

CUSTOMARY PRACTICE OF MEITEI PANGAL **(MANIPURI MUSLIM) IN MANIPUR**

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Abstract:

Meitei Pangal, started their settlement in Manipur from the reign of King Khagemba (1597-1652) which was recorded in the Royal Chronicles of Manipur called Cheitharol Kumbaba. They are the second largest community staying in the valley areas of Manipur, where the Meiteis are the largest community inhabiting in the Manipur valley. They are amalgamated with the Meitei society by marrying Meitei women. They considered Meiteilon (Meitei Language) as their mother tongue. They assimilated to the Meitei way of living though they are the follower of Islam and strictly following the Islamic code of conduct and the Islamic Personal Laws. The primary objective of this work is to study the society and culture of the Meitei Pangals of Manipur. The researcher is mainly focuses on the customary practices of the Pangal such as Marriage, birth and death. This work is largely based on interviews, Royal Chronicles (Cheitharol Kumpaba and Ningthourol Lampuba), Puyas (archaic manuscripts), foreigners' accounts, books, newspapers, magazines, souvenirs etc.

Key Word: Meitei, Pangal, Community, Society, Marriage, birth, death.

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From the historical accounts we know that Muslims have different nomenclatures depending on the place where they belong in this world. In China they are known as ‘Hui’, in Thailand ‘How’, in Burma (Myanmar) they are called ‘Panshi’ and in Manipur they are known as Pangal/Meitei Pangal. The word Pangal is derived from the word Bengal meaning the people who live in Bengal. In fact the Pangals were war prisoners captured by the Meitei king Khagemba in a war fought between king on one side and the allied force of the Bengal and the king’s own brother on other side in the year 1606 AD. The liberal king treated them well and were allowed to settle in Manipur by marrying Meitei women. Their descendents came to be known as Meitei Pangal¹.

The Pangals have been amalgamated with the Meitei society since the time of Khagemba. They have assimilated the Meitei way of living though they are followers of Islam. They follow the Islamic code of conduct and are bound by the Islamic personal Laws in their religious and ritual ceremonies, such as marriage, birth and death ceremonies. The present paper is primarily focussed on the customary practice and rituals of the Pangals in their marriage, birth and death ceremonies. The Meitei Pangal community are the second largest Meiteilon speaking group in the valley. They consider Meiteilon as their mother tongue. The Pangals are influenced by the Meitei socially and culturally though they follow the Islamic code of conduct in their religious ceremonies.

Birth

In the days of yore, when a woman is in labour an elderly woman called Maibi (mid wife) is engaged to help the delivery as there was no physician to be called in those days. The method of delivery for the mother is to lay with her head northward. This they did to ward off bad luck. When the child is born the navel cord is cut by the maibi with a sharp bamboo splinter called ‘Kabak’ by the Meitei Pangals. Hot water is kept ready and every requirement is made available for the purpose of delivery. The “Naopham” (placenta) was collected and put into a new earthen pot and buried on the right side of the courtyard if the child is male and if female it’s buried on the left side¹⁷.

Azaanand Eqamad: It is performed immediately after delivery. The newly born child is given bath with warm water and swaddled in pieces of cloth specially prepared well in advance for the

purpose and then the call of “Azaan” (Islamic call for prayer) is done by a respectable person he may be an old man or Maulavi or male member of the family preferably father of the child. This Azaan is recited into the right ear and Eqamad into the left ear. The Eqamad reads as:

Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar,
Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar
Asshaduallab la illahailallah,
Asshaduallab la illahailallah
Ashadaunmamuhammadarrasullullah,
Ashadaunmamuhammadarrasullullah
Hei alas-shila, Hei alas-shila
Heiyallalfala, Heiyallalfala
Kadakamatissala, Kadakamatissala
Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar
Asshaduallab la illahailallah, Asshaduallab la illahailallah.

It is believed that the sooner the “Azaam” and “Eqamah” are said before anything else is heard by the child, the better it is considered. Giving honey to the child is considered to be the tradition of the Prophet to taste sweet¹⁸.

During the time of parturition the mother and child are usually looked after by her parents, so she has to stay at least 40 days at her parental house. This period of time is known as “Meining Hippa or Meining Kunba”. In some cases “Meining Hippa” is done in husband’s house with limited regular visits of female members from the parental family of the mother. During these days, she has to remain confined to bed and consume simple food consisting mainly of boiled rice with a kind of indigenous salt locally called meitei thum. She eats boiled vegetables and dry fish for ten days. The personal ablution of mother is considered very important and it could be done either on 10th, 20th and 30th day. The last personal ablution is done after the completion of 40 days and this is called as “Chilla” by the Meitei Pangals¹⁹. After the “Chilla” the mother would drink a little “sharbat” (syrup) prepared with the ingredients of sugar, betal leaf, ginger and water and after preparation of the sharbat a well known person recites “Al Fateh” (Quranic verse) over the sharbat then drink by the mother. Now the mother and child could enjoin with other persons and then they could return back to her (mother) husband’s house²⁰.

Aqiqa or Hakkikat (loo Kokpa): The custom of Akika ceremony is performed after the 7th day of birth. It means “loo kokpa” (shaving head). The naming of the child is also done on this day. On this day the child’s head is shaved and the nails are cut. The weight of the shaved hair, nails are weighted and the same amount of gold is sacrifice to the poor’s. It is believed that by performing this sacrifice the child is protected from unwanted incidence or danger in his/her life. On this day the father of the child also made a sacrifice of animals, may be a cow or a goat in the name of god. If the child is male then he should sacrifice two cows or two goats and if a girl he should sacrifice one cow or a goat. The shaven head is massaged with a Kumkum oil (mixture of Jafran and water). Usually naming of child is done in Arabic language and it is prohibited to do it in Persian, Urdu or Manipuri languages²¹.

Sunnat Touba / Khanah Touba: This customary practice is done when the boy is at the age between 7-12, but mostly done below 10 years of age. The term “Sunnat Touba” is the combined word of two different languages; “Sunnat” (the trodden path) is an Arabic word, it denoted the practice of the prophet and “Touba” is Manipuri word meaning “to do”. Therefore Sunnat Touba means “doing the Sunnat/Sunnah” i.e. Circumcision. This practice is compulsory for Pangal boys and it is done by a specialist locally called ‘Napit’. Usually several boys are circumcised in a house of a ‘Leikai’. It is believed that performing Sunnah gives better health to the boys. After this a boy should take rest for 4/5 days and are not allow playing. The ‘Napit’ would visit them every now and then to see that they are healing well. During these days they (boys) are advised to take simple foods such as boiled rice, boiled vegetables with Meitei Thum and dried fish as well as they should avoid oily foods. Now-a -day with the advancement of medical facilities the Sunnah is done by doctors and medical practitioners at clinics, hospital etc.

Na Hutpa and Naton Hutpa (pierce of nose and ear): The Meitei Pangal girls pierce their nose and ears. There is no age limit for a girl to have her nose and ears pierced. It can be done from one year and even below one year. It is common to have the nose pierced on the left side. This is not related to religion but it is for wearing of luxurious ornaments and the ornaments worn on the nose is called “Nasika Chinba” and the ornaments worn on the ears is called “Sana Chinba”²². The practice of “Naton Hutpa” is to identity that the girl is from a Pangal community. On the

other hand 'Pangal boys' are not practicing "Na Hutpa" and Meitei and Tribal boys do this practice. This also identifies that whether the boy belongs to which community.

Tasmiya Khwani: Like other Islamic countries or states the Meitei Pangal children both boys and girls are sent to Masajit or Maktab to learn the dos and don'ts and manners of Islam and Quran. This practice is called "Tasmiya Khwani". When they are 4 years old, it is compulsory to know and learn every part of Islamic religion. They may go to Masajit or Maktab with their elders of the family or may hand over to the Maulavis or Munsis or Qazis. The Meitei Pangal called their teachers as "Miyazi" or "Miyashab". At first the children learn to read the sentence "Bismilla Hir Rahama Nir Rahim" (we are starting learning with the humble and sympathetic name of Allah). And then they learn Arabic and Urdu. Then they further learn "Kalima", "the process of Namaz", "reading of Quran". Both the boys and girls learn the "Fasting of Roja" from the age of 8-11. They are advised to read "Quran". They enjoined the "Sahery meal" at mid night and "Iftar" after sun set and also enjoined "Esha Namaz" and "Tawaric Namaz" with their elders²³.

Tawiz or Zantra: "Tawiz" is locally called "Zantra" is usually worn by every communities of Manipur. "Zantra" is a small Kaboch (small iron hollow pot with cap) and it is hung commonly by black threads and worn in any part of the body such as arm, neck, waist. It is believed that by wearing "Zantra" the child can protect or prevent from devils and certain disease like epidemics²⁴.

Marriage

Marriage among the Muslim is a civil contract. Essentially it is a relation of love, based on spouse willingness to have the union, and it is supposed to strengthen faith, and to further the cause of Islam. It is known as 'Nikah'². As a follower of Islam the Pangals in Manipur follow Islamic practices in marriage. The marriage system of Pangals is a combination of Islamic Law and Manipuri culture³. Marriage is compulsory to all the boys and girls who are at the puberty stage. They assimilate various social and cultural ceremonies of the Meitei which do not violate the Islamic law.

MM Ahamed⁴ mentions that there are certain restrictions on marriage. Such as-

1. Marriage without witness

2. Marriage with a man who already had four wives.
3. Marriage with the woman who was within the Iddat period.
4. Marriage their girls with different religious boys

There are also certain prohibitions for Muslims to marry any women by the Islamic Law. A man can marry any girl or women except somebody's wife, his mother, his father's sister, his sister, step mother and daughters, his sister's daughter, his son's wife or wives, his wives' daughters (who are born to other husband), his wife's or wives sisters (at the same time), his foster mother (who were sucked him), and other women who are nursed by his foster mother⁵. Since they have assimilated the Meitei way of living and customs, they do not generally marry their close relatives or clan members. So exogamy rather than endogamy is the predominant system. In the pangal society marriage between clan members are strictly forbidden and not popular. It is believed that marriage between the same sageis or clan members resulted in adverse consequences⁶. The prevalence of such custom is considered to be the influence of the Meiteis who follows the system of exogamy. It is said that during King Charairongba's time, 'Maraimayum clan' was exterminated for such an offence except an unborn child⁷. A Rahamand supports this point of view by saying that in the Meitei Pangal society no matrimonial alliance is made within the same Sagei (clan) which is also the influence of the Meitei custom on the Pangals⁸. In other Muslim countries, marriages are still arranged through parents, but there is some room for consultation with the intending bride and bridegroom⁹. However the Pangals in Manipur practice two types of marriage they are

1. Hainrga luhongba (marriage by arrangement)
2. Chellaga luhongba (marriage by elopement)

Marriage is called 'Luhongba' in local. Earlier hainarga luhongba is common in the Pangal society and chellaga luhongba is looked down by the society¹⁰. In deed 80% of marriage is through elopement now-a-days (chellaga luhongba). In chellaga Luhongba, the boy usually helped by his friends left home with the girl, which is not approved by the society.

Hainrga luhongba or arranged marriage is the most approved form of marriage in Manipur right from ancient days to present day. It is observed that the contract is mainly made between the parents of the bridegroom and the father or the brother of the bride. When proposal is made, the

girl's family enquires about the groom and his background. In the selection of bridegroom, rational considerations like personality, occupation, characters and other details are considered and reflected on. After this the bride's male relatives talk to the groom's family. Then the bridegroom's family come to see the girl and if they are impressed, they commence negotiation for 'Mehr' (dower money)¹¹.

Marriage by elopement though not permitted by Islam takes place through the mutual decision of the boy and the girl, not necessarily with the knowledge of the parents. Marriage by elopement has become a common phenomenon among the Pangals in Manipur which is influenced by the Meitei Practice of 'Nupi Chenba'. In an elopement the men takes the woman to a friend's house and spend the night there. In the morning groom's father with his male relatives or friends go together to the woman's residence and makes a proposal for marriage. If it is acceptable the Nikah was performed on the second night after the elopement either at the residence of bride or groom. In case of the negative response, the marriage is differed till an agreement is reached¹².

In case of Nupi hainarga luhongba or arrange marriage: Nupi Haiba is the first step in the arranged marriage, which is also practiced by the Meitei Pangals. In this, the guardian of a bridegroom seeks information through a third person locally known as 'Tuti', whether the girl is willing to marry the former's son. If the guardian of the bride expresses willingness, a proposal for marriage is made by the guardian of the bridegroom. The proposal of marriage is called 'hajaba' (request) or 'Mou-thiba' (mou-daughter in law, thiba- to seek). After mou-thiba the guardian of the bridegroom come for the second time to the bride's residence on a fixed date and settle the 'Mehr' i.e. dower money with guardian of the bride. The Mehr or Dower money paid by the boy's family to the girl's family is an essential feature of Muslim marriage¹³.

There are certain customary functions performed prior to the marriage. Such as-

1. Yumjang pot puba
2. Kwa khaiba
3. Sageikwayenba
4. Panukapuba

Yumjang pot puba: This is the first step to enter matrimonial alliance between male and female. This is the introducing phase of the both sides, on this the bridegrooms family go to brides house for the first time by bringing sweets, betal nuts, seasonal fruits, tangra (plate made by banana

leaf). The sweets and other items are kept in a box called 'firuk'. Usually firuk is brought by young women folk.

Sagei kwa yenba (distribution of the betal nuts among the girls clan): After the Yumjang pot puba ceremony, a date is fixed and the bridegroom's family again go to the bride's house, on this day the bridegrooms' side brought betal nuts and distributed them among the relatives and close friends of the girl.

Kwa khaiba (cutting of betal nut): After the settlement of engagement another date is fixed for the performance of 'Waroi pot' (final agreement). According to A.Rahaman, Pangal term Kwa khaiba is equal to the Meitei term Waroi pot puba¹⁴. Salam Irene says that, 'the kwa khaiba (cutting of betal nuts into four pieces) is performed on a date agreed to between the parents of bride and bridegrooms. In this function the invitees gather around and from amongst them one or two old ladies removed the skin of the green betal nuts and cut them into four equal pieces. If the pieces of the nut are found without any defect, it is considered as a good woman. Then the betal nuts with leaves along with sweets brought by the bridegrooms' side are distributed to all the people assembled for the ceremony. This function is performed between the bride and bridegroom's parents prior to the marriage of their children as a symbol of their agreement to their declaration¹⁵.

Panuka puba: On the preceding day of the marriage 'Panukapuba' which is akin to the Meiteis 'Heijing potpuba' or 'Heijing kharai puba' is performed in the afternoon. It can be carried out on any suitable day before marriage or on the day of marriage according to the convenience of the parties¹⁶. On this day, the amount of the Mehr is fixed; it is fixed according to the current price of gold. Mehr is the backbone of both the marriage and divorce. The bride's party brings the tan (bread made by rice flour), kabok (parched rice), kabok afaba (a kind of parched rice), laphoi laphang (branch of banana), yubi (coconut), sweets, heikru (gooseberry), heining (hogplum), betal nut and other seasonal fruits. Heikru (gooseberry) and heining (hogplum) are the compulsory fruit item, sometimes even leaves are used when fruits are not available.

Death

The Meitei Pangals who live in the Manipuri society are believers of Islam so they adopt the Islamic way of disposal of the death body. They bury their death body and this is called “Daphan” or “Leinol Chanba” by the Pangals (Muslim)²⁵. The dead body should be kept straight on a bed without mattress facing west, i.e. to the direction of the Khah or Meca. If the deceased is women, she is stripped off all ornament from her body. Then the body’s chin is loosely tied by a cloth with the head. This is called the “Khadangchet Thaba or Punba”²⁶. The body is covered with a white cloth, called “Kafan phi” by the Pangals²⁷. If the person is death when he/she was at Hajj or Umrah with the dress “Eharam” then his whole body would not be cover and should be open the face²⁸. His/her body is surrounded by relatives and friends. They offer dua (supplication) for the departed soul. His/her kaphan phi covered body is kept at a convenient place in the house. So that those who came to see him/her at last time may get sufficient glimpse of the departed person²⁹.

Shibagi Pao Laothokpa: This is one of the important traditions of the Pangals to announce the death news; this is locally called “Shibagi pao laothokpa”. The method of announcement is done through people to people orally in the early days; now with the advancement of technology they inform the news through telephone or microphone. On this announcement they should clearly announce the exact timing of the “Daphan” or “Leinol Chanba”. This is the tradition of the Pangal that when they get the deaths news as soon as he/she should say that “Inna Lillalu Wa Inna Raziun” (we are born for the Islam and we would back to him)³⁰. It is a tradition that the relatives are attain at the “Daphan” ceremony.

Mourning and Condolence is strictly prohibited to mourn loudly. A woman can do condolence for three days when her relative died, but when her husband died she can mourn for 4 months and 10 days. This period is called “Iddat”. “Iddat” is also done when a woman got divorced but the duration is 3 month and is also performed by pregnant women but the duration is not fixed. During “Iddat” women are restricted to wear new dresses and luxurious ornaments and she should live in seclusion and confined to the house. A widow is allowed to re-marry after the “Iddat” (i.e. 4 month and 10 days)³¹. Pangals have a tradition called “Chak Puba” literary meaning Chak means boiled rice, Puba means borrow. The deceased family were not cooked the

food but those relatives who attain the Daphan were have to take food and this is feed by the neighbours. The deceased family are fed at least three days by their relatives and neighbours. This is a very beautiful tradition of the “Pangals”.

Ritual Bath of Decease: This is very important and compulsory ritual practice of the Pangals. It is done outside or inside the house according to the sex. If the deceased is male than bathing is done outside the house and if female it is done inside the house. A husband may bath his deceased wife. Pangals believe that those involved in bathing the death receive god’s blessing³². For bathing, the dead body should lay on a bed and its (bed) four sides are dug up to drain the water or made loose the surface to absorb the water. The water would be boiled with a plant known as “Sangbrei”(Pogastemon- purpurascens) or the “borroi” (ziziphusmauritiana) leaves and shower and washed clean the body by this warm water³³. Using sangbrei is not because of any religious meaning attached to the plan but because the plant is considered to possess medicinal properties for cleansing the body and give out fragrance. Islam emphasises cleanliness. Then the body is wiped dry with a piece of cloth then apply camphor powder and perfume oil on hand and face to give a good fragrance. Then the body is kept in a narrow slightly bed like wooden structure, called “kei”. The Pangals were not using coffin. After that the Imam wrote the verse of Quran by fragrance oil on the forehead of the deceased. His/ her face is lastly shown to their relatives and friends and then the whole body is covered by a “Ngaobong” (a white large cloth) with the kei. The kei is brought by the son and relatives of the deceased for daphan. This is a peaceful procession where everybody goes in silent and says Janaja Namaz. For Janaja Namaz the head of the corpse is placed westward in the direction of Meca and feet northward. If the deceased is male then the Imam should stand near the head to recite the Namaz and if female he should stand near the chest. The Imam is followed by the friends and relatives during the recitation of the Namaz. However in the recitation of Janaja Namaz women and children are restricted to attend. MM Ahmed opines that the restriction of the women is only because of the soft hearted, impatient and mournful nature of the women and it is not related with religion. Janaja Namaz is the prayer that bag to Allah for forgive the sin done by the corpse when he/she was alive. After completion of the Janaja the body is brought to kaber and place carefully with head pointing westward. The upper portion of kaber was coved by bamboo sticks and “laa” (green banana leaf) or plastic sheets are placed above to prevent the earth from filtering down

into the body. And then the participated peoples at the daphan fill the up the grave or kaber with handful of soil. Once the kaber is fully earth covered, a plant usually either sangbrei or borroi is planted above the kaber and watered and the surface is made smooth and a shape of dome is also made on the kaber. After that the people present there were offer dua and return³⁴.

Quran Khani/LikChatpa: This ceremony is performed by reciting the whole verse of Quran for the departed soul on Friday or on any other day as soon as possible after death. For comfortable the recitation the verses are divided into 30 small parts and it was distributed to all the people present there. Everybody should read their share may be short or long and instead of reciting the verses “Lik Chatpa or sonba” is done by old members who are unable to read verse. The term Lik-Chatpa/sonba is Manipuri word (language) (Lik=Tasbi, Chatpa=go through, Sonba=to recite), it means “to go through the Tasbi or to recite Tasbi”. Therefore it is also known as Tasbisonba by the Pangals. There should be a limited numbers of “Lik” and if the number is 128000 then it was believed to be perfect. On the day there should be light refreshment or feast is arranged for those who present the ceremony.

MangamTouba: MangamTouba is another ceremony performed by the Pangal related with the death from the early times for the deceased soul rest in peace at Janat (heave). The term Mangam means ‘Duty’ and Touba means ‘to do’. It is a Manipuri language but Islamic tradition. Usually the family members arranged a special design of meal/feast for their love one that left the world. The ceremony is like the “Tarpon” of Meiteis, on this the invitees including nearby poor, friends, and relatives were attained³⁶. Usually it is done 40 days after the death was occurred. The meal is served on the Laa (Masu paradisiacal) on the abaxial surface of the laa. Afterthe meal is over, a joint dua foe the departed soul is offered. This is also called as shreni touba by the Pangal. There is no religious meaning attached to this practice³⁶. Kaber Jajarat touba or chatpa: This is another ceremony performed by Pangal. Family peoples are usually go to the kabestan to offer dua for departed loved one. This is known as “Kaber Jajarat touba or chatpa” (going for Kaberjajarat). On this a prayer or dua was done for their sin done by the decease person and pray to Allah for forgiven³⁷. These are the important rituals done³⁷ by the Meitei Pangal related with death. Pangal believed the life after death. They believed that they could get peace after death by doing dua (supplcation) to Allah even if they did sin when they alive.

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