PART TWO

NON-VERBAL FOLKLORE
CHAP TER III

TRADITIONAL MEITEI BELIEFS, CUSTOMS AND CEREMONIES

A. RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

(a) Manipuri Hinduism

The majority of the present-day Meiteis are Hindus of the Chaitanya Vaishnava order. Under the royal patronage of the powerful king, Pamheiba (1709-1748 A.D.) also known as Garin-Niwaz, Hindu religion was introduced in Manipur in the eighteenth century by Hindu Vaishnavite missionaries from Bengal. It is said that at first the people had raised strong opposition to the new faith, since the original Meitei traditional beliefs, customs and practices were believed to have been endangered. But the spread of Hinduism continued, often accompanied with repressive measures by the king. The people somehow accepted the new faith due to the fear of royal punishment. Thus, Hinduism of the Vaishnava order became the state religion in Manipur by the decree of the king.

But it is believed by many scholars --- and they offer various evidences in their support --- that Saivism, Saktism and Tantraism had gained various degrees of influence in Manipur even before Vaishnavism had entrenched itself. In fact, ever to-day there are beliefs, customs and divinities and sacred places which undoubtedly speak of the Meitei society --- associations with the above forms of Hinduism.¹

¹. See S.K. Chatterji, Religious and Cultural Integration of India, Imphal, 1967, pp. 42-48; Atombapu Sharma, Manipur Sanatan Dharma, Imphal, 1952, p. 15; Maiba Kanglon (MS); Miyat (MS).
However, it cannot be said that Meiteis had, and even now have, completely discarded their traditional religion. S.K. Chatterji observes thus, "It [the old form of worship of the Meiteis] went on side by side with the Hindu ritual centering round the worship of Vishnu in his incarnation of Krishna. There is no clear margin between the two religions .... this synthesis or syncretised form of Hinduism is fully believed in by the large number of Meitei people at the present day."² Till to-day, the religious rituals like Lāi-Harēoba, ancestors'-worship, etc. are conducted by the māibās (traditional priests) and the māibīs (traditional priestesses). The Brahmins are forbidden in such traditional rituals. Thus, the old and traditional religious customs still play important part in the social and religious functions of the Meitei society.

With the advent of Hinduism, the Meiteis began to worship Hindu gods and goddesses with the traditional counterparts side by side. There are indications of the replacement of some traditional methods of worship by Hindu forms and of the worship of the Lāis (gods) in conjunction with Hindu gods. There has indeed been a great degree of integration of traditional elements into Meitei Hinduism. Thus, even though the Meiteis are Hindus, it is a different types of Hinduism in which ancient faiths and festivals play a predominantly important role. Now, therefore, the religion of the Meitei

becomes a synthesis of two faiths which has emerged gradually over a fairly long period of time. As S.K. Chatterji observes: "A syncretism of the old pre-Hindu Meitei religion, mythology and ritual with the Hindu Brahmanical (Puranic) religion, mythology and ritual started very early; and with the friendly co-operation of the mâibás and mâibis (priests and priestesses of the old Meitei religion) on the one hand and the Brahmins and Vaishnavas on the other for some centuries, gave to Manipur its own distinctive form of Hinduism." In classical Hinduism Brahmins occupied a superior position even above the royal hierarchical orders. But there are instances in the history of Manipur that Brahmins had sometimes been neglected by the kings. In certain cases the kings had even taken over religious authority or respectability. According to McCulloch, "The Raja, the Brahmins, and male members of the Royal family, give the thread indiscriminately, but to receive it from the Raja and become his disciple, seems to be the preferred method." However, aspects of the traditional religion have fallen away in this process just as certain aspects of classical Hinduism have never gained full acceptance. The result is an amalgamation, in which the distinctive and peculiar cultural and religious genius of the Meiteis has helped shape the kind of Hinduism which is prevalent here. Therefore, Hinduism as integrated into the Meitei pre-Hindu religion is the religion

(b) Aspects of Traditional Manipuri Religion

The Meiteis have faith in the existence of one Supreme Being called Taibang Mapu Sidaba and Atiya Guru Sidaba and his two progenies Sanamahi and Pakhangba. Atiya Guru Sidaba, who creates the Universe is the Lord of the Universe and the God of gods. He guides the individual beings to the right path and redresses all sorrows and sufferings of mankind. His attributes are limitless and indescribable. Although he is formless, he can appear in myriad manifestations. He withdrew himself from the world after creating god Pakhangba who is his son and the ruler of the earth. Sanamahi, his other son, who is the lord of all households, governs the domestic life of the people.

In the Meitei society, Taibang Mapu Sidaba, together with Sanamahi and Pakhangba are considered as the great Trinity. In addition to this, there is in the Meitei pantheon various other deities whose number is computed to be around three hundred sixty four. For the purpose of worship, the deities may be divided into four groups viz., Lamlais, deities of the country side, presiding over the diverse aspects of nature, the

5. There has been in recent times a strong tendency of revivalism of the old religion with ancient gods and deities. There are, for example, groups advocating the revival of the 'Sanamahi religion' indicating the worship all pre-Hindu gods and goddesses of the Meiteis by discarding the Hindu pantheon. Such attempts are an outcome of the reaction of a group of people who protest against the irrational exploitation of the innocent people by the custodians of Hinduism in Manipur.
primal necessity of an agricultural community; the nmanglāis, deities of the forest; the Imunglāis, the tutelary deities of each clan or salāl, seven in number. Besides, the Meiteis believe in the existence of some spirits, such as spirits of rivers, hills and lakes, weird sisters, phantoms, goblins, etc. They try to propitiate them with rituals and offerings so that the spirits may be pleased and may not harass them or put them into troubles.

The traditional Meitei religion incorporates the worship of fire, of the sun and of a number of gods such as Soraren (the god of rain and thunder) and L'entren (the god of water), etc. The Meiteis worship fire preserved in a fire-place (called the phungā) of their houses. They consider it sinful if the fire ceases to burn in it. So they try to preserve it with paddy husk and other materials. They keep three places in their houses as the places of God. The first is phungālāiru which is a small hole dug just to the west close to the said phungā. Next is Sanāmahi kāchin, situated at the south-western corner of the house. This is the place of the household deity, Sanamahi. It is the common practice of the Meiteis to pray everyday to Sanamahi, the lord of every household. The cult of Sanamahi is so strong that even the Brahmins who are the custodians of the Hindu religion worship him in their households.

Besides, most of the hill tribes of Manipur worshipped Sanamahi before their conversion into Christianity. The third sacred spot belongs to is Imā Leimaren Sidabi, which lies near the wall just to the direct north of the phungā. She is generally worshipped on the day of Cheirāoba.

There are four principal deities called Malkei Ngākpa lai, i.e., 'guardians of the directions' and each deity is believed to be in charge of a particular direction. They are Koubru who governs the north-west direction. Wangbren or Wangpurel in charge of the southern direction, Marjing, the guardian of the north-eastern side and Thangjing who holds the charge of the Moirangs in the south-west direction. There are some other deities such as Nongpok Ningthou of the east, Yanggoi Ningthou of the west, etc. Over and above these deities, there are several other local deities worshipped by several groups of families, big and small. These deities are designated as Umanglais. There are about 446 patronymic lineages, each of which has Umanglais believed to be the ancestors or ancestresses of the respective sāgei (clan).²

The Meiteis worship the sun as a prominent male deity and the practice seems to have come down since very ancient times. We find one or two legends about the sun worship in the folk narratives of Manipur. The sun, it is believed, travels across the sky everyday on horse-back. The daily

8. Ibid., p. 29.
movement of the sun across the sky and its particular position is worshipped under the name of Mangāṅ Guru in the morning, Luwāṅ Guru in the noon and Khuman Guru in the evening. The moon is called Thā. According to a book called Lelthak Leikhāroḥ, Atiya Guru Sidaba created the sun (Numīt) and the moon (Thā), two with the names of 'Konjintuthokpa' and 'Ashibā' respectively. Pakhangba, the divine ancestor of the Ningthouja clan is regarded as an incarnation of the moon. This belief was once very popular in Manipur and is still a living faith among the Lois inhabiting in Andro. The moon is worshipped on an auspicious day of the last quarter of every month. 

The Meiteis worship Soraren, the god of rain and thunder. In some accounts he is identified with 'Atiya', the highest God of the Meitei Trinity. A temple dedicated to him is still found at Thoubal Haoba situated at 20 Km. south of Imphal.

Wangbren is the deity of river and water and also the guardian of the southern parts of Manipur. Whenever cases of drowning take place in the valley of Manipur in large numbers, the people worship Wangbren in the belief that there may not be further deaths in water. The main temple of Wangbren is at Sugnu, 80 Km., south of Imphal. Some scholars like Atombapu have identified Wangbren with Varuna and sometimes with Yama.

Koubru, the regent of the north-west and north, was also worshipped annually by the kings in order to avoid famine and other calamities. Temples dedicated to him are to be found among the Loi villages of Sekmai and Phayeng.\(^{11}\)

Marjing, the guardian of the north-east direction, is believed to have full command over the lives of the cattle. He is also associated with traditional Meitei games. The Meitei traditional games or Sagol Kangjei (hockey on horse back) and Khong Kangjei (foot hockey) are believed to have originated from him. In times of calamity caused by cattle epidemic, polo sticks and balls are offered to this deity.\(^{12}\)

Thangjing, the protector of the south-west direction, is one of the most important ancient deities of Manipur. The legends and stories of Saiyon-mapan (nine incarnations) are attributed to god Thangjing. He has his abode on a hill situated at Moirang, 30 Km. to the south of Imphal town.

**B. LIFE CYCLE AND CONNECTED RITES**

A Meitei has to observe certain rituals and ceremonies in his life time which he has inherited both biologically and socially. It is universally held in Manipur that these are essential in one's life.

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(a) Meeronbā (Pregnancy)

People generally understand the usual relationship between sexual intercourse and conception. But they also believe that mere sexual intercourse does not necessarily lead to conception; therefore, they consider children as the gifts of God. Ordinarily, stoppage of menstruation is regarded as a sure sign of pregnancy. When the woman feels for the first time the impending change, she generally informs her husband. People believe that when a woman conceives, she feels slothness in her body, heaviness in her thighs and a little headache. She also develops the vomiting tendency. Some women desire to eat small pieces of earthen-wares and also tendency to have sour fruits during the early period of pregnancy.

A woman in the advanced stage of her pregnancy is not allowed to carry or to lift heavy weight. During the pregnancy the husband is not supposed to kill any animal or a fish. She should avoid places believed to be haunted by evil spirits. She does not go alone out of her house at noon and after dusk in order to avoid evil spirits. In the seventh month, her parents bring cooking pots to be used during her delivery confinement. The husband is prohibited from having any intimacy with his wife during the last two months of pregnancy followed by another three months after parturition. But, a pregnant woman is fed with delicious food, fruits and sweets by her relatives, parents and friends.
At the nine month of her pregnancy, a ceremony called Kokthok Chāṁthokpā is generally performed. It is believed that due to this ceremony the woman retains her strength during her pregnancy and the child-birth. But, it appears that this ceremony has been fizzling out now-a-days. In this ceremony, the husband stands at the Mamāṅthong (front door) and his pregnant wife crawls through his two legs. It is believed that this helps easy delivery of the child. This can also make the child-birth safe.

(b) Angāṅ Pokpā (The birth of the child)

Wealthy people build a special house for the actual birth. The birth-house of the wives of the king is called wāngongpāัง and those of commoners is called chāboksang. In the past, parturition inside the dwelling house was regarded as impure. Now-a-days, there is no separate room and parturition takes place within the living house. However, in order to avoid spread of insanitation associated with child-birth, the kitchen and the deity-rooms are spared.

When labour pains start, the expectant mother lies on a separate bed of straw spread and covered with a mat for delivery. The expecting mother during this period is attended by a māibī (a mid-wife) and assisted by one or two elderly women called māiyoknābi. The experienced old women of the locality or village are also called to assist the expectant mother in delivering the child. The mother and mother-in-law
of the pregnant woman, her married sisters and sisters of her husband, if married, should also be there. A barren woman who wishes to beget children also likes to be there. It is believed that she too would herself get children in the way. Children, pregnant women and male persons are not permitted to watch the delivery. Any impure woman is not supposed to be there as a precaution against any eventuality.

In case of protracted labour pains, the husband strides over the expectant mother three times loosening his namel (one end of his khudei, a small Manipuri dhoti). The hair locks of the expectant mother are loosened and also one bamboo knot of the house is loosened too. When the labour pain becomes intense, the maiibi tells to open thonglon mapan (nine closed gates which are taken as the organs of the human body, i.e., the two eyes, ears, nostrils, mouth, rectum and urinary organ. It is represented by opening the doors, windows, boxes etc. nine in numbers. It is believed that these devices are to be resorted to so that the delivery might be smooth and easy. If the child-birth is delayed, they also assumed that it may be because of the child lying in a wrong position.

When a child is to be delivered, the expectant mother is seated in a kneeling posture. Two or three women support her and the maiyoknabi holds her in the right position and also does not allow her to move so that the child may be delivered without any delay and harm. As soon as the child is born, it
is placed on swaddling cloth nāoyomphi (nāo = child; yom = to cover; phi = cloth).

There are certain commonly held beliefs concerning the actual delivery. A boy comes with the face downwards and a girl with the face upwards. Some children are born with their face appearing first. Much blood flows with a female child and little with the male child. The first crying of a child is very important. If it does not cry, it is regarded as tatnaba (no link) and a ritual is generally performed on the sixth day after the birth in order to protect the child from any evil consequences. If people staying outside the delivery room hear the cry of the child, it is thought to be a proper delivery.

The date of birth, the day of the week, exact hours, minutes and seconds, etc. are noted carefully for preparing the horoscope of the child. It is believed that these are the determining factors in the life of the child. After the delivery of the child, the umbilical cord is cut leaving three fingers length with a bamboo split known as wākthou or a blade or a scissor by the māibi. The umbilical cord is tied with a thread there after. A small cloth is tied around the abdomen of the mother to keep her stomach intact. Hot water is generally applied regularly to her perineum for quick healing up of the perineal lacerations. Then, the child is washed with lukewarm water. Before suckling the child, the father chants Sīlabā Mapugi Ninglen (name and glory of the immortal Lord) in its
two ears. After the advent of Hinduism, the father chants Harinam (Hare Krishna ... Krishna Krishna Hare Hare ... ) instead of Siiaba Mapungi Minglen in its ears. Then the child is symbolically nursed by the mother by its lip on her nipples. (for male child right nipple first and for female child left nipple first). After this the child is breast-fed by a woman called khominbi, until the milk comes properly in the breasts of the mother. She is rewarded either in cash or in kind on the sixth day after birth.

The placenta is then put in an earthen pot and buried either in the northern or southern venakha (verandah) of the house according to the sex of the child. In the case of a male child, it is buried in the southern side but in the case of a female in the northern side close to the wall. While burying the placenta it should neither be too deep nor too shallow, and it is generally believed that if it is buried too shallow, the child would frequently vomit and if it is too deep, the child would become hard of hearing. Therefore, the pit is dug exactly one khubom (the length from forearm up to the tip of the middle finger) in depth by a male person. The Meiteis believed that if after-birth of a female child, its placenta is buried on the right side of the house, the next baby will be a male child. Another belief is that if a barren woman wants to get an issue, the placenta may be buried in the verandah of the house of that woman. Then, it is buried and

is filled up with earth in a very slow process and with light pressure. It is generally believed that if the earth is pressed forcefully the child will be partially deaf. Enough care is taken in burying the placenta so that cats or dogs may not lift it from the ground.

There is a custom in the Meitei society that just after the birth of a child, the māibi, the māiyoknabi and other who have assisted the expectant mother at the time of delivery will be fed as per the convenience of the family of child-birth.  

(c) Yupanthābā

In the past, the Yupanthābā ceremony was performed in the morning of the fifth day after birth of a child and on the night of the same day, a kind of worship for the prosperity of the newly born babe was also held. However, after the advent of Hinduism, on the sixth day Yupanthābā or Sasthi Puja is observed. The process of Yupanthābā of the earlier times and of the present is the same. The māibi officiates as the priestess at Yupanthābā. She prepares singju (salad) by mixing uncooked rice, vegetables, vendem (a kind of plant), heibi with dried or roasted ngamu (mud-fish) chilli and salt. Six pieces of banana leaf are placed on a yāngkok (winnowing fan) and some singju and some rice and curry which are offered to goddess Imoinu Ahongbi are also placed on each piece of banana leaf. The child is then bathed and covered with a clean cloth. The mother is not permitted to touch the child. Then a branch of

of tāiren (Cedrela toona) is taken and water is sprinkled on the body of the child. Then, the māibi sits with her face east-ward in the nibāka of the living house with the child on her lap. The māibi then feeds the child with the prepared mixed food symbolically by chanting six times with the following words:

'Nāpā chāk, napu chāk, pāngal chāk,
Nādayāi sidayāi chāk,
Ngasidagi Taibāy: Shinjik Chārabani,
Mum ... Mum ... Mum ... Ku ... Ku ... Ku.

This has been rendered into English thus: 'Father's food, grandfather's food, strength's food, Immortal food.
Eat the food of life from to-day
Mum ... Mum ... Mum ... Ku ... Ku ... Ku. (tempting the child to take the initial nourishing food).

It depicts that all the food-stuffs that used to nourish the baby's ancestors are being introduced to it from that very day.

The māibi then raises the baby by singing a 'song.' The māibi then places the child on the winnowing fan after removing the food first and moves the winnowing fan gently above the fire and a dialogue starts between the māibi and the mother of the child. The mother is asked by the māibi

15. See Chapter VII for further details.
whether she will accept gold or silver or any valuables in exchange of the child. The mother always asks for the child. This process is repeated and accordingly, the child is given to the mother.

The mother may now take bath and the straw bed of the delivery will be thrown outside the gate of the homestead. Later, in the night a prayer with worship takes place for the longevity and prosperity of the newly born child. This Sasthi Puja is offered to the Sasthi Devi in the room of the mother of the child by the father under the supervision of a Brahmin priest. It is also customary for the woman's parents to present various articles for the child such as a cradle made of cane, dresses, a small mattress, a small mosquito net, bow, arrow, etc., on that day. When the worship begins, books, pens, comb, mirror, ornaments, etc. are offered to the Sasthi Devi. The child is then taken out from the bed of the mother and is placed on a cloth. Then, the father puts vermilion on the middle of forehead of the child. During the last part of the puja, the Brahmin ties a putali (a small thread) around the wrist of the child for his health. The maternal uncle of the child, or in his absence any male member from its mother's side, is called in and a bow with five arrows is given to him. He is clad in a white dhoti, a white shirt, a white turban and a white scarf hanging from his shoulders diagonally tied at the scarf's end around the waist. He stands at the courtyard of the house and shoots the arrows in four directions, namely, north-east, south-east, south-west and north-west and he aims
an arrow at the sky and the earth and it is kept along with the bow near the child to ward off the evil spirits. He chews some baked pea-nuts during and after shooting of arrow. He is the first person to bless the child by giving lan (gift), then the father and other relatives and invitees follow suit. The maternal uncle or the person who shoots the arrow is rewarded for his services. Then the relatives and invitees are entertained.

(d) Yumāng Pāo (House pollution news)

Just after the birth of the child, the news of house pollution is sent to all the patrilineal relatives and it is generally observed for eleven days. During this period all religious ceremonies and performances are prohibited.

(e) Yumsengbā (House purification rite)

On the twelfth day after birth the house is cleaned and the floor is smeared with cowdung and all the utensils and other belongings of the mother are washed and all cooking pots are discarded and replaced by new ones. Then the house is purified by a Brahmin sprinkling water with the tulsi leaf. Similarly, the sāgei of the husband or the father must purify itself by ceremonial washing of clothes, utensils, etc. etc.
(f) Phāibok Pokpā (Twin-birth)

In the Meitei society, twin-birth is considered as a bad omen. It is believed that, when the twins become two or three years old, they talk with each other in the following manner:

"Ipā makok chāsi
Imā makok chāsi"

'(Let us eat the head of the father
Let us eat the head of the mother)'

In order to protect the parents from misfortune a ritual is generally performed by preparing a curry of a couple of sareng fish and the twins will be fed with the two heads of the sareng which serves to illustrate symbolically the scapegoat offered for the parents' heads. There is another belief that if one of the twins dies during the infancy, the spirit of the deceased one tries to devour the soul of the living one. Therefore, in order to save the living one from the departed one's hungry spirit, it is covered with a longhup (plunge basket).

(g) Hingthôngbā (Name-giving)

In giving the name to a child no ceremony is performed. Some parents consult the horoscope of the child before selecting its name: the pānji or the astrologer may give a name or the first letter with which the name is to begin while writing the horoscope of the child. The child is
generally named by the parents or guardians or any elder member of the family. Before naming, the child is addressed as Ibungo, Inao, Nanao if it is a boy, and as Ibeam if a girl. There are many cases of giving two or three names to a child but outsiders generally call only by the formal name given by the family. Hindunised names are very common these days. However, the traditional Meitei names are also still popular. Again, the old Meitei names such as Chaoiba, Chaoobi, Amuba, Tombi, Ibeam, Khendor, Thambal, Leihao etc. etc. are now considered old fashioned while Rajendra, Dilin, Caren, Surjaban, Indrani etc. etc. are considered modern. Ibungo is generally term of address given to any male person. It may be used by any person while addressing to a junior. Ibeam is a general term of address for females. It is used by any person while addressing to a junior one. This name may also be given to any girl.

(h) Kabok-chithaba

A ritual called Kabok-chithaba is generally observed when a mother brings out the child to the market for the first time. When the mother carrying the child on her back comes towards the home, she throws kabok (popped-rice) backward without looking back. It symbolises that the kabok is offered to the goddess of the market not to do any harm to the child who has been brought to the market for the first time. It is believed that this ritual of kabok-chithaba gives pleasure to the goddess of the market.
(i) Chaumbā (Feeding ceremony)

Normally for a male child the Chaumbā ceremony is held in the sixth month and in the case of a female in the fifth month. In this ceremony, the child is fed either cooked rice with fish curry or khir. A kind of fish locally known as ngāhei is generally included in the preparation of the fish curry. The child is sometimes served with the prasad of the local Hindu deities. This auspicious day is fixed in consultation with an astrologer who fixes the day after going through the horoscope. The child starts to wear silver, gold ornaments etc. from this day. It is generally performed on the verandah of the house. After feeding the child, it is placed on a cloth or a mat. Articles such as gold, coin, a lump of earth, paddy, and book are placed separately in a line on a banana leaf. The child is induced to grasp one or two of the articles. It is generally interpreted that if the child touches gold, coin or paddy, it will be a rich man; if it touches a lump of earth, it will have landed property or it may be cultivator and if it touches the books, it is assumed that the child would later on evolve into an educated person. Prior to the spread of Hinduism, the chaumbā ceremony was not prevalent in the Meitei Society. This has come into existence only after the spread of Hinduism. The first feeding ceremony is done along with Vupānthābā on the fifth day of the birth of the child according to the native Meitei customs.
(j) Luhongba (Marriage)

The Meitei marriage is now a mixture of pre-Hindu and Hindu rites. In other words, it is a fusion of Hindu rites with certain Meitei traditional features retained. In the Meitei style of marriage the exogamous and the endogamous marriages are prevalent. The Meiteis are exogamous with regard to the clans or a salāi into which they are divided but are endogamous with regard to the other ethnic groups. A man cannot marry a girl within his own clan (salāi or yumāk) and the violation of it leads to excommunication or banishment to Houjengpan, a Loi village of Manipur. Besides, if a man marries a Brahmin girl or a girl of the clan from which his mother comes, they are sent to a place called Louthel Pallel where they live as untouchables.

Yet, there is another restriction which prohibits marriages between a girl and a boy belonging to the same mother although born of different fathers. 16

An average Meitei marriage is proposed and concluded through these stages, viz., Hāinabā, Vāthangthānabā, Nāroinot pubā and Heijinot-pot pubā. Besides, court marriages are also now prevalent in Manipur.

A day before the date of the wedding proper, the groom is invited to the wedding by the younger brother or any other suitable relative of the bride. The groom is garlanded by the.

boy who comes to invite him. This function is locally known as Borbartan (invitation of the groom). The marriage ceremony takes place in the girl's house. A phiruk called phiruk noongsāng or chingsnung noongsāng contains uncooked rice, two discs of salt, three strands of cotton, tobacco leaf, ginger, etc. covered with a white cloth and tied with a bamboo strip of utang (a kind of bamboo) is to be brought by women whose first child must be a son and still living, who is not a widow, and who has been married traditionally. This phiruk is placed at the phunga-lāiru of the bride's house and is opened in the morning of the fifth day after the marriage by the groom's party. The fortunes of the couple are considered according to the insects found inside the phiruk. It is believed that if ant or spider or spider's webs are found inside the phiruk, it is a good sign. Then, in the afternoon of the fifth day of the marriage, it is followed by the rite of the lubāk chenggān kalā in which the bride's party goes to the groom's place and opens the basket of rice and boxes. On seeing the articles inside the boxes they can foretell the future of the couple. The groom's party brings two phiruks for offering to Apok-asa on the day of marriage. Besides, the groom's party gives a bridal gift which generally includes a phanek, an innaphi and the like.

The actual marriage ceremony is generally started at the bride's residence with a sankirtan when some members of the groom's party arrive at the venue. The groom is received at the gate by the mother of the bride which is called mayā-okā.
(receipt or welcome of son-in-law). Three torches are also kindled and parched rice with flowers are thrown over him. The bridegroom is seated then in an appropriate place before he proceeds to the puja site. At the appropriate time, he goes to the puja site and then takes his seat on a wooden platform known as luhongphāl. The bride comes out of her house and also takes her seat by the left side of the groom till the end of the puja. This marriage ceremony is conducted by a Brahmin priest in which the names of three ascending great grand-parents of both the groom and the bride are voiced as witnesses of it and then followed the giving of dañ by the father of the girl or in his absence by any near relative of the girl. Then, the bride rounds the groom seven times and in the completion of each round, the bride offers flowers on the head of the groom. Then she sits by the side of the groom. The couple place garlands around each others' necks. It is a Meitei custom that the garlands must be made of kundo flowers. Then, by tying the ends of their innaphi (together they two go inside a room of the house of the bride where pan and kāngsabi (sweetmeats) are exchanged between the women folk of the bride and the grooms' party. Then, the bride is carried in a litter for her new home with the articles given to her as dowry. The bride is received by the articles given to her as dowry. The bride is received by the mother of the groom or any female relative authorised by the groom's family.
In the Meitei society, the prospects of the bridegroom and the bride are determined by the rite of usin. During the process of Leikoibā (circle with flowers), this rite called mitam-nga thaba is performed. Just after invoking Ḯrāileimā, Ḯreimā and Kajengnānbi by chanting a hymn, two ngamu (mud fish) are set free in the pond and their movements are also observed by two women (one from groom's party and the other from bride's party). Thus, the future stability of the marriage can be predicted by seeing the movements of the fish in the water.

In the Meitei marriage, there was a system of payment of marriage-price, which is known as mangkat, by way of giving money and the cows to the parents of the bride. This mangkat is not paid now in terms of money or cows. However, in case of royal families, money is paid by way of kwāgok hānbā as mangkat.\(^\text{17}\)

In the wedding night, the bride takes the first meal of her husband's family. It is said that the meals include the preparation of a curry with ngānap fish is a must. The belief is that the union should be part and parcel of the life. The rice which is left over by the husband has to be eaten by the bride on this day.

On the sixth day after marriage, a feast called majām chākkouba is arranged at the house of the bride for the newly

\(^{17}\) N. Khelchandra Singh, Manipuri to Manipur & English Dictionary, Imphal, 1964, pp. 312-313.
married couple to which relatives and friends of both the
sides participate. Just after the feast, the bride-groom
prostrates before the father and other older members of the
bride's family. Then, the groom's party goes and the bride
along with some women may also go a bit later.

In the Meitei society, there is another form of marriage
called chenhong (marriage by elopement). A boy may plan elopement
with the girl of his choice; or a woman may not be happy with
her husband and if she desires to leave him and to re-marry
another man, she can elope with the man of his choice. This
includes those also who are divorced or widowed. In order to
meet the above situation, the Meitei society has a deviant
forms of marriage. In case of the boy and the girl in elopement
they do not give in the groom's house prior to the marriage
ceremony but stay in the house of a relative of the groom's
side. Besides, at this stage, they should not cohabit. If
the parents of the girls are agreeable, the marriage may take
place in the usual way. Sometimes, the parents of the bride
may perform a simple ceremony called keinäkatpa (offering of
bride) or the marriage ceremony may be performed at the
residence of the bridegroom with the consent of the parents
of the bride. Again, elopement of girls, widows and divorcees
where neither formal ritual marriage nor keinäkatpa is
performed on certain conditions, after a few weeks or months
or years, a ceremony known as loukhatpa (acceptance) is
generally performed at the house of the woman. Without this,
the woman cannot take part in the ritual function of her
family and also she is not allowed to join in socio-religious functions of the community. Such women have a certain amount of social stigma. All these may, however, be removed after the performance of loukhatpa by their respective parents.

Among the Lois in Manipur the exchange of gifts and sacrificial feasts to the Imunglai (household deity), to the Lamlaï (deity of country side) and the umanglai (forest deity or sylvan deity) are very common. The "Yu" (wine) is freely served.18

(k) Death and Funeral Rites

In the Meitei society, there are four methods of the disposal of dead body viz., disposal in the air, disposal in the water, disposal at the earth and disposal in the fire. If a dead body is placed in an open area, this method is called disposal in the air; if the dead body is buried, it is known as disposal at the earth; if it is dropped into the water, it is called disposal in the water, and if it is cremated, it is called the disposal in the fire.19

At the time of the death of a person, a maibā (local physician) is always at his side. It is a tradition that death should not take place inside the house. On the death of a person, he is taken out of the house by the left side of the

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verandah called naktha and placed inside a Khangpoksang, a small hut built at the khängengenpham of the court-yard. (khängengenpham is on the south-east of the court-yard).

If death occurs inside the house, the whole house would be regarded as māngba (unclean). The dead body is generally bathed and dressed in new cloth before cremation while it is in the khängpoksang. As the death occurs, the members of the bereaved family start wailing loudly for quite some time. Thus, they express their sorrow by crying. Then, the body is placed in a ku (coffin). The existence of the use of coffin even to-day supports the contention that burial was once practised in pre-Hindu period among the Meitei community. Besides, this system was prevalent upto the advent of Hinduism in Manipur.  

The coffin is taken out with its feet towards the road as if it were going on a journey on the shoulders of four men for funeral. Before the arrival of the dead body, firewood, four bamboo poles, a canopy, the fire etc. for the cremation pyre are collected from the house of the deceased. On the arrival of the dead body at the cremation ground before its cremation, gold and ornaments are removed from his or her body. Then, the body is placed on a pyre which is kept ready. The family members walk round the pyre which is then lit gradually by the eldest son or by the male next

of the kin. In pre-Hindu times, it is customary that males must walk round the pyre five times whereas the female for six times. But, now both male and female have to walk seven times around the pyre in clock wise. Males may stay until the body is reduced to ashes but women and children leave after the pyre is set on fire. They have to take baths either in a river or a pond before they enter their gates. Again, they are permitted to enter home only after they have been received at the gate by someone with fire. All the cooking utensils are cleaned and the deceased's bed is removed and burnt at the gate.

During the cremation of the dead body a small portion of its frontal bone is axed out and kept in a bamboo tube. The tube is hidden around the cremation ground for the purpose of performing the Asti Loukhatô (a custom analogous to the Hindu immersion of ash in a river). On the sixth day after cremation, this is performed in order to bring frontal bone home. On this day, it is tied to a piece of cloth and then placed around neck of the chief mourner or any member according to the choice of the bereaved family. It is also placed at secured place of the house until it is dropped in the Ganges or Jamuna, etc. The period of pollution varies according to the age and the way or the manner of the dead person. It may sometimes last for six days, or twelve days or thirteen days. In case of the death of a person as a Lamboibô (sannyasi),

the sradha is performed on the fourteenth day after death. But for those who die before marriage, their sradha will be on the seventh day. Those who die after marriage and do not take bhek, their sradha will be held on the thirteenth day. However, for the Brahmins, the sradha is performed on the eleventh day. In case of the death of a sannyasi, kiratharngā is not required but in other cases it is a must. He remains withdrawn until the time of sradha and always carries a knife to ward off the evil spirits. The sradha is performed on a large scale with elaborate rituals and it includes a sankirtan and a feast for a large congregation. A feast is performed on the next day of the sradha too. This is called ngātangba (the eating of fish). A feast is performed as monthly ritual for the first year after death. Here, food is served to the close relatives and invitees after it is first offered to the Hindu gods. On the first anniversary of death, a ceremony called nirli or samesor takes place with a kirtan. But, some people perform this last ritual either at Brindaban or in Nabadwip. On such occasions, only vegetarian food is served.

Children dying in infancy below or up to the age of two are buried under burial practice. The spirits of the dead infants are generally called Soren. It is placed in an earthen pot and buried in any suitable place away from the village. Some dry bamboo sticks are stuck on the grave. Besides, baked peanuts or mustard seeds are buried along with the dead body. It is a belief that unless the baked
peanuts or mustard seeds germinate the child will not come back. The whole ceremony is performed by a māiba. Three months after the death, another ceremony called Soren thinratpā is performed with a view to preventing from the return of the spirit to the family. This system is still prevalent.

Again, in cases of the death during child-birth, death of a bachelor or of unmarried woman, a lunatic or of a person who commits suicide, the ceremony of chupsālā is performed by the māiba. But the person who commits suicide by hanging with a rope called thourivan sība was generally thrown away at a place known as Mangarak-Kānbi. Now-a-days this system is extinct. The chupsālā ceremony is an offering something to god with a request not to allow such occurrences or catastrophes or not to be reborn in his or her family or near relatives.22

The following rites like asti and sraddha have been in practice since the advent of Hinduism in Manipur. In the pre-Hindu days, in lieu of sraddha, on the tenth day after death, a worship of Pakhangba deity taken place and the purification of sāgel known as wumsengbā is also done on the same day. There is no sankirtan. If anybody wants to hear, they may hear Sanāmahi Lāhui, Pakhangba Lāhui, Nongsalā Lāhui, etc. which are sung or chanted on that day.23

22. N. Kholchandra Singh, op.cit., p. 178
23. Sakok Lamlel, (NS)
They also pray immortal God for his appeasement and blessings. This system is also prevalent in the Meitei society. But the rites of asti and sraddha are now more popular.

In Manipur many old traditional ideas concerning the dead still have a deep and wide following. It is believed that after death, the soul washes its feet at Khonglāmpāt, drinks water at the hill of Thongāk Lāirembi (Thongāk goddess) and then goes southward to Makoi Mungol Ching (Makoi Mungol Hills). When the soul reaches there, it repents of the reminiscences at the separation from its friends and relatives then goes towards the Lāngjing hill where it washes its face at Mungsėl Khong and sees its image in mirror there. Later on, it goes to the land of the death. In the Meitei society, Thongāk Lāirembi is regarded as the gate-keeper of the land of the death and there the soul refreshes itself with water which is placed in two hollow gourds, a large one for the adults and the small one for the children. A māiba who is the custodian of this shrine of Thongāk Lāirembi would ensure that the two gourds are kept well-filled to assuage the thirst of the dead. This belief is still popular among the Meiteis.

It may be said from the above facts that theories of souls-passages among the Meiteis retain certain elements of the traditional faith notwithstanding the conversion of the Meiteis to the Vaishnavite cult, which is perceptible in the belief of the transmission of the soul into different channels.

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after its release from the human body.

C. FESTIVALS OF MANIPUR VALLEY

(a) Festivals with predominantly pre-Hindu affiliation

Manipur valley is a land of festivals. It is difficult to say which festival is more important than the other. The Meiteis observe both the Hindu and their traditional festivals. All the year round, there is a cycle of festivals with one or two being performed every month. These socio-religious festivals of the Meitei society often consist of dance, song and worship in which mass participation is always witnessed. The dances form the nucleus of these festivals which represent a blending of the native and lately acquired Hindu ways of living. The songs related to some of the important festivals have been taken up for discussion in Chapter VII.

(i) Lai-Haraoba

Lai-Haraoba, one of the oldest festivals of the Meiteis, forms the nucleus of the pre-Hindu Meitei culture and also gives us a glimpse of life and art. "Lai-Haraoba mirrors the entire culture of the Manipuri people. It reveals the strength and weakness, the beliefs and superstitions and perhaps also the charm and happiness of the Manipuri people. It reflects the people at their interest."

The festival is observed in honour of the pre-Hindu gods and goddesses locally known as Umanglai (umang = wood or forest; Lai = god or deity) and also held in the wide open space in front of the Umanglai. It is said that there are about 364 Umanglais and all deities are kept in different temples quite distinct and different from the Hindu temples.

The Lai-Haraoba festival is generally celebrated in the Kentei month of Kalen (April-May). It means the merry-making of the gods and the goddesses. 'Lai-Haraoba literally means the 'pleasing of the god.' The essence of this festival is that we perform merry-making by describing and singing his glory in order to please and satisfy Him. There is a superstition that the Lai-Haraoba worship gives power and strength to the people and it generally lasts from about five to fifteen days. It is a general belief that out of 30 (thirty) days of a month the number of 'good' days are 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 5th, 8th, 11th, 12th, 13th, 15th, 18th, 21st, 22nd, 23rd, 25th and 28th and the remaining fifteen days are 'bad' days. Therefore, this festival usually commences on an auspicious day and concludes in the similar manner.

Although the traditional Manipuri deities are large in number and their identities differ from locality to locality, the principle and ritual formalities of worship are more or less the same. Thus, one day before the Lai-Haraoba the deity

is dressed in new clothes. On the first day of the festival, a ceremony called Lāi-Ikonbā (literally, calling up of the Lāi, i.e., invocation of the divine soul from the water) is performed by a māibi, a māibā, a penākhongbā (penā player) and other male and female attendants including the persons carrying the deity on a litter. It is generally held on the bank of a river or a pond. The māibi invokes the soul of Umanglāi by chanting lengthy hymns. Then, the māibi performs a dance dedicated to the deities belonging to the four points of the compass namely; Koubru, deity of the north-west; Marjing, deity of the north-east; Wangpurel or Wangbrel, deity of south east and Thanjing, deity of south-west as to protect us from evil spirits, mischief and misfortune. When they return in procession, the god (Umanglāi) is consecrated inside its temple. The people bring fruits, flowers and sweetmeats to be offered to the deity. All these offerings are performed by the traditional priests and priestesses.

The māibā then performs what is called Hoilāobā (uttering the sound of Hoi), with his face towards south-west on every evening during this festival. He speaks out a series of riddles and long narrations by way of initiating the festival. Just after the completion of Hoilāobā, the māibi performs Lāibou (birth of the Lāi). The whole episode portrays the life cycle of the deity from its conception. Here the māibi expresses making of the human body, infusing life into it, the post-natal care, building of a house, etc. through the movements of dance. This dance is called Lāibou Jagoi. When
the house is completed, it is offered to the deity. After this, the māibi performs Pāntheoibī Jagoi (Pāntheoibī dance) which describes the romantic meeting between Panthoibī and Longpok Gingthou. The ōsā (a song or pungent love repartee between gods and goddesses) is sung during this dance. In continuation with the dance performance exhibiting the story of Longpok Gingthou and Panthoibī, the māibi shows various dance techniques dealing with the stages of agricultural practices, and use of fishing traps. There are interludes of songs and dialogues. All these actions through dances are very subtle.

Then, a group dance, called Lāiren-Mathek, literally meaning 'curve of a python', is performed in single file with the māibi as the leader. The line-up dancers begin to move slowly within the open court-yard of the Umanglēi in a curved and circuitous pattern and no dancer should leave the line until the movement is completed. This pattern is also known as pānhal (extension of Pakhangba) and thought as the symbol of PaMiangba in his snake aspect. There is a belief that if the line or file is broken, misfortune will befall on the village or locality of the people.

After this, 'Ougri Hangel' is performed with a lengthy song. While the māibi is singing inside a circle consisting of an equal number of men and women, participants hold the rope without moving their feet and hands so that the rope should not fall on the ground until she finishes the song.
This Ougri song epitomises for the welfare and prosperity of the land and the people. The māibi again sings another series of lengthy songs and the participants respond in chorus. Finally the whole circle with the rope begins to perform Thābal Chongbā dance. When the song and the Thābal Chongbā dance are over, māibi coils up the rope and presents it before the deity.

Towards the finale of the Lāi-Harāobā festival, all the participants stand in front of the deity while the maiba and the māibi enter inside the temple. The māibi chants by ringing a small bell in her hand while the māibā sings ncarkärol, the song for sending the deity off to heaven. He also describes the felling of a tree necessary to build a boat for the god to ascend to his heavenly abode. Meanwhile, outside the temple the pena-player plays on the pena while other participants join in with rhythmic clapping (clap and echo the song of the māibā). In the past, the close of Lāi-Harāobā was usually followed by the performance of the indigenous Meitei games and sport like, muknā, lamchel, etc. But, now-a-days the performance of these indigenous games is gradually being discontinued except in some rural areas of the valley.

(ii) Ningol Chākkousā (a feast given to sisters and daughters)

Ningol Chākkousā, a feast given to sisters and daughters, especially the married ones, is perhaps the greatest domestic festival of Manipur. It is observed on the second day of the
new moon in the Meitei month of Hiyāngei (October-November). It is a festival of family reunion similar to the 'Bhaiya Docj', of northern India, the 'Bhai Bij', of western India of the 'Bhatri Dwitiya' of eastern India. Whereas in Manipur, the parents and brothers invite the married daughters and sisters to their houses and feed them, but in other parts of India, the married daughters and sisters invite their brothers to their houses and feed them. Prior to the reign of Maharaja Chandra Kirti, it is believed that what was prevalent in other parts of India was also in vogue in Manipur as well. But, according to some scholars, the later half of the 19th century Maharaja Chandra Kirti ordered his subject to exchange the roles of the host and the guest and thus the brothers become the hosts instead of the guests from that time onwards. The authenticity of this view is doubtful and disputed. For this festival invitations are generally sent on the previous day. On this day every Meitei household prepares a very costly meal. Fish is the choicest delicacy for all. On this occasion every Meitei woman puts on her best attire and ornaments. When the meals are over, the parents and brothers give some presents to their sisters and daughters. Thus, the whole day passes off in merriment and also in exchange of views about life. The daughters and sisters reciprocate by praying for the prosperity and longevity of their parents and brothers.
(iii) Cheirāobā

Cheirāobā is a Meitei festival marking the close of the year. Cheirāobā, literally meaning announcing or heralding by means of a stick, was celebrated on the last day of a year before 1435 A.D. It was customary that the heads of the four panās wearing distinctive colours of their own panā, riding on horseback, proclaimed the passing out of the old and the coming in of the new year by carrying bells with a flag attached to the top of sticks. Hence, the name of Cheirāobā was given to this practice: chei = means stick and laobā or its variation rāobā means shouting.

In 1435 A.D. Kiyamba put an end to this practice and in its place introduced a new practice called Cheithābā (chei = stick; thābā = giving up) which has grown into an institution now. Generally no Brahmins and Lois can hold the office of Cheithābā except a Meitei. He is nominated by the process of comparing his horoscope with those of the king. According to this practice, the Cheithābā for the previous year sits on the right side of the king and the in-coming Cheithābā on his left. The two Cheithābās change places and the retiring Cheithābā then addresses the in-coming Cheithābā as follows:

"My friend, I bore and took away all evil spirits and sins from the Raja and his people during the last year. Do thou likewise from to-morrow until the next cheirouba."  


Then, the new incoming cheithaba kneels before the king and the nobles with folded hands and addresses thus:

"O son of heaven, Ruler of the Kings, great and ancient lord, Incarnation of God, the great Lord Pakhangba, ...
From to-day will I bear on my head all thy sins, diseases, misfortunes, shame, mischief, all that is aimed in battle against thee, all that threatens thee, all that is bad hurtful for thee and thy kingdom."

The man then becomes a Cheithaba and the year is named after him. He is not only exempted from Laloo (forced-labour) but also given a number of gifts by the king.

To-day preparations for Cheiraooba includes cleaning of the house: washing of curtains, table-clothes, bed-sheets and utensils, etc. The old earthen-wares are thrown away and new ones take their place. On the morning of the festival generally, we have vegetarian menu but in some cases there are also fish preparations. When the preparation is over, every household offers food first to the deity of the household gate. Similar offers are also made to other deities. On this day, seasonal fruits and vegetables are offered to the domestic deities, Ipuokpa (Apokpa), Sanamahi and Leimaren Silabi and special worship of these deities are also carried out on that occasion. After the food is offered to different deities, all members of the family enjoy the meals together. Just after the family feast, people go for climbing any nearby

29. Ibid., pp. 105-106.
hillock which is generally named Cheirāoching.

(iv) Heikru Hitongbā or Hidongbā

This festival takes place annually on the eleventh day of Lāngban (August-September) on the moat near Bijoy Govinda’s temple and is highlighted by a boat-race before the deity Bijoy Govinda. The origin of this festival is not fully known but its references can be found in a number of ancient Meitei puyās. In the Sakok Lamlel mention is made of this festival as having been performed during the time of Irengba, a tenth century Meitei king. It is now a Hindu-oriented festival of Heikru Hitongbā which dates from the time of king Bhagya Chandra in 1779 A.D.

The competitors coming from all parts of Manipur should belong to the Meitei community out of which only two lead competitors are selected. There is no fixed number of hihonbā (oarsman). The competitor locally known as hitongbā is generally accompanied by one bodyguard called chang, two leading from oarsmen, called nourengbā, two rear oarsmen called noumāng, and one oarswain called hinōsābā who guides the course of the boat by sitting on the stern. Before the race begins, the two hitongbā make offerings to Bijoy Govinda and Raseswori, which is called heiruk katna (offerings of flowers and fruits). It is also a tradition

30. Sakok Lamlel (MS)
to wear necklace of *heikru* (*Emblica officinalis*) fruit by one of the *hitongba* (crews) and a necklace of paddy seeds by the other. But if the festival falls on Sunday, Tuesday and Saturday, the *hitongba* who uses the right side of the moat wears the necklace of *heikru* and if the festival falls on the remaining days, the *hitongba* in the left side of the moat wears the said necklace. Then, the boat-race takes place. The boat-race of *Heikru Hitongba* festival is almost the same with that of the boat-race of games. The race is generally performed twice. There is a tradition that the fruit *heikru* can't be eaten before this festival.

(v) **Kwāk-tānba**

The final day of the Durga pūjā festival incorporates a local festival known as *Kwāk-tānba* which is generally celebrated on this day. Later on, this *Kwāk-tānba* came to be commonly known as *Kwāk-jatra*. The origin of it is quite obscure, although J. Shakespear describes it as the earlier form of the Meitei etiological legend. The celebration covers traditional customs which are performed only under the auspices of the king. Many dignitaries of the king's court attend this celebration in their traditional dresses. This festival reminds us of the ancient tradition of Manipur on one hand and shows, on the other, a harmonious blending of the local culture with the Hindu festival of Rama's victory over Ravana, the

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Demon king of Lanka (Ceylon). For this festival, at a selected place, foods are thrown out for the birds to come and eat since a few days. Prior to the celebration of this festival traditionally food-stuff is spilled on the ground to attract birds to come and to eat it. When the birds are busy in eating the food a loud noise would be produced by shooting a rifle just to disperse them. The majority of the birds coming to pick up the food are crows as they are very common in Manipur. The pundits or priests carefully observe the direction and manner in which the first bird flies away. The direction in which the first bird flies is generally taken to point out the good fortune or otherwise for the king. When the function is over, the king is informed of the course of the first flying crow and its implications. According to the advice of the royal pundits or priests, the venue of the celebration changes from year to year. The king generally attaches tremendous importance to this performance. In addition to this festival, together with this festival, at another place an effigy of Ravana, made of mud and straw is kept and shot at with rifle by the king. According to the tradition future events of the people of the state of Manipur and the king are predicted according to the points where the bullet of the king hits at the effigy. Even to-day though the king has no political power in the day to-day administration of the state, he is the custodian of such performances. On this day Meitei indigenous games are also staged with tremendous enthusiasm. This is still in practice in Manipur.
(b) Festivals with Hindu affiliation

(i) Durga Puja

Although Meiteis are Vaishnavas and normally do not worship goddess Durga, Durga Puja is a socio-religious festival, which is generally celebrated in a grand way in Manipur. The ceremony starts from the first day of Hera and lasts up to the tenth day. The first day is locally known as Chaorenhouba. It is a custom that the married daughters and sisters are not supposed to enter the houses of their parents from the first day till the end of the Puja. The cutting of nails and hair is also prohibited during this festival. Heikhāgok, a kind of plant is an essential ingredient in Durga Puja because people believe that on her way from heaven to the place of worship the goddess Durga rests on the foot of this tree. On the next day, i.e., the seventh day, she enters the house or the temple which is really known as Yumchangbā (Yum = house, changbā = to enter). The peak of this puja comes on the eighth day when sacrifices are made to the goddess and the worshippers ask for boons from Her. On the morning of the eighth day torbot (gourd) is cut before the goddess with a stroke of the sword which symbolises a sacrifice in Her honour. On the ninth day, the immersion ceremony takes place and the image of the goddess is consigned to the water. All these rituals are conducted by the rahains. In Manipur a section of people known as Meitei Narup (the people who belong to revivalism of the old faith and tradition) worships goddess Panthoibi in place of Durga during this festival.
(ii) Saraswati Puja

Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of 'learning' is worshipped on the fifth day of the new moon in the Meitei month of *Mēna* (January-February). Some believe that she descends on this day to the earth to bestow blessings upon her worshippers. This puja festival was one of the greatest among the Meitei Hindu student community. The worship of Saraswati has gradually declined in the educational institutions in Manipur lately for the last six or seven years.

(iii) Krishna Jaina (Janmastami)

The Meiteis observe the birth anniversary of Lord Krishna on the 22nd day of the Meitei month of *Thawān* (July-August). The performance is carried out under the direction of the Royal priest. People visit the temples of Shri Shri Govindaji and Narayan Thakur at Khambali. Many elderly persons observe fasting up to midnight, the time in which Lord Krishna is believed to have been born. In addition to the celebration of the birth day of Lord Krishna, they also celebrate the birth day of Radha and Bamon. On such occasions, young boys and girls used to go in groups to the lakes for having thambet (fruit of lotus). In the night, a kind of indigenous Meitei indoor game known as Likkon gēnaba (cowrie play in the form of modern lādu game) is played among the boys and girls. But now the game appears to have been declined.
Rath Jatra, locally known as kāng, is celebrated on the second day of the new moon of Ingen (June-July) and concluded on the tenth day. It is believed that this festival was celebrated for the first time in Manipur during the reign of Maharaj Gambhir Singh (1825-1934 A.D.). He began to worship the images of Jaganatha, Balarama and Subhadra on the model of the Rath Jatra at Juri in Crissa. Since then, it has been observed regularly as one of the principal festivals of Manipur.

The pattern of the Meitei kāng (rath or chariot) is unique as the whole structure rests on a square wooden box-like foundation from which wooden posts shoot up to support the upper portion which looks like the top of a traditional Meitei temple. It is a four wheeled chariot. The size from bottom to the top is almost equal. The side walls have been decorated by displaying the paintings of Hindu mythological gods. The Raths (kāngs) are generally drawn on the first and last day of the festival. A small place at the gate of every house is generally washed and cleaned for the purpose offering "arti" before the kāng in the afternoon. When the Rath is drawn, people wait at their gates to offer 'arti' to the god on the Rath and the procession goes forward stopping at different places. People offer fruits, flowers, betel and betel nuts, arti, garlands of flowers or paddy and soaked pea-nuts, etc. etc. It is a tradition that the
Rath of the place called Konung Kang (konung = place, kang = rath) will be taken out by mid-day, which is the head of other Rath, which can be taken out only after the conclusion of the function at the palace. Even to-day this function is celebrated there.

In the night of this festival, beautiful style of singing with dance called Khubak Ishei (clapping song) is presented by groups of singers mostly females in every mandop. The theme of the song is Shri Krishna's departure from Brindaban to Mathura escorted by Ankuira in His mission to kill Kansa with tragic shock and grief to Radha and her associate Gopis at the separation. When all the performances are over, Khechari is served to all the members present.

(v) Yäosang (Doljatra)

This is one of the greatest festivals of the Meiteis. 'Yäosang' means 'a hut for the sheep' which coincides with the Holi in other parts of India. This is known here is Doljatra. This festival is celebrated on the full moon of day of Lamda (February-March). Here, this festival lasts for five days. Boys collect bamboos and construct thatched huts invariably all order the valley around the river banks or road sides. Old Meiteis spend the day fasting. In the evening, the image of Lord Chaitanya is placed in the Yäosang accompanied by "arti" and prayer. Then the image is taken out and the hut is set on fire amidst loud shouts like "Hari Hari Bola." After
the burning of it, the children go from door to door for sennibā (sen = coin, nibā = to beg) which continues up to the next morning. From the morning of the second day, the girls block the passage of the passers by in the streets, lanes, etc. for sen-munbā (sen = coin; munbā = to snatch or to take). This is not actually the snatching of money. They stop the male passers-by catching hold of their hands or clothes and press for money. They will not allow them to go unless their demand is fulfilled. The female passers-by are allowed to go undisturbed.

When the hut is in a flame, people collect the half-burnt bamboos and fix them at their gates. It is believed that these half burnt bamboos ward off evil spirits. They also apply the ash collected from the burnt flags on their foreheads.

The second day is known as pichakāri. On this day, hundreds of holi parties with dholak, cymbal and other instruments from various parts of Manipur sing and dance at the mandap of Shri Govindaji followed by spraying of colour on the participants. Again, the same Holi groups usually assemble on the sixth day called Hālenkā at the mandap of Shri Bijoy Govinda and perform the same songs and dances. On this day, ladies who assume the role of Varshana (the ladies of the village where Radha was born) having veiled their faces in cloths (representing Vrajamai) beat men who represent Brindaban with sticks after mutual exchange of jokes, mostly crude ones in Brajabuli language.\textsuperscript{32} In olden days, kings on

\textsuperscript{32} B. Nilakanta Singh, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 50.
elephant with Lord Vishnu came and participated in such Halankar.

The observance of Yaosang festival symbolises the pang of separation between Radha and Krishna. It also coincides with the birth day of Lord Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. This is the biggest festival wherein the old customs and tradition of the Meiteis have been integrated with the new myths of the Vaishnavite faith.

The Yaosang festival to-day has another ceremony as an adjunct, which is known as Thabal Chongba is, in fact, one of the oldest and most popular ceremonies of the Meiteis, which perhaps yet integrated to the Yaosang festival at some time. The major part of this ceremony consists of community dancing, as the very name of the ceremony signifies — Thabal Chongba, which literally means "jumping in the moonlight".

(vi) Ras Lila

The Ras Lila, one of the most famous and biggest Meitei festivals — or, rather complex of festivals — of Manipur, has six forms, namely, Maha Ras, Vasanta Ras, Kunja Ras, Nitya Ras, Copa Ras and Udukhol Ras. Maha Ras, Vasanta Ras and Kunja Ras festivals are performed on the night of the full-moon of the Manipuri month of Hiyangei (October-November), Sajibu (March-April) and Meri (September-October) respectively. Copa and

34. For details see Chapter IV.
Udukhol Ras festivals are usually held in the Manipuri month of Hiyangei and Mera respectively. Like other Ras festivals, Nitya Ras has no specific time and month for its observance.

It must be pointed out that dance and drama form an integral part of the Raslila festival of Manipur. Although the Ras dance-drama, based on various episodes in the life of Lord Krishna, as accepted as a classical form of dance, the festival itself has the character of a folk ceremony because of the mass participation and other folk elements involved. Scholars and experts have noted that even the Ras dance contains elements of the Lai-Haraoba dance with its folk basis. Again, the exquisitely designed Ras dance costume, particularly the skirt called Potloi, has assumed folk connections having been adopted as marriage costumes.

This festival is usually held in a Ras mandap, a big structure built in front of a Vaishnava temple. However, it is also held in a mandap built for the purpose at any suitable place. A circular stage which is nicely decorated with flowers, creepers and paper-cut designs is arranged in the heart of the mandap for this festival. There are traditional rules with regard to the dimension of the stage, the auditorium and the arrangement of seats.
The performance of this festival is generally preceded by what is known as Nipa (Nupā) Pala. Nipa Pala is an exquisite Sankirtan which has been evolved by incorporating in it a number of Meitei traditional dance forms such as 'Kartāl Chōlom' and Rung Cholom. In the Ras Lila festival, Krishna is generally played by a male child between six and twelve years of age --- or otherwise by an adult female (but never by an adult male). No man past adolescence is allowed within the dance arena during the course of the Ras dance performance, even as a performer Radha, irrespective of the age of the participants playing Krishna, may be either a child or an adult. The leading roles of the Gopis are always played by mature females. Any group of Meiteis can show good performance with a little coaching and a few rehearsals. However, important roles of the performances are taken by hired professionals.

In the Ras Lila performance, there are two vocalists, who are usually women, to do the off-stage singing. Instruments like the Rung (mridanga), the flute, the conch, cymbals and the esrāj are usually played in this festival.

The Meiteis, irrespective of their age go to witness the Ras Lila festival. However, elderly persons normally take more interest than the children, when one goes to see the Ras

35. For details see Chapter IV
Lila festival, he never says that he is going to witness it but he says that he is going "to pray or bow down" before the nas. Separate seats both for males and females are arranged. As the holding of a nas Lila festival is a very expensive affair, the number of such festivals held at any particular time is not usually large.

D. INDIGENOUS GAMES

The Meiteis were and still are very much particular about their physique. The ancient Meiteis lived a Spartan life. The Meiteis are physically a fine race, well made strong and active, though short in stature. Dr. R. Brown thus remarks that "the Manipuris are decidedly a muscular race, some of the men particularly so: they are generally spare in habit of body and fat people are rare. They have good chests and well-formed limbs." They always try to keep their health in proper order by means of sports and games. T.C. Hodson calls them, "... a fine race, the Manipuris are devoted to sports and games." The relevance of this remarks can be fully known when

37. L. Ibochogal, op. cit., p. 113.

38. McCulloch, op. cit., p. 24; The statement made by McCulloch about the stature of the Meiteis is not correct now since the Meiteis have average height.


40. T.C. Hodson, op. cit., p. 49.
we look at the various games and sports of the Meiteis. Some of the principal indigenous Meitei games are as follows:

(a) **Sagol Kāngjel** (Hockey on horse-back)

*Sagol Kāngjel*, that is hockey on horse-back, is the national game of Manipur. The Manipuri word for polo is *sagol kāngjel*. It is connected with the mythology of creation. It is believed that it was invented by Lord Hanzing. It is played with seven players on either side.\(^{41}\) It is also, further, said to have been played on the occasion of recognizing Lāishēma as the wife of king Pakhangba of Manipur in 32 A.D.\(^{42}\) Polo originated from Manipur and the Britishers have no two opinions about the origin of this game which went afterwards across to Britain.

During the reign of king Kiyamba (1467-1508 A.D.), Khagemba (1597-1652 A.D.) and Pamheiba (1709-1743 A.D.) the game is said to have incorporated improvements in its technique from time to time. King Chandrakirti who was also a great patron of this game is believed to have popularised it outside Manipur. Polo was first introduced in India in 1363 A.D. by Maj. Gen. Sherar from Manipur.

*Kāngdrum*, a white ball made of the root of the bamboo and *kāngjel*, a stick (hockey) is prepared from a well seasoned cane or a long shaft of bamboo and both are used in this game.

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The head of the stick is placed on an acute angle to the shaft. The game is played with seven players on horse-backs, on one side. The costume for this game is a scant dhoti, well tucked up and a pair of thick woolen goiters covering the ankle and the knees with a whip in the left hand of the players. The pony's bridle is adorned with big coloured cotton. The players swathe their heads in their kokyet (turban) which are fastened under their chins. On either side of the saddle there are curved flaps of enamelled leather.  

This game is always started in the centre of the play ground by throwing the ball into the middle of the players. There are no goal posts erected for recording goals here. Once the ball crosses the back line, a goal is scored and again it is started from the centre of the ground. The another kind is the British way of polo-game which is played with stricter rules having fixed goal posts. Good players at the game often received royal favours. The game mainly exhibits the physical strength and stamina of the players. Sir G. Evans and A. Brett-James remarked that, "In the long period of warfare with Burma, the game (gagol kangjei) probably served as a training for the Manipuri cavalry, who, once they could get down into the Burmese plains had a better chance of worsting their enemies than over the state infantry had." Even to-day, this game is very popular among the Meiteis.

43. T.C. Kodson, op.cit., p. 49. see also E. Dun, Gazetteer of Manipur, Delhi, 1981, p. 21 (re-print)
(b) **Khong-Kängjei**

This is one of the most popular and attractive indigenous games of the Meiteis. This is played in an open field with seven players on each side tightly dressed and holding traditional hockey sticks (slightly curved bamboo sticks or cane sticks). The game is started with a throw of a ball at the centre of the field. A player may pick-up and carry ball in any manner he likes towards the goal but he has to score the goal only by hitting it with his stick. A goal is scored when the ball crosses the goal line as there are no goal posts. A peculiarity of this game is that a player never allows his opponent to go away off-handed. Therefore, a player often faces and encounters with his rival in his attempt at carrying or hitting the ball towards the goal. This encounter leads to a trial of strength in the form of *muknā* (the Meitei style of wrestling) and one who wins gets himself freed and runs away with the *kangdrum* to reach the goal. Under the royal patronage the game was conducted among the *panās*. This game is also mentioned in the epic story of Khamba and Thoibi. In the past, skillful players received royal favours and prizes. This is one of the oldest indigenous Meitei games of Manipuri origin.

(c) **Muknā**

This is one of the indigenous games of the Meiteis which is believed to have been in vogue since the beginning of the Meitei society. The game is played between two male partners for trial of strength by sheer physical force. If this was
performed before the king, the players had to wear head gear, but there was no hard and fast rule about it, if it is played not in the presence of a king. Two persons of the same physical structure and weights are made partners in the game. This mukhā is a part of khong-kāngjei (Khong = foot; Kangjei = hockey) of the Meitei for trial of strength between two opponents. This is a prestigious game of Manipur and in olden days, this game had royal patronage. Its origin can be traced back since the time of the creation. 45

(d) Lamchel (Race)

This is also one of the most popular games of the Manipuris. According to Capt. E. Dun this Lamchel served the purpose of a competition between the different panās or classes among the Meitei population. 46 At the first there was a race of trial of speed from two panās at a time. The winners in these races were selected for the final trial. The distance to be run by them was about half a mile. The winner of the first man was free from lāloop (forced labour) for the rest of his life. But the winners of the preliminary races between the panās were also exempted from three months' lāloop. The king and his nobles attended it and distributed reward to the winners in the first and final competition. 47 There is the mention of it in the

46. E. Dun, op.cit., p. 23.
47. T.C. Hodson, op.cit., pp. 49-54.
epic legend of Khamba and Thoibi. This game is still played at the close of the Lai-Marabā festival in Manipur.

(e) Yubi-lākoi

Yubi-lākoi, the snatching of coconut, is another interesting indigenous game in Manipur. In olden times, it was a game of one against all. It has also some similarities with the modern game of Rugby. The game starts with the throwing of an anointed coconut by the judge at one end of the field. In order to score a goal a player or a competitor carrying the coconut has to pass the goal line opposing all opponents. A person is sitting at the goal line called Ningthou to whom the coconut is dedicated. The player who can do this is rewarded.

In the past, people played this game at Bijoy Govinda's ground in the guise of gods and demons. Before starting the game, one of the persons carried the coconut and others followed him. They sang songs which alluded to its antiquity - *Jaya Jaya Sindhu Tire Mangal Kare Brahmaadi Devasur*.\(^43\)

The above songs were first sung in old Manipuri (*leitei-lol*) and then people changed it into Bengali from the time of Anata Shai Mantri Punshiba (a long-lived Minister).\(^49\)

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(f) Kang Sannaba

This is another indigenous indoor game played only from spring season till Rath Jatra by both male and female alike on the smooth earthen floor of a sangoi (out-house) with seven players on each side. In olden days, it was a unique game played by aristocratic males and females with a display of traditional costumes. It is associated with the change of season. A round object called 'kāng' of about 1 1/2 inches (0.0331 m.) in diameter and 1/8ths of an inch (0.01905 m.) in thickness is used here. It is a seed of a creeper. If the players of one side hit the target of chekphēi twice by the kāng, then only lamthā is to be pushed. The kāng pushed by propelling the dice on its flat side along the surface of the ground by the force of the middle finger of the right hand with the help of fore-finger of the left hand. If it strikes the kāngkhi (kāng which is placed on the ground upright) is supposed to have scored one point. At half of the duration of a play, interchange of sides takes place. The side having more points of the chekphēis (shooting from a standing position) and one lamthā (in sitting position) wins the game. In some areas of Chittagong, kāng is widely played under the local name of konyon. McCulloch describes about kāng sannaba thus, "It is played only in the spring, the players being generally young women and girls, with

usually a sprinkling of men on each side. The game seems to cause great excitement, and there is great emulation between the sides." 51 There is a mention of this game in the legend of Khamba and Thoibi as well.

(g) *Hiyang* (Boat-race)

*Hiyang* is a boat race held on the moat which surrounds on three sides of the Raja's palace. "It (*Hiyang*) continues for three days. The first day is devoted to a boat race between the Kaohum and Laiphaum Punnahs, followed by a match at hockey on horse-back, wrestling, putting and jumping. The second day is devoted to the same description of matches between the Ahulloop and Miharooop. And the third to a repetition between the Hitakphalba and Potsungba." 52 This festival is most important, and stands are erected on both sides of the moat, the one for the Raja and the women occupy stands on the opposite side of the moat. 53 According to the manuscript *Hijan Hirao* (a treatise on the origin and evolution of boat-race), a boat was first prepared by Luwang Ningthou Punsiba on seeing a mouse cutting and letting the dried stem of a particular grass in the Luwangi river. The mouse managed to

cross the river by means of holding the stem. The boats used in the boat races are two in number. The boats are cut out from one tree and are also broad enough for two men to stand abreast using their oars or paddles. Two persons called hitongbā are selected to lead the rowers of each boat. These leaders put the old Meitei costume and stand in front of the boat with an oar in hand and also hold their rowers. When the competition starts, each hitongbā (the chief) encourages the efforts of his rowers by stamping violently with his right foot at equal intervals. The great object of the race is for the one boat to obstruct the other and bear it into the bank so that the other side may not use their paddles. The boat which touches the finishing line first is adjudged the winner of the race.