Chapter VI

RITES

Religion is man's faith in a power beyond himself which he expresses in acts of worship and service. The life of a Meetei is full of rites and rituals from birth to death. The necessity felt in the minds of these people for their observance speaks of the immense importance given by them to the religious way of life. Though many rites as observed now are influenced by Hinduism at several points, yet they have not lost their specifically Meetei character.

(a) Tree-Cults

The primeval man, in presence of the moving spectacle of nature, conceived to be the expression of living power, felt an awe in which fear, wonder and reverence were mingled. Traces of worship addressed to things of nature are found in primitive societies. The term 'Uwanglai' (forest or wood deity) points to tree-worship among the Meeteis at the earliest stage of their religious development, though at present the original connection of lai with trees is forgotten and the term applies to any traditional deity. The tairen tree (cedrela toona) is worshipped by the loi people even today with fruits and flowers. This tree is used by the maiba (the traditional priest) for cultic purposes specially in the Lai Haraoba. A branch of the tree is waved to exorcise evil spirits. In cases of infectious diseases
a branch of the tairen is hung on the door of the house. The tree once itself divine or at least the abode of a spirit is by and by regarded as sacred to gods.¹

(b) Birth rituals

During the period of gestation the parents are advised not to harm or kill any being. In order to give adequate strength to the mother a ceremony called Kokthokchamthokpa is performed. "In this the mother is seated, and her husband stands behind her, moving a burning piece of pine wood behind her head. He manipulates this torch until the shadow of his wife's head falls on her lap. The light is then extinguished. A maiba then brings a pot of water which is placed in the centre of the house, and offerings of betel nut and fruit are made. After the pot and the offerings have been prayed over by the maiba the woman washes her hands and face outside the house with the water from the pot."² The purpose of this ritual "is to prevent the shadow, with its vital power, from becoming dissociated from the body."³ The Meetei women, in

1. Singh, K.B., Vestiges of Tree Cult among the Meiteis, Folk Lore 5, pp. 334-36. Tree worship was widespread in Burma among priests known as Aris (probably from Sanskrit aranya 'forest'). See Eliot, Sir C., Hinduism and Buddhism, vol. III, pp. 53-55

2. Parratt, S.N., The Religion of Manipur, p. 77

3. Ibid.

The Meeteis believe that man has five thawais (souls or life-essences) and a shadow. See above Ch.IV.
addition, worship the household deity with appropriate offerings in the fifth and seventh months of pregnancy.

Certain rites are observed at the time of the birth of the child. The attending maibi (midwife) cuts the umbilical cord with a bamboo knife with the invocation 'O five souls - the shadow also a sixth - O come'. On the morning of the sixth day the ceremony of ipanathaba is performed. This ritual is the occasion for remembering the divine birth of Konchin Tukthaba, son of Salailel by Leimarel. At this ceremony both the mother and the child are sanctified by sprinkling holy water in which tairen pungfai leaves are dipped with naheirol (purification hymn). Uncooked rice, leaves of heibi, vegetables, yendem (a kind of plant), roast ngamu (fish), chilli and salt are placed on seven pieces of banana leaf on a winnowing fan. The maibi pretends to feed the child with the prepared mixed food seven times from seven leaves, telling the child that it is the food of his father, grand-father and of all mankind. The maibi invokes five souls and the shadow and tells the child that it is the food of life. The rest of the food is offered to the Sarois to appease them. Then the child is placed on the winnowing fan and three great deities Koubru, Nongpok and Thangjing are worshipped for the

1. The midwife is also called maibi but is different from the maibi, the traditional priestess.
2. Wakoklon Hilel Thilel Puya, pp. 34-36
long life and prosperity of the child. The maibi then moves the winnowing fan with the child in it above a fire and asks the mother whether she likes the child or the fan or wealth. The mother replies that she likes the child and nothing else. Then the maibi gives the child to the mother. Now-a-days in the evening Swasti Puja is performed according to Hindu tradition but there is a pre-Hindu custom of arrow-shooting by a maternal uncle of the child in four directions beginning from the north-east and ending with north-west. This rite is performed for the purpose of driving away evil spirits from the child. A rite for feeding the child is observed on the fifth month for the male child and on the sixth month for the female child. The child is fed with the meals prepared out of offerings made to Lainingthou Sanamahi. The meal consists of rice, vegetables and ngamu fish. The yek ancestor of the child is worshipped when food is taken.

(c) Marriageceremonial

Traditional marriage ceremonial consists of several stages. The main features of these rites are given below.

(i) Waroipot Puha: At this stage the parents of the groom ask the parents of the bride to give their daughter in marriage. Marriage is forbidden between those of the same yek. When there is agreement between the parents of bride and the bridegroom, a day is fixed to hold the rite of Waroipot. The groom's family
carries food to the girl's house for offerings to the ancestors of the bride and other deities.

(ii) Heijingpot: According to the tradition of the Meeteis the girl is taken to be a full blooming flower in the garden of her parents. As the price of this flower the groom's parents offer fruits to the parents of the bride. A particular fruit Heikru is traditionally taken to be the chief fruit. Still today there is the living legend of Tampha Lairembi of Wangu in which the Heijingpot meant for Tampha could not be completed as the heikru fruit was absent. There may be other fruits of several kinds placed in a basket called Phiruk. But without Heikru all are meaningless. This function is also called Heiching-Kharai-Puba. Seven heikru fruits are placed in the bamboo basket. If the fruits are not available, being out of season, its branches are used. These are placed in the front along with other six varieties of fruits. The other fruits are placed, three on the right, and three on the left, of the Heikru fruits or branches. This Heiching Kharai and other articles meant for Apokpa (Ancestors) and Lam-Lai (local deities), and other things for entertainment of the people are carried by the groom's party to the bride's residence. Then the Piba who conducts the ritual arranges the seat for the Supreme Deity. After prayer to God, Tenghanba Mapu the Salai ancestors are worshipped by the parents of the bridegroom and the bride. The groom's father then hands over the heiching kharai to the father of the bride. The bride's mother places it under the
pot of rice till the marriage is over. After this event both the parties wait for the day of marriage.

(iii) The Marriage: On the day before the marriage a formal invitation is sent to the bridegroom for the marriage. This is done by a boy of the bride’s family, usually by the younger brother of the bride. A garland of Kundo flowers was prepared along with betel leaves and nuts carefully for the purpose. The boy takes them to the groom and garlands him. The groom, prepared for the purpose, receives the invitation. On the day fixed for the marriage, at the residence of the groom certain rituals are observed. On the verandah there is the preparation of Ishaifu (water-pot) conducted by an expert. In the water pot, full to the brim, one bud of Sangbrei, one bud of Langthrei and a white flower are placed. Wax candles are lighted. Fruits, betel leaves and nuts are laid. The person conducting the prayer first makes himself sanctified and then sanctifies the groom by sprinkling the water with hymns. Then he makes impression on three places of the body of the groom: one on the forehead, one on the centre of the breast and the other just below the navel. The symbolic name of God 'Ha-Hung-Hai-He-Hing' is administered on the aforesaid places by the ring finger of the right hand. Then the person conducting the prayer asks the groom to pray and worship Salailel Sidaba, Leimalel Sidabi, Lainingthou Sanamahi and his own parents. The parents of the groom bless their son. As a measure to
ward off evils the person conducting the ritual utters the hymn to drive away the evils to the south. After all these rituals are over the groom starts for the bride's residence when his breath is on the right nostril moving the right leg first.

The groom is received by the mother of the bride and other women. He has to face smokes of cultic herbs called Khoichu-laikham in order to be protected from evil spirits. He then takes his seat at the north-eastern corner of the place for marriage. This is in keeping with the tradition of Nongpok Ningthou whose abode is to the eastern side. At the marriage itself, the groom's family is obliged to bring offerings to the apokpa (ancestors) and lamlai (local deity). Appropriate offerings are made to the sun, the moon, stars, primal elements of water, fire, air, the sky up and the earth below, Sanamahi and Pakhangba by uttering proper hymns. The groom's family presents a bridal gift of gold ornaments, cloths and other suitable items. The bride's family reciprocates by giving a dowry according to their means. This must include a Tangkhul cloth. Then the groom takes his seat in the middle of the yard and the maiba performs the ritual of invoking the ancestors for their blessings. Then the bride bows down to the household deities and her parents. She walks around the groom seven times. On completion of each round she casts flowers on him. Then the couple place garlands of Kundo flowers around each

1. This signifies the close cultural relation between the Tangkhuls and the Meeteis.
An important feature of the marriage ceremony is the rite of Meetam Nga Thaba (lit. sending away of fish). Two fish are set free in the pond. The prospects of the bride and the groom are read from the movements of the fish. If the fish swim well and together, a happy life for the couple will result. Otherwise the couple will have sufferings in the married life.

There is another rite for determining the prospects of the couple. A basketful of rice (Chengluk Nungshang) is carried by the leading woman of the locality of the groom. It is kept at the Phungga Lairu of the bride's house for four days. On the fourth day of the marriage this basket is opened by the bride's people at the instance of some women of the groom's family. The contents are observed to read the future. Thus if insects like spider are found, this signifies that the couple will be blessed with a good number of children.

Among the Meeteis there is another type of wedding which is closer to the Hindu gandharva marriage. This is not really elopement because the couple stay in the house of a close relative on the man's side. Both the families are informed of the situation and marriage takes place in the usual way.
(d) Death rituals

Death, according to the traditional beliefs of the Meeteis, means the separation of thawai (soul) from its temporary dwelling place, hakchang (the body). It is called nongkaba which means going up to the Nong, the ultimate principle of the world. Man is made up of the inert elements and a living principle called thawai. The disposal of all the elements which constitute a man is a must for the Meeteis. The rites and ceremonies consequent on the death of a person have been extensively influenced by Hinduism but the traditional customs are not absent. Death should not take place in the house if it can be avoided. A small hut called Khangpok Sang is made and the dying person is carried there. A Ku-Kai (a box-like structure) is made. In this Kai the corpse is then placed. It is then carried to the place where the cremation takes place. An old man of the family drops a Langhing (raw thread) from the hut (Khangpok Sang) to the place of cremation. In the absence of Langhing, pieces of cotton can be dropped. This dropping of cotton or thread is believed to be an invitation to the departed one to come back in life once again. The Kai is carefully covered with white cloth not to allow light of either the sun or the moon to pass through and reach the dead body inside. Representing the three great primal elements of Fire, Water and Air, three ropes bind the Kai. The

1. Khangba = stay in waiting.
cloth bearing the seven colours of Meetei Yek should cover the Kai towards the portion of the head. When the dead body has been so placed in the Kai, and the Kai taken to the funeral place the hut is removed. Its removal is done carefully starting from the south-east, then south-west, then north-west and finally north-east.

In the ancient times of king Kangba the dead body was thrown out to be taken over by Kakyen Meengamba, a king bird who was at the service of the king. Then it was thrown into the water of the river near Heibok Ching. Kangbaron Puya says further that from the time of Tonkonba there had been specific place for funeral. Up to the advent of Hinduism burial of the dead was practised. The following references can be made as evidence for the method of sepulture before Pamheiba in the 18th century A.D.

(a) Pamheiba Larei Lathup clearly states that the whole Meetei nation would be in disaster as they would be under the Burmese (Awa Leipak) domination since the bones of their forefathers were thrown in the water of the Ningthi river. It was not right to do things that would bring the nation under the enemies. For opening the funeral places and collecting the bones of the dead for throwing them down into the water of Ningthi, the king should be held responsible.

(b) T.C. Hodson writes, "It is well known that upto the advent of Hinduism, the dead were buried, and the chronicles

1. Lawang, N.A., Ningthou Kangbaron, p. 7
mention the enactment by Khagenba of a rule that the dead were to be buried outside the enclosures of the houses. Gharib Nawaz 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, Gharib Nawaz exhumed the bones of his ancestors and cremated them on the banks of the Engthe River, and from that time ordered his subjects to burn their dead. In another passage also he writes, "... the records distinctly show that up to the formal introduction of Hinduism in the reign of Pamheiba the people buried their dead, ate meat, drank ardent spirits, and behaved just like the hill people of the present day."

(c) Shri Atombapu Sharma remarks thus, "Guru Shantidas said, "The songs of the Meeteis should not be sung. If any body hears them attentively and sheds tears for them, in case of his death in the day time, he becomes a crow and in case of death in the night, he becomes an owl. Then it flies into Makoi Nungon Ching and falls into hell. One should not hear the legends of Nongpok and Panthoibi, and the song of Khamba and Thoibi'. Thus from the funeral places of the Meeteis huge quantities of bones were exhumed. All were carried to the bank of the Hingthi river and thrown into the water."

1. Hodson, T.C., The Meitheis, pp. 116-117
2. Ibid., p. 97
3. Sharma, A., Pakhangba, p. 5
(d) Cheitharol Kumbaba the Royal Chronicle reports, "On the 20th day of the month of Hiyang kei the king took all the bones of the ancestors to Ningthi for cremation." \(^1\)

The editor of the Chronicle comments that there were four kinds of funeral process prevalent in this land before the reign of Pamheiba (Gareb Newaz). He makes reference to Sagok Lamlen Puya which speaks of the four kinds of disposal of the dead: in the air, in water, in the earth and in fire. Of the four only fire had been allowed by king Pamheiba to be in use afterwards. \(^2\) The disposal in the air was the oldest of all. Dead bodies were thrown at a particular place in prehistoric days. 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. Later some places were selected as burial grounds. In the case of burial in the earth good food and cloths were kept beside the corpses. Some pieces of gold and silver were also put within the Kai. Cremation now takes place, according to the Hindu custom, by the river side. "The body is even today placed in a coffin before cremation, which supports the contention that burial was practised in pre-Hindu times in Manipur." \(^3\) It is due to the traditional beliefs that the Meeteis have introduced some new

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1. Cheitharol Kumbaba, p. 73
2. Ibid., p. 74
practices in the Hindu method of cremation. Thus the Kai is placed on the funeral pyre made up of seven layers of fire wood that represent the seven yeks of the Meeteis. The head of the dead body is placed in the north-western direction where the supreme deity Koubru reigns. The feet point towards the south where the mighty Wangpurel, the lord of death, rules. The pyre is lit by the male next of kin amidst ritual singing of divine hymn 'Ha, Hung, Hei, He, Hing' and sprinkling of holy water. It is to be noted that the custom of cremating the dead was not unknown among the ancient Meeteis. Perhaps some yeks practised it.

In the pre-Hindu Meetei society a rite called Chupsa Moithem was observed on the seventh day of death. Even now it is performed by the people. All the male members of the clan or family assemble. The Piba, the chief of the clan or family, writes off the name of the dead individual from the clan or family chronicle. Due prayers and offerings are made to the Supreme Ancestor Tengbanba Mapu and other deities Salailel Sidaba, Leimalel Sidabi and Lainingthou Sanamahi for peace and happiness of the departed soul. It is believed that the soul that had so long been in the body enjoying life's pleasures is now flying about in wilderness. By its very essential nature it belongs to the divine world but by its association with life's passions and desires it is eager to return to this world. Wangkhomcha Chingtamlen observes that Chupsa Moithem is a ritual observed by the relatives of the dead in order that
the departed soul gets a body in a human birth. He makes an analysis of the word Chupsa Moithem. Chupsa is a combination of two words: Chup meaning absorption, and Sa meaning body. Thus Chupsa means absorption in a body. Moithem is a combination of three words: Moo meaning man, Oi meaning 'to become', and Them meaning 'to attempt or make effort'. Thus Moithem means attempt to become man. Chupsa Moithem thus is an attempt to become man by being absorbed in a body.¹

Wangkhomcha Chingtamlem makes reference to Polpi Lang puya which takes Siba (human death) to be Nongtai Leitaipa. Nongtaipa is the flying away of the soul in the high heaven, its original abode. (Heaven is called Nongthou). The human body was left by the soul as it was no longer fit for its stay. It is now buried in the earth (Leipak). This is called Leitaiba. Leitaiba is the Taiba (union) with Lei - mother earth. Nongtaiba is the union with Nong - the Heaven.² Thus on death all the elements that constitute the human body get united with the earth in Leitaiba while the soul goes up in the heaven Nong in Nongtaiba. The prayer to the Supreme Being, Tengbanba Mapu to give a new body to the departed soul in a new birth is called Chupsa Moithem.

As to when this Chupsa Meithem ceremony should be observed, the Polpi Lang Puya states that there are two rituals

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1. Chingtamlen, W., Meeteigi Nongkalon, p. 29
2. Ibid., pp. 30-31
to be performed on the death of an individual after the funeral. They are Numitki Mathou Yangkompa (ritual according to days) and Thaki Mathou Yangkompa (ritual according to months). Thus on the seventh day of the death of the individual Chupsa Meithem rites are performed by the Piba of the sagei with other members. This is the ritual observed according to days. The last rite is observed on the completion of one complete year. This is the ritual observed according to months. It is called Phiroi. 1 Liberally Phiroi means the last offering of cloth. In a deeper sense it means the completion of making the cloth which symbolises a human life that requires twelve months - two months with the father and ten months with the mother. Assuming that the soul will be reborn at the end of a year, the Meeteis perform this rite of Phiroi by offering grand feast in honour of Tengbanba Mapu, Salailel Sidaba, Iputhou Pakhangba and the Salai ancestors. There is another rite called Ukrong Hongba, which must be distinguished from Phiroi. This ritual can be performed even years after the death of the individual. For the great souls about whose death nothing is known and also for the ancestors who died long ago this rite of Ukrong Hongba is performed. The manner and style in both the rites are the same.

1. Ibid., pp. 37-38
(e) Agricultural Rites

Among the Meeteis paddy has so much importance that it has been divinised and worshipped as goddess. This is true of all people of rice growing areas in Asia. The Meetei rice goddess is called Phouoibi. She is regarded as a manifestation of the Supreme Mother Leimalel Sidabi who has descended into the world to feed mankind. Fruits, vegetables and flowers are offered to the rice goddess at the four corners of the specially prepared land. But in pre-Hindu times sacrifice of black hen was made to propitiate the rice goddess. The harvesting of the paddy and the threshing are accompanied by different rituals. Phouoibi is presented with offerings of sugarcane juice, rice flour and banana, all mixed together.

The necessity of rainfall in an agricultural community led the Meeteis to perform certain rites for calling rains during periods of drought. This rain ceremony is performed at Nongmaijing hill in a cave where stone figures are kept for the purpose. Legend has it that a woman, Nongmai Chanu Seleima prayed to the lai Soraren for blessing her with nine sons. Four sons were soon born to her but they were all made of stone. Disappointed she left her home with the stone children. She came to the Iril River which was then in spate. Finding that

1. 'Phou' means 'the unhusked rice', 'Oibi' is the verb 'Oiba' (to become) with the feminine ending 'i'. Phouoibi means the goddess that becomes paddy.
2. Parratt, S.N., op.cit., p. 92
3. Corrupted use of Salailel.
children could not cross the river, she left them on the bank and crossed the river alone. The stones cried out at being left by the mother and the place goes by the name of Nunglaobi. The stones cried out at being left by the mother and the place goes by the name of Nunglaobi.¹ Five other children were also born to the woman. She asked Soraren how the children should be fed. She was told that her children should be fed by offerings made by the people in order to get rain. She went to a cave in Nongmaiijing hill with her first four children, leaving the rest of them in different places. These sacred stones are now guarded by certain Angom sageis and are never touched. When there is rain ritual, a canopy is erected over the Laipham and a white cloth is spread, on which are placed metal coins, iron plates and Longthårei and leisang flowers. Separate offerings are made to each of the five stone figures. The maiba, conducting the ritual, wraps these stones in clean white cloths and invokes the deity (Nongmai, the mother of the stone children). He then takes these stones down to the river and immerses them one after another. After the rainfall, they are taken back to their original abode.

There is another kind of ritual for production of rain. It is called Nonglaoba.² On this occasion there is exchange of obscene words and vile abuses. This rain-ery is performed by the people in the months of Lamta and Sajibu. The use of the

₁. Nung = stone, Laobi = crying
₂. Nong = rain, Laoba = to call.
device of nong laoba in rain-making is confirmed by the Royal chronicles:

"In 1779 sak (1857 A.D.) in the month of Ingel (June/July) on the 22nd day, Tuesday, because of the drought and the failure of seasonal rain, the king and the Angom Ningthou both rade in a boat and abused (nong laoba) each other."¹

The Meeteis believed their king to be a descendent of God. His royal boat was considered to be the representative of Iputbou (Grand father) Pakhangba. In critical times of drought the boat which symbolised the great deity was worshipped. A reference to such an event is made in the chronicles.

"In 1792 sak (1870 A.D.) in the month of Thawan (July/August) on the 6th day, Wednesday, the whole congregation of maibas begged blessing from the king to get rain and worshipped the lai by opening the lock-gate where the sacred boat was: the rain descended."²

(f) Ancestral rites

Apokpa Khurumba ('bowing down to the apokpa') is an important ritual to be observed in a proper manner by each household. The apokpa are the deceased males of the previous

¹ Cheitharol Kumbaba, p. 333. Angom Ningthou was the father-in-law of the king.
² Ibid., p. 391
three generations (the father, grandfather and great-grandfather). A ceremony is held at night during the full moon in which they are invited to attend the Khurumba on the new moon day after sunset. Various offerings are kept on banana leaves which are arranged in a special way. These include cloths, fruits, betel leaf and betel nut, vegetables and fish. The raw food is offered to Sanamahi by the maiba. Then the food is cooked with water drawn from an area sacred to the particular sagei to which the family belongs. The three ancestors are believed to take food when all lights are extinguished and everybody leaves the house. Later the food is consumed only by the household. It must not be taken by anybody outside the Sagei. Even the maiba is not allowed to eat this food.

When we consider the development of the Meetei religion, we discern some beliefs and practices of the primitive stage existing side by side with those of the later and maturer culture. But some elements of the distant past have ceased to play any significant part in the religious life of the people. Tradition and sentiment are however too strong to permit of the primitive practices being speedily discarded; and the tendency is to elevate them in order to bring them into accord with larger ideas. Certain stones which were probably objects of reverence in an earlier age were later conceived to be tokens of the divine presence. Some Meetei kings erected reign-stones and buried a gold cup beneath the stone. Any accident happening to the stone was believed to portend some evil happening to the
reigning king. On some occasions stones were used as sacrificial altars and animals were sacrificed. The actual slaughtering was done by the non-Meetei tribesmen but it is conjectured that in earlier times the Meeteis themselves killed the animals. Pakhangba used to be worshipped by the sacrifice of a pig, while Nongpok Ningthou required in addition a pair of fowls. Possession by a vampire (hingchabi) was cured by sacrificing a mithan (buffalo).1

The following references to animal sacrifice are noted in the State chronicle.

(a) "In 1392 sak (1470 A.D.) king Kyamba offered a gayal at the foot of Khari Hill seeking victory over Kabo Kyang: he was victorious over Kabo Kyang."2

(b) "In the year of Shanthang Mayang, 1540 sak (1618 A.D.) Ibungs Mayamba was born. In that very same year, in Ingel (June/July) he died. They tried to appease Ningthou Marjing with wild pigs, dogs, hens and pigeons: with all these creatures they worshipped him: at every watering place they sacrificed."3

(c) "In the year of Laishriba 1555 sak (1631 A.D.), Lainingthou Khagemba, in the month of Lamda on the fifth day,

3. Ibid., p. 25
a Wednesday, laid the foundations of the Kangla. It was dedicated at once. Many lais, including Koubru, (were offered) sacrifices under a canopy at Kuchu 100 each of buffaloes, goats, sheep, cattle, geese, pigs, fowls, pigeons, dogs, fruit and ginger - without number were sacrificed; he asked for long life."

It is evident that from the primitive period sacrifice and prayer formed the main element of the cultus. The sacrifice was an act of homage or a gift to the god in order to win some favour from him. And the belief that evils could be averted and good things gained by this means, was still operative at the early stage of Hinduisation. In the Meetei religion we find the idea of sacrifice as a means of communion between the worshippers and the deity. But gradually the inclination grew to magnify the ritual efficacy of the duly performed act. This obstructed the deepening of the inward side of the religious consciousness. The religion of the Meeteis embraces all shades of thought and belief from the wandering fancies of primitive superstitions to the highest insight. Here exists by the side of the bright cheerful pantheon of beneficent deities a world of evil demons. So we come across strange utterances of incantations and spells, charms and witchcrafts. Often sorcery and magic prevail over the genuine religious spirit. Devotion to the deity is lost in a soulless mechanism of rites and pedantries of formalism.

1. Ibid., p. 27