

Maibi Cult in Manipur Through the Cinematic lens of “Ishanou”

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ABSTRACT:

‘Ishanou’, an internationally acclaimed Manipuri feature film directed by Aribam Syam Sharma deals primarily with the phenomena associating with *Maibi* cult among the Maitei/Meetei society. Being a film that captures reality in frame, it entails the real stories, lives and emotional encounters of numerous individual *Maibis* within a single cinematic frame. It is the story of *maibis*- and is not simply a dialogue between macro and micro, society and individual, cultural placement and individual positioning of a *Maibi* in the socio-cultural milieu of the *Meitei/Meitei* society-it is more than that. This paper examines the origin of *Maibi* and its philosophy as appropriated in the Meitei/Meetei belief system. Besides, it tries to entail the functions, roles and responsibilities of a *Maibi* within the socio-cultural and political context while examining the adversities faced by a *Maibi* at individual level. Further, the paper examines the changing position of *Maibi* within the political discourse of the state when it shifted from being an erstwhile kingdom to democracy post merger to the Indian union. Finally, the paper illustrates relevance of ‘Ishanou’ in our understanding of the *Maibi* cult.

Keywords: Maibi, Manipuri film, Aribam Syam
Sharma, Meitei/Meetei

INTRODUCTION

Aribam Syam Sharma’s Manipuri Feature Film ‘*Ishanou*’ (1990, translated as ‘The Chosen One’) is conferred with the status ‘Cannes Classics’ in May, 2023, marking another golden milestone for Manipuri cinema. Prior to

this, it was bestowed with 'Best Feature Film in Non-scheduled Language' at 38th National Film Festival, Government of India and was selected in the category – The Official Selection (Un Certain Regard) for Cannes Film Festival, 1991 (Sharma, 2016). With its recent origin, having completed a journey of only fifty years by 2022, Manipuri films succeeds in holding viewers' breath, connecting lives universally through its captivating narration, reflecting upon the lives of its people, entailing their stories through the silver screen. This particular film navigates the world of *Maibi* cult, which is tightly associated with the socio-religious and cultural world of *Meitei/Meetei* community, by examining the life of a young married women *Tampha* (the female protagonist played by Anoubam Kiranmala) and capturing the events surrounding her life. In a subtle manner, the film delineates and illustrates the reality of the *Maibi* cult that has been constructed and commemorate by the society within the *Meitei/Meetei* believe system. After all, '*Ishanou*' serves as a film that introduces the audience worldwide about the institution of *Maibi*, its socio-religious role and position within the *Meitei/Meetei* society of Manipur in one hand and the personal quest, journey and sacrifice of being a *Maibi* at the individual level on the other. Within this broad understanding, this paper tries to examine the world of *Maibi* within the socio-cultural landscape of Manipur with '*Ishanou*' being considered as the case for reference. Analyzing the content as portrayed by the National Award winning film director Aribam Syam Sharma in his film '*Ishanou*', the paper also incorporates primary as well as secondary data through personal interviews and available literatures to understand the philosophical underpinnings of the *Maibi* phenomenon.

MAIBI CULT AND ISHANOU:

Among the *Meitei/Meetei* community, inhabiting principally in parts of the Indian state – Manipur and Assam, and also meagerly at parts of the neighboring countries of Myanmar and Bangladesh, the socio-religious and cultural milieu holds a strong essence in providing meanings to the life of an individual or the group where the roles and responsibilities of a *Maibi* is indispensable. In the *Meitei/Meetei* belief system, *Maibi* has a close association since the time of creation of this universe. Referring to the sacred Text '*Amaibagi Masil*', post the creation of the universe, the supreme creator, *Kuru*, made the God *Sanamahi*, God *Pakhangba* along with Goddess *Nongthangleima* to act as *Maibi*; to move around and reach out at

every possible corner of the created universe and fulfilled in supplementing and creating elements that further requires for the growth, development and prosperity of the inhabiting beings. Also, they act as a medium to communicate between the deity and the laity (Singh, 1997; Bidur, 2017). Thus, *Maibi*, in the Meitei/Meetei belief system, is an act and also a medium which is gender neutral by its origin and have created as to fulfill the assignments that could support the living beings to live in a better way. In the sacred text '*Panthoibee Naherol*', mentions are made for male Gods, namely *Khana Chaoba*, *Sendong Moriba*, *Kouba Angang*, *Thangmai Maar Ningthou*, *Kainou Chingkheirakpa* etc who have served as a *Maibi* (ibid). According to Ngangbam Kumar Maibi (1978), during the reign of *Noangda Lairen Pakhangba* there were three male and nine female *Maibi*. The act of being a *Maibi* and fulfilling its needful activities has been continued to be performed by Gods and Goddesses till the reign of *Meidingu Khagemba* according to the sacred text '*Ningthourol Shingkak*' after which human learned, performed and follows as a *Maibi* (Singh, 1997). Thus, since the beginning, *Maibi* have continued to act and perform ceremonies to save living beings, especially mankind, from being harm and ill fated. During the process, the varied role taken and activities performed by them gave *Maibi* different titles and thus comes to know by different names which includes - *Korou Nongthou Maibi Wachumbi*, *Leipak Maibi Hanbi*, *Khomlen Mangchangthoubi*, *Lainung Maibi*, *Laihou Maibi*, *Laiphanbi Lairambi*, *Sharik Chomjao Subi*, etc.

Maibi, being an institution that holds the socio-religious and cultural steering of the Meitei/Meetei society continued to function coherently within the general community since time immemorial. They are treated with respect, and hold a special position within the society due to the traditional authority society sanctions to *maibis*. Inspite of this however, no one, in general, wants their sons or daughters or self to become a *Maibi* (Chaoreikanba, 2023 & Mongsaba, 2024), an idea that is also used as the epigraph in the film '*Ishanou*'. Drawing to the common life of the general public, the film entails about a small middle class family of *Tampha* living in a village of Manipur along with her mother, husband and a daughter. Getting tighten on managing to buy even a used two wheeler while also financing the family needs, *Tampha's* mother even borrowed money with interest from local groups. The film in a subtle manner succeeds in narrating

the family bond, relations, social conditions and issues like corruption to concretize the background of the narration. Being a couple in their early phase of married life, one day Tampha while visiting a place to spend some leisure time along with husband, felt an unusual attraction for a wild flower (here *Vanda Coerulea Griff*); so plucking and adorning that flower transported Tampha to a different world, not controlled by consciousness. In the *Meitei/Meetei* belief system, adolescents and young people are usually warned not to pluck a flower, from/in an unknown location, and smell or adorn over one's ear (which is called as *Chinba*) simply because it looks beautiful and attractive. It may act as a medium for an individual to come in contact with Lais¹ or other spirits (Chaoreikanba, 2023). Thus, Tampha, come in contact and being embodied with the supernatural being, starts having developed behaviors and visions unaware of her own self. Symbolically, the condition is captured by the scene where Tampha left her *enaphee*², as it being the primary attire associated with a married woman in the *Meitei/Meetei* tradition. Being aware of the symptoms, the family tried performing ritualistic prayers for 'unbecoming' a *Maibi* that however went into vain.

According to Chaoreikanba (ibid), becoming a *Maibi* happens through one of the three usual routes, first, one who has come into contact with *Lai Nungshit*³ (for which Gunindro, 2020 uses the term 'Chosen by God'); second, one who can receive it through hereditary and last, one who learns the required skills and knowledge of a *Maibi* through proper training under the guidship of a senior *maibi*. The last type popularly known as *Maiyoknabi Maibi* generally learn the knowledge, skill and processes of rituals which primarily associates with pregnancy, childbirth etc and is still consider as a type of *Maibi*. However, the first and second types of *Maibi* also need to learn a proper means and way so as to exteriorize the unknown embodiment and vision that resides within through '*Ema Guru*', an another expertise *Maibi*. Finding and choosing one's '*Ema Guru*' is not a conscious decision but is directed to the becoming-*Maibi* through their visions or dreams (Memchoubi, 2006 & Chaoreikanba, 2023). In, 'Ishanou', Tampha left the home in death of the night in an unaware state of her

1 Gods and Goddess

2 A cloth wrapping around the upper part of the body

3 Spiritual medium

action and landed to the home of ‘*Ema Guru*’ where formal streamlining to the cult is taught by residing at the home of the ‘*Ema Guru*’. Tampha rejected the attempts made by husband to return to their family where the ‘*Ema Guru*’ reconciled to make her return after she can skillfully handled and go along with her newly found self. “Women who become Maibis are, in fact, deviants who do not conform to the standard Meitei social roles” (Sircar, 1984). Distancing herself from the socially defined role of a woman – a wife, a mother, a daughter, and instead immersing to her newly found world of *Maibi* cult and its practices, in the film, made Tampha’s husband as well as mother broken and helpless. The particular scene in the film where Tampha’s husband made a visit at *Ema Guru*’s home, as an attempt to take her back, but left even without meeting her, from their gate in the state of despair, symbolized the concrete but invisible wall that exist between the two world – the profane and sacred. According to Memchoubi (2006), anyone, whether man, women, elder or child can become a *Maibi* through the ‘Calling’ or learning. *Maibis* performs ritualistic prayers for the growth, development and prosperity at the level of – nation, village, groups and individuals. While they are known for being the medium to communicate with the deities, they also perform propitiatory rites. In the Meitei/Meetei society, *Maibi*’s oracle and its corollary rituals form an integral part before initiating a major event or an act to result a positive outcome (Sicar, 1984; Singh, 1997; Memchoubi, 2006; Gunindro, 2020; Chaoreikanba, 2023). Thus, *Maibis* have a primary role and position in Meitei/Meetei social life. However, according to Chaoreikanba (2023), not to become a *Maibi*, many family tried to suppress ‘the calling’ through rituals, in which unsuccessful attempts or inappropriate manner lead to ‘*ngaona-pheina naba*⁴’ of a becoming-*Maibi*. In many other, family performs rituals so as to push back the immediate engagement and respond to ‘the calling’ until the person reach certain ‘matured’ age where s/he gets loosen from the worldly domestic engagements like child birth, childrearing etc. It is all due to the strict way of life, in terms of food, dressing and daily ritualistic activities, which a *Maibi* has to follow differing from the general masses in one hand; and also the engagement of *Maibi*’s in socio-cultural and

4 Becoming and behaving in a socially unacceptable manner like a mad person; Gunindro (2020) use the term ‘Shaman’s sickness’ and ‘Call of the spirit’

religious rituals like *Lai Haraoba*⁵ that distant a *Maibi* from family, physically as well as psychologically; and also has to performs ritualistic dances and songs at public arena that is considered unappreciable for many families in the Maitei/Meetei social tradition. Such a level of dissonance can be understood from the act that “after the death of a *Maibi*, her family performs a special funeral ceremony called *Chukshaba*, so that no other *Maibi* is born in the future in the family” (Sircar, 1984). Thus, *Maibi* cult as a cultural and religious entity has a prime importance in the Meitei/Meetei belief system but has a contradictory degree of acceptance at the personal level. In *Ishanou*, on the returning of Tampha from *Ema Guru*’s home, her mother accepted her but with a state of despair and loss. To her extreme sadness, Tampha found her husband and daughter left their home with consent of her mother for their daughter’s better future. According to Aribam Syam Sharma (2022), it is generally believes that daughters of a *Maibi* has higher possibility of becoming a *Maibi*. Thus, that apprehension made Tampha’s husband left with their daughter to keep the child distant from Tampha. Thus, becoming a *Maibi* forces one to meet multiple forms and levels of separation and angst at personal level when the phenomenon itself, in case of becoming *Maibi* under the first two ways as mentioned, is of no personal choice. Even while searching for the actress to cast the role of the main protagonist, Tampha, the team had met difficulties as people hesitant to act as a *Maibi*. In support of the team comes the belief that people born to the families of Brahmin and Sana⁶ are not prone to becoming a *Maibi* that resulted in the casting of Anoubam Kiranmala, a Brahmin, to act as Tampha who later got “Special Mention” at the 38th National Film Festival, Government of India for the same portrayal (Sharma, 2022).

Understanding the sacredness of the cult, the team of film ‘*Ishanou*’ treated the subject, not simply as a story of another film but with much care and seriousness of its elements and philosophy. Consultations were made in minute details with exponents to the field that includes Ngangbam Kumar Maibi, Pandit Ngariyanbam Kulachandra, Khangenbam Mnagi etc besides engaging real *Maibis* while filming the scenes (Sharma, 2016). Even, the main protagonist, Anoubam Kiranmala was made to stay along with

5 Annual ritualistic celebration of the Gods and Goddesses at localities/villages that continues for days or even for months

6 Person born in the households belonging to Royal clans

and getting trained from the *Maibis* rigorously for almost two months on dances and songs of *Maibis* and also to enable in portraying their peculiar behavior and manner (Sharma, 2006). It was a film that captures reality in frame. It entails the real stories, lives and emotional encounters of numerous individual *Maibis* within a single cinematic frame. So, it is the story of a community and their engagement with the masses within a general societal framework. Sociologically, 'Ishanou' as a film is not simply a story but a dialogue between macro and micro, society and individual, cultural placement and individual positioning of a *Maibi* in the socio-cultural milieu of the *Meitei/Meitei* society.

The impact of 'Ishanou' can be examined from different perspectives. It can be understood as the celebration of the unique culture and way of looking towards the world by a particular group of people. While, this film can also be studied for its excellence in the application of cinematic techniques and treatments. Besides, 'Ishanou' can also be examined on the role that women play in the cultural landscape of the land. Mongsaba (2024) stated that 'Ishanou' entails the deep and universal emotion of emptiness, love, longingness and separation faces by a woman – as a mother and also as a wife, when she is drawn to a path where conscious decision and choice has no value. However, at the individual and social level, Aribam Syam Sharma (2022) stated that 'Ishanou' as a film succeeds in bringing certain changes upon the perspectives and understanding of the general public towards *Maibi* and *Maibi* cult. He explicitly mentioned of an instance where a husband of *Maibi* thanked him and shared the positive changes people of their locality starts having towards the life of his wife (a *Maibi*) and family after seeing the struggles a *Maibi* faces through the depictions as made in the film. Here, Chaoreikanba (2023) stated that in Manipur, people most commonly came across *Maibi* in *Lai Haraoba* celebration where they sing and perform dances as part of the rituals. However, people who aren't aware of the ritualistic philosophy but taken *Lai Haraoba* just as another festival considered the act of a *Maibi* as performances for the sake of entertainment and enjoyment resulting towards a misleading connotation upon *Maibi*. Such a degrading position of *Maibi* in the *Meitei/Meitei* society all starts with the advent of democracy as a form of government. While Manipur was an erstwhile Kingdom, *Maibi* has a prominent and respectable presence

and thus even had a separate Ministry called *Maibi Loishang*⁷ (as a part of *Pandit Loishang*). This *Loishang* plays an important role at different levels – Kingdom, village, group, clan and individual, in almost all aspect of life under strict supervision and code of conducts. However, with the abolition of Monarchy, the power of the traditional institution of *Loishnag* also gone and thus emerges variations in the philosophy as well as practices and even in conduct of rituals at practice. With no proper regulations, *Maibi* started functioning at individual level which ultimately shown the path of its degradation. Further, the rise of modern education system with due importance being given upon scientific reasoning further sidelined the traditional practices and value system which were closely associated and uphold by the Maibis (Memchoubi, 2006; Chaoreikanba, 2023).

CONCLUSION

Traditionally, in Meitei/Meetei society *Maibis* are recognized as ritual specialists and had a high status in state affairs where the kings even follows their oracle before an expedition or during the period of crisis and also performs propitiatory rites (Sircar, 1984). Philosophically as well as functionally, in the Meitei/Meetei believe system, the origin of *Maibi* traces back to the creation myth where they are assigned to fulfill all the tasks required for the better habitation, growth and development of mankind. They continued to uphold the ritualistic aspects and safeguard the socio-cultural elements of the community at different level. However, at the individual level, *Maibis* needs to follow a strict way of live and have to made sacrifices distancing from the general masses. Thus, even though it is a respectable position, no one wants their family member to become a *Maibi*. ‘Ishanou’ as a film is mindfully scripted by Maharaj Kumari Binodini drawing the world and the angst surrounding the life of a *Maibi*. As a film, ‘Ishanou’ succeeds in making general public inform, aware and educate about the *Maibi* and the function they serves in the ritualistic and cultural milieu of the Meitei/Meetei believe system. The perfect depiction and unique portrayal of the complex philosophy with human touch makes ‘Ishanou’ a classic movie not only in India but also to the world cinema. Derek Malcolm (The Guardian, January 24, 1991) described ‘Ishanou’ as, “Perhaps the best film in the panorama, largely because it tells a good story

7 A separate Ministry for *Maibi*

with great honesty and lack of guile, came from the State of Manipur” (Kongbam, 2021). With the film being conferred ‘Cannes Classic’ in 2023, ‘Ishanou’ continue to hold the spectator with its screening being circulated in major International Film Festivals with the latest screening is scheduled to be made on The Academy Museum of Motion Pictures in Los Angeles on March 11, 2025 under the theme “Emotion in Colour: A Kaleidoscope of Indian Cinema”.

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