

Original Research Article

Priestesses in Ancient and Medieval Manipur

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: March 01, 2019
Accepted: March 25, 2020
Published: March 31, 2020
Volume: 2
Issue: 2

ABSTRACT

The priests (maibas) and priestesses (maibis) are the ritual specialists of Meitei society since time immemorial till today. No rites and rituals are complete without them in most of the ceremonies of the Meitei society. Thus, this paper traces their origin and their roles in ancient and medieval Manipur and the changes over a period of time. In short, it's about revisiting the ancient past by looking at their role of the maibis who have kept the ancient traditions alive for ages.

KEYWORDS

Maibis, Maibas, Ancient, Medieval, rites, rituals

Introduction

The history of Manipur starts from the year 33A.D. where a King called *Nongda Lairen Pakhangba* ruled for a very long time. This small kingdom called Kangleipak has a history which dates back to thousands of years with a written script of its own. In 18th century, the kingdom *Kangleipak* came to be known as 'Manipur' a sanskritised name given by King Bhagyachandra during the process of Hinduisation. Its history can be divided into three phases: the ancient phase starting from 33A.D till 14th century; medieval period from 15th till 18th; modern period from 19th till 20th century.

The history of Manipur has been associated with a certain class of religious people called the *maibas* (priests) and *maibis* (priestesses) who acted as guides, advisors to the King and were regarded as the religious head of its own indigenous religion called *Sanamahi*. They form an integral part of the society and polity of Manipur ever since time immemorial. Their role in ancient history of Manipur cannot be sidelined as every aspect of life was filled with religious influence. So, this article aims to have a short discussion and the roles of the priestly class during the ancient and medieval times.

Methodology

For this research paper, archaic texts known as *Puyas* are consulted. This bulk of literatures called the *Puyas* are many in numbers and they are written in ancient Meitei script. It talks about the life of the Kings, queens, the priests, the priestesses and the people at large. It also contains vast information on religious, social and political history of the monarchical times. However, the flip side of *Puyas* is that they are undated with unknown authors. Other than the *Puyas*, the royal chronicle called the *Cheitharol Kumpapa* which is the only dated source is used for this research paper. The accounts of British officers are also consulted for this paper. Also, other historical books constitute the secondary sources for this research article.

The role of the priestesses in ancient and medieval Manipur

It is generally believed that the *maibis* (priestesses) were in existence since the time of *Nongda Lairen Pakhangba*, the first historical King of Manipur. The *maibis* were the soothsayers, who advised the King and the public in general of any forthcoming dangers and suggested ways to avert them. They simply act as the medium between the gods and mankind by conveying the message of gods. The *maibis* or the priestesses owe their institution to a princess who lived hundreds of years ago (Hodson, 1908:109). Legend has it that princess *Panthoibi* was the first *maibi* who started the *Lai Haraoba* religious festival in ancient times (Kumar, 2014:250). Since then the institution of *maibi* or the tradition itself have been handed down to generations after generations which exist till today. Another historian S.N Parratt (2007) wrote that the priestesses deliver oracles from the deities after invoking them through offerings and rituals; they are also the preservers of the original religious traditions and an expert in traditional dance and songs. It is generally believed that *maibis* has existed much before their male counterparts and hence occupies a higher position in religious rites and rituals.

A woman becomes a *maibi* when she is possessed by a deity and she has to follow certain rules and the symptoms of possession can be recognized through certain behaviors. The possessed *maibi* has to undergo training for years under an experienced *maibi* to become a full-fledged *maibi*. During the training period, the *maibi* has to learn traditional song and dance and has to follow certain protocols unlike any other women. They are forbidden to eat some forms of fish, cannot use particular plants and trees as firewood while cooking and if they happen to do it then they suffer body ache, convulsions and uneasiness (Brara, 1998:137). After the training, a *maibi* has to register with the *Pandit Loisang* (College of priests) and then she becomes a regular *maibi* who can perform the rites and rituals in a proper manner. The *maibis* belong to three salais (clans): *Shanglen*, *Nongmai* and *Phura* and each clan's priestesses has different languages to communicate with the deity of their own clan (Brara, 1998:137). Contrary to the priestesses, the *maibas* or the priest hardly get possessed and if it does than the priest has to wear priestess clothes.

The first reference where the service of a priestess was sought by the King is mentioned in an archaic text called *Naothingkhong Phambal Kaba* where the coronation ceremony of King Naothingkhong (653-763A.D.) was conducted with elaborate rituals guided by a *maibi* (Singh,1983:49). Much later in the year 1074 A.D, a *puya* called the *Loiyumpa silyel* which is called by historians as 'The Ancient Constitution of Manipur' made a reference to their varied roles in society. According to this *puya*, they were assigned specific roles as physicians, midwives, religious and political advisors and as the only class that performed the rites and rituals associated with daily lives. Among all the deities, the nine sylvan deities (*umang lais*) of importance were worshipped and served by the priests and priestesses those days. A ritual called *Singkhai Hunpa* was prevalent during this time and it was a way to foretell an event by a priestess through certain methods known to them. Likewise, there were other rituals which were performed exclusively by the *maibis* as it is their domain.

The *maibis* played a very active role in society as well the political scenario of those days. They were consulted on various issues ranging from everyday lives to politics in the King's royal court. In ancient times, the *maibis* were an important part of the King's court and the King dare not disregard their sayings and predictions as it often turned out to be true (Brara, 1998:139). The priestesses were divided into different groups who work on different clans of the Meitei society. There existed a college of priestesses called the *Ametpa Loishang* in 1570 A.D during the time of King Mungyamba and this institute was exclusively for midwives and female physicians who fall under the category of *maibi* but does not perform the rites and rituals associated with any ceremony (Parratt&J.Parratt, 1997:333). They treated sick people through a kind of massage, an art which continues to exist till today (Parratt, 2007:57). Their services were sought by the King and the people as the Meitei society was deeply governed by specific rites and rituals of traditional belief system.

During the time of King Meidingu Khakempa (1597-165 A.D.) the help of a famous priestess called *Khabi amaibi* was sought in locating the reason behind the death of a seven-year-old prince and this particular event is

mentioned in many archaic texts like *Miyat Puya* and *sanamahi Laihui* (Kumar,2016:263). Since then there has been a number of recorded events in archaic texts where their service was sought on many occasions.

Results and Discussion

K. Singh (1985) wrote about Manipur's society that "Manipur's history is believed to be of religious belief. The influence of the *maibas* and *maibis* (priests and priestesses) and their divinations have been treated with considerable respect". This belief system where the *maibis* were consulted for important occasions at every stage of life formed an integral part and parcel of the Meitei society.

In spite of the references about the *maibas* and *maibis* in many archaic texts called *puyas*, the royal chronicle called *Cheitharol Kumpapa* makes a sporadic mention of the priests and the priestesses in its account. But the mention of *maibas* as compared to that of *maibis* became much more during the medieval and modern times of Manipur. The royal chronicle for the first time recorded an event of 1583 A.D where a *maiba* drank *yu*, an intoxicant while performing some religious rituals (S.N.Parratt,2005:60). Thereafter, events associated with *maibas* are recorded in the royal chronicle many times. From the beginning of 15th century, the *maibis* role seems to have declined and the popularity of *maibas* seems to have increased dramatically.

Conclusion

The status of the priest and the priestess greatly declined after the introduction of Hinduism in 18th century Manipur. Their roles were reduced and most of their tasks were taken over by the pandits post Hinduisation. The royal chronicle of Manipur recorded many religious conflicts during the 18th century where the religious leaders of Hinduism and *maibas* of ancient religion called Sanamahi clashed on various occasions. Hinduism prevailed over a period of time with the support of the state but the ancient religion was not discarded overall. What followed was a synthesis of two different belief systems and a huge change in the socio-political scenario of Manipur. Nevertheless, the *maibis* still occupy an important part in performing the rites and rituals of Meitei society till today though their roles have diminished with time. The *maibis* were at the top hierarchical position in ancient times and in the performance of religious rites and rituals, no one can actually replace them. Thus, the history of Manipur is deeply woven with the socio-religious history of Manipur where the *maibis* have been an indispensable part of the life of the people of Manipur.

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