

Socio-Cultural Life of Meitei Pangal (Manipuri Muslim) in Manipur

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ABSTRACT

Royal Chronicles of Manipur, Cheitharol Kumbaba recorded that Meitei Pangal started settlement in the valley of Manipur from the reign of King Khagemba (1597- 1652). They are the second largest community next to Meitei and assimilated into Meitei society by marrying Meitei women. Manipuri Language (Meiteilon) is considered their mother tongue. They adopted the Meitei way of living, though they adopted Islam as religion and strictly follow the Islamic norms and personal laws. The paper is an attempt to highlight the socio-cultural life of Meitei Pangal such as family, marriage, birth and death, beliefs and practices, etc. This work is qualitative research based largely on open ended interviews, oral discussions and other secondary sources such as Royal Chronicles (Cheitharol Kumpaba and Ningthourol Lampuba), Puyas (archaic manuscripts), journals, books etc.

Keyword: Meitei Pangal, Society, Culture, Marriage, Birth, Death

INTRODUCTION

The Meitei Pangal is the second largest community in the valley of Manipur having distinctive cultures and traditions, comprises of 8.40 percent of the total population while majority being the Meitei community representing about 53 percent. They have been amalgamated the Meitei's way of living since the time of Khagemba, and since then influenced socially and culturally by Meitei. However, they follow the Islamic code of conduct and are bound by the Islamic personal laws in family, marriage, birth, and death ceremonies. The liberal king treated them well and allowed them to settle in Manipur by marrying Meitei women and their descendants came to be known as Meitei Pangal. This distinctive identity formed out of syncretism have played a crucial role in shaping the socio-cultural landscape of Manipur.

The culture and tradition of Meitei Pangal reflecting the blend of Islamic beliefs and local customs results to a lively cultural identity that is always evolving. In the midst of modern problems, their perseverance and dedication in preserving their tradition illustrate the value of their culture in Manipur. The Meitei Pangal are the real example of how a groups can preserve their unique identities while contributing to the larger socio-cultural landscape. Their narrative shows flexibility, solidarity, and the lasting force in an ever-changing world. The Meitei Pangal have historically faced challenges in asserting their identity within the state. This has often resulted in social and political marginalization. In recent years, issues related to land rights, community representation, and cultural preservation have gained prominence. The community has been striving for greater recognition and inclusion within the socio-political framework of Manipur. There are various aspects of their culture such as language, religious practices, birth, marriage, death, festivals, cuisine, arts, and social structure.

Manipuri (*Meiteilon*) is the primary language spoken by the Meitei Pangal. They considered Manipuri as their mother tongue and able to speak and write fluently although many members of the community speak Urdu. The use of Manipuri reflects their deep-rooted connections to the local culture, while Urdu connects them to the broader Islamic world. Bilingualism is common, allowing them to engage with both local and national identities. Some Urdu, Arabic, Parsi words were introduced in Manipur like *Hokum*, *Dukan*, *Khobar*, *Amil*, *Wakil*, *Rumal*, *Dalali*, *Darbar*, *Diwan*, *Sarkar*, *Gulab*, *Sabun*, *Haq*, *Sabi*, *Sanam* (in the sense of mistress/sweet heart), *Qalam*, *Dalil*, *Sahar*, *Bazaar* and many others in present time. It may be said that the use of Persian and Arabic words had enriched and beautified the Manipuri language.

Religious Practices

Meitei Pangal believed that there is one God called Allah, a supreme creator and sustainer and his last messenger, Prophet Muhammad is the founder of Islam religion. They adhere to the teachings of the Quran and the practices of the Prophet Muhammad's teachings and guidance which are central to their identity. They strictly follow the five fundamental principles without fail, viz, (1) Kalimah, (2) Namaz, (3) Roza, (4) Zakat and (5) Hajj. Those people who believe in the Islamic religion must know the Kalimah (*lah Illaha Illallahu Muhammadur Rasullulah*), meaning there is no God except Allah, Muhammad is the messenger of Allah. Namaz is compulsory for all Muslims who pray five times a day - Friday Namaz, Taraweeh Namaz, and Eid Namaz, etc. Roza is kept compulsory for all the Muslims by fasting one whole month (*Ramjan*) in a year. During this month, every Muslim prays for forgiveness, reward, and protection from the evils, except exempted under certain conditions. Zakat, the purifying tax on accumulated wealth is maintained by those rich people donating compulsorily to needy peoples, and orphans. Hajj, an annual pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia is the last principles for those Muslims capacity or are eligible to perform the Hajj, but not compulsory for poor people. The community predominantly follows Sunni Islam, with a unique interpretation that incorporates local beliefs and practices.

Meitei Pangal celebrate two festivals in a year, viz. *Eidul-fitr* and *Eidul - Adha*. *Eidul-Fitr* is observed on the last day of the month of Ramzan, the month where compulsorily fasting (Roza) for all mature Muslims, except exempted under certain conditions. It is also called the fasting festival. Another festival, *Eid al-Adha* is performed after *Eidul- Fitr*, for the sacrifice of the Prophet Ibrahim. It is also called *Bakra Eid*, which means the festival of sacrifice. During this festival, they sacrifice a goat or a cow, and then distribute uncooked meat to the poor, orphan and relatives for reward, forgiveness, and protection from the evils. Their participation in local festivals further enrich their cultural identity. Participation of Festivals like *Ningol Chakouba*, a major festival of Meitei, see their involvement of other communities, showcasing their ability to blend their identity with local traditions. Such participation fosters a sense of belonging and mutual respect among different ethnic groups in Manipur.

Birth

Birth ritual is one of the important life cycle rituals performed when an individual enters into different stages of life. It is a customary practice performed by almost all the communities of the world. It is a symbol of welcoming the newborn baby into their respective communities and caring for them. Every community regarded children as precious gifts from God. Some ritual and practices involved in birth system include -

- (1) **Azaan and Eqamad Prayer:** It is performed immediately after delivery. The newly born child is bathed with warm water and wrapped in pieces of cloth specially prepared well in advance for the purpose, and then the call for 'Azaan' (call for prayer) by a respectable person, who may be an old man or Maulavi, or a male member of the family preferably father of the child. This Azaan is recited into the right ear and Eqamad into the left ear without which the baby would not be treated a Muslim. Giving honey to the child to taste sweet is considered as Sunnat practice of the Prophet.
- (2) **Aqiqa or Hakkikat Sacrifice:** The custom of the Akika ceremony is performed on the 7th, 14th, or 21st day of birth, if not otherwise may performed later depending upon parent's conditions (niyat). However, parents must keep their words once if they promised to perform the sacrifice. It is also called 'loo kokpa' (shaving head). On this day, naming of the child is also done. The father of the child has to sacrifice an animal in the name of God. If the child is male, then the father must sacrifice one cow or two goats, and sacrifice one cow or a goat in case of girl child. In Aqiqa, if the sacrifice is performed with a cow, fresh meat is distributed to the poor, orphan and relatives, whereas cooked meat is distributed if the sacrifice is done with a goat.
- (3) **Meining Hippa or Kunba (Parturition):** During parturition, the mother and child are usually cared by her parents by staying at least 40 days at her parent's house. This period of time is known as 'Meining Hippa or Meining Kunba'. In some cases, Meining Hippa is done in the husband's house with regular visits of female members from the maternal family. During these days, the mother has to remain confined to bed and eat simple food, mainly boiled rice with a local salt called Meitei Thum. She eats dry fish like Ngamu, Ukabi along with boiled vegetables for twenty days. Meat soup is also recommended for speedy recovery of the mother.

- (4) Sunnat/ Khanah Touba (Circumcision): This customary practice is done only for the boy when he attains at the age of 7 to 12 of years, but commonly done below 10 years. Sunnat Touba means performing Sunnat/Sunnah, i.e., circumcision. This practice is performed compulsory for boys by a specialist locally called Napit. Usually, several boys are circumcised in a house of a locality. It is believed that performing Sunnah give better health to the boys. Immediately after this practice, a boy must take rest for 4/5 days avoiding outdoor playing. Now-a -day with the advancement of medical facilities, the Sunnah is done by doctors and medical practitioners at clinics, hospitals, etc.
- (5) Na Hutpa and Naton Hutpa (Pierce of Nose and Ear): The Meitei Pangal girls pierce their noses and ears not related to religion. There is no age limit for a girl to have her nose and ears pierce. It can be done in one year or even below one year. It is common to have nose pierce on the left side for wearing luxurious ornaments. The ornaments worn on the nose are called Nasika Chinba, and the ornaments worn on the ears is called Sana Chinba. The practice of Naton Hutpa is to identify that the girl is from a Pangal community. On the other hand, Pangal boys are not practicing Na Hutpa which also identify the community the boy belongs.
- (6) Tasmiya Khwani (Learning): Like the practices in other Islamic world, the Meitei Pangal boys and girls after attaining four years send to Masjid or Maktab to learn all about do's and don'ts, and manners of Islam and the Quran. This practice is called Tasmiya Khwani. They are accompanied by elders of their family, or entrusted to the Maulavis, Munsis or Qazis. The Meitei Pangal called their teachers Miyazi or Miyashab. At first, the children learn to read the sentence Bismilla Hir Rahama Nir Rahim.
- (7) Tawiz or Zantra (Locket): Tawiz locally called as Zantra is usually worn by every community of Manipur. Zantra is a small Kaboch (small iron hollow pot with a cap), and it is commonly hung by black threads and worn on any part of the body, such as the arm, neck, or waist. It is believed that by wearing Zantra, the child can protect themselves from devils and certain diseases like epidemics.

Marriage

Marriage is one of the social institutions which provide legal marital relationship amongst the men and women. For most of the communities, marriage is celebrated as integral part of life to sustain family and mankind, however, this concept is different in case of Islam. Marriage is not an act of sacrament rather it is a social contract. They may have many duties and responsibilities in society besides the union of man and woman. The marriage system of Meitei Pangal is a combination of Islamic law and Meitei culture. *Nikah* and *Mahr* or dower are obligation in Islamic culture. There will be no marriage without the consent of both parties and can be dissolved or separated base on their wills or according to the Islamic law. Marriage without consent is void, and a marriage with consent under compulsion is invalid. Marriage is usually performed in one of the four forms, namely -

- (1) Engaged Marriage (Hainaba)
- (2) Eloped Marriage (Chenba)
- (3) Captured Marriage (Chenba Phaba)
- (4) Recognition of Eloped Marriage (Loukhatpa)

Engaged marriage is the most common practice in the Pangal society. Engaged marriage or arranged marriage is the most approved form of marriage in Manipur that began from ancient times to the present day. Eloped marriage is looked down on by society. Despite all, 80% of marriage is through elopement nowadays (*Chellaga Luhongba*). In an eloped marriage, the boy is usually helped by his friends to run away with the girl, which is not approved by society. Captured marriage take places in rare case which is treated as worse and look down upon by society. It is done forcibly without the consent of the girl. Agreement of recognition by both parties after long period of eloped marriage and captured marriage due to disapproval by parents being the same clan or lack of consent from girl is also one of the practices in Meitei Pangal. There are certain customary practices performed prior to the marriage such as *Yumjang Pot Puba*, *Kwa Khaiba*, *Sagei Kwa Yenba*, and *Panuka Puba* which is due to the influence of Meitei culture. Certain restrictions are also imposed on marriage such as, marriage without a witness, marriage to a man who already had four wive, marriage with the woman who was within the *Iddat* period, and lastly, marriage off girls to other boys of different religion.

Traditionally, Meitei Pangal use to pay gift to the bride by the bridegroom's side, either as a sum of money, gold, or any other valuable property. Mahr/Dower is compulsory to give to the wife by the husband to safeguard and strengthen the economic position of married women. There is no fixed amount for the Mahr/ Dower; it depends on the condition of man. It is a right of the wife and considered essential for the validity of the marriage. Mahr is not a payment given by the wife's family to the husband or his family. Mahr is a right, not a price for marriage, and a crucial element of Islamic law.

Death Ceremony

Meitei Pangal adopted the Muslim way of disposal of dead body. The practice of burying dead body is called *Daphan* or *Leirol Chanba*. The dead body should be kept straight on a bed without mattress facing west i.e. toward the direction of the *Khah* or Mecca. In case of women, the deceased is stripped off all her ornaments from body follow by loosely tied of chin by a strip of cloth with the head, the practice called the *Khadangchetpa* or *Punba*. The body is again covered with a white cloth called *Kafan phi*. Let us discuss some few characteristics of death ceremony -

- 1) **Announcement of Death (*Shibagi Pao Laothokpa*):** The announcement of news of dead called '*Shibagi Pao Laothokpa*' is one of the important traditions of the Pangal. The method of announcement of dead was done orally through people to people in the loud voices in early days but with the advancement of technology, relatives and friends are now inform with the help of telephone or microphone. On this announcement, the exact time and place of *Daphan* or *Leirol Chanba* should be clearly mention. It is also custom among the Meitei Pangal that as soon as the news of dead is announced, they must say, '*Inna Lillahi Wa Inna Eleihi Raziun*' (we are born for the Islam and we would back to him). It is a tradition that all the relatives are attain at the *Daphan* ceremony.
- 2) **Ritual Bath of Deceased:** This practice is performed either outside or inside of the house depending on the gender. If the deceased is male than bathing is done outside the house and it is done inside the house in case of female. A husband may bath his deceased wife. Meitei Pangal believe that those involved in the bathing of dead receive god's blessing. For bathing, the dead body should lay on a bed where four sides are dug up to drain the water or loosen up the surface to absorb the water. The water boil with the leaves of shrubs known as *Sangbrei* (*Pogastemon- purpurascens*) or the *Borroi* (*ziziphusmauritiana*) leaves should be used to shower and cleaning of deceased.
- 3) **Recitation of verses (Quran Khani/Lik Chatpa):** This ceremony is performed by reciting the whole verses of Quran for the departed soul usually on Friday or on any other convenient day soon after the death. For the purpose of recitation, the whole verses are divided into 30 small parts and distributed to all the people present there. Everybody should read their share either a short or long verses. Instead of reciting the verses, *Lik Chatpa* or *Sonba* is also performed by old members who are unable to read.
- 4) **Feast for departed Soul (Mangam Touba):** It is another ceremony performed by the Meitei Pangal for the deceased soul to rest in peace at *Janat* (heaven). The Manipuri term, *Mangam* means feast and *Touba* means to observe. Usually, the family members arrange a special feast for their love ones that had departed the world like the *Tarpon* of Meiteis. On this ceremony, all the friends and relatives regardless of their economic status were invited to attain.

Clan and Family Institution

The Meitei Pangal family is patriarchal meaning the father is the head of the family. His words are obeyed by his wife and children. They practice both joint and nuclear families. Permanent family in which the eldest son lives with his parents, unmarried brothers and sisters, in addition to his own children. Essentially, the type of family of eldest married son having three generations living together is called a joint family. Another type of family is a nuclear family where family is established only with his wife and children. In the course of time, such nuclear family become a joint family when a married son living together with his parents, wife and children.

The social structure of the Meitei Pangal is clan-based, with families play a vital role in community life. Community placed a strong emphasis on kinship and social bonds, which are reinforced through cultural

practices and gatherings. Meitei Pangal were given *Sagei* (Clan) according to their occupational/profession and the work they performed. Some Meiteis also converted to Islam and were assigned Sageis such as Oinam and Thangjam (Kullachandra and Badaruddin, 1991). The list of 58 Manipuri Muslim clans is based on Nongsamei Puya. Different Kings assigned clan names based on occupation, settlement areas, or even known and established clan founder (Bhogeswor and Janab, 1973).

Cuisine

The cuisine of the Meitei Pangal is a vibrant aspect of their culture, characterized by use of locally sourced ingredients and traditional cooking methods. Their food features a mix of Islamic culinary practices and Manipuri flavors, resulting a unique gastronomic experience. Common dishes include meat dishes particularly of beef and chicken, *Kangsoi*, *Iruk/ Iromba*, *Chamthong* traditional prepare with local herbs. The community also enjoy different kinds of sweets and desserts especially during festivals. Traditional cooking methods, such as the use of clay pots and open flames, are prevalent, preserve in their culinary heritage.

Arts and Crafts

The Meitei Pangals have a rich tradition of arts and crafts, contributing to the broader cultural landscape of Manipur. They are skilled in various forms of handlooms and handicrafts including weaving, pottery, and embroidery. The craftsmanship often reflects motifs and designs while incorporating local patterns, showcasing their dual heritage. Music and *Naat* are integral to the cultural expression of the Meitei Pangal. Traditional forms of *Marifat* and *Naat* music often performed during festivals and ceremonies are common, with unique adaptations that resonate with their identity. They also perform some traditional dances like *Thabal Chongba*, *Maibi Jagoi*, *Khullang Esei* etc.

Challenges and Resilience

Meitei Pangal navigate a complex landscape marked by ethnic tensions and socio-political dynamics in Manipur. Despite the rich cultural heritage, the Meitei Pangal have faced socio-political challenges, often grappling with issues of identity, representation, and marginalization within the state. Ethnic tensions and competition over resources have complicated their existence, leading to a struggle for recognition and inclusion. In recent years, there has been a growing movement within the community to advocate for their rights and promote awareness of their culture. This has given a continuous thrust to document the history and traditions of Meitei Pangal. Meitei Pangal contribute to the vibrant cultural fabric of Manipur, striving to coexist peacefully with other communities while asserting their unique identity. There has been a growing interest in the cultural heritage of the Meitei Pangal, with the efforts of documenting their history, traditions, and their contributions to Manipur. This renewed focus has helped foster a sense of pride within the community and has encouraged younger generations to engage with their roots.

Education has become a focal point for the Meitei Pangal, with increased efforts to improve literacy and access to education within the community. Various educational institutions and initiatives aim to provide opportunities for youth, enabling them to engage with broader socio-economic frameworks while retaining their cultural identity. Various organizations and associations exist within the Meitei Pangal community to promote education, cultural preservation, and social welfare. These bodies work towards addressing issues faced by the community, such as representation and access to resources. They also organize cultural events, workshops, and seminars to encourage younger generations to engage with their heritage.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded from the above understanding that the socio-cultural life of Meitei Pangal is intertwined with the customs and practices of Meitei inhabited in valley areas of Manipur. Meitei Pangal have adopted the Meitei way of living and therefore, they felt the strong influences of Meitei socially and culturally while maintaining the code of conduct and personal laws of Islam in their religious ceremonies.

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