangga (fruits), Paana Tangga (betel leaf and nut), Thaomei (ritual lamp), Mengkruk (scented crystal powder) and flowers to the five ultimate soul of the departed one. Family members and others offer flowers to the burial place led by elder male members. Those five pieces of dirt from the burial place signify five ultimate soul of the death and is tied to a white cloth with a white flower garland and a coin. Then it is tied to the Thoubu's neck and he comes back to the ritual place with others. After reaching the courtyard the Amaiba removes the cloth from the Thoubu and it is placed in the middle of the ritual place on a plantain leaf. Offerings are made by the Amaiba with flowers and Meira with appropriate chants. With this the ritual of Mangani Leihun Tamba concludes. After the offerings there may be a feast for the attending mass. The feast is of pure vegetarian items.

### **iii) Lalna Thouram**

This ritual is commonly known as Sorat (sradha). It is observe on the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the death. The ritual starts in the morning at around 8-9 a.m. An Eeratphu (earthen pot) is placed in the middle of the Sonnapung (ritual place at the courtyard) with its appropriate offerings for this ritual. A Phambal, a specified place for the almighty Lainingthou Sidaba to witness the ritual is also made. In front of the Phambal fruits and flowers are offered in five Tangga Lakois (round

shape plantain leaves) by the Amaiba chanting appropriate hymns. Offerings are also made to the Phambal with flowers. It is made by the Thoubu, and followed by other family members, relatives and others who wish to make their offering. Some food items are also offered to the supreme almighty after cooking by an expert known as Pujari. This is called Luklen Katpa or Luk Katpa. With this the morning session of the ritual concludes.

Afternoon session of the ritual starts at around 2 p.m. Arangpham sanctifies Pungyeiba, Eseisakpa, Amaiba and other attending masses. It is called Lei-Langba or Lei-Chandan. It is for the formal reception and purification of the people for the ritual. The ritual performers (drummer and singer) and Amaiba is offered cloth by the Thoubu (host) along with a Paana Tangga to each of them. After the offering for ritual singing by the Amaiba the singing begins, with the drummer starting first. They sing about the evolution of mankind, soul, hymns of the ultimate almighty, etc. Before the ending of ritual singing, Meira Katpa (offering of ritual lamp) is observed. Arang Puren (the chief Arangpham) sanctifies the ritual performers and attending crowd. Offerings are also made to the Phambal with flowers and Akatsen (dakshina). A shawl known as Leng is offered to the Pungyeiba, Eseisakpa, Sanglen Mapu (presiding man of the ritual place) and Amaiba by the Thoubu. The attending crowd also make their offerings and prayer at the Phambal at the end of the ceremony. The Amaiba clap his hand three times and removes flowers, fruits etc., from the Eeratphu. Then he places them into a plantain leaf facing Chingkhei (east) and prays. He removes the Eeratphu from its place as well. The main pillar (Jatra) of the ritual Mandap (pandal) that is also known as Urep is also taken out and dropped towards the Chingkhei direction. It is offered to the Chingkhei Yaiphu king and prays for the forgiveness for any misdeeds and discontents of the ritual that might have occurred.

As mentioned earlier there may be some local variations in the process and procedures of the ritual. Those Meiteis who follow Hinduism observe this ritual in slightly different ways and in different days (13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> day of the death). In some cases there is no afternoon session with ritual singing. In these cases the ritual concludes with a feast after proper offerings and prayers during the morning session. It is

believed that the morning session with the rites like Eeratphu Latpa, Luk Katpa, offerings and prayers to the Phambal and Meira Katpa are the main components of this ritual. After finishing these rites in the morning session the ritual can get shortened and conclude with a feast without observing the afternoon session.

#### **iv) Kumon Phiroi**

This ritual is commonly known as Phiroi. It is the last rite of an individual. This ritual is observed on the day of completion of one year from the day of death following Meitei lunar calendar. A Phambal is made in the middle of the courtyard for this ritual. An Eeratphu is placed and worshiped in front of the Phambal. Six pieces of Heiruk (fruits) and Paana Tanggas are also placed. Mengkruk thaomei (scented ritual crystal powder torch) is also offered. Heirang, Leirang (fruits and flowers) are offered to the Phambal with appropriate hymns and chants by the Amaiba. Family members and relatives of the deceased also make their offerings. After that Tara Luklen (cooked food items with several dishes) is offered to the Phambal. Then the rite of Meira Katpa (offering scented ritual fire) is observed by the Amaiba. The ritual concludes with a feast with family members, relatives and all the others who are present at the ceremony.

In Meitei beliefs human body gets rest when the individual dies but its soul does not get rest. After the completion of one year the departed soul gets a new birth to a new body. This ritual of Kumon Phiroi is observed for the well-being and prosperity of the new birth by praying and offering to the supreme almighty (Tengbanba Mapu). According to Meitei philosophy it takes twelve months for the soul to become a mortal being (human being). The life source of mankind stays in the father for two months then it passes on to the mother where it stays for ten more months. Thus, after the completion of twelve months it becomes an individual. Conception of a female is called Lakyen Phiyan Taiba or Lakyen Phiyanba in Meitei archaic language. This process gets finished by completing twelve months and becomes a new individual. The term Phiroi signifies Phi-Loiba – completion of the Phi or Lakyen Phiyanba. Thus, after the completion of one year the departed soul gets a new body to a new birth.

## Conclusion

Like in any other human societies the Meitei society has elaborate life cycle rituals. These rituals are important aspects of Meitei socio-cultural life. In fact they are very significant parts of Meitei culture. They play a very crucial role in proper functioning of Manpuri (Meitei) culture as a whole. Culture, being a complex whole, has many aspects and life cycle rituals are the most important part of it. In each and every part, cultural traits have their respective function and role for the proper functioning of that culture as a whole. Birth, marriage and death rituals are the most pivotal life cycle rituals in Meitei culture. These rituals mark important stages of life of an individual. Through these rituals an individual passes from one stage to the next stage of life and finally reunites with the nature again after its lifetime. The purpose, meaning and significance of these life cycle rituals are found deeply imbedded in Meitei traditional religion and philosophy. These rituals are indispensable aspects of Meitei life.

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