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Religious Syncretism in Manipur in the 18th Century

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Abstract

Marking the 18th century as a significant socio-cultural and ideological transformation, the religious tradition of the Meitei community began to interact closely with the expanding influence of Vaishnavism. Production of a gradual and complex blend and syncretism can be visible in the reign of King Charairongba (r. 1697-1709) as an initial phase. Rigorous development of the religious and ideological structure by King Garibniwaz (r. 1709-1748) was consolidated through comparative policies, helping stabilise and integrate Vaishnava traditions with those of the Meitei community by King Bhagyachandra, who ruled Manipur between 1759 and 1798. Religion acts as a powerful element within society and has become closely intertwined with the exercise of political authority. Through the patronage and regulation of religious practices, the monarchical system influenced aspects of the kingdom's social and cultural order through rituals associated with birth, marriage, and death, the celebration of festivals, and the ideological foundations of kingship. Such developments and syncretism significantly influenced the political scenario of the Manipur kingdom. The paper employs historical methodology to examine the major aspects of religious syncretism and assimilation as a tool to strengthen the royal authority and society during this period. Drawing from the available primary and secondary sources, the research paper seeks to explore the motivation and historical significance behind these developments in the 18th century carried out by King Garibniwaz and Bhagyachandra. The paper also argues the interaction between traditional Meitei practices and Vaishnava Hindu elements, which produced a distinctive and hybrid religious tradition unique to Manipur.

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Introduction

The processes of cultural assimilation have been considered central to the evolution of complex societies, which are built through networks of interactions. Human communities are historically developed through the encounters of absorbed reinterpretations. Similar to the material culture, belief systems, literary forms and ideologies circulate across regions, contributing to the cumulative growth of civilisation. Robert Redfield, in this regard, argues that cultures are not static entities but continuously reshaped through interaction and exchange with other cultural systems.[1] This insight highlights that cultural lacunae are often filled through selective borrowing and adaptation to a society's needs rather than through passive imitation. Such processes are rarely uniform; instead, they produce layered and hybrid formations of culture that retain traces of both continuity and transformation. The present state of Meitei religion and cultural identity is the result of continuous interaction between pre-Hindu indigenous religious system and external influences, most notably forms of Vaishnavism. The reigns of Pamheiba (Garibniwaz) (1709-1748 CE) and Chingthangkhomba (Bhagyachandra) (1759-1798) represent critical junctures during which the process of religious assimilation intensified and acquired a more institutionalised character.

Rites Of Passage

The rites of passage of the Meitei community, as seen in the present form, portray a historically layered synthesis of indigenous ritual practices and Vaishnavite elements, producing a distinctive and structured cultural formation. This religious formation created new ritual meaning, symbolic associations and frameworks that were not fully present in either pre-Hindu Meitei practices or in the received Vaishnavite traditions. In this sense, Meitei rites of passage display a creative process of cultural re-composition, wherein external influences were selectively appropriated and re-signified within an existing cosmological and social order.

1 Robert Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture: An Anthropological Approach to Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 20–40.

The process of syncretism was neither instinctive nor socially uniform. It acquired particular momentum and systematisation in the 18th century under the active royal patronage, especially during the reigns of Pamheiba and Bhagyachandra, during which Vaishnavism was elevated to a position of political and ritual centrality. The royal court played a pivotal role in institutionalising this new forms of ritual practice, codifying norms, and disseminating them. It should also be recognised that the consolidation of these syncretic forms extended well beyond the 18th century. The 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed the further standardisation and social diffusion of these practices. It was facilitated by expanding networks of religious specialists, textual circulation, and increased interaction with broader Hindu cultural spheres. By these periods, many of the hybridised rites had acquired the status of standard tradition, often retrospectively naturalised as integral to Meitei identity.

Birth Rituals

In the pre-Vainavite Manipur, childbirth was mediated through ritual specialists and symbolic acts which highlighted the relationship between the human body, lineage and the sacred landscape. While the presence of influences in Manipur can be traced back to the fifteenth century, it was only from the eighteenth century onwards that these influences began to effect substantive modifications in the domain of social and ritual practices. An illustrative example of this transition can be witnessed in the sphere of birth rituals, particularly the observances associated with the sixth day after childbirth. A clearly visible process of syncretism is present here, where pre-existing Meitei ritual structures were not replaced but rather reconfigured through the incorporation of Vaishnavite elements.

In the indigenous Meitei tradition, the sixth-day ceremony after birth, referred to as *Eepanthaba* or *Yupanthaba*, is a significant post-natal rite with deep historical roots. This ritual is centred on invoking the blessings of the goddess *Pitai-Khomdaibi* and is performed by a *Maibi* (Female Priest). The elaborate assemblage of ritual objects required for the ceremony reflects a symbolic economy grounded in fertility, indigeneity and auspiciousness. Items such as the *yangkok* (a bamboo winnowing tray), *foudang fou* (a basket of paddy), specific combinations of fruits, flowers, and food items, including *kaboknachal*, *ngamu phumlou* (roasted fish), and *ngaree* (fermented fish),

collectively signify abundance, continuity and the embedding of the newborn within a cosmological order tied to land and lineage.[2]

The recitation of *pena*[3], such as *Panthoibi Luhongba*, *Lei Langba*, and *Khamba Pokpa,* formed an integral component of the ceremony.[4] From the eighteenth century onwards, however, this indigenous practice underwent a process of expansion and modification through the incorporation of Vaishnavite ritual forms, most notably the *Swasti Puja* that invokes *Swasti Devi*, considered within the Hindu pantheon as a deity associated with well-being and destiny that incorporates a range of ritual characteristic of Brahmanical practice. Introduced under the broader ambit of state-sponsored Hinduism, this ritual was performed alongside *Eepanthaba*, thereby producing a composite ceremonial structure. Unlike the latter, which is officiated by a *Maibi*, the *Swasti Puja* is conducted by a Brahmin priest, marking a shift not only in ritual content but also in the authority of sacred ceremonies. A Brahmin priest chants Sanskrit mantras, prepares a *janma kuthi* (horoscope), and ties a sacred thread.[5] around the infant's wrist.[6] The material assemblage for this ritual, comprising items such as a coconut, sacred thread, lamp, betel nut and leaf, and an earthen tray, reflects a different symbolic order, one that is aligned with pan-Indian ritual conventions rather than native to the land.[7]

At the same time, the process of syncretism has evolved in the retention and adaptation of local elements within this newly introduced framework. The incorporation of *waree leeba* and *lairik thiba-haiba*[8] demonstrates how Vaishnavite textual traditions are incorporated into the existing performative practices. Similarly, the act of arrow-shooting by the maternal uncle during the *Swasti Puja* suggests the persistence of indigenous kinship symbolism within the restructured ritual. The absence of this element in earlier textual references

2 Moirangthem Nilima Devi et al., "Beliefs and Practices of Pre-Natal and Post Natal Rituals of the Meiteis in Manipur," *International Journal of Advanced Research (IJAR)* 13, no. 05 (2025): 449.

3 A traditional string instrument for the Meiteis.

4 Makhonmani Mongsaba, *Manipur Sanskritida Pena* (Imphal: Angomningthou Preservation & Documentation Centre, Uripok Achom Leikai, 2010), 70.

5 It is an act signifying ritual protection and incorporation into a broader Hindu cosmological framework.

6 Moirangthem Nilima Devi et al., "Beliefs and Practices," 449.

7 *Ibid.*

8 They are the forms of narrative recitation involving the Mahabharata and Ramayana.

indicates that such features were likely incorporated later, which can be taken as an ongoing process of localisation rather than a fixed ritual template.

Rituals in Marriage Ceremony

The processes of religious assimilation that reshaped Meitei birth rituals in the eighteenth century are equally prevalent in the domain of marriage, where indigenous norms were restructured through engagement and contact with Vaishnavite practices. As reflected in early narrative and ritual texts, Pre-Hindu Meitei marriage customs reveal a structure yet culturally distinct set of practices grounded in local cosmology, kinship, and material exchange. Accounts, *Panthoibi Khongul* and *Naothingkhong Phambal Kaba,* provide valuable insights into these earlier forms and indicate the existence of established ceremonial sequences before the advent of Brahmanical influence. Particular ritual stages such as *Waroipot Puba*[9] and *Heijing Kharai Puba*[10] are in the indicative system in which alliance-making was ritually codified and socially approved. The references in the great text *Nongban Pombi Luwaoba* and *Panthoibi Khongul* to the exchange of items such as traditional *yu* (rice beer) and meat further highlight the centrality of commensality and reciprocity in indigenous marriage practices. Such offerings were not merely symbolic but constituted essential components of social bonding and ritual obligation. Significantly, however, there is no indication in these early sources of the use of floral garlands, which is an element that has become integral to contemporary Meitei marriage ceremonies. The performative dimension of marriage was likewise marked by the presence of *pena* ritual traditions. Songs such as *Panthoibi Luhongba, Nongbal Ponbi, and Luwangba Nongkhong Koibi* were performed in marriage ceremonies, embedding the ritual within a narrative and mythological framework that linked the union to culturally resonant archetypes.[11] These performances reinforced the sacrality of marriage while simultaneously preserving collective memory through oral transmission.

The eighteenth century, however, marked a decisive shift in the ritual configuration of marriage with the growing influence of Vaishnavism under royal patronage. During the reign of Garibniwaz, elements associated with

9 It is a form of formal confirmation of marriage.

10 A pre-wedding Meitei traditional ceremony where the groom's family visits the bride's home with gifts, formally asking for her hand.

11 Mongsaba, *Manipur Sanskritida Pena*, 71-72.

the Ramanandi tradition, particularly an early form of *kirtana* called *Bangdesh,* were introduced.[12] These developments were further systematised and refined under Bhagyachandra, who is credited with the institutionalisation of *Nata Sankirtana* as a formalised devotional and performative tradition. Over time, *sankirtana* came to occupy a central place not only in religious observances but also in life-cycle rituals, including marriage and death ceremonies. This extended Vaishnavite devotional culture into the fabric of everyday social life.

One of the most visible areas of this syncretic transformation is the adoption of the *kundo* (*Jasminum multiflorum*) garland in marriage ceremonies. While the use of the floral garland is a widespread feature of Hindu rituals, commonly referred to as *varamala* or *Jaimala*, its adaptation within Meitei society took on a distinct and unique form. The preference for *kundo*, an odourless and unassuming white flower, suggests a process of selective appropriation and adaptation wherein external symbols were reinterpreted in accordance with local aesthetic and cultural sensibilities. The association of the flower with purity and simplicity may have contributed to its acceptance. Mention can be made about its mythological linkage to Vaishnavite traditions, particularly narratives involving Lakshmi and Vishnu, which provided an additional layer of religious legitimacy. Similarly, the practice of circumambulation, specifically, the bride circling the groom seven times, is another instance of Hindu ritual incorporation into Meitei marriage ceremonies. While such practices are characteristic of broader Brahmanical traditions, their inclusion within Meitei marriage ceremonies reflects a pattern of ritual adaptation and modification rather than wholesale adoption. These elements were not merely transplanted but were integrated into an existing ceremonial structure, which coexisted with indigenous practices.

Death Rituals

The death rituals in Meitei society present one of the most striking instances of ritual transformation and systematisation in the eighteenth century. While indigenous mortuary practices were diverse and flexible in earlier periods, the advent and consolidation of Vaishnavism under royal patronage led to the gradual reorganisation of these practices into a more standardised framework. The pre-Hindu Meitei society recognised multiple modes of

12 E. Nilakanta Singh, "Bhagyachandra's Contribution to Manipuri Culture," in *Rajarshi Bhagyachandra and the Bhakti Movement*, ed. Aheibam Koireng Singh et al. (Gurgaon: Shubhi Publications, 2020), 37.

disposal of the dead, which included burial, cremation, exposure in open air, and disposal in water.[13] Among these, burial appears to have been the most prevalent in earlier periods. Although detailed accounts of funerary rites are relatively sparse, traditional texts provide glimpses into certain ritual practices associated with burial. One such instance, recorded in *Thawanthaba Hiran*, a thirteenth-century text, describes a post-burial rite performed approximately one year after death. In this ceremony, the grave was partially exhumed and the skull retrieved and ritually cleansed in a process known as *Porom Thindokpa*. Among elite families, the skull could be adorned with a golden headpiece, followed by a modest ceremonial observance.

In contrast, cremation in the indigenous Meitei tradition appears to have been accompanied by a more elaborated sequence of performative and communal rituals, in which the *pena* played a central role. Upon death, the body was first placed in the *mangol* (the front verandah space of the house), where lamentation songs such as *Nongarol* were sung, and as the body was moved to the *sumang* and *khangyen* (open courtyard spaces), the *pena* continued to accompany the ritual.[14] Subsequent ceremonies involved the placement of the body within a temporary enclosure, where family members engaged in ritualised singing and dancing and were accompanied by offerings to the deceased. The funerary procession to the cremation ground was itself a performative act, marked by the singing of songs such as *Singumlon* and *Nongarol*, while the *pena* player performed compositions collectively referred to as *Ashei Toral Eshei*.[15] These performances were not merely expressions of grief but constituted a structured ritual language through which the passage of the soul was mediated. The importance of the *pena* in these rites is further highlighted by the existence of specialised ritual practitioners, referred to as *Khamnung Lamlen Asheiba*, who were specifically associated with death ceremonies.[16] Post-cremation rituals also reveal a complex set of beliefs and practices. On the sixth day following death, a rite known as *Tangja Lufouba* was performed, which involved the retrieval and drying of a fragment

13 Naorem Sanajaoba, *Manipur Past and Present (The Heritage and Ordeals of a Civilization), Volume II: Philosophy, Culture & Literature* (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2018), 113.

14 Mongsaba, *Manipur Sanskritida Pena*, 73.

15 *Ibid*., 73-74.

16 *Ibid*.

of the skull.[17] This act, like the earlier burial-related *Porom Thindokpa*, indicates a continuing ritual relationship with the physical remains of the deceased. Additionally, the first death anniversary was marked by a ceremony known as *Firoi*, during which pena performances (*pena pala*) formed an integral component.

The eighteenth century, however, witnessed a gradual but decisive shift in these practices with the increasing dominance of Vaishnavite ritual forms. Indigenous funerary performances centred on the *pena* were progressively supplemented or replaced by *kirtana* and *sankirtana*, which introduced a new devotional idiom rooted in Krishna bhakti. Similarly, the incorporation of *wari-liba* and *lairik thiba-haiba* reoriented the ritual focus from ancestral and local cosmologies to a broader Vaishnavite framework. *Kirtan* was performed during Garibniwaz's *shradda* (funeral rites) ceremony in 1752.[18] This is the first mention of *kirtan* being performed during Manipuri life passage rituals.[19] The growing centrality of *sankirtana* in death rituals is vividly illustrated in the account of the death of Bhagyachandra in 1798. As recorded in the Cheitharol Kumbaba, continuous *sankirtana* was performed for seven days at the Govindaji temple in his honour.[20] This instance not only reflects the personal piety and interest of the monarch but also exemplifies the institutionalisation of Vaishnavite ritual forms within royal and public domains.

Festivals

The transformation of festival traditions in Manipur during the eighteenth century constitutes a crucial dimension of the broader process of religious syncretism. For the Meitei community, festivals were collective expressions of cosmology, seasonal cycles, and social cohesion, and these became important means through which new religious ordeals were articulated and disseminated. Many of the major festivals observed in Manipur in their present form bear the imprint of this period, during which deliberate efforts

17 *Ibid*., 74.

18 Saroj Nalini Arambam Parratt, *Cheitharol Kumpapa: Original Text, Translation and Notes, Vol. 1, 33–1763 CE* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 170.

19 Rodney Sebastian, "Refashioning Kingship in Manipur in the 18th Century: The Politico-Religious Projects of Garibniwaz and Bhagyachandra," *Religions* 12, no. 12 (2021): 9, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12121041.

20 Saroj Nalini Arambam Parratt, *Cheitharol Kumpapa, Vol. 2, 1764–1843 CE* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 151.

were made by the ruling elite to reinterpret indigenous ritual practices within a Vaishnavite framework. This process, initiated during the reign of Pamheiba and further consolidated under Bhagyachandra, involved not merely the introduction of new festivals but, more significantly, the re-identification and transformation of existing ones.

Panthoibi Eratpa

A particularly illustrative example of this syncretism can be noticed in the festival known today as *Durga Puja* in Manipur, which may be historically traced to the indigenous observance of *Panthoibi Eratpa*. In the pre-Hindu form, this festival was centred on the worship of the goddess *Panthoibi*[21]. The ritual responsibility for the worship of *Panthoibi* traditionally rested with the Khaba clan, and the observance took place annually from the fifth to the tenth day of the month of *Mera* (October-November).[22] The eighteenth century, however, witnessed a significant reinterpretation of this festival through the identification of *Panthoibi* with the Hindu goddess *Durga*. This process of equivalence was not an isolated instance but formed part of a broader ideological project in which several indigenous deities were aligned and identified with figures from the Hindu pantheon. Under the patronage of Pamheiba, such identifications were actively promoted as a means of integrating local religious traditions into a wider Brahmanical framework. The introduction and institutionalisation of Durga Puja in Manipur can thus be understood as both a religious and political act, aimed at reconfiguring the ideological framework of the kingdom.

The celebration of Durga Puja in Manipur can be traced as early as 1714 during the reign of Pamheiba, and it gained further prominence following the arrival of the Vaishnavite preceptor Shantidas in 1716.[23] The construction of Durga temples, one at Moirangkhom and another at Heibok, under royal patronage, provides concrete evidence of the material and institutional support extended to this transformation. These developments not only facilitated the adoption of Durga worship but also anchored it within specific sacred spaces, thereby reinforcing its legitimacy and visibility. It is important,

21 A prominent deity within the Meitei religious pantheon associated with fertility, war, and feminine power.

22 Laishram Sujakumar, *Meiteigi Harao Kummei Makhal Khara* (Wangjing: Wanging Women and Girls Society, 1973), 2.

23 *Ibid.*, 4.

however, to distinguish between earlier instances of Durga worship and the eighteenth-century process of syncretism. While references to the worship of Durga-like deities may be found in earlier periods, such as during the reigns of Khuiyoi Tompok (2nd – 3rd CE) and Khongtekcha (8th Century), there is no substantive evidence to suggest that these were identified with *Panthoibi*.

Yaoshang

Among the festivals of Manipur, *Yaoshang* occupies a particularly significant position where the processes of religious syncretism are not only visible but structurally embedded within the ritual sequence itself. In its present form, *Yaoshang* is widely identified with the Hindu festival of *Holi*; yet its historical formation reveals a more complex origin rooted in the indigenous Meitei festival of *Loipan*. The convergence of these two traditions in the eighteenth century exemplifies how pre-existing ritual frameworks were reinterpreted and reorganised under the expanding influence of Vaishnavism.

The indigenous festival of *Loipan* appears to have been deeply embedded in Meitei cosmology and mytho-historical consciousness. It was associated with the primordial creation narratives involving deities such as *Chingu Ingouba* and *Nongpok Ningthou* in conjunction with *Nongpok Panthoibi*, situated within the epoch of *Hayi Chak*, the earliest phase in Meitei cosmological time.[24] Celebrated on the full moon of the month of *Lamta* (March), *Loipan* lasted for five days and involved collective participation marked by festivity, ritual observance, and social cohesion.[25] In this sense, it functioned not merely as a seasonal celebration but as a re-enactment of cosmological origins and marked the relationship between the community and its divine order.

The eighteenth century, however, marked a decisive shift in the meaning and structure of this festival through its assimilation into the Vaishnavite observance of *Yaoshang.* It got associated with the birth anniversary of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, the central figure of the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition. It was actively encouraged during the reign of Pamheiba, which facilitated the reinterpretation of indigenous festivals within a Vaishnavite theological framework.[26] The alignment of the festivals reflects a deliberate act of ritual synchronisation, whereby the existing festive calendar was retained but

24 *Ibid*., 38-39.

25 *Ibid*.

26 *Ibid*., 40.

infused with new religious meanings and interpretations. This process of syncretism was further elaborated during the reign of King Bhagyachandra, under whom Vaishnavite devotional practices attained a more systematised and aestheticised form. Bhagyachandra's deep personal devotion to Chaitanya contributed to the strengthening of *Yaoshang* as a Vaishnavite festival, while simultaneously allowing for the retention of local elements.

One of the most distinctive features of the festival, which is the construction and subsequent burning of a small straw hut (*yaoshang*) on the first evening, has been interpreted within the Vaishnavite narrative as commemorating the birth of Chaitanya in a humble dwelling. Yet this ritual act also resonates with earlier indigenous practices associated with seasonal transition and communal participation, suggesting a layered symbolic structure. Equally significant is the performative aspect of the festival, particularly the practice of collective singing and the chanting of devotional phrases such as "*Haribol*," attributed to the influence of Chaitanya's bhakti movement. The custom of going from house to house to collect monetary offerings further reflects the incorporation of the Vaishnavite devotional economy into the social fabric of the festival. Over time, these elements became so deeply integrated that the original festive associations of *Loipan* receded from popular tradition, giving way to a predominantly Vaishnavite interpretation of the festival. The transformation of *Loipan* into *Yaoshang* thus signifies not merely the addition of new ritual elements but a gradual reorientation of meaning, wherein indigenous cosmology was subsumed within a broader Vaishnavite devotional framework. This process was neither instantaneous nor uniform; rather, it unfolded through sustained interaction between royal patronage, Brahmanical mediation, and popular participation.

Conclusion

The religious transformations of eighteenth-century Manipur were not confined to the ritual practice alone but formed part of a wider reconfiguration of social, cultural and ideological life. The processes of syncretism evident in rites of passage and festivals, whether in birth ceremonies such as *Eepanthaba* and *Swasti Puja*, matrimonial practices, or the restructuring of mortuary rituals and festive cycles, collectively point to a deliberate and state-mediated engagement with Vaishnavism. Under the patronage of rulers such as Garibniwaz and Bhagyachandra, these transformations acquired both

institutional depth and cultural legitimacy, installing new religious meanings within existing social structures. The increasing prominence of Bengali and Sanskrit, particularly in liturgical, administrative and literary contexts, marked a significant shift in the cultural orientation of the Meitei polity. This shift also extended to the symbolic landscape, as the nomenclature of rivers, hills, and settlements increasingly bore the imprint of Vaishnavite influence, signalling the penetration of new religious idioms into everyday spatial consciousness.

It is important to recognise that these processes did not result in the wholesale removal of indigenous traditions. Rather, they produced a layered cultural formation in which older ritual structures, cosmological beliefs, and performative practices were reinterpreted, giving a Vaishnavite colour and taste. The resulting synthesis played a key role in shaping the contours of contemporary Meitei identity, wherein elements of both indigenous *Sanamahi* traditions and Vaishnavite Hinduism coexist in a dynamic, if at times tension-filled, relationship. The process of syncretism can serve as an engine of cultural enrichment, enabling societies to address internal lacunae, expand symbolic representations and engage with wider civilisational currents. On the other hand, such processes may assume a more coercive dimension when they are accompanied by the marginalisation or suppression of pre-existing traditions. The history of religious syncretism in Manipur entails moments of tension, contestation, and cultural displacement. The syncretic transformations of eighteenth-century Manipur were neither linear nor unidirectional; they were shaped by negotiation, adaptation and power. The enduring legacy of this period lies in the complex cultural tapestry of Meitei society today, a tapestry woven from multiple strands of tradition, belief and historical experience.

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