

**Invited Article**

**Myth, History, and Culture of Manipur: Past and Present**

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Myth, history and culture are vital organs of ethnography studies. Through them we can understand beliefs, customs, observances, practices handed down for a long time from prehistoric times to the present. Culture is a whole mass of social system shared, observed, protected and honoured by one and all within the social group – beliefs, traditions, customs, rituals, codes, laws, institutionalized and considered as social dogmas for the guidance of man. Primitive people with their lesser and limited social activities, contacts were constantly faced with the vastness of the universe, the mystery of life, environment and nature, and were pondering about how life came into being and how the earth in empty universe took shape, the answer to these questions is to find the Cause, that is the Origin. This Cause was at the root of living beings, human faith, religion, and that was the origin of the concept of God, the Originator of all, land, water, sky, life on earth, and the universe. He is unreachable outside the material world, hence Sacred. In every respect primitive religion is in the form of animism and it reveres a Creator, and with that magic, religion, faith and all other observances followed: “there are the traditional acts and observances, regarded by the natives as sacred, carried out with reverence and awe, hedged around with prohibitions and special rules of behavior. Such acts and observances are always associated with beliefs in supernatural forces, especially those of magic, or with ideas about beings, spirits, ghosts, dead ancestors, or gods” (Malinowski 17). In other words that is the origin of human culture. When we talk of culture, we mean the system of how things go about, the traditionally transmitted principles of faith, observances, rites, morals as acquired by man in society. A.B. Tylor says by way of defining culture, “Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Moore 4). Where this belief becomes the fountain of life the existence of myth culture tends to hold the moral universe of man.

Myth represents the pristine state of the universe, man, and his environment including other living beings, nature and natural forces. Culture is restricted to human beings, animals do not have culture; humans as against the “lower animals ... have the ability to perpetuate their learning. The residue of social knowledge passed on through social transmission is the basic mechanism in culture.... It is not learned by individual experience but socially. Culture is tradition which is

handed down” (Moore). Herskovits argues, “culture is learned; that it allows man to adapt himself to his natural and social setting; that it is greatly variable; that it is manifested in institutions, thought patterns and material objects.” He further adds, “It also implies that culture is more than a biological phenomenon. Culture includes all the elements in man’s mature endowment that he has acquired from his group by conscious learning or by a conditioning process – techniques of various kinds, social and other institutions, beliefs, and patterned modes of conduct” (305-06). In short, culture is the summation of the norms, values and morals implicitly or explicitly manifested. It determines the status of the society. It is the composite behaviour of a people of a nation or a social group or community. Culture helps establish the identity of a people who live in a society. Through various aspects of culture of a group, community, nation the group’s worldview shared by one and all can be seen. In time such forms, behaviours, and practices had been repeated such that the vision, aspirations of the people and their conception of life and the universe were deeply moulded in the mind and blood of people, and they formed the moral attitude of people, perpetuating as socially accepted truth or reality. Culture constitutes, as observed earlier, religion, beliefs, customs, traditions, observances, rites, magic. Primitive faith that even grew into the form of institutionalized and organized form of religion emerged from cultural myths that such stories as myths have become “a reality lived,” “a living reality, believed to have once happened in primitive times, and continuing ever since to influence the world and human destinies. This myth is to the savage what, to a fully believing Christian, is the Biblical story of Creation, of the Fall, of the redemption by Christ’s Sacrifice on the Cross. As our sacred story lives in our ritual, in our morality, as it governs our faith and controls our conduct, even so does his myth for the savage” (Malinowski 100). All Hindu gods and goddesses are from the Hindu myths. Myth has been passed on in cultural traditions from time immemorial. Myths are the earliest form of human awareness of the existence of God who created everything, and when culture was born it carried over the story of myth in practical form, as rituals, observances, belief system, incantations, magic, and so on. Culture represents the experience of human beings over time gathering their practical knowledge as they went on living from generation to generation. Culture is a complex phenomenon of human activities, a knowledge system that expands continuously from the primitive to the sophisticated. It changes, it alters, some parts even excised and new realities emerge: “All cultural knowledge is characterized by progressive acquisition and addition,” Tylor remarks (Moore 4).

Thus, culture is a complex system of myth, religion, ritual in its rudimentary form, although changes and additions appear in time. Individuals are taught about the governance of life, society and environment in harmony with all others, gods, spirits, demons, living, non-living. In doing so it firmly adheres to the moral vision of the society for the enhancement of quality, progress and well-being of all. It constantly safeguards and perpetuates the customs and traditions,

festivities, rituals, prayers, beliefs. Culture is the notion of the gradual evolution of human society.

The present paper demonstrates three phases of Manipuri culture: (1) the ancient myth/ritual-centred culture, (2) the Hindu cultural colonization period with its erasure of Origin Myth, culture and history, and (3) the resurgent modern period. These three are the vital issues of our Manipuri culture and history, and an engaging field of research and debate over the years. Understanding the true history of Manipuri culture would be able to get a good deal of information about this old civilization in different hue and colour. The moot point of discussion will be focused on myth, ritual, belief, faith and history as they form the most important aspect of Manipuri (Meitei) cultural identity. Cultural identities as defined by Stuart Hall “reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as “one people,” with stable, unchanging, and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history” (234).

## I

It will not be possible to discuss the earlier phase of Manipuri culture without making a survey of the original Meitei Creation Myth, faith, belief system, observances, social customs, religious practices, ritual performances. The earlier culture of Manipuri Meitei culture was myth-centred that gave expression to the Myth of Creation centering round such central points: how God created the world out of the pre-man state of the universe, how the earth came into being/existence with living beings on it, how God’s planning, action led to the formation/creation of life on earth, how man grew up as a social being in close proximity to nature, and how he expanded life and established home. Myths and rituals consistently unfold the whole mystery of the universe, creation of the earth, lives of living beings, man’s gradual response to his needs, his environment consciousness, role and responsibility in the society. All this is displayed for the Meiteis in their annual *Laiharaoba* festival performed at local shrines. *Laiharaoba* is a unique cultural festival where the composite cultural identity of the Meitei people finds its fuller expression by means of the reenactment of the Creation myth, ritual invocation and calling upon the divine power to get infused in the *lai* (deity) who stands for two principles, a male and a female. Partly it recreates the cultural memory of the very creation of the earth and living beings emerging from the vast emptiness on land, in water, and in air. Atingkok Sidaba is the Supreme Creator, His consort Goddess Leimarel is the Supreme Mother. Asiba (Sanamahi), Konchin Tinghokpa also called Haraba (Pakhangba) were the siblings, the former of whom was entrusted with the creation of the earth and living beings and the latter impeded the progress much to the annoyance of the former, showing their rivalry. All gods and goddesses in the Meitei pantheon were formless. Creation was so baffling, Asiba made little progress until He approached the Supreme Father for solving the difficulty. At this Atingkok boomed: “And lo, behold”, He opened His mouth wherein a bright vision of the earth was rolling, man, animals,

birds, hills, lakes, rivers, trees all visible to the delight of Asiba. He remained maimed for a moment in surprise and joy, then burst forth in a paroxysm of joy, as He drove the vision out of Atingkok's mouth. This cosmic event is called "Lai Hoi Laoba". With that Asiba accomplished creation of the earth by stamping the microcosm and macrocosm vision – comprising His own image, a tortoise, a cow, an elephant and Pakhangba's Paphal (multilayered coiling pattern of snake God). The lump of earth from underneath culminated in the final shaping of the Earth and life. The Gods celebrated the cosmic event of the vision flashed in the eye of Asiba to be called "*Laiharaoba*" (pleasing of God). It is believed that circa the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC for the first time on the human plane Khaba dynasty in Kangla performed *Laiharaoba* celebrating the union of God Nongpok and Goddess Panthoibi. *Laiharaoba* is a many sided Meitei ritual, it unearths the myth of creation, reveals the cultural memory of the Meiteis while Gods of creation and ancestors are propitiated with reverence who in turn ensure peace, prosperity, procreation, continuation of human population, health, plentiful harvest, abundance of food grains, fish, health, protection from evil spirits for the year. What is the most exciting part of this ritual is the retelling and reenactment of the creation myth in an elaborate and intricate ritual performance by the *Maibi* (priestess) who enters into communion with the divinity in an air of mysticism and occultism. *Laiharaoba* comprises folk songs, folk dance symbolically expressing the creation of man from conception to his manhood passing through stages of growth, initiation, socialization, romance, house making, weaving, fishing, farming, and so on. It is a combination of ritual performances, taboos, prohibitions along with songs, dance, folk drama, community games, and ritual narrative of *Hijan Hirao*, an old ritual song about the ascension of life to the higher reality represented by a boat leaving for a higher journey.

About *Laiharaoba* being the composite culture of Meitei community Ch. Manihar, a literary historian rightly says: "*Lai Haraoba* has been there since time immemorial to present the composite culture of the land – be it myth of creation, religious faith, dance, music, traditional costumes or indigenous sports" (295). As a ritual it has the binding force of the society, a social and religious activity collectively shared by a community. Malinowski in his celebrated book, *Magic, Science and Religion* writes: "The community whole-heartedly engaged in performing the forms of the ritual creates the atmosphere of homogenous belief." It affirms the religious belief in safeguarding and protecting and comforting the people in distress and also ensures "the right way of thinking and acting and society takes up the verdict and repeats it in unison" (67). In the absence of formal teaching, judgments of law social cohesion is ensured by self-acting automatic machinery of moral implanted in myths and rituals. Through its repeated performance year after year constantly the cultural identity of the Meitei people is constructed. At this point of discussion what is meant by cultural identity is significant. Stuart Hall defines "cultural identity" in the following terms:

The first position defines "cultural identity" in terms of one, shared

culture, a sort of collective “one true self,” hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artistically imposed “selves”, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as “one people,” with stable, unchanging, and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history. (234)

*Laiharaoba* is the collective Meitei identity, it is the complete folk tradition within which Meitei pulse and heart beats. It is the expression of his belief, belief system, religion, all codes, and activities of life, and it is the fountain of Meitei identity, religion, philosophy, culture and worldview. Kapila Vatsyayan, in the third chapter entitled “Cultural patterns of Manipur” of her book *A Study of Some Traditions of Performing Arts in Eastern India: Margi and Desi Polarities* writes thus:

The *Lai Haraoba* today considered a cultural festival only is indeed a long-drawn-out ritualistic community activity revolving around the several *Umanglais* (literally the jungle gods). During the festival of the Gods (*Lai Haraoba*) these deities (but all without iconographic form) are invoked and many scholars have tried to establish a relationship between them and the gods of the *vedic* pantheon. While one may agree or not with this correlation it is clear that the *Lai Haraoba* is yet another version of asserting the concept of the formless and beyond form manifesting itself in multiple forms. The whole ritualistic festival is built also on the principle of establishing a series of correlation between the microcosm and the macrocosm. (48)

As mentioned above, the purpose of myth is to ensure the well-being of a society, restore order. Myth stands for the guidance and protection of a society; the set norms are to be coded with time tested messages the society follows. Malinowski argues:

Myth fulfils in primitive culture an indispensable function: it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom. (101)

It has a large social and cultural significance that even science and technology cannot do away with it. As for the collective identity of Meitei people in Manipur, it is to be noted that *Laiharaoba* sacred ritual is the marker of Meitei culture for it speaks of the whole collective Meitei world view, identity, culture unshakable in thick and thin over the years creating a homogenous culture over the millennia. Any great social, political and religious campaign against it did not yield long lasting results. The almost three-century old Hindu cultural incursion in Manipur

that outdated many of our old social and religious systems fell far short of the desired aim of shutting down the institution of *Laiharaoba*. It endured the onslaught perpetrated by the invading alien disruptive forces and nothing could be altered in any manner. Meitei *Laiharaoba* is not to be looked at as a simple ritual festival because in it the many-fold ideology of Meitei culture resides in the sense that it offers “a way of looking at and interpreting – of ‘living’ - the world” and all that is displayed in it is “*collectively held*” (Hawthorn 107). As a system of knowledge, that is, *episteme*, it emphasizes, as Foucault says, “the total set of relations that unite, at a given period” (69). Evidently, it is not simply a matter of social custom nor is it a reflection of ritual performance but a manifestation of a defining pattern of life, culture and religion of a people. The importance of *Laiharaoba* in this paper is that it reflects Meitei creation myth, the long-drawn-out process of ritual and cultural practices.

## II

Creation myths are a powerful expression of a culture, for which reason many times national cultures are rewritten, falsified and misinterpreted as a means of degrading such a culture when an alien culture and religion are imposed on the people of the old faith. Up until the 18<sup>th</sup> century major changes in the Meitei faith did not take place although immigrant Brahmins from the Hindu heartland of India started to sneak in through the back door they were still at bay. An eventful thing occurred following the presentation to Meitei King Meidingu Kiyamba (1467-1508) a metal carved image of some unknown identity by King Khikhompha of Shan Dynasty (popularly known as Pong Ningthou), now in Myanmar after their joint military operation against a Burmese King in the year 1470. When the image fell into the hands of the Brahmins, they started worshipping it as Visnu<sup>1</sup>. “But what came of a far-reaching consequence is the Shan King’s gift of a metal icon of Vishnu to his Meitei counterpart...” (Manihar 105). No doubt, reportedly it had some magical healing power when it touched and scrubbed scabies, etc. Thereafter it was worshipped. Believably that was the first ever known contact Manipur (then Kangleipak) had with Hinduism. Brahmins started to show up way back in the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, first during the reign of King Naophangba (438-518), and continued slowly to influence Meitei Kings such as King Irengba (984-1074). Their religious activities slowly gained momentum: King Charairongba (1697-1709) became a devotee of Vaisnava faith. He was even regarded as the *avatar* of Vishnu. When he was succeeded by his son, Pamheiba in 1709, he ruthlessly exercised an iron hand to convert the whole of Manipur to Vaishnavism barring the hill tribes. All it happened when Santidas, a Hindu bigot, suddenly appeared in 1716 in his court. Already a staunch champion of Ramandi faith for Santidas it did not take much time and labour to convert Pamheiba. The King and the sycophant Santidas were hand in glove, and both launched a crusade against the native faith and culture. They wrecked all forms of Meitei belief system, traditional institutions one after another in quick

succession. After his initiation into Ramandi he was given the title “Maharaja” and became a Kshetriya like the Hindu kings, and also known as Garibniwas, a Sanskritized name euphemistically a champion of the poor and the downtrodden. His rule from 1709-1748 is still remembered as the darkest period in the history of Manipur. The callous hands of Garibniwas and Santidas committed social, cultural and religious crimes. Both destroyed original Meitei deity shrines, their masks burnt and buried, one hundred twenty old MSS written in old Meitei script on various subjects by Meitei learned *maichaws* (pundits) were collected and burnt. Forced conversion was done unhindered through coercive means. The Meitei Creation myth was rewritten, modified, changed, falsified thus it got merged with the myth of Vedic gods and goddesses. We need to look at these new developments a bit closely.

Soon after Santidas arrived in Kangleipak he converted King Pamheiba. Without losing much time they blasphemously demolished Meitei Umanglai Laishangs (literally shrines of forest gods and goddesses, but actually they are not forest gods, they were/are creation myth gods and goddesses, ancestors, clan chiefs whose shrines were in wooded forests in every locality where annual ritual *Laiharaoba* was/is performed). Once the shrines were blasphemously demolished new Hindu Gods and goddesses took their place. The so collected masks of the deities were burnt and buried in the Mongbahanba forest near the present palace by the side of the Imphal river in *Inga* month 1726. Shortly after that on the 20<sup>th</sup> day of *Ingen* month seven more icons of gods and goddesses were also demolished including those of Panthoibi, Lainingthou Sanamahi, Soraren, Hoidon Pokpi (Khelchandra 37-38). Upon this site where the masks were buried now a statue of Hanuman got erected “carved out in 1729 ... in relief on a big slab of stone” (Jhaljit 163) and the place has ever been known as Mahabali Umang. Presumably it was about this time that “worshipping of local ancestral deities, observance of traditional rites, performance of the religious festival *Lai Haraoba* were put to a sudden end” (Manihar 109). Later, in the year 1737 on the full moon day of *Wakching* month (December-January) mass conversion ceremony was held at the confluence of two rivers, the Imphal and the Iril at Lilong where the unwilling masses were collected and forced to have a dip in the water with a branch of *Nongkhrang* tree on pain of death pledging that they would renounce God Sanamahi from that day onwards, and only chant the name of Rama. This was called *Nongkhrang Iruppa*. Reportedly in 1737 three thousand more people were converted and *luguns* (sacred thread) were worn (*Cheitharol Kumbaba* 98) as a permanent marker of the new faith. However, some scholars hold the view that the event occurred in 1729. But *Cheitharol Kumbaba* record cannot be refuted because it is Court Chronicle. Bending the valiant people was at a heavy price, religious persecution, killing, throwing in the flooded river by putting in gunny-sacks, banishment became a new normal of the time. Non-believers were not in the mainstream, thrown out at the margin as outcastes. Believed to be an ominous event to hold the general public to ransom it was felt necessary to break the spell of the pledge on the 6<sup>th</sup> day of *Fairel* 1774 by the then tutelage King

Okendrajit performed a mass emancipation ceremony allowing the people to choose their God Sanamahi rather than any Hindu gods (Nilbir 167). He himself renounced Hinduism.

Emboldened by the anti-Meitei religious temperament of the king and his relentless efforts to convert the plains people with no obvious opposition from the people Santidas was hell-bent on destroying as many as 120 MSS written in old Meitei script (as cited above) on a variety of subjects, literature, divine beings, hills and mountain lore, stone lore, migration history, man's origin, law, geography and topography, creation myth, conception, childbirth, art, music dance, warfare, predictions, beliefs, religious places, healing methods, propitiation rites, incantations, historical accounts, and so on (Khelchandra 46-47). Both the king and Santidas collected and confiscated these MSS before they were unceremoniously burnt at Kangla on the 17<sup>th</sup> day of *Mera* (October) 1732 (*Cheitharol Kumbaba* 93) in similar fashion Meiteis disposed of the dead then newly got currency. It was, however, King Charairongba, father of Garibniwas who ruled from 1697-1709 whose Nimandi faith based on the worship of Radha, Krishna, Visnu, Kalika in temples dedicated to them "got the mortal remains of those buried Meiteis exhumed and consigned to the flames" (Manihar 107). Before that the dead were buried. Santidas did the burning himself thus turned the treasure house of Meitei archeology to ashes. That was a turning point in the process of Hinduisation of Manipur.

Close on the heels of these savage acts Garbniwas and Santidas had hatched up another plan to keep the Meitei people in complete forgetfulness of their myth, history, culture by making a colonial historiography, a counter theory challenging the Meitei myth of creation, genealogy, belief system. The result was *Bijay Panchali* (written in Bengali), a chronicle of myth, history, culture all staging a coup d'état against ancient Manipuri culture, history, genealogy and myth. Suddenly Manipur lost its past glory, falsified the whole cultural history by linking it to the Vedic myth, religion and culture identifying Meitei people as Aryans, although racially, linguistically, culturally, anthropologically, historically they were of Mongoloid descent. There was a serious question of cultural contamination in Manipur. According to *Bijay Panchali* "Manipur traditions carry back their country to a high antiquity" (Jhulon 2), and the accounts of Creation emerged from the Ganges valley civilization with Siva as the first settler. *Bijay Panchali* narrates the story of creation as rendered by Siva to Ganesh. Siva first descended upon the Nilkantha-giri (Nongmaiching hill) and settled there, then he came down to Sangai-Yumpham; accompanied by his divine consort Parvati he chose Sthirachal (Hiyangthang) where the goddess Durga (Parvati) had her abode in Kamakhya temple. Originally it was the place of Hiyangthang Lairembi (Hiyangthang Goddess). Manipur was called "Siva-Nagar". Siva took the role of Asiba (the God of Meitei Creation myth). He was also identified with Poireiton, a contestant of Pakhangba (not the mythical God) who ascended the throne of Kangleipak in Kangla in 33 AD. Siva is described to have gone to the Koubru hill

where he displayed Sri Krishna's Maharas (dance). The Supreme Spirit is called Atiya-Guru Sidaba (a Hindu name of Atingkok Sidaba, the Supreme God). Siva was in need of a dry place for his dance performance, and with the help of divine beings and Krishna he made the land dry by draining out the water through Chingnunghut. Kangla was the first dry land which Siva had chosen for his Rasa, witnessed by many gods and goddesses. Ananta, the serpent king, was also present and the place was lit with his bright gem for seven days and nights till the Rasa dance was over. Eventually, the country was called "Manipur" (the land of brightening gem). Thereafter Siva became the king of Manipur, but he was just to become Ananta's minister. The throne at Kangla was above a great *Surung* (underground cave). Ananta left this new country for his old palace, and a new age ushered in with Chitrabhanu of the Gandharva dynasty to be the first human king. His reign coincided with the falling apart of the Mahabharata step brothers, the Pandavas and the Kouravas due to a dispute over land. The Pandava prince Arjuna on a pilgrimage came to Manipur following a horse along a sea coast until he arrived at Bakananda (Mahabali) where he found some Brahmins taking bath in the Bejoya river (the Imphal river). A chance meeting with Chitrangada, the daughter of Chitrabhanu on the river bank led to their union. After staying for one year and a half Arjuna left Chitrangada who gave birth to Brabubahana, the mighty king of Manipur. This is the first link of Manipur to being part of the *Mahabharata*, to be proclaimed the "Mahabharata Manipur", a spell that engulfed Manipur and the Meitei people for a long time. This connection is further extended when Arjuna, on a military expedition to mark the territorial expansion of the Pandavas kingdom, known as *Aswamedh jnajna* reached Manipur following a horse. His horse was captured by Brabubahana's soldiers. In the ensuing argument between Brabubahana and Arjun the latter insulted the former and called him names referring to his mother. He even challenged Brabubahana to a fight in which Brabubahana killed Arjuna. But Ananta's gem brought life back to the slain Arjuna and his soldiers. There was reconciliation between the father and the son when the former recognized the latter as his son. Brabubahana's son Yavistha who succeeded him was again identified with Pakhangba, the first legendary king of Ningthouja clan (as mentioned above) who ruled from 33AD for one hundred twenty years according to *Cheitharol Kumbaba*.

*Bijay Panchali* was made up of spurious materials thus becoming a strong Hindu religious discourse which could divert and alter the stream of original Meitei faith, pantheon of deities, and could change geographical names attached to Meitei gods and goddesses. Sanamahi and Pakhangba were presented as Kuptreng and Sentreng, the two sons of Atiingkok. The Supreme Father tested both Sentreng and Kuptreng while He floated down a river disguising as a dead cow. Sentreng who was worldly wise knew that it was His Father for a dead cow would not wag its tail, while Kuptreng doubted it being his Father. Hence the one who knew the Father was called Pakhangba (Pa = Father, Khangba = to recognize). When Atingkok felt it was time to appoint one of the two sons a king. He announced that the one who travelled round the earth seven times first would be crowned the

king. At this Kuptreng set out on the mission immediately riding a tiger, but Sentreng being physically weaker could not undertake the venture and kept weeping. It was to his rescue that Leimarel, the Supreme Mother advised Him to go round the throne of the Supreme Father seven times. He did so and kingship of the land went in his favour before Sanamahi staked His claim. After storms of protest by Sanamahi He was made Lord of the household to be worshipped by all with the erring Mother Leimarel as His Aide. This part of the myth came from the original myth save the Sanskritized names of Kuptreng and Sentreng.

On the whole the effect of cultural colonization was widespread damage done to the native culture, myth, history, oral tradition and identity inevitably, that for more than two centuries Manipuri Meitei identity was seriously in shadow. To the people of India outside Northeast and Bengal Manipur was no more than an unexplored land of strange people until very recently. Thanks to the political revolutionaries, sports talents and cultural artistes who have brought Manipur's recognition nationally and internationally in the recent history. It has sweetness and bitterness. The Manipuri identity is blurred and fractured. In general, Manipuris are a complacent people, until the past few decades they enjoyed the fantasized idea that they were the descendents of the Pandava Arjuna and prided themselves on being imaginary part of the *Mahabharata* so much so that the fantasy was pushed afar by the earlier Manipuri Sanskrit scholars intending to keep the people in a state of Lotus Eaters. They supported the theory advanced by Santidas intending still to keep the people in slumber. Hindu gods and goddesses occupied the minds of Meitei Hindus invariably, Hindu religious functions have still become part of Meitei cultural tradition. Rasa dance native to the soil derived from the Bhakti tradition and high spiritual realm associated with the heightened sense of love between Lord Krishna and Radha reechoing the love poetry of Vaishnavite sages, Chaitanya, Surdas and Jayadeva. It was imaginatively and artistically developed in the form of classical song and dance by King Bhagyachandra (1763-1798). Out of the confluence of cultures there emerged a hybrid identity of Meitei people amidst assimilation, syncretism. Out of this later synthesis of myth, culture and programming of Hinduism through rites, religion and festivals all year round it will not be difficult to feel that the basis of truth and purity never remains static in the cultural post-colonial period in Manipur articulating cultural pluralism. First, it was violent suppression of the voice of the people by physical intimidation, religious persecution but in the long run forced imposition worked, the valiant Meiteis became mellow, stopped meat eating and wine drinking, listened to the stories from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* as for instance, before the return of modern resilient generation with a dictum of revivalism mantra on their lips. Yet, still one could see the duality of cultural identity, although the false myth and history have long been subverted. To know Manipuri Meitei culture, one needs to know Manipuri/Meitei myth, history, genealogy vis-à-vis Hindu cultural myths, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* traditions.

Whatever changes that could be seen were part of the national history, for nothing could make them change. Those things imperishable remain the same through thick and thin. Hard traditions still resist change. There are currents and counter currents. Even in the heyday of Hinduism Meitei people enjoyed individualism discarding impositions. McCulloch in his *Account of the Valley of Munnipore and of the Hill Tribes* so writes:

A short time before the accession of Gureeb Nawas some few Munniporees began to profess Hinduism, and since then their Rajas having successfully adopted that faith, the profession of it has extended to nearly all. But although they thus profess Hinduism, they have not given up their ancient worship, and above three hundred deities are still propitiated by appropriate sacrifices of things abhorrent to real Hindoos. (17)

McCulloch adds: "A people who act thus cannot be very strict Hindoos .... And it is a common practice for all people to abandon altogether Hindoo observances" (17). "Thus, Hindooism with Munniporees is but a fashion" and it is "A religion professed, not from conviction, but because it is a fashion." (18). Meitei people are by nature dualists. All Meitei Hindus worship original divinities, perform *Laiharaoba* festival. They have conflicting faith. Their kings who professed Hinduism were still ardent believers in God Pakhangba. Col. J. Shakespear in his article "The Religion of Manipur" published in the British journal, *Folk-lore* (1913) thus writes about Pakhangba, the mythical god/king: "The greatest of all the gods is Pakhangba. He is the mythical ancestor of the Meithei kings, and is the first king mentioned in the Chronicle [*Cheitharol Kumbaba*] .... He is said to have assumed the form of a god by day, and by night he used to be a man" (423). Pakhangba has his place in Kangla, the ancient palace, whereas in the present palace there is the temple of Govinda. Cultural ambivalence is a characteristic form of Meitei psyche. Mention may be made that after the destruction of the temple of Sanamahi misery befell the king's family, his children and the queen. Prayers were offered to Sanamahi and the demolished temple was restored once more for his family's well-being.

### III

Garibniwas's extremism in religious and cultural matters came to an end when he was killed by his own son in 1748 along with Santidas. But when Chingthankhomba also better widely known as Bhagyachandra came to the throne again Hinduism flourished. He was a devotee of Lord Krishna. The wooden idols of Krishna and Radha still kept in the Imphal palace were consecrated by him, said to have been carved in wood of a dream vision. In no way he gave disapproval of the worship of Sanamahi yet it was during his time that a series of festivals in the names of Hindu gods and goddesses was performed all year round. He originated the concept of *Rasa Leela*<sup>2</sup>, a splendid dance and song performance based on the saga of love relationship between Krishna and Radha in a mood

profound and unique in itself to capture unfailingly the combined aesthetic, spiritual union of body and soul melt in art form. Merged with *Laiharaoba*, *Thang-Ta* (martial arts) and Visnavite philosophy, *Rasa Dance* is as complex as it is creative; it is the ultimate form of artistic refinement where all aestheticism, spirituality and deep philosophy fuse together giving expression to cultural diversity and syncretism. It is one form of art where a synthesis of cultures and myths in a style charged with all moods is presented in subtle visual dance form and high-pitched background classical music. *Rasa Leela* or dance is an artistic expression of the union of *Jivatma* with *Paramtma*, that is, the Ultimate Reality represented by the Gopies and Bhagavan Krishna respectively. As a paragon of art, it evokes enduring charm transcending time and space.

Bhagyachandra's death in 1798 was followed by the reigns of King Gambhir Singh, Narasingh, Debendra, Chandrakirti, Surchandra and Kulachandra, Churachand, Bodhachandra up until Manipur became a part of Indian Union in September 1949 through the British colonial period from 1891-1947. The colonial period witnessed political upheaval both against the British rule and the monarchical authority of the king. It was a time of social, political and religious reawakening, when people under the leadership Hijam Irabot fought against social and political injustices done. Inhuman exploitation of the masses led to the outbreak of the First Nupi Lan (Women's War) in 1904 and again the illegal exportation of rice by the British Government just on the verge of the World War II inflamed the return of the Second Nupi Lan in 1939. Similarly, the masses revolted against House Tax, Salt Tax, Water Tax, social, religious oppressions in the form of artificial social divisions, rigid caste system, ostracism, temporary excommunication, *mangba-sengba* (untouchability), *chandal senkhat*<sup>3</sup> (*tilak* tax) imposed by the authoritarian Brahma Sabha affecting the general run of life in Manipur. Those who could meet their demand were treated as higher caste people while others were just pariahs. Power was vested in the Brahma Sabha with the sole authority over religious matters under the full patronage of the king. In the social scale Brahmins occupied a higher place than other people of different clans. Social divisions due to *mangba-sengba* could be waived for those who could pay fines ranging from Rs.500 in case the prohibition imposed by the king, to Rs.200 if prohibition was given by a noble man or Rs.50 if imposed by a local *Ratan* (a person authorized to declare one *mangba*, who would maintain social distancing). Brahma Sabha members were Brahmin Vaisnabs, loyal to the king who was anointed with the largesse. Originally it was instituted during the time of King Bhagyachandra under the name "*Pancha Ratna*," a body of five Brahmin pundits to assist the king's administration, and the name got changed during King Chourjit (1800-1813) to "*Naba Ratna*". King Gambhirsingh (1825-1835) renamed it "*Brahma Sabha*" by making it more powerful with full responsibility in all the affairs of Hindu religious activities. Truly speaking, the overt culture is a reflection of the palace paradigm. Only a paradigm shift could save the besieged Meitei society from the perpetuation of such anti-human organizations and state sponsored oppressive institutions.

In the early 1930s *Brahma Sabha* was openly challenged, suppressed public voice was heard for the first time, its cultural policies under fire. People from many walks of life joined hands with the leaders of newly formed Nikhil Manipur Praja in 1932. Conscious Brahmins and Meitei leaders worked together against the oppressive anti-people laws. Nikhil Manipur Praja established by leaders like, Khagendra Singh, Kshtrimayum Tomba, Chongtham Meramacha, Hijam Hawaimaton later got merged with Nikhil Hindu Manipuri Mahasabha and these founding members confided in the leadership of Hijam Irabot. Water tax, *chandol senkhai*, *mangba-sengba*, were abolished by the public. Irabot and his group went to the bereft families who were not allowed to cremate the dead bodies for the reason that they could not pay purification tax. They exhumed the buried dead bodies and had the bodies cremated, sang the *shradha* songs, such ceremonies as performed without taking the permission of Brahma Sabha. About 1940 a wind of change was round the corner, many of those inhuman laws were discontinued and abolished. Shri Atombapu Sharma, the then Chief of Brahma Sabha was indicted by the court for his alleged involvement in illegal collection of money from the *amangba* people who were desirous of purification to gain a social position. Atombapu fled the country.

Thus Meitei culture for over two hundred years from 1716, the year Santidas came to Manipur experienced a travesty of cultural representation causing dislocation of myth, ritual, history, tradition, belief system, religion, all undermining the cultural validity of an oriental race. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Manipur again lost its independence when British colonialism set foot in Manipur following Manipur's defeat in the Khongjom War in 1891. About this time a sizable population of the hill tribes became Christians. Territorial expansion in the colonial agenda whether that was political or cultural went hand in hand with religious conversion, and other forms of exploitation, and political subjugation followed suit. As for western colonization, Peter Childs and Patrick Williams say: "The important factor had previously been religion. A land was not recognized as conquered until its inhabitants were converted to Christianity and for this reason missionaries travelled with all expeditions" (233). But the adoption or profession of an alien religion by the natives would not guarantee a higher status for them, for despite their allegiance to the new religion they still continued to live in the same position as prejudiced subjects, the other of the colonizer. The belief that the new religion would make him safe respectable citizens was a doubtful conjecture.

The period covering 1930s and 1940s became relatively restless when *Apokpa Marup*, a revivalist movement under the leadership of Naoria Phullo from Jaribond, Hailakandi District, Assam, came out openly with a slogan to return to the Meitei roots with that the revival of Sanamahism was first priority on the revivalist agenda. He made consciousness arising campaigns for regaining the lost identity of the Meitei people including the old Meitei script then no longer in use in favour of Bengali script. In response, Hindu religious festivals like Janmasthan, Radhasthani, Durga puja, Sivaratri started to decline, instead

Meitei *Sajibu Cheiraoba* (New Year), Panthoibi *iratpa* (puja), Imoinu *iratpa*, *Mera Hou Chongba*, *Mera Chaorel Houba* in reverence of Lainingthou Sanamahi were (still on the rise) celebrated with renewed religious fervor and vigour. The maintenance of the worship of God Sanamahi that had been in the hands of some Brahmin families from the time of King Garibniwas was transferred to the native Meiteis after even bloodshed on 13 October 1977. After that God Sanamahi has occupied a historic place in a temple at Haying Khongban, the Compound of the 1<sup>st</sup> Manipur Rifles. On 23 April 1992 King Okendrajit made a historic declaration on the original religion of Manipur:

I open the Lubak Tabu and abandon Hinduism as state religion and recognition is hereby withdrawn by the **Royal Customary Law** of the country, instead the **Royal Customary Law** revives the Lainingthouism as state religion and do hereby give recognition as state religion. (Nilbir 168)

Recently, the erection of a temple of Sanamahi at the foot of the Nongmaijing Hill has become a turning point in the revivalist movement. National identity will be given and protected by the specific national culture, religion, traditions and truth of history and myth.

#### IV

At the end of the paper, I intend to posit a similar view as Bhabha says, “claims to inherent originality or purity of cultures are untenable, even before we resort to empirical historical instances that demonstrate their hybridity” (Ashcroft *et al.* 61). A critique of colonial culture often explores that the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized “is ambivalent because the colonized subject is never simply and completely opposed to the colonizer” (12). Many colonized societies have got the legacy of European colonialism be it language, culture or value system. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has unveiled the height of globalization; inter-cultural cooperation and inter-continental understanding are in rapid progress; new challenges like poverty, unemployment, disease, environmental degradation, global warming, arms race, cold war have increasingly threatened not only life on this planet but the planet itself, altogether these make us aware that nothing is better than living together reducing our differences and bridging the gap between man and man. No society is free from the influence of other societies, we cannot live in iron cages as well as all alone. To say this does not mean the dominant power will swallow smaller cultures. In post-colonial societies things are different though, because there is the question of hegemony and power relations, the efforts to erase the weaker culture or political system by the stronger and larger culture including coercive measures has become a phenomenon in national policy structures. That is an ever-saddening trend in the present century. In multi ethnic, multicultural countries like India there exists the fear that bigger cultures with their bigger political ideology will exercise hegemonic policies where the minority, peripheral groups are entrapped as in a nightmare incapable of

resistance. Under the circumstances living under such a condition is like walking a tight rope. Meaningful living is possible only when co-existence and mutual respect are put to the fore. Otherwise, we live between hope and fear. This is proved to be true by our experience especially when myth, history and culture were treated with disrespect as if they were born of a surrogate mother.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>To assume that the metal cast idol was that of Visnu was too fanciful to believe. It was a ploy for preaching Hinduism in Kangleipak by Brahmins. This theory was rejected by scholars and researchers both. The possibility is that such idols were those of Bhagvan Buddha that might have come from China. Such idols still appear in plenty from China. Buddhism came centuries ago to the South East Asian countries. It is believed that c.250 BCE Emperor Asoka sent Buddhist missionaries to Burma. During the Seven Years Devastation of Manipur by Burma from 1819 – 1826 all temples in Manipur were not spared, but the so called Visnu temple at Lamangdong was reportedly left unharmed, which fact raises questions about the identity of the idol as being that of Visnu.

<sup>2</sup>The first Rasa Dance was performed at Canchipur palace, now the site of Manipur Central University under the auspices of King Bhagyachandra himself a lover of art, music, dance, and performative experimenter for five days beginning the 12<sup>th</sup> day of *Hiyangei* month (November) 1779 while Govindaji was reverentially consecrated. Rasa dance has three types connected with specific occasions: *Kunja Rasa* on *Mera Wakhinba*; *Maha Rasa* on *Mera Waphukpa* and *Basanta Rasa* on *Sajibu* full moon day.

<sup>3</sup>*Chandol senkhai* is a punitive method of house tax collected from the masses who professed Hinduism. *Chandol* is a lump of lightly scented earth whitish brown in colour, the paste of which was/is applied to the face, on the nose forming a pattern to mark the person's faith in Hinduism/Vaisnavism, the practice of which is still followed by a few people, men and women. In the past this earth was supplied by Bramha Sabha people and in exchange they collected a huge amount of money as price very exorbitantly. General people could not pay the amount regularly because of abject poverty. Those who could not pay were branded *mangba* (untouchables, impure, polluted,) people until they cleared the due with interest. They were socially ostracized. But the practice was abolished by a social reformation group led by Hijam Irabot in the 1940s.

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\* This is an invited article by Professor M. Mani Meitei.