

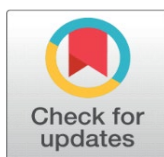
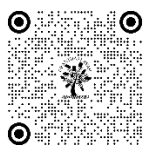
RITES & RITUALS ASSOCIATED WITH ANCESTRAL WORSHIP OF THE MEITEIS

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DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.3497](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.3497)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

Ancestral worship is a form of religious practice, which honours the deceased family members through various ritual offerings. The practice is rooted in the belief that ancestors continue to exist in a spiritual form and maintain a connection with the living, influencing their fortunes and well-being. This form of practice is intricate in nature and multifaceted phenomenon. It helps family and society to trace their roots to ancient times, shaping the very core of social, cultural, and political structures, a testament to the enduring power of heritage and cultural ethos. Ancestral worship remains an important aspect of many cultures today, and its continued practice reflects the enduring influence of tradition and cultural values. As a subject matter, it is widely studied across various disciplines, particularly in anthropology, history, and sociology. In the *Encyclopaedia of Psychology and Religion*, Kasi and Mathew pointed out that the term “Ancestor worship” was introduced by the renowned British Philosopher and Sociologist Herbert Spencer in the year 1885, and it refers to the practice of performing rituals to summon deceased relatives. The Salai (Clan) are known in Manipur since the centuries preceding the Christian era. The term Salai which literally means God of the lineage (Sa=Sagai=lineages, lai=God) is composed of number of lineages. A salai of the Meiteis was originally an ethnic group or tribe speaking a distinct language or dialect occupying a territory, having an autonomous principality under a ruler who was both a political chieftain and social head of the clan. In this backdrop the paper in a humble attempt to highlight some of the rites and rituals associated with the ancestor worship of the Meiteis.

Keywords: Ancestor, Rites, Rituals, Clan, Family

1. INTRODUCTION

Rites and rituals are the important ingredients of any religion. Like other religion, the cult of ancestors was also associated with elaborate rites and rituals. The rites and rituals carried out by the members of the ancestor worshipping society had certain peculiarities. In many cases, such rites consisted mainly of the making of certain offerings usually of food and drink on a fixed day and month. It has also been the practice of all the ancestor worshipping group of the Valley areas of Manipur (the state is located in the North-Eastern parts of India) that the making of offerings to these ancestors were conducted solely by the ‘Piba’ (head of the clan) of Meitei along with the members of his group. In short, a person who does not belong to a particular sagei(sub-clan) or salai (clan) was strictly prohibited to participate in the ancestral rituals. The main reason was that the rites had reference only to the ancestor of the particular group and the offerings were regarded as the sharing of the dead ancestor of the group and the living descendants. A member belonging to the ancestor-cult believed that he received his life, off springs and wealth with the blessings of his ancestor. If his conduct was not satisfactory enough, his ancestor would be wrath and stop giving him blessings thereby he would be fell upon by sickness or some other misfortunes.

2. DISCUSSION

According to Thiren Layat, offerings to the ancestors were said to be of three kinds, namely, 'Charot', 'Korat' and 'Morat'. Charot is the kind of rites in which human beings were sacrificed. Human sacrifice was then replaced by animal sacrifice known as 'Korat' in which animals such as cows, buffaloes, mithuns, cats and puppies/young dogs were offered during worship. Animal sacrifice was then finally replaced by another kind of rite known as 'Morat' in which only fruits, flowers and fishes were offered to the deities.

Charot according to Ibochouba was the earliest practice of human sacrifice. The practice was corroborated by a reference in another puya 'Lai Khunda' which stated that 'the nine Laibungthous ate human flesh, animal, fish and drank wine.' Korat or Karat meant, as given in Yabeerok and Thirel Layat as sacrificing of animals, like cattle, buffaloes, mithune, cats and young dogs. J. Shakespeare witnessed two interesting ceremonies which he had been seen with his own eyes, while accompanying the then Maharaja of Manipur, Maharaja Churachand. One at Santhong's Laiphram, where one buffalo, two pigs and a cock were sacrificed and another at Khaanachaoba's laiphram, here too, a pig was sacrificed. We also found references in Cheitharol Kumbada(royal chronicle) the practice of animal sacrifice in the Meitei society. King Kyanba (1467-1508 C.E.) offered a Mithun at the foot of Khari Ching (Khari hill), in 1470 C.E. for the favour of victory over Kabo Kyang (now in Burma). During the reign of King Khagemba (1597-1651 C.E.), we also found two other instances of animal sacrifices. In the first instance, in 1618 C.E., Marjing, a guardian god (lai)of the north-east direction, was appeased by offerings wild boar, dog, duck, hen and pigeon. In the other, in 1631 A.D. several animals, namely buffalo, goat, sheep, ox, pig, dog, geese, hen, pigeon, etc. of hundred each were sacrificed to a number of deities including Koubru, another god of guardian of the North-West direction, asking for long his life.

After the adoption of Hinduism in the first half of the 18th Century C.E. during the time of King Garibniwaz(1709-1748 C.E.), Morat or Marat, the offerings of fish, fruits, flowers, etc. which substituted the above two kinds of blood sacrifices, became a normal feature of worship of the lais among the Meiteis. These article, were strictly prescribed as laid down in the ancient Meitei text known as puya for each Salais. Let us look some of the examples. According to Thiren Meiram Leeba (ancient manuscript)

Name of the Clan

Ningthouja

Nganba

Moirang

Sarang-Leishangthem

Khuman

Luwang

Angom

Name of the fish

Ngatin

Sareng

Ngatil

Ngara

Ngatin

Ngamu

Sareng

As mentioned in the Sagei-Salailonpuya

Ningthouja

Angom

Luwang

Khuman

Moirang

Nganba

Sarang-Leishangthem

Sarengangangba

Sarengangouba

Sarengshangleinaba

Sarengamuba

Sarengarrangba

Ngangnalangba

Saren munalangba

According to ImoinuAhongbeeTungnapham

Khuman

Sarengamuba

Kha-Nganba	Sarengngangbalangba
Mangang (Ningthouja)	Sarengangangba
Angom	Sarengangouba
Luwang	Sareng napu

The above prescriptions revealed that sarenga kind of fish of different colours which suited of the different salai were offered as sacrifices. Sareng became one of the mandatory food items for the worship of ancestor. Likewise, each salai has its own fruits, during the veneration program to the ancestor many fruits were offered and some fruits may be left out, however fruits associated with each salai would be compulsory there. For example, according to Rajmohan were as follows: -

Name of the Clan	Name of the fruits
Luwang	Kihom
Mangang (Ningthouja)	Thamchet
Angom	Heiba
Khuman	Heikru
Sarang Leishangthem	Sholom
Khaba-Nganba	HeijangHeithum
Moirang	Heitag Kang-grou

Differentpuyashave given different fruit of each salai, but we may assume that each salai have one particular fruit which would be compulsorily offered during the time of offering to the ancestor. The knives used in the ritual of ancestor worship were known by various names, shape and size given below against the names of the salais;

Ningthouja	Chak-thang
Angom	Pukak-thang
Luwang	Tontumba (Maton-tumba)
Khuman	Tonkakpa
Moirang	Yemba-tok
Khaba-Nganba	Chin-naiba
Sarang-Leishangthem	Khunthok-thang

The shape of the knives meant for the different salais of the Meiteis were designed for that purpose. Like fruit, fish, knife, every salai has a distinctive colour of own. Apokpathounirol has given the origin of the salais such a manner that 'Angouba or white gave birth to Angom, Ashangba or Green, to Chenglei, Eeshing Aruba or blue to Luwang, SorarenMurangba (Arangba) or strips of black and white, to Moirang. Memanaba or dust grey, to Khaba, Imuraba or Black, to Khuman, and Angangba or red to Ningthem. Different writers have given slightly different colours connected with the seven salais as follows:

According to Kulachandra

Name of the Clan	Name of the colour
Ningthouja	Anangba (Red)
Angom	Angouba (White)
Luwang	Higok (Blue)

Khuman	Amuba (Black)
Moirang	Arangba (Stripe of black and white)
Khaba-Nganba	Ashangbalangba (Strips of Green)

According to Lalachand

Name of the Clan	Name of the colour
Ningthouja	Anangba (Red)
Angom	Angouba (White)
Luwang	Higok (Blue)
Khuman	Amuba (Black)
Moirang	Arangba (Stripe of black and white)
Khaba-Nganba	Ashangbalangba (Strips of Green)
Sarang-Leishangthem	Awaoba/Pana Langba (dust grey)

According to Rajmuhon

Name of the Clan	Name of the colour
Mangang (Ningthouja)	Ngouna Ngang-ngranaba (Twilight)
Angom	Angouba (White)
Luwang	Sana ahingbalangba (Gold)
Khuman	Higok (Blue)
Moirang	Ngounaashangbanalangba (Stripe of green and white)
Khaba-Nganba	Muna Ashangba (Deep Green)
Sarang-Leishangthem	Memnaba (dust grey)

According to Budhichandra

Name of the Clan	Name of the colour
Ningthouja	Anangba (Red)
Angom	Angouba (White)
Luwang	Higok (Blue)
Khuman	Amuba (Black)
Moirang	Napunalangba (yellow stripe)
Khaba-Nganba	Ashangbalangba (Strips of Green & white)
Sarang-Leishangthem	Sangna waoba (greenish grey)

Ancestors may also be evoked when the worshippers ask for the grant of specific wishes. For example, the ritual is to be performed for the purpose of granting of wealth, it is performed in the month of Inga (May-June), and it is performed in connection with granting of offsprings, it is held in the month of Langban (August-September), for long life in the month of Poinu (November-December). The Pure Ancestor Worship (ApokpaKhurumba) and its associated rituals may be categorised into three groups. They are the following

- 1) Salai Apokpa Khurumba (worship of clan progenitors)
- 2) Sagei Apokpa Khurumba (worship of sub-clan progenitors)
- 3) Phungga Apokpa Khurumba (worship of family progenitors)

Salai Apokpa Khurumba as the name implies relate to the worship of the apokpas of each of the seven salais of the Meitei social organization. The descendants of each salai worship their ancestor with appropriate rites on a fixed day and months of a year of the Meitei calendar (which is based/calculated on lunar system). The worshippers seek blessings from their progenitor for general prosperity, well-being and protection of the whole salai. As discussed above each salai venerates its apokpa (ancestor) by the offerings of particular fruits, flowers fish, animal etc. Thiren Meiram Liba Puya (ancient manuscript) and other puyas have given a comprehensive list of the various items to be offered to each Salai Apokpa along with the particular direction and laia associated with each salai.

Sagei Apokpa Khurumba: As a salai (clan) consists of hundreds sagei and their families it is not possible for a full participation of all the members. It is at this juncture that Sagei Apokpa Khurumba acquires great significance. Here, the Sagei Apokpa is evoked along with the Salai Apokpa, therefore, for all practical purposes Sagei Apokpa Khurumba emerges as the most widely observed rituals and thus representing the Meitei ancestral rites and rituals.

Phungga Apokpa Khurumba: Perhaps the close link between the dead ancestor and the living descendants are witnessed in the observance of the Phungga Apokpa Khurumba. Here, a family worships its immediate ancestors without the participation of anymore else outside the phungga group. Unlike Salai Apokpa khurumba and Sagei Apokpa Khurumba, the Phungga Apokpa Khurumba can be performed on any auspicious day. The day and month are, however, fixed according to the Meitei calendar if the family desires to pray for specific grants such as offspring, wealth etc.

The worship of the family ancestor was in a limited scale, that of the sub-clan was a little bigger but that of the Umanglai was very elaborated. The prescribed rules for ritual observances are followed strictly. The Maiba and Maibi as the ritual specialists are the main functionaries in the sagei apokpak hurumba ceremonies. All the participants in the ritual performance must be only the members of the particular sagei led by the 'Piba' and no outsider are permitted to join it. The whole ritual programme is similar with that of Lai Haraoba expect that the rites in the former must be completed in one day only. The main ritual of Sagei Apokpa Khurumba is performed at the phura (shrine) which is located at the courtyard of the Sagei Piba. Inside the phura is kept athinbi which represent mother and a khallong the father of each sagei which are both made of iron. The thinbi is kept buried in the ground while the khallong is kept over it above the ground. Each Sagei Piba will ensure the safe-keeping of these two items. If on account of any reason such as natural calamity or migration etc., where the thinbi and khallong of the sagei have lost and could not be able to traced, the two items will be replaced and kept in the phura accompanied by rituals conducted by the Maiba and Maibi officiating the ceremony. In the early period only the Thangjam sagei has the sole right to cast these iron items of thinbi and khallong for the whole community. The installation of thinbi and khallong has certain rules to be followed. A bearer is assigned to bring the two items from the place of casting to the phura who has to maintain strict silence throughout the journey. Any conversation required is done for the bearer by an attendant who accompanies him.

The main ritual of Sagei Apokpa Khurumba is the Lai Chaklon Katpa i.e., offering of food to the ancestor. The Maiba and Maibi are the two leading experts officiating the rituals. The pena (one stringed fiddle) singer accompanies the rite performances with the song of Ahonglon. The central theme of the song is 'hongnemse', (let us offer food). At the start of the ritual, the ancestors are evoked from the water. The Maiba and the Maibi accompanied by the pena singer perform the 'Lai Ikouba' or 'lai Loukhatpa' ritual from the river. It is an essential aspect of the Lai Chaklon Katpa ritual. The significance attached to this Lai Ikouba ritual is that the lai is now given life and the other rituals can now follow. She then invokes the lai by name. The Maibi then dances holding the ishaifus (cultic pot) of the Lainingthou and Lairemma facing the four cardinal points guarded by Thangjing, Marjing, Wangbren and Koubu. The piba usually carries the lai and the next the eldest male carries the lairema; the piba's wife and the wife of the next eldest male bear the ishaifus for the ikouba. Those who bear the lai must have an unblemished marriage line.

The next item was Maibi Laimang Phamba. This was a prophecy for the future life of the lineage. The Maibi started giving oracle, ringing her small bell. The oracle confined mainly to the affairs of the sagei. When all the ritualistic performance was over, a share for the evil spirits was given. When the meal was ready, the cooking pots for rice and fish were brought directly before the deity to observe the auguries. Four meals were arranged, three for the three ancestors and one for their protector. Except the piba and maiba nobody was allowed to participate the ritual function. Light was put off which was supposed the coming of the ancestors and taking the food. When the light was lit up the three meals which were supposed to have been taken by all the Gods were taken by the family members. One interesting feature observes is that all the remaining food and fruit articles offered earlier to the Apokpa are almost equally distributed among the families of the Sageis. Another important feature is that each and every family of the sagei makes it sure that every family member is present in the communal prayer and feasting. The leftover was buried in a hole so that animals

and birds etc. should not eat it. Thus, the annual ancestral ritual concluded with the feasting, exclusively, of the members of a particular salai. The hereditary patriarchal society had been represented in these functions. It gave the opportunity for social gatherings; developed morality and kinship system. It was a part of socio-religious activities.

3. CONCLUSION

Ancestor worship of the Meitei had far reaching significance. Worship of the family ancestor sowed the seed of morality and discipline in a family. Sooner or later a parent became god, so it cultivated in a child the idea of love and care for the parents. The worship of Sagei apokpa khurumba enabled to meet once in a year all the members of the sagei in the name of the ancestor worship and induced them to think for a moment that they all the lineages of the same parent or progenitor. Thus, it brought love and co-operation within asagei.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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