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# Exploring Sustainability and Gender in the psyche of the Meitei through Goddess Ecology

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## Abstract

Goddess ecology is a framework that views nature as a sacred, feminine entity. The Meitei are an indigenous community nestled in the crossroads of Southeast Asia, South Asia, and China, in the northeastern corner of India. The lifeworld of the Meitei is closely entwined with nature. The socio-cultural elements and their religion exhibit a strong animistic belief system. The animistic beliefs later became deified into guardian spirits when combined with nature's totem. As agriculture is the mainstay of the economy, the deities of the Meitei are said to possess the power to control the natural elements of air, water, and the sun. And, as a society where women are fostered to complement its menfolk, the cosmogony provides substantial space to goddesses. Therefore, the paper attempts to understand the concept of goddess ecology, analytically, that exists in the socio-cultural psyche of the Meitei by exploring the manifestation of nature/environment in the form of goddesses in the Meitei pantheon- *Ima Leimalel Sitapi* -believed to be the Universal mother of the Meitei; *Lairemma Emoinu* - the manifestation of wealth and prosperity, and *Lairemma Phouoibi* - the goddess of agriculture, especially paddy. The paper, in its basic argument, argues that the manifestation of the natural world in the form of goddesses clearly reflects the upholding of gender equality and an intimate understanding of environmental sustainability, whereby both nature and women are protected through its socio-cultural practices. The paper drew on existing literature, oral traditions, especially legends surrounding the goddesses, and folk beliefs.

**Keywords:** *geo-piety, gender, beliefs, sustainability, Manipur*

## Introduction

The interaction amongst the elements of nature – air, water, land, biotic, and abiotic effectuate the biosphere. Societies conceive of nature as a resource to be used for their own benefit. The manifestation of nature as deity reflects the spiritual belief of a society in its natural environment. The core idea of geo-piety is to link spiritual beliefs with natural environments.[1] J.K. Wright initially coined the term geo-piety in 1947. It denotes a sense of thoughtful piety aroused through human awareness of the natural world and geographical space. It encompasses a complex web of the local psyche through the sacred interpretation of landscapes. The manifestation of goddesses as representations of natural geography and celestial bodies by societies reflects the strict reverence societies place on their natural environment for its sustenance. The concept of Earth being the Mother Goddess is universal. Goddesses are considered protectors, nurturers, and creators of the natural world. The United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 2030 Development Agenda posits the role of women in sustainable development programmes.[2]

The Earth is seen in the form of a female deity. In Greek mythology, *Gaia* is the primordial earth goddess. She is seen as the mother of all, as all gods and goddesses are believed to be descended from her through her union with Uranus (Heaven) and Pontus (Sea), embodying the physical planet and its ability to nourish it. However, some cultures may even link the goddess associated with Earth to agricultural cycles and seasonal change. In the Incan tradition, Pachamama represents the Earth and agricultural fertility. She is a revered Andean goddess who also serves as a fertility goddess, presiding over planting and harvesting, embodying the mountains, and at times causing earthquakes. She is also an ever-present and independent deity with the creative power to sustain life on Earth. The Greeks consider Demeter to be the goddess of grain and harvest. It is believed that her emotions influence the seasons- her grief for her daughter Persephone causes winter, while her joy brings spring.

1 To understand the ideas and uses of geo-mentality, geo-piety, and topophilia, see HongKey Yoon, "On Geomentality," *GeoJournal* 25, no. 4 (1991): 387–92.

2 a. United Nations, "The 17 Sustainable Development Goals," United Nations, 2015, https://sdgs.un.org/goals.

b. United Nations, "Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development," United Nations, 2015, https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda.

Artemis is considered a goddess who embodies the untamed spirit of nature. She characterizes wilderness, hunting, and childbirth. In Philippine folklore, Maria Makiling is regarded as the guardian spirit of the mountains.

Celestial bodies like the moon are also inherently connected with female deities. In Chinese mythology, Chang'e is associated with the moon. She represents renewal and the cycle of time. In Greek mythology, Selene is the lunar goddess. It is believed that Selene drives her chariot across the night sky as a sign to humans. The Roman equivalent of Selene is the Goddess Luna. In Egyptian mythology, Nut is the goddess of the star-studded sky. She is symbolized as an infinite canopy of the heavens and the protective embrace of the cosmos. Amaterasu represents the connection between solar energy and nature in the Shinto belief system.

Feminine spirits are also strongly linked with land and natural elements. In Slavic folklore, water spirits are linked with Rusalka. Another significant facet of nature represented by feminine spirits is water bodies. As water is an element of life- cultures across the world consociate the female water deities as benefactors of purity, renewal, and mystery. In the traditions of Yoruba and Afro-Caribbean beliefs, Yemaya is considered the mother of the oceans.

In the Indian context, *purusa* exhibits the masculine manifestation of nature, exemplifying an inherent and essential character. At the same time, *sakti* represents the feminine manifestation as an energy that actuates the protean material universe. The religious history of India is replete with a plethora of feminine conceptualisations of nature. The concept of Earth as a goddess called *Pritihivi* or *dhartimata* is ancient and all-pervasive. The religious literature of ancient works is replete with instances where the divine feminine mediates nature personification. In Indian mythology, there is a representation in feminine form of the sky wandering celestial bodies to the sprouting plants- *Usas, Aditi, Kuhu, Anumati*, etc. In Hindu mythology, the river goddess Ganga itself signifies spiritual purity. It is believed that a dip in the Ganga cleanses one's soul.

## Discussion

Goddess Ecology may be conceptualised as a multi-layered system that incorporates cosmological beliefs, ritual practices, normative ethics, and ecological outcomes. It functions through the sacralisation of nature, thereby transforming human-ecological interaction into a moral and spiritual

obligation. At its core, Goddess Ecology perceived nature as animate, conscious, and gendered. Elements of nature, such as forests and rivers, are personified as maternal figures. It believes in the idea of cultivating a reciprocal and morally regulated human-nature interaction rather than owning nature for human advantage. Therefore, ritual practices become a significant mechanism of sustaining the relationship. Seasonal festivals and offerings are aligned with ecological cycles such as planting, harvesting, and rainfall. While cultivating moral regulation, it also creates a normative ethics based on taboos and moral obligations. It prohibits activities such as deforestation, over-harvesting, or pollution within sacred spaces as defined by tradition. These ethical behaviours are enforced through a collective belief in divine sanction rather than formal institutions.

Manipur is a small hilly state located in the northeastern corner of India. The state enjoys a temperate climate- subtropical monsoon (*Cwa*) in Koppen's Classification[3] throughout the year. The topographical feature comprises hill ranges, valleys, forests, rivers, and lakes. Of the various valleys (*tampak*)[4] -the Imphal valley which lies in the central part of the state constitutes nearly 10 percent of the state's total area.[5] According to the recent Forest Survey of India report, nearly 67 percent of the total area is under forest cover, ranging from very dense to moderately dense forests and open forests.[6] Bamboo forest (6.35%), Chir pine (1.59%), Khasi pine (1.59%), Miscellaneous forest (85.71% - *Albizia species, Castanopsis species, Duabanga grandiflora, Ficus species, Lannea coromandelica, Macaranga species, Pinus kesiya, Quercus species, Schima wallichii, Tectona grandis*), Oaks (1.59%) constitute the forest of Manipur. The state is drained by two main drainage basins- the Barak River basin, draining the

3 A. John Arnfield, "Koppen Climate Classification | Description, Map, & Chart," in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, April 11, 2019, https://www.britannica.com/science/Koppen-climate-classification.

4 For a better understanding of the geological classification of the valley, see Abdullah Khan, Sarfaraz Ahmad, and Shadab Khurshid, "Geology and Geomorphology of the Manipur Valley Using Digitally Enhanced Satellite Image and SRTM DEM in the Eastern Himalaya, India," *International Journal of Geosciences* 03, no. 05 (January 1, 2012): 1010–18.

5 "Annexure-1 Comprehensive Details about Manipur State and Its Environmental & Social Sensitivities' Manipur State -Background," 2015.

6 Forest Survey of India, "FOREST SURVEY of INDIA INDIA STATE of FOREST REPORT 2023 VOLUME I" (Dehradun: Ministry of Environment Forest and Climate Change, 2024), https://fsi.nic.in/uploads/isfr2023/isfr_book_eng-vol-1_2023.pdf.

western parts of Manipur, and the Manipur River basin, draining the central part into Myanmar following a north-south slope. The Loktak Lake, which lies in the south-western part of the central valley, is the largest freshwater lake in northeast India. The southeastern corner of the lake is the Keibul Lamjao National Park, composed primarily of *phumdi* (floating biomass). Therefore, the national park is also known as the world's only floating national park. The *phumdi* serves as the natural habitat of Sangai (*Cervus eldi eldi*), the state animal of Manipur. The Sangai is endemic to the *phumdi*. The state flower, Shirui Lily (*Lilium mackliniae*), is endemic only to the Shirui Hill range in Ukhrul.

The Meitei are an indigenous community settling primarily in the central valley region of Manipur. There is also a diaspora settlement in Assam, Tripura, Bangladesh, and Myanmar.[7] Being at the crossroads of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and China, the Meitei culture is also influenced by these regions at different historical periods.[8] In 33 CE, the Meitei, under the Ningthouja dynasty, established their civilisation and consequently the nation-state of Manipur. The first half of the 18th century CE marked the peak of this small nation-state.[9]

In the faith of the Meitei, nature includes all living and non-living organisms. The presence of geo-piety in the psyche of the Meitei is clearly reflected in the tradition of Umang Lai Haraoba—a Meitei endeavour to

7 Among the push factors of migration, the *chahi taret khuntakpa* (Seven Years' Devastation) 1819-1826 Burmese occupation of Manipur is of great significance. In modern times, the search for better opportunities and ways of living serves as a push factor. For a deeper understanding of diaspora and identity politics, see M. C. Arunkumar, "Meitei Diaspora and the Identity Politics," *JOURNAL of SOCIOLOGY and SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY* 01, no. 1-2 (December 8, 2010).

8 The influence of South Asia is seen in the form of Vaishnavism, which the Meitei refer to as '*nongchup haram*' (western door), and has influenced the Meitei way of life since the 18th century. See, Takhellambam Ilabanta Singh and Sougrakpam Dharmen Singh, "Investigating the Socio-Cultural Dynamics of Manipuri Hindus in 17th and 18th Century Manipur," *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice* 30, no. 1 (January 29, 2023): 4270–73.

The influence of Chinese and Southeast Asian cultures can be explored through the historical evolution of the people of Manipur over the centuries. See, Hareshwar Goshwami, *History of the People of Manipur*, (2019), 36–71.

9 For the development of the Meitei nation-state in the pre-colonial period, see

N Joykumar Singh, *Emergence of Manipur as a Nation State*, (2015).

Gangmumei Kamei, *History of Manipur Pre-Colonial Period*, (2015).

integrate oneself with nature by forming a secular relationship.[10] Lai Haraoba also reflects the lifecycle of a human being, with ritual songs such as *Ougri* and *Khencho* linked to the creation of the universe and Earth.[11] Moreover, the Meitei have animistic beliefs,[12] which become deified into guardian spirits when combined with nature's totem.[13] In Meitei cosmology, *Chingu Khoiyum Yaibirel Sidaba* is considered the Supreme God, the benevolent and the protector of men.[14] He assigned the task of creating Earth to his eldest son, *Atingkok Sidaba*, with the aid of his brother, *Atiya Sidaba*. *Kari, Kara, Nongdamkhu, Nongdamham, Thawa, Chenga, Yucheng, and Yuha* were the guardian deities associated with four cardinal and four inter-cardinal directions. Later, *Koubru, Marjing, Wangpurel Khanachaoba,* and *Thangjing* emerged as the guardian deities. Abodes of important male deities are associated with hill ranges and peaks. For instance, *Laiyinghtou Koubru*'s abode is in the Koubru Hill ranges; *Laiyingthou Thangjing Koirelloi*'s in the Thangjing Hill ranges; *Laiyingthou Marjing*'s on the hill ranges of Heingang; and *Laiyingthou Sorarel* as the sky god. Further, natural relief features like lakes and rivers are believed to have their own guardian deities – *Khanachaoba Wangpurel* on the southern portion of the Imphal River in Sugnu, *and Laiyingthouhanba*, which can alter topographical features.

Hijan Hirao,[15] In the form of a long narrative poem imbued with deep sentiment for nature, especially the tree, the poem narrates an incident believed to have happened during the reign of *Hongnem Luwang Ningthou Punsiba* around the middle of the first millennium CE. It is evident from the

10 Kshetrimayum Premchandra, "Meitei Umanglaiharaoba and the Order of Nature," *Transcript: An E-Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies* 02, no. 01 (2022).

11 Ch. Manihar Singh, *A History of Manipuri Literature*, (2021), 12–16.

12 On animism and the characteristics of primordial religion, see Gangmumei Kamei, *Essays on Primordial Religion* (2006), 9–17.

13 Saroj Nalini Parratt, *The Religion of Manipur*, (1980).

14 *Chingu Khoiyum Sidaba* procreated *Leimarel Sidabi* as the universal mother, and three sons – *Atingkok Sidaba*, later known as *Asiba* (lit. *siba* – to ask someone to do something), as he was assigned the task of creating Earth and lifeforms, *Atiya Sidaba*, and *Konjil Tukthaba*. Later, Chingyu Sidaba procreated *Lairemma Nongthangleima* to lure away *Konjil Tukthaba*, as he was disturbing *Asiba*. See, Sairem Nilabir, *Laiyingthou Lairemmashinggee Waree Sheengbul*, (2014), 1–3.

15 Manihar, op. cit., pp. 16–17. Also see, Ningthoukhongjam Khelchandra, *Ariba Manipuri Sahityagy Itihas (History of Old Manipuri Literature)* (1969), 48–58.

ballad that necessary customary rites like *yelhing thaba* (a ritual where a hen is released freely into the wild in exchange for goodwill) were performed to beget the tree. In addition, hymns were recited or sung to seek the blessings of nature and spirits. *Nonglao*[16] *Esei* is addressed to *Laiyingthou Soraren* in times of severe drought to call for rain. *Louta Esei* is sung before commencing the plowing of an agricultural field, asking the natural spirits to bless the farmer with a bountiful harvest.[17] On the other hand, another hymn, *Phoukouron*, is sung in praise of *Lairemma Phouoibi* for a rich harvest.[18]

In this way, it can be argued that the Meitei revered the natural environment, believing that the sustenance of society depends on nature's blessings. Therefore, hymns and rituals were used to worship spirits associated with nature. On the same note, the Meitei cultural fabric also exhibits a rich interplay between goddesses and natural environments. One interesting aspect of the goddesses of Meitei is their ability to manifest/incarnate as humans in the earthly world of the Meitei or as other goddesses. The Meitei after realising the competence of the manifestation then again worship the manifestation as a new divinity. The paper uses three female divinities, namely *Ima Leimalel Sitapi, Lairemma Ereima,* and *Lairemma Phouoibi*, to understand the goddess ecology of the Meitei.

## Malem Ema/ Ima Leimalel Sitapi

The Earth is personified as a female in Meitei's psyche. The female persona called *Malem Ema* is a manifestation of *Ima Leimalel Sitapi*[19]. The Meitei show reverence to *Malem Ema* through the tradition of *Paklei Namsa,* also known as *Malem Leisa*. The *Paklei Namsa* is a paste made from either *leimu* (thick, dark clay) *or leikok* (silt clay) soil, applied on the forehead between the

16 *Nong* literally means rain. See, Thounaojam Caesar, "Gods, Moral Order and Rituals: Shared Rituals and Religious Beliefs of the Ancient Meitei of Manipur," *SP Publications International Journal of English and Studies (IJOES) an International Peer-Reviewed Journal* 3, no. 11 (2021): 111–13.

There is also a tradition of marrying a male and a female frog to beget rain, as in the *Bhekuli Biya* of Assam. See, Birendranath Datta, *Folkloric Foragings in India's North-East* (1999), 32.

17 Manihar, op. cit., p. 22.

18 Ibid.

19 She is believed to be the Universal Mother, as it is said in the book (*Sanamahi Laikan (a Socio-Cultural History of Manipur*, 1975/1995) *Chingu Khoiyum Yaibirel Sidaba* created '*taibang pumnamagee mama*' (trans. Mother of all)

eyebrows and just above the eyebrow line in a circular shape measuring about a centimeter in diameter. A popular belief amongst the Meitei for putting *paklei namsa* is derived from the Meitei cosmogony. After getting the throne from his father, *Konjil Tinghthokpa*[20] bowed down before his father,[21] *Salailel Sitapa*. While performing the act, a considerable amount of Earth was on his forehead. The Meitei believe that the action of *Konjil Tingthokpa* initiated the tradition of *paklei namsa*.[22] Therefore, philosophically, the tradition of *paklei namsa* is a way of showing reverence to Mother Earth. At the same time, the tradition would have necessitated reserving a small plot of land in the respective homestead or community area to procure the *leimu/leikok* free from wastage and other human actions. This sacralisation of land through a strong belief is a way of maintaining a clean environmental space, which can be understood as a practice of environmental sustainability.

In the birth rituals of the Meitei,[23] the baby is placed on a *yangkok* (winnowing fan) by the *Maibi*, who performed the necessary rites. Here, *yangkok* represents *Malem Ema*, signifying that the child is to be brought up on the lap of *Malem Ema*. Symbolically, *yangkok* represents the shape of Mother Earth.

*Meitei Yumsharol* [24] also explicitly asserts that the shrine *of Leimarel Sidabi* should be in the centre of the northern wall of each house. The motif of water-fertility-female is widespread. *Leimarel Sidabi* is worshipped in an earthen pot called *an isaiphu*. It is filled with water and covered with a lid. *Leimarel Sidabi* is believed to reside in *Isaiphu*. *Leiamrel Sidabi*, being a mother, can be related to fertility as 'people who revered water as a creative force tended to make their spirit female and consider water the source of life and mother of all things.'[25]

20 *Konjil Tingthokpa* came to be known as *Pakhangba* (lit. one who knows his father) from this event. And he became the lord of the universe, succeeding his father.

21 While his elder brother pursued to revolve around the universe seven times, *Konjil Tingthokpa* on the advice of his mother revolved the throne of his father seven times.

22 Nilabir, op. cit., pp. 1-10.

23 Chingshubam Merathaba Meetei, "Birth Ritual among Meitei/Meetei Sanamahi Community of Manipur: Meaning, Practices and Significance," *Journal of North East India Studies* 12, no. 1 (2022): 51–62,

24 For details on Meitei Yumsharol, see Naoroibam Indramani, *Meitei Yumsharol*, 7th ed. (1995; repr., Imphal: N. I. Publications, 2020), 1., Irabot Ningthouja, *Meitei Yumsharon*, (2016), 29–52., Yumnam Sapha Wangam Apanthoi M, "The Meitei Yumjao: A Cultural Symbol," *JETIR* 5, no. 12 (2018): 515.

25 Barbara Watson Andaya, "Rivers, Oceans, and Spirits: Water Cosmologies, Gender,

In a hymn called *Leimarel Mingkhei*,[26] it is said that *Leimarel Sidabi* resides in a state of constant bubbling inside a large pot filled with water,[27]

> "She who does not waste the essential air of living
> She who does not let the unnecessary air spread on this Earth
> She who resides in a clay pot is called piritkhombi."

These lines from the hymn support and hold up the *Meitei* faith that *Tengbanba Mapu* ordained her to nurture all life, male and female. Indeed, water can be considered a source of life. Further into the hymn, it is said that she (*Leimaren Sidabi*) was the first to be extracted from the sun by *Taibangpanba Mapu*. And, her legs are adorned with water so that she can procreate life.[28]. A popular belief among the Lois of Manipur is that *Leimarel Sidabi* does not like to meet the sun (*Korou Anganba*) in the morning.[29] Thus, *Leimarel Sidabi* is associated with the creative force of water.

## Lairemma Ereima

The ideology of associating gods and divinities with water is not a phenomenon exclusive to this highland state. In studying the character of water, Tvedt & Oestigaard opine that divinities may manifest themselves in water and as

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and Religious Change in Southeast Asia," *TRaNS: Trans -Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 4, no. 2 ( June 6, 2016): 239–63.

26 Kirankumar Mayanglambam, *Laiingthou Sanamahi Khurumba, Ema Leimarel Khurumba Amadi Imoinu Ahongbee-Gy Thounirol Asuba* (2019).

27 Kirankumar, op. cit., p. 18.

The actual line in the hymn says

*Hum-len nong-fai cham-ngam-dabi*

*(= hingba da changba nungsit pu manghandabi)*

*Ham-ken sifa chai-han-da-bi*

*(= taibang hakchang g kan-nadraba nungshit pu chaithokhandabi)*

*Fu-rel nung-gee pirit-khombi*

*(= khwaidagy chaoraba chafu manungda leiraga pirit pirit sou-ee haina piritkhombi haina Min-gou-we)*

28 Kirankumar, op. cit., pp. 29–30.

The actual line in the hymn says

*Tampa mei-bi han-dong-bi*

*Laija esing ka-nak-na-bi*

29 Lairenlakpam Bino Devi, *The Lois of Manipur: Andro, Khurkhul, Phayeng and Sekmai* (2002), p. 48.

water.[30] This embodiment is due to the significant role water occupies in the cosmic process. So, any culture whose cosmos began with water would definitely consider water to belong to the divine realm. In the traditional *Meitei*society, water is life, and life begins from water, and life occurs in the mother's womb, and the universe is the mother.[31] This is exhibited in the ritual of *Lai Ekouba*, a ritual where the soul of the deity is evoked from the realm of water.[32] Here, water acts as a meeting point of heaven and Earth.

At the same time, the Meitei consider *Lairemma Ereima* as the water goddess. *Lairemma Ereima* is believed to be the incarnation of *Lairemma Panthoibi*. *Lairemma Nongthangleima*[33] decreed *Lairemma Panthoibi* to produce a human incarnation. Accordingly, *Lairemma Panthoibi* incarnated as Luirala Saphabi, the sole daughter of the *Chingdai* chief.[34] The chief was a friend and an ally of the Meitei King *Telheiba* (r. 1335-1355 CE). So, the followers of *Sanamahi* believed that the incarnation happened during the reign of *Meidingu Telheiba*. Following a sequence of fateful events, *Luirala Saphabi* immersed herself in the depths of the *Iril* River at *Konfam*, situated near Pukhao.[35] For her selfless act, *Meidingu Lairenba* issued a strong decree across his kingdom to worship *Luirala Saphabi* as *Lairemma Ereima* in the form of *Umang Lai*. It is one example where a deity is believed to have had a human existence at some point in the past.[36] In slight contradiction to popular belief, Saroj Parratt and John Paratt are of the view that 'the main lais of Meitei religion are not primarily connected either with trees or forests, and there is only one place in

30 Terje Tvedt and Terje Oestigaard, "A History of the Ideas of Water: Deconstructing Nature and Constructing Society," in *A History of Water*, ed. Terje Tvedt and Terje Oestigaard, vol. 4 (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011),

31 Arambam Lokendra, "Meitei Cultural History: Economy, Society and Ideology from Early Times to the 18th Century A.D" (Ph.D. Thesis, 1996).

32 For a detailed description of Lai Ekouba, see Saroj N. Arambam Parratt and John Parratt, 'Lai Haraoba: An Analysis', in *The Pleasing of the Gods: Meitei Lai Haraoba*, (1997), pp. 34-36.

33 *Chingu Khoiyum Tengbanba Mapu* ordained her to assign *Panthoibi* to produce a human manifestation. *Lairemma Panthoibi* is another manifestation of *Lairemma Nongthangleima*.

34 Nilabir, op. cit., p. 86. Chingdai is a small village in the northeastern hills of Manipur, around 137km from Imphal.

35 There is a story that *Saphabi* delivered the beheaded head of *Meidingu Tabungba* (r. 1359-1394 CE) to *Kangla*. Several locations along the *Iril* River, like *Lukhra-khong, Echai, Ekou, Konfam, Sambei, and Haotal,* are associated with Saphabi's lone journey to *Kangla*.

36 Parratt, *Religion of Manipur*, p. 9.

the whole *Lai Haraoba* ritual where such a connection is possible'.[37] The event also reflects the efforts of Meitei kings to establish cordial relations with hill chiefs so as to strengthen the budding Meitei nation-state.

Another belief associates *Lairemma Ereima* with *Eputhou Wangpurel Khana Chaoba*, one of the guardian deities guarding the southeastern flank of Manipur.[38] When *Khana Chaoba* decided to head for the southeastern corner through the Imphal River and reside there, *Lairemma Ereima* asked Khana Chaoba for his favor to join him, to which *Khana Chaoba* agreed. As fate holds, while taking a bath at Sanjenthong, *Ereima* missed spotting *Khana Chaoba* pass by. After chasing *Khana Chaoba* for a while, as *Ereima* could not spot *Khana Chaoba*, she decides to take another incarnation and stay with the *Oinam* lineage. After residing for seven years, *Ereima* decided to plunge into the Imphal River, holding a flower in her hand. The place is still known as *Ereima Hidel* in Singjamei. Every year on the 12th lunar day of *Thawan*, a ritual called *Thawan Potlakpa or Wangbren Ereima Thouni* is observed.[39] It is believed that observing this particular annual ritual provides safety for women and children and protects them from drowning. Even in cases of drowning, the Meitei believe that the soul of the drowning person would be spared, thereby making him alive.

It is also believed that there are two water goddesses of the Meitei – *Lairemma Eraileima* and *Lairemma Ereima*.[40] Both goddesses are manifestations of the Meitei's mother goddess *Ema Leimarel Sidabi* and *Lairemma Nongthnagleima*.[41] *Eraileima* is believed to be the goddess presiding over the surface of the water or the water goddess of the northern part of the Imphal valley. In contrast, *Ereima* is believed to be the water goddess residing under the water or the water goddess of the southern part of the Imphal valley. The north-south division is made at Lilong, where the Iril River joins the Imphal River. In general, the Meitei believe that a female divinity resides in water bodies. This belief is particularly strong when any individual, especially a child, is drowned

37 Saroj and John Parratt, *Lai Haraoba*, p. 1.

38 See Nilabir, op. cit., pp. 26-28.

39 N. Sanatomba Singh, 'CULTURAL HERITAGE OF MANIPUR CONCERNING THE CALENDRICAL RITUALS', *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences* 08, no. 01 (2018).

40 B Kulachandra Sharma, *Hiyangthang Lairemma* (2013): 219.

41 In Meitei cosmogony, both *Ema Leimaren Sidabi* and *Lairemma Nongthangleima* were created by *Chingu Khoiyum Yaibirel Sidaba.*

in water. The Meitei philosophise the drowning as being taken in by the water divinity, and as a mishap rather than an accident. Proper rituals in the form of floral offerings are made to the divinity in exchange for the drowned and to suffice so as to prevent future mishaps in that particular water body.

## Lairemma Phouoibi

Agriculture was the primary occupation of the people of Manipur. It was a mode of sustenance for the people. Although agriculture flourished in pre-colonial Manipur, it could not go beyond the subsistence level.[42] The Meitei have a strong belief and reverence for *Lairemma Phouoibi*. She is the goddess of agriculture and prosperity. In the *Meitei Yumjao* (traditional house), *phoukei* (granary) is generally placed on the southern side of the house. It is built on a raised platform of around 4-5feet to protect from any waterlogging. It is also believed that *Lairemma Emoinu* (the goddess of prosperity and wealth) is revered as *Phouoibi* when she resides in the granary. In Meitei cosmogony, *Phouoibi* was an incarnation of *Lairemma Nongthang Leima*.[43] With a thought of blessings his Meitei sons and daughter*, Tengbanba Mapu* ordained *Leimarel Sidabi* to instruct *Leimarel Nongthang Leima* to incarnate herself as *Lairemma Phouoibi*. In her first incarnation, she is believed to be *Chakpa Ningol Saphabi Charei Phisabi*. Following a series of ill-fated events with her lover, *Khangsunaha Saphaba Wanglen Pungdingba*, they were reincarnated in the land of Moirang. It is believed that the legendary figures of Khamba and Thoibi are reincarnations of the two lovers.[44]

*Lairemma Phouoibi* was instructed to prosper the people with a bountiful harvest of paddy, wealth, and riches. The Meitei pray to *Phouoibi* for good crops free from pests, insects, and other natural calamities. She is revered for a bountiful harvest. She blesses the Meitei with riches and prosperity. It is believed that the blessings of *Phouoibi* are manifested in the form of overflowing *kei* (granary), cowsheds full of cows, pigsty full of pigs, and coops

42 Ningombam Basanta, *Agrarian System of Manipur 1826-1947 A.D.*, Reprint (Sunmarg Publishers & Distributors, 2023), p. 140.

43 Nilabir, op. cit., p. 65.

44 The legend of Khamba and Thoibi from *Moirang Kangleiron* became one of the magnum opus of Hijam Anganghal, a pioneer of Modern Manipuri literature through his '*Khamba-Thoibi Seireng*'. See, Hijam Anganghal Singh, *Khamba Thoibi Seireng Hijam Anganghal Singh* (1986),

full of hens.[45] Given the geographical challenges in pre-colonial Manipur, where most of the central valley was covered in marshes, revering Phouoibi for a bountiful harvest is a reasonable avenue. At the same time, bringing in large quantities of paddy or rice from neighbouring kingdoms like the Cachar, Ahom, and Burma would not have been possible due to want of proper communication and mode of transport. Therefore, the Meitei have to rely on natural forces for a good harvest each year. Although revered as an *Umang Lai, Phouoibi* can be worshipped by individuals. She is prayed for her blessings in paddy fields before harvesting the paddies for a bountiful harvest; in granaries before putting in the harvested paddies for safe-keeping, the stocked paddies free from pests and rats.

The timing of offering rituals to *Phouoibi* differs according to the area of land holding. For a person owning several *sangams* (approx. 0.625 acres, i.e., one-fourth of a *pari*), the ritual is performed after harvesting the last *Sangam*. While it is performed on the day of harvesting, if the person holds only a *sangam*.[46] Technically, *cheirong* (thrashing sticks) are used to thrash paddy. But, for *Phouoibi*, the thrashing is done only by hand, and the obtained straw is used to make a small makeshift broom called '*hanubi.*'[47] (lit. older woman (grandmother figure). Another earthen pot with water is also kept beside the thrashing mat as an embodiment of *Phouoibi*, looking after the harvesting.

There are also other rituals associated with *Lairemma Phouoibi*, known as '*Phouoibi Iratpa*' *or Phougouba*. It is observed on the 5th lunar day of *Poinu*.[48] Here, *phouoibi* is revered after harvesting the paddy planted during the monsoon season. Offerings and prayers are made for favorable weather in the coming season, as well as for thanksgiving, with offerings from the current year's harvest. The same rituals of thanksgiving are observed in Phayeng, one of the Loi communities of Manipur, as *Phouoibi Chanou Tamba*.

In another text, *Phouoibi Waron*, *Lairemma Phouoibi* is depicted as having several human incarnations. However, in each of her incarnations, she does

45 The actual Manipuri belief runs as – *loimom phou na phou-gei chol-le; Kaorel san na sang-gol thal-le; tekpi oak na oak-kon pa-re; kai-rei yen-na yeng-gon chandre*.

46 Basanta, op. cit., p. 17.

47 There is also a tradition of referring to the broom used in the house as '*hanubi*'. However, today broom is generally referred to as '*sum-chit*'.

48 N. Sanatomba Singh, 'CULTURAL HERITAGE OF MANIPUR CONCERNING THE CALENDRICAL RITUALS', *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences* 08, no. 01 (2018).

not live with her human lover for an extended period of time.[49] The Meitei philosophise this belief as a way and nature of life's material wealth. In pre-colonial days, a family's wealth was measured in paddy. The flickering nature of each manifestation of *phouoibi* establishes that material wealth is temporary and serves as a strong message to the Meitei to maintain healthy boundaries in their lives and material wealth, and to share what one has in times of want.

## Conclusion

Since the yore of Meitei civilisation, socio-cultural norms have been strictly shaped by the nature of interaction with the natural world. The Meitei weaves the elements of nature intricately into its cultural fabric, thereby shaping the religious beliefs. Although the present paper studies three separate goddesses – *Ima Leimarel Sidabi, Lairemma Ereima, and Lairemma Phouoibi* - there is no strict, fast tradition that any element of nature is exclusive to a particular divinity. For instance, water is associated with both *Ima Leimarel Sidabi* and *Lairemma Ereima,* while *Ima Leimarel Sidabi* is worshiped as a water in a pot, *Ereima* is considered to be the goddess of the watery expanse- lakes, ponds, rivers. As water sustains life, the Meitei considers it a vital resource. Therefore, associating water with a divinity, more specifically a female figure who can embody motherly care and a nurturing soul, helps protect water bodies from direct pollution, such as dumping waste into water bodies or other activities that harm water quality. At the same time, the water supply scheme became effective only after India's independence; therefore, the Meitei depended solely on rivers, community ponds, homestead ponds, and lakes for potable water. Even the Loktak lake is gendered as a goddess and revered as *Loktak Lairembi*, thereby greatly affecting the dos and don'ts of the lake. With the spread of society and population, the Meitei shifted from a hunting-gathering economy to settled agriculture. This necessitates reverence for natural forces, such as the monsoon and the sun, to facilitate a bountiful harvest. This reflects the worship of *Lairemma Phouoibi* as an agricultural goddess both in pre- and post-harvesting of paddy. The Meitei believed that geo-piety would invoke the blessings of the gods associated with its specific natural elements. This proves that the Meitei culture is deeply rooted and entwined with nature. One such case is in *Hijan-Hirao*.

49 Sanjenbam Yaiphaba Meitei et al., *The Cultural Heritage of Manipur*, p. 186.

Another significant aspect of the goddesses of the Meitei pantheon is their ability to incarnate or manifest themselves as human or divine. All the recognised goddesses are manifestations of either *Ema Leimarel Sidabi, Lairemma Nongthangleima* or *Ema Panthoibi*. More or less *Ema Leimarel Sidabi, Lairemma Ereima, and Lairemma Phouoibi* are an outstanding manifestation of nature and its forces in the pantheons of the Meitei. The Meitei regards water and food, two of the most important resources for survival with feminine divinities thereby connecting the nurturing and caring spirits of mothers. Thus, we can safely argue that the Meitei considered gender, the environment, and piety.

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