Chapter IV

MAN

Reflective thinking is the special prerogative of man. The early Meeteis exhibited a remarkable development of thought in their conception of man and his place in the cosmos. All the puyas proclaim that man is not transient flesh but the immortal spirit and derives his being from God who is the ultimate Father. The Meeteis repudiate the view that the destiny of man is determined by the action of blind and ruthless forces of the material world. According to them, man comes into being within a world divinely ordered, a world whose interacting elements are created and sustained by God. At the beginning there was manifestation of the elements that would constitute the world and of the deities who would participate in the creation of the world. Man is the goal and glory of creation. Out of the infinite eons of cosmic gestation he rises; he struggles, doubts, dreams, suffers, sings and dies. But he is not just a frail thing of nature but a being conscious of God within him. Religion arises from man's sense of the Infinite. The growth of the religious consciousness means man's progress in the knowledge of himself. The Meetei thinkers of the distant past attempted to discover the meaning and significance of human life. Despite their ignorant superstitions they exhibited enlightened faith and sought to trace the working of the divine spirit in the universe and the place and function of man in the divine scheme.
The word 'Meetei' means mankind. 'Mee' means 'man' and 'tei' means 'other'. Man is other than God who has created him and is other than the creatures who are devoid of self-consciousness. Viewed in this light the word 'Meetei' does not denote a few people belonging to this land only. It denotes human being through whom God realises his supreme purpose. To the early Meetei thinkers, human nature, in its richness and variety, in its heights and transcendence, was a baffling mystery. They did not consider man in isolation, i.e., apart from the ultimate reality. The main feature of all the Puyas is the enquiry into the nature of man, his origin and destiny.

According to Leithak Leikhalon Puya after the creation of the earth and the heaven Atiya Sidaba (Immortal Sky) asked Ashiba to create human beings. Ashiba created the first man Pongkhu on the pattern of the image of Atiya Sidaba. But to make it alive was a problem. Only when five deities, Koubru, Apanba (Pakhangba), Thangjing, Marjing and Wangbren, entered into the body of Pongkhu with the Supreme Deity Lainingthou, and seated themselves in their proper places within the body as souls (life essences) Pongkhu became alive. The five souls were named Tinon, Neno, Tatan, Piyan and Yapi.1 Thereafter Pongnaoton was created by Ashiba on the pattern of the image of Atiya Sidaba. But he also could not breathe. The deities

1. Leithak Leikhalon, p. 55
Kari, Kara, Arangba, Okonglen and Nongtamba were placed by Atiya within the body of Pongnaoton as the five souls, and then he breathed. In both these cases man was created by God and he became alive only by the divine power which worked within him as the soul or the life essence.

The Wakoklon Hilel Thilel Salai Amailol Puya again says that the first human species was created by Konsen Tulei Henba (Sanamahi), who arose from the sacred water preserved by Salailel Sidaba and Leimalel Sidabi (the Supreme father and mother) in a sacred pot. It is said that Sanamahi created different orders of living species, first those who could live in water, then those who could live in water and land both, then those who could live in hills and jungles. But all these different species of living creatures could not satisfy Salailel Sidaba. Man was created then ultimately on the pattern of the image of Salailel. The first created human being was named Mee-Khalouba, and Salailel made him alive. Seeing the majestic beauty of Mee-Khalouba Leimalel wished to have a divine child. The child so born was named Konchin Tukthaba. Acquiring perfect knowledge of God and his Creation he won the title Pakhangba. Pakhangba married seven divine girls (Lai Nurab Taret) and by them had seven sons who became the ancestors of the seven yeks of the Meiteis. According to this puya Konchin Tukthaba Pakhangba was the foremost Ancestor

1. Ibid., p. 39
of mankind. He was addressed as Iputhou Pakhangba, the grandpa of mankind. He is known as Meekiti Makok Laikiti Mamei (the beginning of mankind and end of the divine).¹

According to Ningthourol Seireng Ashiba's seven children were the seedlings of mankind. They were made alive by the Atingkok Maru Sidaba. Of the seven children so created one was seated on the peak of Koubru to rule over the gods. Konchin Tingthokpa was assigned to rule over the created world. The six children and Konchin Tingthokpa thus became the ancestors of mankind. The six children were Ingouraba (Angom),Ashanba (Nganba), Imuirangba (Luwang), Khemanba (Khuman), Ashan Memanba (Khaba), and Muwaoba (Moirang). They were led by Konchin Tingthokpa Pakhangba. The Meeteis look upon Atingkok as the foremost manifestation of the ultimate reality. Taopiloinai is considered to be the feminine principle representing the collection of elements floating within the infinite lap of Atingkok. According to the ancestral genealogy maintained by the Meeteis still today Atingkok Maru Sidaba is the ultimate Father and Taopiloinai is the ultimate Mother. Thus the Meeteis claim divine origin of all people. Creation is realisation of God's Will. Man is the cream of this creation. The divine purpose, i.e., God's manifestation into the universe of things and beings and realisation of Himself again in and through the manifestations can be fulfilled only

1. Wakoklon, pp. 32-36, 47-58
through this cream species, the mankind. It is for this reason that the traditional beliefs and the puyas of the Meiteis regard human life to be the most valuable of all (Taipang Mapak Athoiba). Some expressions indicating the divine essence in man are made in the puyas: He Mee Lai Oipasa (Oh man who is but divine);¹ He Mee Laika Tainapasa (Oh man who is next to god);² He Mee Thawai Leipasa (Oh man who has the soul - the supreme divine essence of life);³ He Mee Lai Manpasa (Oh man who is like god).⁴ Ashiba's creation of the different orders of living species - those that can live in water first, then those that can live in both water and land, and then those that can live in mounts and jungles, and Ashiba's presentation of all these living species to the Lord of creatures to see whether these creatures could serve the divine purpose of self-manifestation and self-realisation and the dissatisfaction of the Lord with all those created beings and His asking Ashiba once again to create still another species on the pattern of His own image - all these are suggestive of the divine interest in the human species. God endowed man with divine qualities, intelligence and spirituality. The thrusting in of the Thawai (souls) by the deities and their seats within the human body as

1. Wakoklon Hilel Thilel Salai Amailon Pukok Puya, pp. 17, 15
2. Ibid., p. 15
3. Ibid., p. 19
4. Ibid., p. 37
the five souls (principles of life) clearly show the inherent divine element in the human constitution. Man could appreciate and realise the Supreme Being and His glorious activities in the creation of the universe. At the very outset the Meetei puya Leithak Leikhalon clearly speaks of the perishable nature of the entire manifested universe of things and beings. They are all subject to the universal law of death and decadence. All the nine orders of heaven and earth, fire, water, air and even all the deities disappeared into the primal potential nothingness. Thus the physical constitution implies the mortal nature of man who has a body constituted by the different manifested elements in the universe. Thus the human beings have two main aspects: the physical, unintelligent, material aspect on the one hand, and the spiritual, intelligent and immortal aspect on the other.

This mortal frame, the human body, is called by the Meeteis Hakchang. We may now understand its very nature and constitution from the meaning of Hakchang. Hakchang is a combination of two words Hak (meaning heavy and valuable) and Chang (meaning quantity or proportion). It thus means the combination of heavy and valuable elements in a certain quantity or proportion. So much significant is the proportion of the elements in the body that any change that disturbs the equilibrium causes serious consequence in the body such as death and illness. If the disturbance is temporary there is illness, and if it is permanent there is death. Now the
questions arise: what are the elements that are combined in a certain proportion? Wherefrom are the elements taken? How are they combined and in what proportion?, and who combines them? As the answers to these questions lead naturally to the metaphysical background of the body, a discussion on the nature of the soul which is within the body controlling and regulating it becomes a must. A body apart from soul is but dead matter.

Human life is said to be the most outstanding creation - the cream of the created world. All things in the infinite bosom of the universe are for man.¹ Like the Vedic Aryans, the Meeteis also believed that there are mainly five primary elements, fire, water, air, earth and heaven that constitute the human body. The Meetei funeral of the dead body called Pot-Loiba (placing things at the proper place on the close of an event) indicates that the human body after death has been appropriated into the different constituent primal units. The element of fire joins Fire; water joins water; air joins air; earth goes to earth, and heaven to heaven. After one's death the immortal soul in him forms a new body constituted by the five elements. It stays first in the sky, then in water, then in the beast having no foot, then in the sun, then in the stars for some time, then in the father, and then ultimately in the womb of the mother for a new birth.² The individual form may

¹. Eeyek Saleilon, p. 60
². cf. Nonglon Pathup Wachetlon Puya.
change, but the essence is not destroyed.

In the puyas it is found that Ashiba is the main
divine architect creating the different orders of living
creatures including the human beings. But this Ashiba (Sanamahi)
is God Himself appearing for the purpose of creation. The
thrusting in of the life principle, the Thawais (souls) into
the body of human being, as shown by the puyas, is done by the
deities who are the diverse expressions of God. In all these
accounts of the puyas the creation of the human world is but
a divine affair in fulfilment of the supreme wish of Tenghanba
Mapu to manifest Himself into a Universe and realise Himself
through it.

From the above discussions it is evident that man has
a mortal frame - his body, which is subject to death and
decadence, being a member of the manifest universe in which
nothing is permanent. Even the primal elements of fire, water,
air, earth and heaven shall have to disappear at the end. Over
and above this mortal feature of the human being there is still
something more which is free from mortality. In the absence of
this the human body constituted by the different elements of
the manifest universe is inert. All human activities are due
to the presence of the soul in the body. The search for this
principle which lies at the background of human life is the
main task of the Meetei puyas.
Man is called 'Mee' for it has been created on the pattern of the shadow or image, called 'Mi' in Meetei language. Man is so made that he is capable of realising the supreme unity running through all things and beings in the universe including himself. According to the Puyas, man has an immortal essence within the mortal frame. What is immortal belongs to Tengbanba Mapu who is the Immortal Self (Yaibirel Sidaba) transcending the perpetual procession of decay, death and disappearance. To the Meeteis the human body is a place of divine habitation. So long as the equilibrium once set by God is not lost, the deities live in the body of the man as the Thawais (souls). Man possesses mind (Pukning) and intelligence to be conscious of the divine glory. Though there are five Thawais, ultimately they are all one. As to how they enter into the body, it is said that Atiya Sidaba pierced into the body through the Linfu (the uppermost soft area of the cortex) and took in the five deities through his breath. They are placed in the five parts of the body: Koubru in the cortex, Marching in the heart, Apanba in the navel, Thangjing below the navel and Wangpurel in the sex glands.¹ The Puyas refer to a sixth soul called the shadow (Mi). It is a part of the personality and is associated with the body at the time of birth. When the midwife (maibi) cuts the umbilical cord with a bamboo knife, she invokes the six souls to take up their

¹ Leithak Leikhalon, p. 55f
place in the child:

'O five souls - the shadow also a sixth - 0 come.'

It is believed that the Thawai and the Mi, life-essence and shadow always go together. So long as the Thawai are within the body, the Mi is also there. When Thawai go out, the Mi follows.

The principle of life is called Lainingshing Heivi who makes all the creatures breathe for their life. All that blows are His breath. This divine breath is of two orders: one outside the body of the creatures and the other within the body. The former is called Atiya Sidaba (Immortal Sky) and the latter Yaibirel Sidaba (Immortal Soul). The former is called Yanglouba while the latter is Thawai Changacha (the soul that enters into the body at some opportunity). The former is called Nongshit (that blows in the Nong as His own breath) while the latter is Nungshit (that blows within the body of the creatures as their breath). But these two, Nongshit and Nungshit, are but One, the Supreme Life principle called the Lainingshing Heiyi. The union of Nongshit and Nungshit, the Yanglouba and the Thawai Changacha is the occasion of death to the beings. The Supreme breath, the Lainingshing Heiyi, the Nong is the Ultimate Principle of Life, the immortal element in all. The blowing in of this breath

1. Parratt, S.N., The Religion of Manipur, p. 78
Koubru is the source of all the transparent life fluids in the body. The Supreme Mother Leimatel seated below the navel calls down this fluid from the Koubru in order to animate the whole body. Lainingshing Heiyi shines like a diamond on the forehead of the human being. It is due to the special divine gift, mind (Pukning) that man alone is able to enjoy self-conscious existence. So long as Pukning regulates the activities of the Thawais, there is conscious control over all affairs within the body. But when it is drawn up towards Lainingshing Heiyi, it loses all control and follows the supreme Thawai, i.e., the Ningsha, the life breath. Ningsha goes out to its counterpart the Nongshit (Yanglouba). With this union there is the death of the individual. That the immortal Lainingshing Heiyi is in the body of man is regarded as a secret (athuppa wa). His place is said to be beyond the reach of the sun and the moon. The meaning of the statement is that the two eyes representing the sun and the moon cannot see the forehead where the immortal Self rests in the human body. The secret of this divine presence cannot be known by those persons who are greedy, proud and untruthful and have no settled mind.\(^2\)

To the Meeteis death is only a stepping stone, not the stopping place. Man's physical body has an end but his

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1. Nonglon Pathup Wachetlon, p. 15
2. Ibid., p. 15f
inner self has life eternal, for it is involved in the cycle of birth and death. Death and illness are inflicted on human beings by God to make them aware of their status as members of the mortal scheme and to instil in them the desire to attain eternal divine life.\(^1\) According to Nonglon Pathup Wachetlon Puya, there are three life-streams within the body. They are called Kha-Khong, Lai-Khong and Malang-Khong. Of the three, the middle one, Laikhong leads to the Supreme Lord, Leimafel. The Supreme Mother alone knows this way. When the equilibrium of the elements in the body is disturbed, the five souls come up to Leimafel (who has her seat on the lotus heart) to apprise her of the turbulent streams. Then shouting Hou-Hou she comes up to Maru Sidaba following the course of Laikhong. The union of Leimarel and Maru Sidaba is called Hung-Ning which is the cry of all the deities who move upwards to leave the body. All the souls (Thawis) then merge in the life-breath (Ningsha) which then stops functioning and unites with its counterpart Nongshit blowing outside the body. All deities merge in Atingkok who becomes united with the Supreme Deity, Lainingshing Heiyi. When the latter leaves the body, the individual dies.\(^2\)

The human body is considered to have been constituted by various elements found in the manifest universe and is thus subject to decay and death. But it is never condemned by the

\(^{1}\) Singh, O. Bhogeswar, Ningthourol Seireng, p. 21  
\(^{2}\) Nonglon Pathup Wachetlon, p. 10f
Puyas. The whole being of man is not the body alone. There is an essence in him that is immortal and that makes him alive. The entry of the eternal essence into the transient body is a divine affair in which different deities make themselves seated in different parts of the body. The human body is therefore regarded as a temple. The Supreme God as seated in the body has different names. He is called Yunghing Hanba for his descent from above and stay below. He is called Ipuroi for his being always with man and the world. He is called Eumthok for his being sprung from Atiya. He is called Meisangba for his watchful care.

All the Puyas agree that death means release from bondage. Polpilang Puya says that when thawai are compelled to unite with the Supreme Lord, death occurs. Khamoi Yangoi Sekning Puya says, "Know that it is death if Yanglouba and Chengacha unite and become free from strain and trouble." Yanglouba means the air blowing without in the Nong, the Boundless whole. Chengacha means the life-breath blowing within the human body. Death is merging in the Infinite Expanse.

Nongkaba, Nongmanba, Laeikhiba and Shiba are words commonly used to mean Death. To know what Death means we may understand the implications of these words. Nongkaba is a

1. Ibid., p. 19
2. Khamoi Yangoi Sekning Puya, p. 2
combination of the words J  Nong and Kaba. Nong according to
the Puyas is God, the Ultimate, and Kaba means to climb or to
go up. Nongkaba thus means the going up or climbing towards
the Ultimate Home, the Heavenly abode. Nongmanba, a combination
of two words : Nong (the Ultimate) and Manba (fading away)
means the fading away of an individual's life in the Nong. Lai-
Oikhiba, a combination of two words : Lai (the Divine) and
Oikhiba (to become) means the individual's becoming divine or
return to his divine abode. These terms suggest the meaning of
Death to be the individual's union with the Lord. Shiba
popularly means death. The term has many implications like
dismantling or decomposition of a thing. As the human body is
a material thing, on the death of an individual his corpse is
decomposed and dismantled in a natural process and the elements
that constitute the human body return to their respective
ultimate original abode.

From the above discussions it is clear that Death
means the end of the earthly life of the individual human being
and his going to the original heavenly home, the Nong. The
material elements that constitute his body go back to their
original places in a funeral process called Potloiba by the
Meeteis. The immortal essence that is in him also becomes one
with the Supreme Deity, the Nong, the Tengbanba Mapu.

Traditionally the Meeteis believe that when a man
dies he goes to the land of Death known as Khamnung Sawa led
by an enchantress called Kikei Lou Onbi. Immediately after death the individual is believed to be going to a place called Khonghampat where the dead wash hands and legs.¹ Then he crosses a stream and proceeds to Thongak - the main gate of the land of Death. There he meets the deity Thongak Lairemo who controls the gate. Led by Kikoi Lou Onbi who could assume any form according to the choice of the dead, the man proceeds in darkness through a small plain known as Thongak Ashithel and along the Makui Nongol Ching, the range of hills where the dead man realises that he is dead and has left his former life. Thus proceeding, he reaches Khamnung Sawa where Thongarei reigns supreme. This land of the dead is considered to be underworld. Its Lord is said to be Lai Wangpurel Sidaba of the South who has been identified by some with Thongarei. The Meeteis considered the South to be the land of the dead. When Hinduism became the religion of the state this Wangpurel/Thongarei was considered by the Meeteis to be the counterpart of Yama, the Lord of death according to the Hindus. All the traditional legends suggest that the Meeteis believed in life after death. The souls after their stay under the mighty rule of the Lord of Death, undergoing punishment for their vices and enjoying divine bliss for their virtues in the former lives, are reborn in the human world.

¹. Khong = foot, hamba = to wash.
The philosophical reflection on the whole course of human life from the cradle to the coffin and the traditional belief in rebirth are shown in an old funeral song of the Meeteis. The song allegorically narrates the life of the human being. Fed by the mother’s breast the child grows up. When grown up he enjoys life’s varied temptations. He fights the battle of life as lured by the evil temptations, passions, desires and greeds. He finds himself baffled. He suffers defeat in the fight. While retiring in utter disappointment in the struggle of life, he realises his own misdeeds against the supreme law of God from which he has gone astray. He feels that he is far from his heavenly home. Finally he meets his own end – the death. He leaves his sweet body. But the moment he leaves the body he again aspires after the previous life with the former body. He attempts to rehabilitate in that body. But in the old body he cannot enter. He is in bewilderment. He wants to find a place in life. But all his attempts are in vain. His well wishers and near ones are crying for his rebirth in a new human life following a natural course.

The funeral song runs as follows:

Heirangkhoi is an edible fruit
Sweeter than it
is the milk from mother.
Lotus blooms in the middle,
The bees hum and run after it.
Oh great, come and let us go
The greedy and envious are many
Go forward in the front
In the mid of the thick battle
The man being tired takes rest,
Looking back at the original abode
The sweet lovely place is far away.
When the once flown bird comes back
It cannot have a place for stay
And the bird is bewildered.
Oh great, the sweet and lovely
From the gorge wherefrom all descended,
Come back flying.

This last part of the song suggests a new birth after death. In Indian philosophy also passions and desires are accounted for as the cause of birth. Life with passions and desires continue to get involved in the vicious circle of birth and death. This song clearly suggests that the soul by its very nature belongs to God, the Supreme Immortal Soul, Tengbanba Mapu. He who has known the true nature of his own self, knows himself in his original nature and is immortal. As in Indian systems, so in the religious philosophy of the Meeteis the impact of the passions and desires can be dispelled only by true knowledge of the soul.

To the Meeteis, the human body is a Lang (a tran) in which the soul bird (Thawai Polpi) is kept. Leaving the former Lang (body) the soul bird goes to another Lang. This is called
Langon (the change of body). Human birth means this Langon. As said by Mangang Laininghal to Luwang Leikoiba in the Polpilang puya, the origin of man's life is the Sun. The Sun is taken to be Sanamahi while the moon is Apanba Pakhangba. He represents the Supreme in the manifest world of things and beings. He is Korouhanba; he is Atiya Sidaba; He is Apanba Pakhangba. That which would become human being comes from the Sun first. Then it is handed over to the Moon (Apanba). The moon again gives it over to Thaba (Evening star), then to Sachik (Morning star), then to Okpuroi, then to Taohuireng, and then ultimately to the man who would be father. The father bears it for two months. After that it is given to the mother. The Meeteis call Father Ipan Panthou for it remained there (Panba) in the father for two months. For its being given over to mother and her taking care of it, mother is called Thanglen Irubi Ima. According to the Meeteis, the life cycle of a man is complete in seven generations ranging from the Iputhou Purel (Great-great grandpa) to grandson. First Iputhou Purel initiates, then Iputhou, Ipu (grandpa), Ipa (father), Isha (the self), Icha (son) and Ishu (grandson) come successively. Ishu means the completion (shuba) of the life cycle. These are the seven generations of a human being as set forth in the puyas. The Meeteis call this Langon Taret.1

1. Kala, P., Leihou Nonghou, pp. 11-18
Dr. Radhakrishnan observes, "The one doctrine that has the longest intellectual ancestry is the belief that the ordinary condition of man is not his ultimate being, that he has in him a deeper self, call it breath or ghost, soul or spirit. In each being dwells a light which no power can extinguish, an immortal spirit, benign and tolerant, the silent witness in his heart. The greatest thinkers of the world unite in asking us to know the self."¹ The Meetei Puyas clearly enunciate this great truth. The possibility of our existence beyond the short span of our present life is justified by the very nature and constitution of the human being. Some of their views are crude but they exhibit flashes of profound insight into the problem of human destiny. Materialism is rejected. Man is not just a physical object but a mixture of matter and spirit. But the early Meetei thinkers gave expression to their thoughts in language and style that suited their land and time. Their aim was to lead man to the Highest Truth. Man is rooted in the Spirit: man is divine - this is the central teaching of the Meetei religious thought. Spirit stands for the changeless principle of ultimate reality. The spirit in man is not an evolutionary phenomenon. It has not evolved from the material elements. Without Thawais man is just an inert material body. With the entry of these souls man is raised above the level of the natural world. He is not simply the

¹ Radhakrishnan, S., Eastern Religions and Western Thought, p. 25
Man, however, begins his earthly journey with matter. He bears the marks of change and temporality in his fragile body. But he is a complex being because he belongs to both divine and material orders. To the Meetei thinkers, matter is not evil because it is a manifestation of the Supreme. The body, therefore, is not wholly unimportant to man. Had there been no matter, life would have been impossible. But man as spirit transcends the material plane. This divine destiny of man works as a purifying and uplifting power in the heart of the individual. However long and devious the way, he will reach his divinely appointed goal.