

Birth Ritual among Meitei/Meetei Sanamahi Community of Manipur: Meaning, Practices and Significance

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This paper describes and gives the meaning, customary practices, contexts and significance of birth ritual among Meitei/Meetei community of Manipur under Sanamahism. Meitei/Meetei community is the predominant ethnic group of Manipur, and Sanamahism is the traditional religious faith of this community. Like the followers of every world religion the followers of Sanamahism among the Meitei/Meetei community have been observing certain life cycle rituals since time immemorial. The present study describes and interprets the underlying facts and significances of customary beliefs and practices on birth of a child of the community through the perspective of Sanamahism. Doing review of relevant literatures and using the methodology of qualitative field research through interviews and discussion with, as well as through overt participant observation, the paper proposes that birth ritual of Meetei/Meitei community under Sanamahism is one of the important aspects of the socio-cultural life of the community; it has social, cultural and scientific significances, and it also plays a significant role in identifying the ethnographic description of Meitei/Meetei community of Manipur on religious line. This proposition is explained throughout the paper first by describing all the relevant concepts of birth ritual, followed by an analysis of all the aspects of rites and their meanings. The paper contributes to a broader understanding of, and discourse on, the theme and the fundamental basis of birth ritual of this small Meetei/Meitei community of India.

Keywords: Meetei community, Sanamahism, Life cycle rituals, Birth Ritual

Introduction

Every world culture has several life cycle rituals. As a part of cultural beliefs and practices, these rituals are performed when an individual enters into different stages of his/her life beginning from the stage of conception till the stage of death. In every community childrens are regarded as precious gifts from God. Birth is one thing that all human beings share in common although our birth experiences are all unique. The birth of a child can be auspicious and sacred time for a family. The sacredness of a

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child's birth is shown by the customary religious practices performed before and after the birth of baby. The customary religious and symbolic act performed at the time of birth of a baby is regarded as birth ritual by all the communities of the world. However, beliefs and rituals surrounding this important stage of life vary from religion to religion. It means birth practices and rituals are all greatly influenced by the religious beliefs of the particular community. Like the followers of every world religion the followers of Sanamahism, the traditional religious faith of the Meitei/Meitei¹ community of Manipur, have been observing certain birth rituals since the time immemorial.

Described by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru as “Jewel of India”, Manipur is situated at the North-eastern corner of India on the Indo-Myanmar border. It is one of the seven north-eastern states commonly known as seven sister states of Indian Union. The state lies between the 90°03` to 94°78` east longitudes and 28°83` to 25°68` north latitudes covering a geographical area of 22,327 square kilometres. It is bounded by the Indian states of Nagaland to the north, Mizoram to the south and Assam to the west. The state has a population of almost 3 million including the Meitei/Meitei who are the majority group in the state; the Meitei/Meitei Pangals (Manipuri Muslims), Naga Tribes, Kuki Tribes and other communities who speak a variety of Sino-Tibetan languages. Geographically, the state can be divided into two regions: the oval shaped valley at the centre which is of approximately 2000 square kilometres, and its surrounding parallel hill ranges which constitute more than 90% of the total geographical area of the state. The Meitei/Meitei people primarily occupies the valley region. They present about 53% of Manipur's population. Manipur's ethnic groups practice a variety of religion. According to census of India 2011, out of the 2,855,794 people in Manipur, there are 1,181,876 Hindus representing 41.39% of the total population of Manipur, 239,836 Muslims at 8.4%, 1,179,043 Christians at 41.29%, 1,527 Sikhs at 05%, 7,084 Buddhists at 00.25%, 1692 Jains at 00.06%, 23,767 “Other religions” at 8.19% and 10969 “Religions Not Stated” at 00.38%. As far as religious composition of ethnic group is concerned, the Meitei/Meitei Hindus constitute the largest ethnic group of the state.

The Meitei/Meitei Sanamahism community is one of the remarkable communities native to the state of Manipur. Alike other communities, they are also enriched with immense traditional beliefs and customs. Sanamahism is an animistic, ancestor worshiping and shaman led religious tradition found among the Meitei/Meitei people in Manipur. It is a cult - a system of religious beliefs, practices or behaviour which are not part of any established religion. The term “Sanamahism” is derived from “Sanamahism” (lit. “Spreading like liquid everywhere”), the most important Meitei deity (Parrat, 2013). Sanamahism is the name of the Almighty Lord given by the Meitei/Meitei people. He is regarded as the king of all deities, the creator and controller of the Universe. Thus, Sanamahism is basically based on the worship of God Sanamahism which is socially and legally recognized traditional form of religion of the Meiteis/Meiteis of Manipur. The followers of this particular religion among the Meitei/Meitei community are recognized as Meitei/Meitei Sanamahism people. Currently, they come under the category of ORPs (Other Religions and Persuasions) in Manipur's religious

census report and occupy 8% of Manipur's religious population according to 2011 census report of India.

This article is about the socio-religious customs and practices related to birth ceremony of the Meitei/Meetei Sanamahi community who are inhabiting mainly at the Imphal area of Manipur. It also describes the slight variations of birth related customary practices that exist between the Meetei/Meitei Sanamahi community and the Chakpa² group of Meitei people who have their own unique culture within Sanamahism.

Literature review on birth rituals

Every Society has their own life cycle Ritual – a body of custom specially associated with religious performances. Life cycle rituals are actions performed as common practices which are the results of folk belief developed on the basis of religious faith by the people of a community. A ritual may precisely be described as the way of performing religious act, that is, of playing, singing, dancing for the Gods, making sacrifices or preparing offerings. Mircea (1959) observed that rituals are those conscious and voluntary, repetitive and stylized symbolic body action that are central on cosmic structure and/or sacred presence. Thus, we can see that rituals are parts of the religious aspects of man.

As part of cultural beliefs and practices, life cycle rituals are performed when an individual enters into different stages of his/her life. Birth ritual is one of the important life cycle rituals. It is a culture bound ceremony performed by different group of people of the world as a mark of welcoming new born babies into their respective communities and, also of caring them. All religious traditions around the globe have certain ways of welcoming a new born child into the community. For instance, whispering the words of *Adhan* or *call to prayer* (“God is great, there is no God but *Allah*. *Muhammad* is the messenger of *Allah*. Come to prayer.”) into the right ear of the child by his or her father as the first words heard by a new born baby (Blumberg, 2016), performance of *Aqiqah* to celebrate the welcoming of a child's birth on the 7th day which may be postponed to later often 14th or 21st day after birth (Huda, 2019), etc. are some of the Muslim traditional rituals that are performed after a baby is born. In Hindu tradition, the *Jatakarma* ceremony involving whispering the name of God into the ear of the baby is performed on the day of birth of the baby (Pandey, 1976). The ceremony of *circumcision* is performed on a specific day in Islam and Christianity and, in Judaism it is called *B'rit Milah* (Blumberg, 2016). *Baptism* of infants is common practice in Catholicism and viewed as a way of cleansing the child of original sin and, in Sikh tradition, parents visit their local Gurudwara with the baby as soon as possible following the birth typically within 40 days (Blumberg, 2016). These are examples of some of the spiritual rituals performed by different religious communities of the world.

In Indian context, birth rituals are major areas of study on child welcoming and caring practices. We all know that India is a land of various cultural traditions. In India, not only large sections of the society all small groups or communities also have their own cultures and ceremonies associated with birth of the babies. For instance,

among the Zeliangrong tribe of north-east India, certain traditional rituals such as *Buhkaomei* (calling of the soul), *Napmum loumei* (Bathing of the child), *Laangmumei taloumei* (protection of the child), Burial of the placenta, etc. are observed (Kamei, 2016). The Mising community of Assam also follows certain rites of birth like tying *Lakjin* and *Lijin* to the hand and legs of the child after taking bath to keep evil spirits away, purification of both mother and her husband along with the child by feeding *Mantraput* water (Deka and Deka, 2010), etc. The Praja community of southern Orissa performs certain rites of purification such as *Nahindisara* on the day when the naval cord falls i.e. approximately within a week after the child birth, and *Sanahadisara* which is observed soon after the stoppage of the menstrual flow of the mother approximately within 12 to 15 days after the child birth. Another ritual called *Ekosia* is performed on the 21st day of the child birth as the first hair cutting and name giving ceremony (Pramanik, 2008). These are some of the cultural practices observed by many communities during early days after child birth.

Materials and Methods

In order to make an in-depth study of the present research work, the mixed method of the descriptive, the explanatory and the analytical research design was employed. The relevant data, both primary and secondary, had been collected employing purposive sampling and snowball sampling. The samples were collected mainly from Imphal valley where there are all main religious institutions which prescribe religious norms relevant to the ritual processes. Primary data collection was done with the help of key informant interviewing method, interview guides, overt- participant observation as well as non-participant observation method. Interviews were conducted with the help of schedules with Amaibas (Priest), Amaibis (Priestess), Arangphams (arranger/architect of rituals) and resource persons who have a good knowledge about Meitei religion and life cycle rituals. Necessary secondary data had been collected from earlier monographs, books, journals, ancient Meitei Texts and Chronicles.

Findings and discussions

The Meitei/Meitei Sanamahhi community like the other communities in the world follows certain religious beliefs and observes birth ritual when babies are born. It is believed that it is the Almighty God who creates all living beings including the male and the female for the expansion of their descends from generation to generation. In the realm of human sphere, the roles of both sexes are equally important in the creation of their offspring so that the human being can never be extinct. In fact, the roles played by women in such case can never be neglected because they are the one who faces all kinds of difficult situations to bear the baby from the time of conception. The Meitei/Meitei community since the time immemorial has been practicing certain rituals during pregnancy of a woman. It is done with the belief that a baby can become a perfect human being in life if proper care is given since the time of its conception. For this reason, the community observes various forms of ritual during the period of pregnancy of a woman. To save the blooming child from abortion, they used to perform some rituals during the period of pregnancy on certain specific months. In addition to this, the pregnant woman and her husband are subject to many taboos with respect

to their diet and daily activities for the wellbeing of the mother and safe delivery of the baby. Such rituals, in turn, serves as one of the mechanisms to control human mind and behaviour for the good cause. Thus, Meiteis/Meeteis are having their own cultural tradition of observing a more or less elaborate rituals guided by certain beliefs before the delivery of a baby.

Many customary practices are performed after the delivery of a baby. It comprises of the ritual performed at the time of cutting off umbilical cord just after the baby is born, the ritual associated with burial of placenta and umbilical cord, the ritual of care both for the mother and the baby and, the ritual of *Eepanthaba*. The following section describes and explains the significance of those cultural practices and elements associated with birth ritual which are performed after the delivery of the baby.

(i) Ritual for the Calling of soul and the cutting off Khoiree (Umbilical cord)

In the past, just after the birth of the baby, the *Khoiree* (the umbilical cord) was cut off by a sharp bamboo knife known as *Wakthou*. The specific bamboo from which the *Wakthou* is made is called *Uttang*. This rite was performed by the *Wangon Amaibi* (the mid-wife) who conducted the delivery of the children in the house. Just after the birth, the new born baby was hold by the mid-wife. Before cutting off the umbilical cord, the mid-wife holds the cord and shit it towards the baby for three times by pronouncing the following hymn three times:

“O! five souls, the shadow also a sixth,
Come! Come!”(Parrat,2013)

The above prayer is the calling in the five souls together known as *Thawai Manga* and the *Mi* (the shadow) to take up their place in the child. According to Meetei/Meitei beliefs, a human being has five ultimate souls (*Thawais*) and a shadow (*Mi/Thawaimiren*). It is said that the five souls are nothing but the five basic elements of all living beings: *fire, air, water, earth and space*. These five elements are regarded to be various manifestations of the Almighty God of the Universe who is generally known as *Taibangpanba Mapu*. On the other hand, the shadow is regarded as a part of the personality. In Meetei/Meitei religious philosophy, there is a myth that describe what the *Mi* (shadow) is. In the mythical story of creation of the Universe and the living beings, the deity *Atingkok Shidaba* who is also known by the name *Khoiyum Ashiba*, after making several attempts, finally creates a man from the shadow (image) of His father *Chingu Khoiyum Yaibirel Shidaba*, the Almighty God of the Universe. The created man is just like His father, and *Khoiyum Ashiba* does so on the advice of His father. Following the myth, “Shadow” is regarded as the image of the Almighty God and this image is considered as a part of the personality of a human being. Influenced by this myth of creation, the Meeteis believe that the images of all human beings are nothing but the accompanying shadow of the Almighty God. Hence, the prayer signifies the importance of the five things viz. *fire, air, water, earth and space* as the five souls of a human being and the *shadow* as the sixth important thing whichaltogether identifies what a human being is.

After performing this “Soul Calling Ceremony”, the umbilical cord is knotted by

nine sacred threads in the case of a boy child and by seven sacred threads in the case of girl child, to protect the souls and shadow (image) from the evil spirit. Then, the cord is cut off by the sharp bamboo knife *Wakthou*. Here, the nine sacred threads represent the nine *Laibunghous*³(divine youths) and the seven sacred threads as the seven *Lainuras*⁴(divine girls). It is said that *Atingkok Sidhaba* had brought forth those *Laibunghous* (divine youths) and *Lainuras* (divine girls) from within Himself in order to help Him in the creation of the universe.

After knotting the umbilical cord by the sacred threads, it is cut off by the sharp bamboo knife. The use of bamboo knife as a cutting tool signifies that Meetei Sanamahi people are very much dependent on natural tools to meet their needs.

Now, in continuation of the ritual process, the baby child is cleaned with lukewarm water and then covered with a soft cloth and handed over to the father. The father whispers the following *Mapugi Mingkhei* also known as *Yaibirel Mingkhei* (religious spell praising the Almighty Lord) three times into the right ear of the child in case it is a baby boy, and into the left ear in case the baby is a girl:

“*Hung! Haa! Hei! Hey! Hing!*

Hayi – Haya- Hayum- Sidaba- Sidaba- Sidaba Mapu.” (Tomba,2020)

The above ritual is the first occasion of *Laiming Piba* (Giving the name of God) ceremony to the life of the new born baby. It a ceremony for making the baby listen the name of the Almighty God, the various manifestations of Himself and the creators of mankind. And it is done for the wellbeing of the baby.

After this part of rite, the baby is handed over to the mother. The mother tries to give her milk to the baby. If she is unable to do so, at least she should act as if she gives her own breast milk to the baby. As she is not in a position to give her own breast milk, a woman having a new child is requested to give her milk to the baby. In such case, the woman is known as *Khom-inbi*. This is also a sign of cooperation that is maintained among the Meitei/Meetei community whenever in need. This part is also the first occasion of food giving to a newly born baby. Some scholars are of the opinion that the Meitei/Meetei like the Kabui tribe used to put a few drops of *Kalei* (intoxicated liquor) to the mouth of the baby marking it as the first occasion of food giving ceremony.

(ii) The burial of Naopham(placenta) and Khoiree (umbilical cord)

The practice of burial of placenta and umbilical cord after birth as a cultural rite has been carrying out by the Meiteis/Meeteis since time immemorial. We all know the biological importance of these organs that develop in the uterus of the mother during pregnancy, providing oxygen and nutrients to the growing baby. As a sign of recognition of the importance of these organs for a growing baby inside the uterus of the mother, the Meiteis/Meeteis use to bury them with special care and rituals after the birth of the baby. After the umbilical cord is cut off, it is wrapped inside a *Changbi Laa* (a kind of banana leaf) along with the placenta and then it is put inside an earthen pot. Traditional sacred leaves of *Khoiju* (*Ternifolius D. Don*) and *Leikham* (*Goniothalamus Sesquipedalis*) are burnt to fumigate and sanctify the pot containing

the organs. Valuable items such as a coin known as *Taret Senja*, one grain of white rice and one grain of red rice representing *Lupa Konyai* and *Sana Konyai* respectively which in turn represent valuable elements of Silver and Gold respectively are put inside the pot as a mark of reverence and appreciation shown to the organs. The pot is covered with an earthen lid and then buried underground (around 14 inches depth) on the adjoining area of the house known as *Yenakha* in specific direction according to the gender of the baby. In the past, if the baby was a boy, it would be on the area adjoining the right side of the house where *Piba ka* (room for male youths of the family) was allotted. In case of a girl child, it would be on the area adjoining the left side of the house where *Ningol Ka* (room for maiden) was allotted. In the process, prayer is done to the Goddess *Pitai-Khomdaibi*, one of the incarnations of supreme mother Goddess *Leimarel Shidabi* for the wellbeing of the child.

The practice of burial of placenta and umbilical cord is still prevalent in Meitei/Meetei Sanamahi society, be it in the urban area or rural area. Religious wise, Meiteis/Meeteis take special care for umbilical cord with the belief that it serves in the way to heaven after death.

(iii) Care for both the mother and the baby

After the delivery of the child, the mother is given due care for a period of five days. This period of confinement is known as *Maning Kumba*. The mother is confined to the house until when the birth ritual takes place on the 6th day. For the Chakpa, the ritual is on the 5th day if the baby is a boy, and it is on 6th day in case the baby is a girl. During this period, the mother receives the best care and gets enough rest, that even meals should be prepared for her by the family. She is provided with only boiled rice with dried fish specially *Ngamu* (*Orientalis schneilder*) and roasted *Meitei Thum* (traditional salt cake) which is believed to help get rid of being winded. On the day of birth ritual ceremony, both the mother and the child take bath and cut off their nails. From that day, simple food with simple curry is taken for almost one month. Attention is paid to the point of abstaining from foods that could harm the health of both the mother and the baby. Besides this, their bodies are always kept warm. All these cares indicate that in Meitei/Meetei society, a woman's health is always taken care of and is never discriminated.

(iv) Eepanthaba

Eepanthaba or *Heisoi-Epanthaba* is one of the most significant birth related rituals of the Meiteis/Meeteis and it is performed on the sixth day after the birth of the baby. Other synonymous terms or concepts used by different religious scholars to denote the same phenomenon are *Ipanthaba* and *Yupanthaba*. *Yupanthaba* is a term used by Chakpa community to denote the birth ritual. Meiteis/Meeteis have mythological belief about the first performance of *Eepanthaba*. Laishram (2009) mentions that the first *Eepanthaba* ritual was performed at the divine birth of Konchin Tukthaba, son of the Supreme God (*Lainingthou*) and Goddess (*Leimaren*). This proves that the customary tradition of this birth ritual is very ancient.

Eepanthaba is a religious ceremony performed for the well-being and long life of the baby carrying the pure blood of the parents who belong to a particular *salai*⁵(clan)

group with prosperity and vigour. Another significant aspect of *Eepanthaba* is the reason of why it is commonly performed on the 6th day after the birth of the baby by the Meiteis/Meeteis of Imphal area. According to the Meetei/Meitei mythological belief, a human being is an amalgamation of all the six things i.e. the five souls and the shadow. As a symbol of recognition of the importance of these six things in the creation of human being, *Eepanthaba* ritual is performed on the 6th day after the birth of the child.

The ritual of *Eepanthaba* is performed in two different sessions: the first session in the morning and the second in the evening of the same day.

Ritual in the morning

The morning session of *Eepanthaba* ritual is very meaningful and significant. The main theme of the ritual is to propitiate different Gods and Goddesses to seek their blessings for the baby. A very specific goddess known as *Pitai-Khomdaibi/Pithai Khomtaibi* who is believed to be an incarnation of Mother goddess *Leimarel Shidabi*, is mainly worshipped because the Meiteis/Meeteis believe that the Goddess looks after the baby since the commencement of pregnancy. This ritual is conducted either by a priestess (*maibi*) or by a woman who has full knowledge about the ritual process.

The ritual starts as soon as all the clothes and other stuffs used by the mother and the baby are washed and cleaned with water. The house is also purified spiritually by sprinkling *holy water*⁶. It usually begins when the sun's rays reflect on the floor of the house. Now, both the mother and the baby are also spiritually purified by sprinkling holy water from the *Nahaiphu* (a small earthen pot containing holy water) with the leaves of *Tairel* (*Cedrela toona*) and *Pongphai* (*Dactyloctenium aegypticum*). For the people of Chakpa, the birth ritual is very elaborate but it is performed only in the morning. In Chakpa tradition, some special items which represents the basic needs in one's living are offered to various manifestations of the Almighty God and Goddess. Ritual items include a basketful of paddy, one garland of dry fish, two traditional round shaped salt cakes known as *Meetei/Meitei Thum*, seven coins and one coil of *Lee* (dried stem of a kind of plant) are to be put on it. These items are placed on the veranda near the entrance door of the house. Offering of *Yu* (local rice beer) to deities is a must and it is an important part of Chakpa birth ritual. The *Amaibi* (priestess) sanctifies the house, the mother, the baby and all other items arranged by sprinkling holy water with *Tairel* leaves. The mother sits near the ritual site along with her baby and prays to *Mangang, Luwang and Khuman*, the triple deity of the supreme divinity in Sanamahism and seeks blessings. Another interesting aspect of Chakpa tradition is that a special sacred arrangement is made at the evening time on the day before the *Yupanthaba* ritual takes place. For this a small area near the bed of the mother and the baby is properly moped with water and some cooked rice on a banana leaf known as *La Latol* are placed there. Above the uncooked rice, three buds of *Langthrei* (*Eupatorium Birmanicum*) and one local egg are kept. Beside this, a shirt and a *Pheijom* (a white loin) of the father (in case the baby is a boy), or an *Innaphee* (a special traditional cloth for Meetei woman) of the mother (in case of a baby girl) and a book are also put on the banana leaf. On the next day after *Yupanthaba* ritual is over, the uncooked rice is to be kept for the mother. The egg is to be taken by the father after

it is boiled. The Amaibi is honoured with the delivery of a basketful of paddy, some *Singju* (indigenous vegetable salad) and some well prepared foods by a newly married woman. These are ritual aspects of *Yupanthaba* of Chakpa Phayeng (Chakpa community inhabited at the village *Phayeng* of Manipur) through which differences with the *Eepanthaba* ritual of the Meitei/Meetei Sanamahi community mainly residing in Imphal area are figured out. Now let us look at in details how the Meitei/Meetei Sanamahi community performs the *Eepanthaba* ritual in common.

The Meitei/Meetei Sanamahi group in common has a very elaborate proceedings of birth ritual. For them, both the morning session and evening session are unavoidable. The necessary requirements for the morning ritual are: One *Yangkok* (a bamboo craft like a big plate used for winnowing, drying, etc.), one *Foudang fou* (basketful of paddy), seven kinds of fruits, seven kinds of flower, seven *Kabok nachal* (a handful of roasted flakes made from coarse meal of hulled rice), some vegetables mainly *Heibi Mana* (Meddler leaves), *Yendem* (alocacia), banana stem, etc, one *Ngamu phumlou* (roasted mud fish), three lived *Ngamu* (Mud fish), some dried chili, some salt, some *Ngari* (fermented fish), a handful of uncooked rice, a pair of *Meitei Thum* (traditional salt cake), a garland of seven *Ngari* (fermented fish) known as “*Ngari Pareng Achumba*”, one tuber of *Shing* (ginger), some coins, some leaves of *Khoiju* (*Ternifolius D. Don*) and *Leikham* (*Goniothalamus sesquipedalis*), etc. In another relevant text, only some specific requirements are mentioned namely a pot of water filled to the brim, a pair of *Meitei Thum* (traditional salt cake), a *Foudang fou* (a basketful of paddy), a garland of flower having the colour of the particular clan (*salai*) of the baby, one *Ngari pareng achumba* (garland of fermented fish), a piece of gold, some coins, some fruits and some betel nuts (*Kwa maru*) and betel leaves (*Kwa Mana*).

At the beginning of the ceremony, the *Foudang fou* is placed on the floor of the northern side of the veranda known as *Mangol* near the main door of the house moped and cleaned with water. Special items like one *Meitei Thum*, one *Ngari Pareng Achumba* and a tuber of ginger (*Zingiber officinate Roscoe*) are placed above the *Foudang fou*. Some authors in their texts have mentioned about a tuber of *Paan* (taro of *Colocasia* plant), some fruits, some flowers and some coins to be kept above the *Foudang*. A pot of water filled up to its brim is placed near the *Foudang*. An earthen plate containing *Khoiju* and *Leikham* leaves on it and a pot containing three lived *Ngamus* (mud fish) with some water inside it are also placed. The *Maibi* (priestess) then sprinkles holy water with leaves of the *Tairel* (Red cedar) and the *Pongphai* (crow foot) around the house to purify it and then, on whatever items that have been arranged. After that, they are offered to the Sun God along with a lamp and burning incense. Leaves of *Khoiju* and *Leikham* are also burnt. In some texts, it is mentioned that the items are offered to the three Gods viz. *Mangang Sidaba*, *Luwang Sidaba* and *Khuman Sidaba* – the protectors of three different timings of a day: morning, afternoon and night respectively. Here, it needs to be understood that all these Gods are different incarnations of the Almighty God. There is also a mention about the offerings to be made to a *Phambal*⁷, a special seat for the Almighty Lord. Nowadays, the practice of worshipping of *Phambal* in the morning session has been skipped. In all cases, the offerings are made to seek blessings from the God for the

wellbeing of the baby. Blessings are also sought from Goddess *Pitai Khomdaibi* (the Goddess who is believed to take care of the baby) for the long and healthy life of the baby. After this, the *Maibi* prepares a mixture of raw vegetables known as *Singju*. It is prepared mainly with the *Heibi mana* (Meddler leaves), *Yendem* (Alocacia), Banana stems, a handful of uncooked rice, *Ngari* (fermented fish), chili and salt. Meiteis/Meeteis believe that *Singju* represents the milk as well as the human food given by the mother earth (*Malem Eema*) to feed the baby. There are reasons of why these particular ingredients are arranged for this ritual. In fact, these plants and leaves have mythological as well as medicinal importance. For the rite, the *Singju* is divided into six parts placed on separate pieces of banana leaf on the *Yangkok* (Winnowing fan) along with other items. The *Maibi* (priestess) takes the *Yangkok* inside the house and keep it near the gate of the main door of the room where both the mother and the baby live. The child is then bathed and wrapped around with clean cloth. The *Maibi* sprinkles holy water on the child, the mother and all the ritual items. She then pretends to feed the child with the mixed food *Singju* from each piece of banana leaf. This is repeated five items with the words:

“Father’s food, grandfather’s food, human food, eat this!”

On the sixth occasion, the wording is changed:

“O! Five souls and the shadow, this is the food of life! Eat this!” (Parrat,2013)

After this rite, the *Maibi* simulates the washing of the child’s mouth six times. This ceremony of feeding the baby is known as *“Tara Chak-eenba”* or *“Tara Chak-een Tamb”*. Some scholars have mentioned a slightly different process of this ceremony. The *Maibi* divides the *Singju* into two groups on a *Yangkok*. One group consists of seven separate pieces of banana leaf and another group has nine pieces. Here, the *Yangkok* symbolizes the shape of the mother earth and, the *Singju* along with other items including *Ngamu Phumlou* (roasted mud fish) represents the breast milk of our mother earth. The *singju* on seven separate pieces as well as nine separate pieces of banana leaf represent offerings made to seven *Lainuras* (divine girls) and nine *Laiputhous* (divine youths) respectively. After putting all the necessary requirements on the *Yangkok*, it is offered to the Goddess *Pitai Khomdaibi* to bless the baby for a long, healthy, wise, prosperous and vigorous life! The *Maibi* then takes the baby on her lap and cleans its mouth. She pretends to feed the baby five times with the *Singju* and *Ngamu Phumlou*. The first four feedings are made for knowing and getting the qualities of the Almighty God of the universe (*Taibangpanba mapu Lainingthou Sidaba*), *Malem Ema* (mother earth), the five souls along with the shadow (*Thawai manga miga thana taruk mak*) and the parents of the baby respectively. The last and fifth one is for having the best wisdom in the life of the baby. In this way, different steps are mentioned in different texts so far as this feeding ceremony is concerned. But on each feeding, the *Maibi* pronounces these words *“Mum-mum-mum”* followed by *“kuk-kuk-kuk”*. The words *“mum-mum-mum”* are used when she pretends to feed solid food *“singju”*. On the other hand, the words *“kuk-kuk-kuk”* are pronounced when she pretends to feed the baby with water. No matter different texts mention ritual process which are of slight differences, it is clear that the morning session of

the “*Eepanthaba*” ceremony is observed to describe that all human beings live on food which are primarily found in nature.

In continuation of the ritual, the *Maibi* carries away the *Yangkok* containing the *Singju* and other items on it outside the main gate of the house. The items are placed heading towards the north direction on the right side of the gate. They are offered to the deities who dwell outside the household and prayer is made for the wellbeing and long life of the child. After this, the *Maibi* brings only the *Yangkok* inside the house.

The morning ritual is concluded by the ceremony of handing over the baby to the mother. As soon as the *Maibi* comes back from the main gate (*Thongal*), she purifies the *Yangkok* by sprinkling holy water with *Tairel-pongphai* leaves and covered it with a cleaned white cloth. A *Yotsebi* (a three- legged traditional tripod under which a fire is lit for cooking food or other purposes) is brought into the room where the mother is confined. A fire is lit under the *Yotsebi* after which the *Maibi* puts the baby on the *Yangkok*, holds tightly and moves it around three times over the fire for warding off evil spirits. Then, she puts a piece of *Sana* (gold) or any object identical to gold in its colour, a piece of *Lupa* (silver) or any object identical to silver in its colour and a piece of *Leitum* (dry mud) on the *Yangkok*. The *Maibi* asks the mother whether she wants the child or the fan *Yangkok* and whether she will accept valuable things represented by gold, silver in exchange of the child. The mother asks only for the child. The *Maibi* then hands over the child to the grandmother or to any senior woman of the family and in turn, she gives the child to the mother. The mother takes the child and embraces tightly. The *Maibi* is then honoured with some valuable items or money for her duty. The *Maibi* in turn wishes all the family member of the baby for having a healthy, prosperous, vigorous and long life. There is a reason for putting the baby on the winnowing fan *Yangkok*. This *Yangkok* represents the mother earth. The baby is to be brought up on the lap of *Malem Ema* (mother earth) feeding human food represented by *Singju* available on its soil. To express such a symbolic meaning, the baby is placed on the *Yangkok*. Another point of significance of this ritual is that it shows the utmost care and love of the mother for the baby. Nothing valuable is there for the mother in the universe other than her child, it shows.

The finishing part of the morning ritual is prayer to the Sun God who is also known by the name “*Yoimayai Taodanba Korouhanba*”. This finishing prayer is known as “*Laitaiba*” and it is made by lighting up lamp and burning incense near the *Foudang* on the veranda of the house. On this, the *Maibi*, on behalf of the parents of the baby prays the Sun God who is also regarded as one of the incarnations of Almighty god to send *Emoinu Ema* (mother Goddess of wealth and prosperity) who comes out from the left side boy of Himself to the house so that they could live happily throughout their lives with good health, prosperity and vigour. The *Maibi* then finally utters the words- “*Ha! Hung! Ha! Yeng!*” After this, *Laitaiba* prayer, all the items on the *Foudang* are kept in their proper places inside the house. These items should not be given to the *Maibi*. Instead, she is honoured with some valuable items that satisfies her mind as a sign of gratitude to her.

Evening ritual

The birth ritual continues in the evening of the same day. This second session starts

after the sunset. The father of the baby and the maternal uncle usually mother's younger brother have specific roles in this ritual. Like in the morning rituals, certain items are arranged in this session too. Essential requirements for the evening ritual are : a *Phambal* (altar), a white cloth to be used as cover of the *phambal*, one *phaijom* (white Loin) and one *Kokyet* (crown-like cotton hat) for the deity, one *Lamthang* (a white cloth to be wrapped around the shoulder), other relevant clothes and ornaments for the God and the Goddess, a medium size earthen pot to be used as *Eeratphu*⁸, four bamboo sticks known as *chukchiwa*, one bow, five arrows, raw cotton yarn, three sets of *Heiruk Tanna*(pieces of some varieties of fruits put on a round shaped banana leaf), three sets of *Kwa Tangga*(a set of a slice of peeled betel nut and a betel leaf put on a round shaped banana leaf), one *Heijang*(citron), one *Yubi*(coconut) or one *Papaya*, one earthen tray, one *Lafoi Changthokpa*(a bunch of banana that comes in odd numbers when counted in pair), one betel nut, one betel leaf, one *Sana-konyai*(a piece of gold or a grain of red), one *Lupa Konyai*(a piece of silver or a grain of white rice), *Leishang* (Club Moss), a handful of rice, an earthen pot, three mango leaves, some bamboo stripes, white flour, five white flowers, some uncooked rice, some *Thoiding* (Sesamum) , some flowers, *Tingthou* (Cynodon dactylon pers), leaves of *Tairel* and *Pongphai*, some clothes and ornaments for the baby and some books and other relevant items mentioned in the horoscope of the baby, etc. When all these items are examined, it is found that Meitei has the tradition of using some specific indigenous plants and leaves that have been considered to be sacred things since the time immemorial. These plants and leaves have been using in making various forms traditional medicines because of possession of high medicinal properties in them. Some of the ritual items also represent some of the basic needs of the life of the baby.

Another interesting aspect of this ceremony is that specific things which constitute parts of ritual items are brought from the maternal side of the mother of the child to the house of the daughter giving birth. This culture is known as "*Potyengba*". These specific things include a utensil or an earthen pot containing some water and lived *Meitei Ngamu*(mud fish) three or five or seven in number covered with banana leaf, some uncooked rice in a clean container, three or five salt cakes (*Meitei thum*) presented neatly on a *Lukmai*(a flat bamboo container), one "*Athenpot*" which is a combination of some uncooked rice , one *Lafoi Laphang changthokpa* (a bunch of bananas that comes in odd number when counted in pair) and some vegetables displayed neatly altogether in a container, one small pillow, a mattress and some clothes for the newborn baby and for the mother, jewelry items like bangles and ankles of the baby and other eatables mainly sweets and fruits, etc. These things are carried by ladies in traditional attires walking in a row according to symbolic values assigned to the things up to the house of the newborn baby. This culture of *Potyengba* shows the gratuity and sharing of happiness of the two families. Relatives, friends and localities are also invited well in advanced to attend the ceremony. It is also a sign of sharing of happiest moment among the group members.

Unlike the morning session, the evening session of *Eepanthaba* is conducted by a *Maiba/Amaiba* (Priest). The ritual starts with the worship of *Phambal* and *Eeratphu* by the father under the instruction of the Maiba. These are the worship of different

incarnations of the Almighty God and its manifestations. This rite is performed on the right side of the entrance door inside the house by the father under the instruction of the priest. The *Phambal* represents a sacred seat for the Almighty Lord and, the *Eeratphu* represents the Goddess Mother Earth. An earthen tray containing some uncooked rice, one *Lafoi Laphang Changthokpa* (bunch of bananas), one coconut or one papaya, one Citron known as *Heijang*, one coin known as *Taret Senja*, a set of small clothes known as *Laiphee* for Mother Goddess, a set of one betel nut and a betel leaf and some flowers is placed on the left side of the *Phambal* of the Almighty God. This earthen tray is known as *Pungharen/Heiyom* and it represents the Supreme Goddess *Leimaren Sidabi*. Another two sacred seats are also arranged in front of the *Phambal* – one for the worship of “*Nongdamba Lai*” (the God of fortune) and another for the worship of goddess *Pitai Khomdaibi*. On the right side, “*Nongdamba Lai*” is worshiped. And, on the left side, the goddess *Pitai Khomdaibi* is worshiped. It is believed that *Nongdamba Lai* is the God of destination who comes in that night and writes the destiny of the child, (who writes good fortunes on the forehead of the baby.) and the goddess *Pitai Khomdaibi* always takes care of the baby. Thus, the evening session is a grand ritual held to propitiate various gods and goddesses for their blessings to the child.

After making all the relevant sacred structures, the priest along with the father of the baby starts the rites for the worship of *Eeratphu*, *Phambal* and *Pungharen/Heiyom* with religious hymns and spells. After that, the priest displays all the required items including items brought by maternal party of the mother viz. clothes and ornaments of the baby, the pillow and the mattress; the bow, the arrows and the raw cotton yarn known as “*Langhing -langseng*” in front of the *Phambal*. Now, the worships of *Nongdamba Lai* and *Pitai Khomdaibi* take place. The father prays to the god and the goddess for the wellbeing of the baby.

The baby is now placed on the mattress in front of the *Eeratphu* facing its head towards the North. The Amaiba does “*Nahei- Nasengba*” (purification rite) of the baby by sprinkling holy water from the *Naheiphu* (small earthen pot). After purifying the baby, the holy thread *Langhing-langseng* also known as *Langhing Miren* is worn around the wrist of the child by the father. If the child is a boy, a thread combining seven individual threads is bound on his right hand. If the child is a girl, then it is bound on her left hand. While doing so, the names of seven clan gods are uttered in poetic form and prayed to them. The seven individual threads represent the seven clan gods namely – *Mangang*, *Luwang*, *Khuman*, *Angom*, *Moirang*, *Khaba-nganba* and *Salai Leishangthem*. The wearing of these 7 threads symbolizes that the baby now becomes culturally bound to the unified system of Meitei/Meetei Sanamahi tradition. The single unified thread formed by the combination of individual threads also represents the “*Koirellai*” meaning the Almighty God who lives everywhere in the Universe.

There are also some cases that a combination of nine individual threads is tied on the wrist of the male child and seven threads on the wrist on the female child. Here, the nine individual threads represent the qualities/energies of nine *Laipungthous* (divine youths) and the seven individual threads represent the energies of seven *Lainuras* (divine girls). It is done for the wellbeing of the baby and its protection from evil

spirits. After this, the father says “*Hayi Sidaba*” (unique spiritual terms representing Almighty God) on the right side of the baby’s ear, and “*Haya Sidabi*” (unique spiritual terms representing Supreme Goddess) on the left side of the ear. Thus, the father utters the names of God and Goddess in the ears of the baby and it is also a part of *Laiming Piba* (making the baby hear the names of Supreme God and Goddess).

After binding the sacred thread *Langhing langseng* on the baby’s wrist, the father puts a small round shaped mark on the forehead right between the eyebrows of the baby using a paste made by mixing a lump of soil of Earth with some water by the tip of his ring finger. This rite is known as “*Paklei-Leisha-Namba*”. It is a sign of welcoming the baby to the family who believes in Sanamahism. It also points out the belief that the forehead of human body is the sacred spot where the Almighty God shines on. The mark also evokes a feeling of sacredness on the applier and on the people with whom the individual come into contact. Thus, this customary rite is very symbolic and it is one of the unique cultural features of Sanamahi followers.

Ten kappa (shooting of arrows) ritual as an important part of evening ritual of Eepanthaba

In continuation of the ritual, it is time for the maternal uncle to play his role. He shoots *Ten* (arrows) on the four directions (north-east, south-east, north-west and south-west) with the belief of driving away evil spirits from the child. This has to be done in the courtyard of the house. In this rite, the *Amaiba* first offers flowers with his spells to the bow and five arrows which is kept in front of the *Eeratphu*. The spell is all about seeking blessings from the five elements, the various manifestations of the Almighty viz. fire, water, air, earth and space for the protection of the baby from evil spirits. It is also mentioned that the five arrows are the most powerful arrows possessing the energies of these five elements.

Next, the maternal uncle is sanctified with the holy water from the *Naheiphu*. Then, he offers flower to the bow and the five arrows. After offerings and prayers, he goes outside the house with the bow and the arrows. At first, he starts shooting four arrows one by one at these four different directions -*Chingkhei* (north-east), *Thangjing* (south-west), *Wangbren* (south-east) and *Koubru* (north-west) by taking the names of the four mythological expert archers namely *Phunal Telheiba*, *Mende Haotakpa*, *Chairel Yenphoi Lakpa* and *Khori-Telheiba* to protect the child from the influence of evil spirits. The last and fifth arrow is not shot but just aimed up in the sky and down to the Earth as if it seeks the protection of life of the baby from the Supreme God and Goddess. Then he comes back inside the house with the bow and the fifth arrow. The arrow touches the front door while entering inside the house. He places the bow and the arrow in front of the *Eeratphu*. He finally prays to all the Gods and the Goddess and, seeks blessings for the child. After this, the father and the mother offer their gratitude to the maternal uncle with *Akatsen* (money). Then, the uncle offers *Akatsen* to the baby which signifies the giving of blessings and wealth to the baby. He is followed by the father, friends, relatives and others who come to attend the ritual wishing for long life, wisdom, health, wealth, prosperity and vigour to the child. After this, the child is taken inside and handed over to the mother. Then, the bow and the arrow are kept on the wall of the bedroom until the baby is grown up to three

years. This is done with the belief that the bow and the arrow always protect the baby from all evil forces coming from all directions.

Later on, the Amaiba sanctifies himself with a few drops of holy water from the *Naheiphu*. He offers flowers in front of the *Pungpharen/Heiyom* and prays to the Goddess *Pithrai-Khomtaibi/Pitai Khomdaibi* for long life, good health and good care for the baby. Now the final prayer of *Eepanthaba* ritual is made to the Supreme God of the universe with specific hymns known as "*Atairon-lairon*". In the hymns, the *Amaiba* prays to Him to return back to the place from where He comes from. Both the father and the mother also pray to the Almighty God with all their heart and soul for the wellbeing of their baby. Lastly, the *Amaiba* prays to the God to forgive the misconducts, deficiencies, wrong procedure, if any, during the ritual. And this is how the final prayer is made. The night ritual is concluded by providing foods and drinks to all the members who come to attend the ritual.

Conclusion

The birth ritual of the Meitei/Meetei Sanamahi community is very elaborate in nature. This ritual is one of the important aspects of the socio-cultural life of the community. Birth ritual, being a cultural trait, has its respective function and role in proper functioning of Meitei/Meetei culture as a whole. In fact, it is one of the most important life cycle rituals that mark important stages of life of an individual. This ritual is very significant culturally, socially and scientifically. Culturally, it plays a very crucial role in the identification and proper functioning of some parts of Meitei/Meetei Sanamahi customary traditions. In the social context, the ritual plays a significant role in determining the status of Meitei/Meetei women in the society and also the sign of existence of cooperation among the members of the society. Importance given to physiological status of women, the importance of five basic elements of life viz, fire, water, air, earth (land) and space in the form of sacred objects, use of various medicinal plants and vegetables as main components of ritual items, etc. are all scientifically significant in human life. From the study, it is found that the meaning, purpose, and significances of birth ritual are some of the important criteria that give the basis of life cycle rituals found deeply embedded in Meetei/Meitei traditional religion i.e. Sanamahism.

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Notes

1. *Meetei* and *Meitei* are two terms used by the people of Manipur to denote the same ethnic group.
2. *Chakpa* is a subgroup of indigenous Meetei/Meitei people who are still following their indigenous socio-religious customs and practices under Sanamahism. Now, they are indigenous Meetei/Meitei scheduled caste community of Manipur. In Manipur, there are seven Chakpa villages and they are Phayeng, Andro, Koutruk, Sekmai, Khurkhul, Tairenpokpi and Chairen.
3. The names of nine Laibungthous (divine youths) are Laininghanba, Khamlangba, Mongba Hanba, Chakhaba, Naokan, Muwa Ningthou, Luwang Punshiba, Marjing and Koubru. They, along with the seven Lainuras (divine girls), were credited with the task of levelling the uneven earth which was thus made habitable.
4. The names of seven Lainuras are Leishangthem Lairemma, Sarangthem Lairemma, Phou-oibi, Thoomleima, Panthoibi, Nongthangleima and Ngaleima. The seven Lainuras are the manifestation of Leimaren Sidabi who is believed to be the supreme Mother Goddess of the universe.
5. Salai is a term used by the Meitei people to denote a clan. It is a group of sageis (surnames) tracing descent from a common mythological ancestor. The Meitei community has seven salais. They are Mangang (Ningthouja), Luwang, Khuman, Angom, Moirang, Khaba-Nganba and Sarang Leishangthem (Changlei). They all are exogamous groups and this salai (clan) system is the backbone of Meitei social organisation. The Meiteis use two terms of significance rather frequently in their social introduction among themselves: *Yek*, the name of salai and *Yumnak*, the name of the *Sagei* (surname). See Laisram, 2009, 35-45.
6. In Sanamahism, *Tairel* tree (*Cedrela toona*) and *Pongphai* plant (*Dactyloctenium aegypticum*) are two sacred plants used as purifiers spiritually just as Tulsi (*Ocimum Sanctum*) is used in Hindu religious faith. When some clean water is put in a container and the leaves of *Tairel* tree (*Cedrela toona*) and *Pongphai* plant (*Dactyloctenium aegypticum*) are dipped into it, the water is treated to be holy water. It is believed in Sanamahism that when this holy water is sprinkled on any object by using the leaves of these two sacred plants the “Tairel” and the “Pongphai”, the object becomes sanctified spiritually.
7. A *Phambal* is an altar. It is a raised structure with a flat top, often shaped like a table that is placed facing the west as a seat for the Almighty God.
8. An *Eeratphu* is a culturally well decorated earthen pot containing sacred water and other ritual items inside it. It represents the Goddess *Malem Ema* (Mother Earth) who comes out of the body of the Almighty God.

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