

Ritualistic Medicine: A Cultural Perspective on Traditional Healing in Manipur

Heisnam Budhichandra Singh

ABSTRACT

The ritual practice known as “**Thou Toubá**” has been a cornerstone of the traditional healthcare system of the Meetei community, deeply rooted in their cultural and spiritual beliefs. Ancient manuscripts, or **Puyas**, authored by **Maichou** (traditional scholars), attest that the Meetei have long possessed a unique system of healthcare and medicinal knowledge, shaped by their ethics and worldview. According to these texts, the Meetei believe that the world is governed by imperceptible forces categorized as **Gods, Spirits, and Evil Forces**. Malevolent spirits are thought to cause diseases, epidemics, and misfortunes affecting humans and other living beings. The Meetei hold that appeasing these spirits through rituals can bring blessings and prosperity, making ritual practices an essential part of their healing traditions. Traditional healers play a pivotal role in diagnosing ailments and determining the influence of these spirits. Before administering herbal treatments, healers perform ritual ceremonies aligned with the prognosis, ensuring harmony between the spiritual and physical realms. The Meetei also attribute many afflictions to cosmic energies, known as “**Grahagee Dasha**,” emanating from planets, satellites, and stars. To counteract these influences, healers combine ritual rites with medicinal remedies, reflecting the holistic nature of their healthcare system. This integration of **rituals, therapy, and herbal medicine** underscores the Meetei belief that occult powers are the root cause of human suffering.

As part of the tantric tradition, incantations and spiritual practices form a vital component of Meetei medicine, emphasizing the interconnectedness of the physical and metaphysical worlds. This article highlights the enduring

significance of ritual practices in the Meetei traditional healthcare system, illustrating how they remain inseparable from their medicinal approach. The study relies on **primary and secondary sources**, including ancient Puyas, scholarly books, and articles, to explore the cultural and historical dimensions of these practices. By examining the role of rituals in Meetei healthcare, this work sheds light on the community's rich heritage and its continued relevance in contemporary times.

Key words: Ritualistic medicine, Traditional Healthcare, Herbal, Therapy, Meitei.

INTRODUCTION

Manipur, located in the northeastern region of India, is a land rich in cultural and spiritual traditions. Among its diverse indigenous practices, traditional healing systems have remained deeply embedded in the daily lives of the people, particularly the Meetei community. These systems emphasize a holistic understanding of health, viewing disease not only as a physical disturbance but as a disruption of the spiritual, social, and natural harmony. Ritualistic medicine refers to healing practices that combine spiritual rituals, symbolic acts, and herbal remedies, aiming to restore balance between the human and the supernatural world. In Manipur, these rituals are intertwined with cultural, religious, and ethical worldviews, reflecting a cosmology where health is maintained through continuous negotiation with divine and unseen forces.

This research seeks to explore the enduring practices of ritualistic healing among the Meetei people. It aims to address: How are ritual practices performed within traditional medicine? What cultural and spiritual beliefs underpin these practices? How does traditional healing coexist with or resist modern medicine? Adopting an ethnographic and qualitative approach, the study relies on primary sources (field observations, interviews with healers) and secondary sources (ancient manuscripts, scholarly publications). An interdisciplinary framework drawing from anthropology, cultural studies, and medical humanities informs the analysis.

TRADITIONAL HEALING SYSTEMS IN MANIPUR

The traditional healing systems of Manipur, particularly among the Meetei community, present a complex interplay of cosmological beliefs,

natural medicine, and ritualistic practices. Rooted in ancient knowledge documented in *Puyas* (sacred manuscripts), Meetei healing traditions view health as a dynamic balance between the human body, natural forces, and the spiritual realm. Practices such as *Thou Toubu*—the act of ritual appeasement—are fundamental to the healing process. Illnesses are not simply regarded as biological phenomena but are often attributed to disturbances caused by malevolent spirits, cosmic forces (*Grahagee Dasha*), or ancestral displeasure. To address these ailments, traditional healers employ a wide array of methods, combining herbal medicine, spiritual invocations, divination, and ritual sacrifice. The diagnosis process itself reflects a unique fusion of physical and metaphysical assessment. A healer examines the patient's pulse, observes bodily signs, and interprets dreams or divine messages (*Mangtak*) to identify the cause of the illness. Healing is holistic—aimed not only at treating symptoms but also at restoring cosmic and social equilibrium.

ROLE OF TRADITIONAL HEALERS (MAIBAS AND MAIBIS) IN MANIPURI SOCIETY

In Meetei society, traditional healers known as *Maibas* (male) and *Maibis* (female) hold revered positions as custodians of sacred knowledge and mediators between the human and the divine.

- Maibas are primarily responsible for diagnosing physical and spiritual afflictions. Trained in pulse-reading techniques, herbal pharmacology, and ritual performance, Maibas perform a wide variety of tasks from leading private healing sessions to conducting public rituals during festivals like *Lai Haraoba*.
- Maibis, on the other hand, embody spiritual roles as priestesses, often specializing in trance-based healing, sacred dances, and invocations of deities. Their role is critical during large-scale communal ceremonies, where they channel divine forces and ensure the correct performance of intricate rituals.

The authority of Maibas and Maibis comes not just from technical skill, but also from their moral integrity, spiritual discipline, and extensive knowledge of oral traditions, myths, and healing chants. In many communities, becoming a Maiba or Maibi involves years of apprenticeship, ritual initiation, and sometimes a divine calling revealed through dreams or signs.

Traditional healers are also counselors, mediators, and moral guides, consulted for issues ranging from personal illness to community crises.

INTEGRATION OF ANIMISTIC BELIEFS AND HINDUISM IN HEALING RITUALS

The traditional healing practices of Manipur exhibit a fascinating syncretism, blending indigenous animistic beliefs with later Hindu influences.

- **Animistic Foundations:** Indigenous Meetei cosmology is rooted in the belief that the world is inhabited by myriad spirits (*Umang Lai*, *Lam Lai*, *Apokpa*) who must be respected, appeased, and honored through rituals. Illness is seen as a disruption of relationships between humans and these spiritual entities, requiring ritual negotiation and offerings to restore harmony.
- **Hindu Influence:** With the historical introduction of Hinduism in the 18th century, particularly Vaishnavism under King Pamheiba, new elements such as prayers to Hindu gods and astrological consultations were incorporated into the healing system. However, the integration was not a wholesale replacement but a creative adaptation, where local deities and Hindu gods coexist in ritual performances.
- **Cultural Synthesis:** Rituals like *Khayom Lakpa* (offering divine food) and *Saroi Khangba* (animal offerings to ward off evil) reflect this blending, where ancient nature-worship is performed alongside Hindu prayers. Sacred spaces like *Sanamahi Kachin* (household shrines dedicated to the Supreme God Sanamahi) further demonstrate this layered spirituality.

Thus, traditional healing in Manipur is not static but dynamic—continually evolving through cultural exchanges while preserving its core emphasis on spiritual balance, ritual precision, and communal well-being.

RITUALISTIC ELEMENTS IN MANIPURI TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

The healing practices of the Meetei community are deeply ritualistic, reflecting a view of illness as not just a physical disorder but a manifestation of cosmic or spiritual imbalance. Ritualistic elements are inseparable from treatment and represent a sacred dialogue between humans, nature, and the divine. They act as vital interventions to negotiate with unseen forces, realign energies, and restore health.

A. SACRED RITUALS AND CEREMONIES IN HEALING

Central to Manipuri traditional medicine are sacred rituals and ceremonies that aim to appease gods, spirits, or ancestral forces believed to be responsible for illnesses. Some of the major ritual forms include:

- **Lai Haraoba (“Rejoicing of the Gods”):** A grand communal ritual that serves both a curative and preventative purpose, celebrating the spirits that safeguard the people and their environment. During Lai Haraoba, Maibas and Maibis perform sacred dances (*Laiching Jagoi*), songs, and prayers to invoke divine favor, heal communal illnesses, and bless the land.
- **Ushin Toubas (Offering a Substitute):** In this ritual, a living creature such as a cock, duck, or fish is symbolically offered to the gods in place of the afflicted person. The belief is that the suffering of the patient can be transferred onto the substitute, restoring the patient’s health.
- **Chaban Thaba (Offering Cooked Rice and Idols):** This ritual involves offering specially prepared rice and flour idols to appease spirits causing the disease. It is often accompanied by chanting invocations and prayers by the healer.
- **Nahei Nashengba (Purification Ritual):** Sprinkling water infused with sacred plants like *Tairen*²⁸ and *Pungphai*²⁹ on the patient to cleanse their spirit and purify the mind, reinforcing mental strength and physical healing.

These rituals highlight the performative aspect of traditional healing, where chants, symbolic acts, and offerings collectively create a sacred therapeutic environment.

USE OF SYMBOLIC OBJECTS (PLANTS, ANIMAL SACRIFICES, SACRED CHANTS)

Symbolism permeates every aspect of Manipuri ritualistic medicine. Objects used in rituals are not mere props but are imbued with sacred significance:

28 Scientific name of Tairen is (*Cedrela toona*)

29 Scientific name of Pungphai is (*Dactyloctenium aegyptium*)

Sacred Plants:

- *Tairen* and *Pungphai* grass are considered spiritually potent. Used for sprinkling holy water and purifying spaces, these plants symbolize healing and divine blessing.
- *Khoiju*³⁰ (aromatic leaf) and *Leikham*³¹ are burnt as incense to drive away malevolent forces and to create a sanctified healing environment.

Animal Sacrifices:

- In rituals like *Yelhing Thaba* and *Sharen Chanba*, animals (such as hens, pigs, or fish) are offered to appease divine forces. The sacrifice serves as a physical manifestation of gratitude, repentance, or petition for healing.

Sacred Chants and Incantations:

- Chants, known as *Mantras*, are recited during rituals to invoke divine beings, narrate the mythological origin of the ailment, and command spirits to release their hold over the afflicted. These chants are rhythmic and are believed to have vibrational power that influences the spiritual realm.

Every object and act in the healing process carries symbolic meanings related to cosmic order, spiritual protection, and human–divine relationships.

THE CONCEPT OF “LAIKHURUMBA” (DIVINE INTERVENTION IN HEALING)

“Laikhurumba” is a central belief in Meetei traditional medicine—the idea that successful healing requires not only medical intervention but the favor or intervention of the divine.

- Illness is understood as a disruption in the cosmic or spiritual balance, often caused by offending deities, angering spirits, or failing to perform necessary rites.
- Healing rituals thus seek “Laikhurumba”—the divine acknowledgment and active intervention needed to cure the patient. It is not enough to physically treat symptoms; the metaphysical causes must be addressed through specific offerings, prayers, and negotiations.

30 Scientific name of Khoiju (*Plectranthus ternifolius*)

31 Scientific name of Leikham is (*Goniothalamus sequepetalis*)

For instance, in the case of *Lai Taiba*, a ritual is performed to reach an agreement with the spirit believed to have invaded the patient's body, requesting its departure in return for offerings and homage. Similarly, during serious illnesses, rituals like *Khayom Lakpa* and *Sharen Chanba* are conducted to seek mercy and blessings directly from the gods. Without "Laikhurumba," no treatment is considered fully effective, regardless of the skill of the healer or the strength of the medicine. This concept encapsulates the Meetei understanding that true healing is both a physical and a deeply spiritual process, requiring active divine grace.

CULTURAL AND SOCIETAL PERSPECTIVES

Understanding the traditional healing practices of Manipur requires examining the broader cultural, societal, and religious frameworks in which these practices are embedded. Healing is not an isolated medical act but a communal, spiritual, and moral event that reflects the values and cosmology of Manipuri society.

A. Community Beliefs and Perceptions of Ritualistic Healing

In Meetei society, health and illness are interpreted collectively rather than individually. Disease is seen not merely as a physical affliction but as a sign of spiritual or cosmic imbalance affecting both the individual and the community. Ritualistic healing, therefore, serves a dual purpose: restoring the health of the patient and reestablishing communal and cosmic harmony. Community members often view the success of a ritualistic healing not only in terms of the patient's recovery but also in the symbolic reaffirmation of traditional values, social cohesion, and the reaffirmation of faith in the spiritual world. A patient's illness is often believed to be a symptom of a broader disruption in community life—such as a forgotten ritual, the anger of ancestral spirits, or a breach in moral conduct. Moreover, healing rituals provide a public space where communal fears and anxieties about health, death, and misfortune are collectively addressed. Festivals like *Lai Haraoba* are both healing and celebratory, creating communal solidarity and reinforcing the cultural identity of the Meetei people.

B. Comparison with Modern Medical Practices—Conflict or Coexistence?

The advent of modern medicine has created both tensions and opportunities for traditional healing systems in Manipur:

Areas of Conflict:

Modern biomedicine often views illness strictly through a biological lens, leading to scepticism about the spiritual explanations and ritualistic practices of traditional medicine. Healthcare policies frequently neglect or marginalize indigenous practices, labeling them as “unscientific” or “superstitious.”

Areas of Coexistence:

In reality, many Meetei people today navigate between both systems, seeking biomedical treatment for physical symptoms while continuing to perform rituals to address perceived spiritual causes. A patient may visit a doctor for medicine and simultaneously consult a Maiba for a ritual ceremony.

Cultural Pragmatism:

This pragmatic coexistence reveals an adaptive strategy where traditional healing is not abandoned but evolves, maintaining its relevance in contemporary life. It suggests that for many in Manipur, health is multifaceted, requiring attention to both bodily ailments and spiritual disturbances.

Thus, instead of a strict opposition, the relationship between modern and traditional medicine in Manipur often manifests as a complex, dynamic negotiation.

C. Gender Roles in Traditional Healing (Maibas as Male Healers vs. Maibis as Female Shamans)

Gender roles are significant in shaping the practices and authority within traditional healing systems:

Maibas (Male Healers):

Maibas are typically trained in the technical aspects of diagnosis, ritual leadership, herbal medicine preparation, and astrological readings. They are responsible for performing pulse readings, conducting household purification rites, and leading major sacrificial rituals.

Maibis (Female Shamans):

Maibis hold powerful spiritual roles as intermediaries between the human world and the divine. They are often considered “chosen” by divine forces and undergo years of spiritual training and initiation.

Maibis lead sacred dances, spiritual trances, and major festivals like *Lai Haraoba*, channeling the presence of deities through their bodies.

Gender Complementarity:

Rather than a hierarchy, Maibas and Maibis embody a complementary system where masculine and feminine energies are both essential to the healing process. This reflects a broader Meetei cosmology where balance between opposing forces—male/female, human/divine, natural/supernatural—is crucial for harmony and health.

In sum, gender roles in traditional healing are both culturally prescribed and spiritually significant, ensuring that the sacred practices of health and healing are balanced and complete.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Analyzing ritualistic medicine in Manipur requires a theoretical framework that highlights the cultural, symbolic, and psychological dimensions of healing. Drawing from anthropology and cultural theory, this approach views traditional Manipuri healing practices through the lenses of ritual studies and medical anthropology. Victor Turner's concept of liminality reveals how healing rituals act as transformative spaces where patients symbolically transition from illness to health, while Claude Lévi-Strauss's insights into the logic of symbolism show how rituals like Ushin Touba and Chaban Thaba structure experiences of disease and uncertainty. Medical anthropology further frames illness among the Meetei not merely as a biological phenomenon but as one deeply embedded in spiritual, cosmological, and moral contexts. These perspectives emphasize that ritual healing is less about the biomedical cure and more about restoring cosmic balance, social order, and personal meaning.

Beyond theoretical interpretation, the efficacy of Manipuri healing rituals lies in their psychosocial, symbolic, and communal power. Rituals offer patients a sense of agency and reassurance, reinforcing communal ties and identity while stimulating psychosomatic healing responses through emotionally charged, sensory-rich experiences. Moreover, these practices are rooted in indigenous knowledge systems that integrate ecological wisdom, spiritual cosmology, and oral tradition. The careful use of local medicinal plants and the oral transmission of healing knowledge reflect a deep connection to both the environment and cultural identity.

Although modernization threatens these traditions, contemporary revival efforts underscore the importance of preserving ritualistic medicine as a vital and evolving cultural heritage, deserving of respect and serious scholarly engagement.

CHALLENGES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Despite its rich cultural significance and demonstrated efficacy within its sociocultural context, ritualistic medicine in Manipur faces substantial challenges. The rapid spread of modernization, urbanization, and globalization has led younger generations to favor quicker, pharmaceutical solutions over traditional, time-intensive healing rituals. Traditional knowledge transmission, once passed orally from Maibas and Maibis to apprentices, is weakening due to declining interest and socio-religious commitment. Additionally, the lack of institutional support from healthcare policies and the persistent stigmatization of indigenous practices as “unscientific” have marginalized traditional healers, eroding their community standing. Environmental degradation, particularly deforestation, further threatens the availability of sacred and medicinal plants essential to healing practices, disrupting the material foundation of traditional medicine.

However, these challenges also open pathways for revitalization and integration. Traditional healing practices could be incorporated into complementary health systems alongside biomedicine, addressing psychosocial and spiritual dimensions often overlooked by modern healthcare. Community health models could formally recognize traditional healers as health advisors, especially in rural areas, while interdisciplinary research into herbal medicine could validate and enhance the scientific understanding of indigenous knowledge. Cultural therapy programs rooted in traditional rituals could also support mental health and social cohesion. To preserve and promote ritualistic medicine, policy measures such as official recognition of traditional healers, documentation and archiving of ritual knowledge, the establishment of educational programs, conservation of medicinal plants, targeted funding, and promotion of cultural tourism are crucial. Through sensitive and respectful approaches, Manipuri traditional healing can not only survive but continue to thrive, offering future generations profound cultural and therapeutic wisdom.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that ritualistic medicine in Manipur is a deeply ingrained and resilient system of healing that transcends the purely physical aspects of health. Rooted in the cosmology of the Meetei people, traditional healing practices seamlessly integrate spiritual, psychological, and social dimensions of well-being. Through rituals like *Ushin Toubá*, *Chaban Thaba*, and *Lai Haraoba*, communities reaffirm their connection to ancestral spirits, deities, and natural forces. Traditional healers—Maibas and Maibis—serve not only as medical practitioners but also as spiritual mediators, cultural custodians, and social leaders. Their work highlights the holistic understanding of health as an intricate balance between the human, the ecological, and the divine.

Despite modern pressures, ritualistic healing continues to adapt, showing remarkable resilience through community festivals, hybrid medical practices, and cultural revival efforts. This underscores the fact that traditional medicine is not a relic of the past but a dynamic, evolving system still relevant to contemporary society. Ritualistic medicine is more than a healing practice; it is a living expression of cultural identity, collective memory, and spiritual worldview. It embodies the Meetei people's ethical principles, ecological wisdom, and cosmological narratives, serving as a bridge between the material and the spiritual worlds. By participating in healing rituals, individuals are not only cured but also reintegrated into their social and cosmic orders. This underscores the profound role of ritualistic healing in nurturing a sense of belonging, continuity, and moral grounding within the community. Moreover, these practices challenge dominant biomedical paradigms by offering alternative ways of understanding illness and health, emphasizing relationality, symbolism, and spiritual consciousness.

Given the increasing threats to traditional knowledge systems, urgent efforts are needed to document, preserve, and revitalize ritualistic healing traditions. Future research could explore comparative studies across different Naga and Manipuri tribes, investigate the pharmacological potential of traditional herbal remedies, and assess how ritual healing contributes to mental health resilience in indigenous communities. Interdisciplinary studies combining anthropology, ethnomedicine, psychology, and ecology would provide a richer understanding of the manifold dimensions of Manipuri healing traditions. By safeguarding and respecting these

indigenous systems, we not only protect cultural diversity but also expand the global knowledge of health, healing, and human flourishing.

References:

- Birchand Singh, K. (2017). *Manipur Maiba*, Imphal.
- Hedacklon (Unpublished Manuscript)
- Hemchandra, C. (2014). *Numit Kappa*, Uripok Naoremthong, Imphal.
- Hemchandra, C. (2014). *Poreiton Khunthok*. Uripok Naoremthong, Imphal.
- Hemchandra, C. (2017). *Masilne*. Uripok Naoremthong, Imphal.
- Ibungohal Singh. L. And N. Khelchandra Singh (2015). *Cheitharol Kumbaba*. Imphal, Manipuri Sahitya Parishad.
- Jogendrajit, Singh, (1963). *Shida Heedak*, Imphal, 1963.
- Kanglei Shanglen Puba Puya (Unpublished Manuscript)
- Khepalon (Unpublished Manuscript)
- Kullachandra Singh, N. (1980). *Mihun Langon*, Lamshang.
- Laihaton Lambuba (Unpublished Manuscript)
- Manikchand Singh, K. (2013). *Chengleirol*, Digital Printers, Keishampat, Imphal.
- Manikchand Singh, K. (2014). *Sanamahi Laihui*, Khurai Konsam Leikai, Imphal.
- Meetei, S. B. (2011). *Meetei Ningthourol*. Imphal.
- Sharma, B. K. (1989). *Ningthourol Lambuba*. Imphal.
- Shingligi Maram (Unpublished Manuscript)
- Singh, A. (1960). *Amaiba*, Imphal.
- Singh, C. (1975). *Khulem, Loiyumba Shinyen*. Imphal.
- Sorarel Macha Khunkumba (Unpublished Manuscript)
- Taoroinai Yangbi (Unpublished Manuscript)