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# Understanding The Culture Of The Meiteis Through Oral Narrative Genres

Rabikanta Singh<sup>1</sup>, Ng. Pungfa<sup>2</sup>, S. Sumanta Singh<sup>3</sup>, M. Monoranjan Singh<sup>4</sup>, K. Ingocha Singh<sup>5\*</sup>

<sup>1,2,5</sup>Associate Professor, <sup>3,4</sup>Assistant Professor

P.G. Department of Anthropology, D. M. College of Science, Imphal (India)

\*Corresponding Author, Email: kingcha2010@gmail.com

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## Abstract:

This study explores the oral narratives of the Meitei, an ethnic group from Manipur, India, focusing on folk tales, myths, and legends. These narratives serve as a reflective medium, offering insights into the social, political, kinship, and religious dimensions of Meitei society. By examining these stories, the study aims to uncover the symbolic expressions within their social system. The research employs a comprehensive methodological approach, including interviews with pundits and religious specialists at sacred shrines, participant observation of local storytellers known as wari liba, and life-history techniques from elders who have preserved the tradition of oral storytelling. This anthropological investigation into the cultural context of Meitei oral literature reveals deep-seated insights into their human experience.

**Keywords:** Meitei, oral narratives, myth, folk tales, symbolic expression.

## Introduction

Anthropologists, as storytellers, weave narratives from their own experiences and those of others to understand and interpret diverse cultural worlds (McGranahan 2015). By crafting these narratives, anthropologists aim to convey both the essence of the stories and the theoretical frameworks that underlie social and cultural analysis (Rosaldo 1989, Hill 2005). This dual approach of storytelling and theoretical interpretation allows for a deeper understanding of cultural dynamics. Furthermore, oral narrative genres play a pivotal role in shaping contemporary and future fiction, highlighting the timeless nature of these stories (Huber and Jonaitytė 2020). The Meitei, an indigenous people from the state of Manipur in India, possess a rich tradition of oral narratives that are intricately woven into their social fabric. These narratives, comprising myths, legends, and folk tales,

serve as a medium through which the Meitei express and preserve their cultural identity. The oral traditions of the Meitei are not merely stories; they are a reflection of their societal values, norms, and beliefs. These narratives offer symbolic expressions that permeate various aspects of their social systems, including kinship, politics, religion, and literature.

In the realm of kinship, oral narratives help to define familial roles and relationships, reinforcing the social structure and ensuring the transmission of cultural values from one generation to the next. Politically, these stories often encapsulate historical events and leaders, thereby shaping the collective memory and identity of the community. In terms of religion, myths and legends provide explanations for the origins of the universe, natural phenomena, and moral codes, thus guiding the spiritual beliefs and practices of the Meitei. Additionally, these narratives contribute to the literary tradition of the Meitei, influencing contemporary literary forms and inspiring new creations.

### **Literature Review**

Recent studies have also examined how oral narratives contribute to social cohesion and community identity in various indigenous cultures. They have also looked at the impact of modernization and globalization on the transmission of oral traditions, highlighting the challenges and adaptations faced by communities in preserving their oral heritage. Oral literature, as a primary medium in cultures without a written language, plays a crucial role in preserving cultural tenets and living heritage (Vansina 1985). This form of literature is instrumental in maintaining the continuity of traditions, beliefs, and social norms across generations. Recent studies have continued to underscore the significance of oral narratives in cultural preservation. For instance, Anthony Wonderly (2009) categorizes oral narratives into three primary genres: myths, folktales, and legends. These categories help in understanding the different functions and characteristics of oral stories within a culture.

Myths are often used to explain the origins of a people and significant cultural practices such as ceremonial dances or religious rites. They typically deal with primal times and cosmic events, offering explanations for the world's creation and the human condition. Legends, on the other hand, narrate embellished and romanticized human actions that are locally bound and historically rooted (Lewis 1969; Grantham 2002). Legends often claim to be based on historical truths, providing a sense of historical continuity and identity to the community. Folktales differ from myths and legends in that they are less concerned with historical accuracy and more secular in nature. They often carry moral lessons and reflect the customs, traditions, and beliefs of the community (Laloo 2010). Folktales serve as a vehicle for entertainment and education, transmitting cultural values and societal norms in a more accessible and engaging manner.

## **Objectives**

The primary objectives of the present investigation are i) to investigate how the Meitei community shapes and conveys its worldview through oral narratives; ii) to analyse the content and context of Meitei oral stories to uncover their underlying symbolic meanings and cultural significance; iii) to illuminate the intricate connections between Meitei storytelling traditions and their broader cultural context; and iv) to offer insights into how Meitei narratives are utilized by the community to interpret and navigate their social and cultural environment.

## **Research Methodology**

Methodologically, the primary data for this study were collected through interviews with pundits and religious specialists at sacred shrines, participant observation of local storytellers known as wari liba, and life-history techniques from elders who have experienced traditional forms of transmitting folktales. These methods provided a comprehensive understanding of the oral narrative practices within the Meitei community. The interviews with religious specialists offered insights into the spiritual and ceremonial aspects of the narratives, while the participant observations and life-history techniques captured the performative and intergenerational transmission of stories. The study was supplemented with publications of anonymous archival scribe works, which provided historical context and textual support to the oral narratives. This triangulated approach ensured a robust and nuanced understanding of the Meitei's oral literature, allowing for a detailed analysis of how these stories shape and express the community's worldview. Recent methodologies in anthropological research have emphasized the importance of combining ethnographic fieldwork with archival research to capture the dynamic and evolving nature of oral traditions.

## **Analysis and Results**

### **Folktale:**

The folktale genre, an ancient form of storytelling, serves as a repository of cultural wisdom and imagination, transmitted orally across generations. In the Meitei culture, folktales hold a special place, known by various terms such as Phunggawari and Chakngaiwari, each reflecting different aspects of communal life and storytelling traditions. These tales, often narrated by grandparents and elders of the family, create a warm and intimate atmosphere, typically shared around the hearth, symbolizing a sacred space in Meitei society. The act of storytelling, referred to as "chinbung wari," is a cherished tradition among the Meiteis, often beginning with familiar phrases like "Once upon a time" or "Long ago." These narratives, collectively known as "leipung phamba," cover a diverse range of themes and experiences, reflecting the multifaceted nature of human existence. Meitei folktales encompass a wide array of sub-genres, including

animal tales, fairy tales, trickster tales, humorous anecdotes, hero tales, and didactic tales. Each tale offers unique insights into Meitei customs, traditions, and cultural beliefs, serving as a vehicle for both entertainment and moral instruction. For instance, tales like "hanubi hanuba pan thaba" and "ningol mawa apang" explore themes of animal behavior and human folly, while stories like "Kakyen Suja athouba" and "ningol mawa ashingba" delve into romantic and heroic narratives. Trickster tales, such as the story of a stone-blind ningol mawa, highlight the cleverness and wit of the protagonist, often resulting in humorous outcomes.

Additionally, folktales featuring interactions between son-in-laws and mothers-in-law provide comedic relief, offering commentary on familial dynamics and societal norms. These tales, rich in metaphorical expressions and cultural nuances, serve as a reflection of Meitei social life and values. Beyond entertainment, Meitei folktales also serve as a means of preserving historical and cultural knowledge, explaining natural phenomena, and addressing family issues. Anecdotes and explanatory tales offer insights into Meitei folklore, enriching the cultural heritage of the community and fostering a sense of collective identity.

### **Myth:**

Myths, revered as sacred narratives, provide explanations for phenomena beyond human comprehension and shape the cultural worldview of a people. In Meitei mythology, cosmogonic myths and origin myths elucidate the creation of the universe and the emergence of social order, respectively. One such myth recounts the binary division of social poles, reflecting fundamental aspects of Meitei society. The Supreme God Sidaba, along with his sons Achiba and Kharaba, plays a central role in this myth, symbolizing the balance between creation and destruction, order and chaos. The myth also highlights the role of gender dynamics and familial relationships, with characters like Nongthang Leima and Sanamahi embodying themes of love, loyalty, and maternal power. Through symbolic imagery and narrative complexity, the myth elucidates the ideological values and social structure of Meitei society. Myth narrates the social division of the autochthones in Manipur, attributing the emergence of clans to a divine test orchestrated by Guru Sidaba. The story, featuring a dead cow and seven groups of people, serves as a foundation for Meitei social organization, reflecting themes of unity, cooperation, and divine intervention. These myths, steeped in symbolism and cultural significance, offer profound insights into Meitei cosmology and worldview. Through storytelling and oral tradition, they preserve the collective memory and cultural identity of the Meitei people, fostering a sense of continuity and connection to their ancestral heritage.

In another myth, the social division of the Autochthones in Manipur is recounted, although alternative perspectives suggest the amalgamation of various smaller groups into clans. According to this myth, a social bond was forged to facilitate the division of people and the emergence of clans. Guru Sidaba, the Supreme God, assumed the form of

a brown-colored dead cow and drifted along the river's current. This event was intended to test His sons. Upon encountering the cow, Kuptreng initially deemed it to be a decaying object. However, Sentreng observed more closely and noticed the wagging tail of the dead cow. Together, they pulled it onto the bank. Seven groups of people then divided and cremated the cow. The parts taken by each group for cremation determined their names, thus forming seven Yeks:

1. Ningthouja - Sentreng claimed the beautiful eye, resulting in his Yek being known as Ningthibam (Ningthiba meaning beautiful), from which the Ningthouja clan derived.
2. Angom - Kuptreng chose the white (Angouba) neck, leading to his group becoming the Angom clan.
3. Luwang - Pammiringba claimed the brain (Lawai Lemphu).
4. Khuman - Leisangtao took the foreleg (Khumang).
5. Moirang - Konsouren claimed the stripe (Meiring Marangba) on the belly.
6. Khaba - Asangba took the lower part of the face (Chenglou Maithong).
7. Nganba - Tumanganba claimed the bright (Anganba) heart.

In a slightly different version involving Taothingmang (Grandson of Pakhangba, 264-364 A.D.) and his elder brother Yoimongba, the two brothers had fishing spots along the Imphal River. Lai Sidaba, the Supreme God, decided to test them by drifting down the current in the form of a brown-colored cow carcass. Initially stopping at Yoimongba's fishing area, it continued to circulate despite his attempts to move it. When the carcass reached Taothingmang's area, it remained stationary despite his efforts to dislodge it. Perceiving this as an extraordinary occurrence, Taothingmang pulled it onto the bank. In a subsequent dream, Lord Sidaba revealed His test and advised Taothingmang to divide the carcass among his people for cremation, which would bring prosperity. Taothingmang then summoned six other group leaders, and the group-name of Yek was conceived, with specific names given to each Yek based on the parts taken from the carcass. In a mythical narrative reminiscent of the Hindu epic Ramayana, the twin sons of Sri Ram and Sita, Khoitom and Mantom, are portrayed as natives of the land. In one version, Mantom (Lera Khongnang), born of a concubine relationship between Liklabicha Nongtamnu and Koubru, was adopted by Luwang Punshiba, while Khoitom Phantek was the son of Liklabicha Nongtamnu and Soraren Pureiromba. These myths illustrate parallels and interactions between Hinduism and Meiteism.

### **Legend:**

In folkloric terms, legends are locally rooted and historically grounded narratives that claim credibility by referencing what is known to be historically true (Wonderley 2009,

41). The Meiteis also possess their own legends, with one of the most renowned being associated with the Moirang area surrounding Loktak Lake. Known as Moirang Sayon, meaning 'incarnations at Moirang,' it depicts a divine play orchestrated by Lord Thangjing among humans. Goddess Panthoibi is said to have incarnated seven times, imparting love but ultimately experiencing the sorrow of separation. The legend primarily revolves around romantic sequences with tragic endings, weaving together neighboring communities and the deep ties of the surrounding landscapes. Its credibility is bolstered by the presence of tangible evidence still found in the region. For example, the Kom people recount tales of their village, Khoirentak, as the very place where Khamba, the legend's central figure, once subdued nine tigers. They also believe that a large stone along the path to Salangthel marks the spot where Khamba gazed upon his native Moirang valley. This legend has been predominantly passed down through folk songs accompanied by instruments like the pena (an indigenous stringed instrument) or dhulok (drum), and is referred to as the Moirang Parba.

### **Conclusion:**

The Meiteis possess a wealth of folklore that serves as a profound reflection of their culture. Through an anthropological lens, it becomes apparent that they utilize symbolic expressions not only in their literature but also in various aspects of their social fabric. Different segments of society engage in secret rituals that contribute to the formation of kin groups, while socio-politically, they communicate with one another through coded language. Meitei folktales exhibit diverse forms and versions, yet they offer insights into social activities, beliefs, and behaviours. For example, in the folktale "Sandrembi and Cheisana," Sandrembi's transformation into a dove after death symbolizes a deeply held belief about the continuation of the soul. The practice of offering rice grains to doves is a poignant illustration of this belief, while also highlighting the social interactions between different ethnic groups like the Pangal (Muslim) and the Meitei. Thus, Meitei folktales serve as a lens through which we can analyse the diachronic and synchronic aspects of their social structure.

Myths, on the other hand, are narratives whose truths are considered self-evident as they integrate personal experiences into society's operational framework (Schultz and Lavenda 1998, 142). Considered products of high verbal art, myths are traditionally conveyed by the ruling elite of society, including elders, political leaders, and religious specialists. They often revolve around past or future events, providing literal interpretations of origin and purpose, guiding present-day behaviour. In Meitei mythology, the sevenfold classification of clans within the religious fusion of the Sanamahi-Pakhangba cult represents an evolved societal structure. Metaphorically, the Meiteis employ metaphor in stories such as those featuring son-in-law and mother-in-law, comparing one thing to another in a meaningful way. Additionally, their oral narratives are rich in metonymy, as evidenced in creation myths and other tales, showcasing their intellectual depth and storytelling prowess. Thus, Meitei folklore not

only preserves their cultural heritage but also serves as a window into their intricate societal dynamics and philosophical worldview.

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