

Origin and Development of Meetei Eshei Religious and Social Rites

Moirangthem Sophiya Chanu¹, Dr. Yumlembam Bidyananda Singh²

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Performing Arts, Manipur International University, Imphal, Manipur, India

²Associate Professor, Department of Performing Arts, Manipur International University, Imphal, Manipur, India

Abstract

Meetei Eshei is the traditional music of the Meetei people of Manipur. Entrenched in cosmology, religion, social and community life, it has evolved over centuries. This paper traces the origin of Meetei Eshei from the beginning of universe. Tengbanba Mapu, the Supreme Lord of the universe wished to create the world of living and non-living species. The philosophical back-ground of the ancient Meetei Eshei with its references to the creation of the universe, human beings and other facades of life are productive grounds for the evolution of a characteristic style of art. The only shame is that with the gradual conversion of the Meetei into the fold of Hinduism since the beginning of the 17th century the Meetei way of life, costumes and habits are in a slow, but painful process of being overwhelmed by the destroying impact of the scaled modernism. A timely attention to save the gradual disintegration of an ancient culture is urgently called for. Sanamahi Pakhangba period to its present-day institutional and digital development. It examines how religious rituals, historical events, and cultural movements shaped its forms such as from birth to dead of Meetei society. The study highlights the role of oral tradition, institutions, and research scholars in preserving Meetei Eshei.

Keywords: Religious, Folk Music, Oral Tradition, Manipur Performing Arts., Meetei Eshei, Social Rites, Dance and Music,

Introduction

Meetei Eshei originated in the pre-Hindu ritualistic traditions of Kangleipak, where it functioned as an integral component of religious ceremonies dedicated to ancestral deities such as Pakhangba and Lainingthou Sanamahi. During the medieval period, following the assimilation of Hinduism, Meetei Eshei underwent significant transformation, adapting to new philosophical and performative contexts. The early 20th century witnessed a resurgence with the establishment of APOKPA MARUP (1930), MEETEI MARUP (1945), PAKHANGBA LAINING (1946) UTRA SANGLEN (1946) and LAININGTHOU SANAMAHI THOUGAL LUP (1947), which sought to revitalize indigenous practices. In the 21st century, Meetei Eshei has received institutional patronage and has evolved into both a sacred ritual form and a medium of cultural expression. Music is the living archive of a community. For the Meitei people of Manipur, Meetei Eshei is merely performing in social and religious ceremony but a record of belief, history and identity. The beginning of the universe in Meitei cosmology states that the Supreme Primordial Eepuroi Apokpa created the world using five elements: Mei - Fire, Eeshing - Water, Nungshit - Air, Leipak

- Earth, and Atinga - Sky. From this cosmological idea, songs and rituals emerged to maintain harmony between humans and nature. This paper explores the origin and development of Meetei Eshei from ancient times to the present.

Cosmic Evolution period

The origin of Meetei Eshei can be traced to Meetei Evolution theory. Wishing to manifest the Ipuroi Apokpa also called Tengbanba Mapu create the universe. The above five elements so emerged to conventional the primeval start of Universe. Ipuroi Apokpa lifted up the heavy earth on the surface of the water, called Sanaching Koubru (Koubru Hill). He (Ipuroi Apokpa) thought solemnly from his right nostril there issued male deities with Salairen Shidaba as king of deities and they climbed up on the peak of Koubru hill. From his left nostril issued forth Leimarel Shidabi and her associate female dieties they also climbed up on the peak of hill. Dieties were settled at the peak of the Koubru hill Salairen became the king of the dieties and Leimarel as his consort. From the pores sweat of Ipuroi, there emerged the Saroi and dieties pointed out the place directed to them lived in the dale of Koubru mountain. There thus ensured a fierce battle between the deities and saroi (also called as Haos) who claimed newly formed land belonging to them. The Eeshei Thougol Marup (entertainers with song and music) entertained both the deities and “Haos” when they got completely fatigued in their past battle against each other. Loyalakpa Panganba was the only deity revered by the Haos. Loyalakpa Panganba brought the newly land to Eshei Thougol Marup. Salairen reigned over the land for long times.

In course of time, Konsen Turei Sengba who was a manifestation of Ipuroi Apokpa was founded as a three-days old child in the Phuhing. Salairen handed over the child to Leimarel and leimarel embraced the child with all loving care and brought the child up as her own son and gave the name PHUHINGSI. Meanwhile, Leimarel got Salairen’s child, conceived and gave birth at the dead of night and child was named “KONSEN TUKTHABA” and both children grew up. Salairen asked to his Kongseng Tureisengba to create the world of living species and to create plant for food of the living being before he create living species. Kongseng Tureisengba carried out accordingly and Konsen Tukthaba destroying all that created things. Konsen Tureisengba narrated the matter to Salairen and Salairen manifested out of himself and amiable lady named Nongthang Leima in her “DANCE AND MUSIC” that attracted and charmed the disturbing. At the time Kongseng Tureiseng completed to created all the things of living and non-living species.

Intermediary Period

The Transitional/Intermediate Period represents a liminal phase connecting mythological time with historical time. In the Hayi Chak, identified with Satya Yuga or the Golden Age of Truth, Tengbanba Mapu incarnated as Lila Pakhangba to govern the world. The reign of Kangba, son of Pakhangba, is noted for the introduction of Kangjei and Sagol Kangjei, which are regarded as cultural markers of the primordial era.

The Haya Chak or Treta Yuga represents the second cosmological age in Meetei tradition. It is described as the Silver Age, marked by a gradual reduction in truth and moral order compared to Hayi Chak. According to Meetei Puyas, during this period Tengbanba Mapu manifested as Longja Pakhangba to maintain cosmic order. This age is associated with the establishment of early institutions, ritual practices, and the codification of social norms, thereby serving as a transitional bridge between the primordial Golden Age and later historical periods.

The Khunung Chak or Dvapara Yuga constitutes the third cosmological age in Meetei tradition. It is conceptualized as the Bronze Age, marked by a further deterioration of dharma and social order. Meetei Puyas state that during this period Tengbanba Mapu manifested as Lolang Pakhangba to sustain the cosmos. “Lolang” is often interpreted as “the powerful” or “the stabilizer,” indicating the deity’s role in maintaining order amidst growing conflict. This age is associated with the emergence of complex polities, warfare, and the institutionalization of kingship, thus forming a critical link between mythic time and early historical traditions in Kangleipak. During the “Konna Chak” Kali Yuga (The current Iron Age of material focus) Tengbanba Mapu manifested as “Nongda Lairen Pakhang” rule the world in 33 AD to 134 AD. The period of Meidingu Khuyoi Tompok (154–264 AD) is recorded in the Cheitharol Kumbaba as a transformative era for Meetei cultural life. His reign is noted for the formal introduction of the Pung, a barrel-shaped drum that became central to both secular and ritual performances. Analogous to the Mridanga of classical Indian tradition, the Pung provided rhythmic structure to Meetei Eshei and Lai Haraoba. This innovation represents the shift of Meetei Eshei from purely oral-vocal tradition to an instrumentally accompanied performance art, thereby laying the foundation for its later development. The period of Meidingu Loiyumba (1078–1122 AD) represents a landmark in the developmental history of Meetei Eshei. King Loiyumba promulgated the “Ogri Hangel”, a comprehensive code of conduct and classification for performers, also Ogri Hangel song, is used in defending and offending enemy during the time. Under this system, artistes were divided into six fundamental Pana. This institutional division standardized training, repertoire, and performance roles, and ensured the transmission of Meetei Eshei across generations. Thus, Loiyumba’s reforms mark the transition of Meetei Eshei from clan-based practice to a state-regulated cultural institution.

Hinduism Influence period

In the time of Meidingu Kiyamba (A D 1467-1509) there was little attempt to impose Hinduism upon the people as a whole. Although the king himself formally took the sacred thread he did not attempt to establish Hinduism as the state religion, nor did he neglect the worship of the traditional lai. Apart from the presence of Brahmin Kshetri migrants, was the extent of Hindu influence at this time imposed. Kritania and concoction arrogant Meetei Traditional music and rites. Imposed Hinduism by Brahmin migrants.

The rise of Vaishnavism and Hinduism period

Rise to prominence with the accession of Charai Longba we pass to the period in which Hinduism, in one or other of its forms, became the dominant religion of Manipur, largely through the support and patronage of the reigning monarchs. During the reign of Meidingu Pamheiba (Gariba Niwas) (1709-1748) have reached a stage where Vaishnavism became the official religion of the state. A Brahmin, one Santidas Gosai came to Manipur from Sylhet and introduced the worship of Ram and Hanuman. Santidas Gosai became the guru of King Gariba Niwas, Hindu deity assuming the role and the place of a traditional deity and banned all those activities of early Meetei rites and rituals. During the rules of Pamheiba order to fire all the Holly books of earlier Meetei manuscript in 1729. A wholehearted exertion was made to impose it upon the people as a whole, and punishments were prescribed for those indulging in blatant non-Hindu activities. Under his rule Hinduism became established as the state religion. Hinduism period also continued from the reign of Meidingu Pamheiba to Meidingu Churachand (1891-1941). Following the adoption of Hinduism by Meetei society, most aspects of socio-economic organization, political structure, lifestyle, philosophy, and cultural practices underwent significant transformation.

Revitalization period

During the period of Meidingu Churachand in 1928 he met Laininghal Naoriya Phullo at Rangia Railway Station Assam on way to kolkata for a conference. Naoriya Phullo (Naorem Phundei, 1888-1941 AD) who one of the Pioneer of Meetei religion had expressed the story of the origin and history of the Meetei to the King Churachand. The concept of “Meetei” as basic dimension has thus been explained in terms of sustaining values and ideals of an embodying significance of nationalism which remains ever assured and secured as well. In 1928 Meidingu Churachand declared that reveal of the ritual and rides of Meeteis. 217 nos. of years (i.e., 1709-1928 AD) have dominated by the Viashnavism and Hinduism in Manipur. During the rebuilding of Meetei Traditional cultural ideologies, aesthetics and spiritual value of Meetei religion. Apokpa Marup was established in 1930 by Laininghan Naoriya Phullo at Hounashang Cashar Assam. Apokpa Marup propagated the religion of almighty God Apokpa (ancentral god). Later on, the followers of Laininghal Naoriya Phullo’s also established Meetei Marup in 1945 in the same philosophy of Apokpa Marup at Wangkhei Thambalkhong Manipur. During the time, foremostly 19th century was more recent development of Meetei Eshei and becoming more and more popular Songs of Meetei Peoples. Organizing public meeting, discussing, publishing books and papers. Modern generation of Indigenous Meetei peoples had reformed the early Meetei rites and ritual. Preserving owned Gods and Goddesses, Priests and Legends, Social costumes and religious ceremony.

Developmental period

During the reign of Meidingu Budhachandra (1941-1949 AD), he renounced Vaishnavism and Hinduism in 1945 at a public assembly convened at the residence of R.K. Tomalsana in Wangkhei Thangjam Leikai, Imphal. This marked a pivotal moment for the revival of Sanamahi and Pakhangba religion and Meetei cultural identity. Pakhangba Lainging Lup a religious group was established in 1946 at the residence of Wangkheimayum Gulapmacha of wangkhei Ayangpalli "through the performance of Meitei Eshei by the members of the group". Meetei people have an admirable wisdom of love and pride in owned earlies Meetei culture. Seriously love owned mother language and literature, mythological and ritual songs. During the socio-religious awakening movement in Manipur, numerous religious organizations were established by the people. It was in 1946-47 that “UTRA SANGLEN” was founded at Kangla. Subsequently, the “LAININGHTOU SANAMAHI THOUGAL LUP” was established, also constituted to preserve and promote Sanamahi Laining faith and practices. The Lainingthou Sanamahi Temple Board (LSTB) was established by the Government of Manipur under the Lainingthou Sanamahi Temple Board Act in 1976. It was created to protect and safeguard the sacred shrine and traditions of the traditional Meitei deities. During this period, Meetei Eshei exhibited a marked shift toward secular performance and public entertainment, diverging from its earlier sacred and ritualistic context. In the 21st century, Meetei Eshei and related ritual ceremonies have received official encouragement. The principal traditional deities referenced during this period are the ancestral deity Pakhangba and the household deity Lainingthou Sanamahi. Thus, Meetei Eshei has been preserved and transmitted from generation to generation, embodying the collective memory and cultural identity of the Meetei people.

Conclusion

Meetei Eshei emerges as a holistic cultural practice that synchronizes human labor with the cycles of nature and articulates the Meetei community’s ecological dependence. From its mythological roots in the Hayi Chak to its institutionalization under kings like Khuyoi Tompok and Loiyumba, and its 20th-century

revival, Meetei Eshei has continuously adapted while retaining its core ethos. For centuries, it was sustained through the oral tradition, transmitted from Guru to disciple, which preserved not only musical techniques but also cosmology, ethics, and identity. In the contemporary period, while documentation and institutional training have supplemented orality, the essence of Meetei Eshei lies in its lived, performative, and nature-centric character. Meetei Eshei stands as both an artistic heritage and a cultural archive of the Meetei people. Themes included creation, deities, and heroism. Instruments were limited to Pena, Dhol and Kartal. Thus, Meetei Eshei began as a fusion of ritual, nature and community. 21st Century today Meetei Eshei is in a phase of documentation and revival. Meetei Eshei began with the cosmic song of Eepuroi Apokpa and the five elements. It developed through religion, war, love, and social life. Today, due to institutional support and research, it continues to evolve without losing its identity. Preserving Meetei Eshei is not just preserving music, but preserving the memory and spirit of the Meitei people. The evolution of Meetei Eshei might readily have been perceived as sacred by subsequent generations.

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