

PART – III

**CHAPTER VI: ROLE OF MAN AND WOMAN IN
RITUAL PRACTICES**

CHAPTER VII: ROLE OF CHRISTIANITY

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CHAPTER VI

ROLE OF MAN AND WOMAN IN RITUAL PRACTICES

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Introduction

Among all peoples social distinction are made between men and women; sometimes these distinctions extend through the whole sphere of social life, sometimes they are confined to certain aspects. Discriminations and associated taboos exist between men and women in regard to such things as: dress and decoration, speech, etiquette, food, recreation and freedom of movement; division of labor, ownership of property, participation in political life, legal responsibility; participation in tribal activities (e.g. attendance at ceremonies, conducting of ceremonies, practicing, magic, etc.); specific norms of grouping (e.g. clubs or secret societies restricted to one sex only) (Notes and Queries on Anthropology 1951: 66).

But co-operation and antagonism between the sexes may be given social significance. An extreme form of sexual segregation is found in Muhammadan and Brahmin societies, where women are secluded in their own quarters in the home and are allowed outside only subject to severe restrictions (ibid: 66). The distinction between men and women of the three communities of Manipur i.e. Kukis, Meities and the non-Manipuris, in certain aspects of socio-religious life, and the status of women in their particular society has been studied.

In every kind of human society we find the existence of priesthood. The priest's office was to draw near to the God and to introduce the worshipper to Him. The system of priesthood evolved as a functional aspect and then it established itself as a hereditary right of those born in priest's family, and thus has continued to exist till today. It is a faith of dependency which has allowed this practice to exist.

Priesthood is a profession associated either with religion or traditional medicinal system or both and was born out of magico-religious rituals. As religious rituals developed the office of priesthood also realigned itself with varying degrees depending

upon the various religious practices. From magico-religious rituals and nature worship, worship of deities to simple prayers, in all respects these priests officiated the functions, chanting hymns, sometimes meaningless or sometimes meaningful. By any means however the office of priesthood never diluted even in respect of atheist religion like Buddhism and Jainism. Even in modern days when rituals are largely ignored and priesthood neglected, the priests are called and certain rituals, prayer or worship is followed not out of respect but out of fear (Ghosh 1997: 75).

Admission to the priesthood maybe perfectly unorganized, or it may be a hereditary privilege or it may be obtained by initiation at the hands either of an individual or a corporation, but the one indispensable condition of admission in all cases is that there shall be some outward and visible indication or guarantee that a God has been entered into him. Thus in the Tonga Islands "a God is believed to exist at that moment i.e. the moment of inspiration, in the priest and to speak from his mouth".

VI.1. Kuki Men and Women in Ritual Practices

According to all the respondents, traditionally in the Kuki society the experts and the officiants of rituals were mostly males. 2.78% of the Kuki respondents said that male priests and female priestesses were present in their society, adding that the female experts were not there independently though. The reasons for non-existence of independent priestesses in the Kuki society are that women were thought to be incapable of taking the responsibilities of the job. They were considered weak and thought to be incapable of interacting with the spirits and make offerings in the middle of the night. So it was thought to be difficult and inappropriate for women to go whenever, wherever they were wanted by the villagers, said the Kuki respondents. 2.78% rural respondents believed that there were female priestesses based on what they came to know from their elders who used to say 'thiempu thiempi' together, and this hinted that female experts must also have

been there. According to this group of respondents the wife of the thiempu only assisted and went along with the husband thiempu.

According to 21.11% of the Kuki respondents old priests were preferred in their society. 8.33% of them did not have any idea about the preference of old or younger priest in their society. The remaining 70.56% of the respondents said there was no preference for old priests in their society.

The reasons for preferring old aged priests by the Kukis were because of their experience and maturity. Another reason was there used to be only one thiempu in each village and it only depended on the availability of the priest. In the present society, according to the 81.67% rural and all the urban converted Kuki respondents they do not have any preferences of old or young church pastor for performing certain social ceremonies.

In the traditional Kuki society a person became a priest only after being trained by a senior thiempu until the person thoroughly learns the chants and ritual words. In some cases where the son succeeded, the father taught himself. There was no age limit to become a thiempu but should be of 25-45 years old and usually after marriage.

The Kuki ritual experts did not have to wear any special dress or symbols or badges while officiating. The experts only used to wear a short white dhoti and white turban said by 4.44 % old aged respondents. According to the Kuki respondents, the thiempu, was paid for his service in kind. Payment was neither made in cash nor accepted by the thiempu in their society for it was considered as an act of selling the art by the thiempu. So, the thiempu was usually gifted the meat of the sacrificed animal in that particular ritual, paddy, zu, knife, iron implements, etc. Each households of the village had to render a day's service to the thiempu's house or in his field for cultivation. Even a cow was also given depending on the ritual.

The Kuki traditional ritual experts did not observe any special diet or social restrictions. In the Kuki society women did not have any significant role to play in the rituals except associated with their husband and the Chang-ai ritual which could be afforded only by the wives of the chief or some rich man. But in the present faith there are no special rituals where the women play the major role.

VI.2. Maibas and Maibis in Ritual Practices among Meities

Among the traditional Meitie society, the officiants and the experts were both males and females. The males and females have their own roles to perform in different rituals of the traditional Meitie religion. But among the Vaishnav followers the officiants are only males and no females were allowed to officiate in any rituals. The reasons for women not being priestesses among the Meitie Vaishnav followers is due to their periodic menstruation which causes pollution and hence are not allowed to read Holy Scriptures. According to all respondents they did not have much preference for older or younger priests.

Those who were well versed in the Veda-Shastras and who performed the rituals well according to the Shastras were generally preferred. It also depended on popularity, nature of the individual and likings of the person offering the ritual. So there was no preference for older or younger priests. As regard to the indigenous religious priests and priestesses, it all depended on the seniority, accuracy, and also on the popularity of the priest.

Manipuri women always worshipped Gods and the Goddesses as was done by the menfolk. In matters of religion there was equality between men and women. Upto the beginning of the 19th century, i.e. in 1802 women were allowed to sing and dance in front of Radha-Govinda at the time of the inauguration of a Mandap (Ibongohal 1967: 446-72). The Manipuri temples and the society also have the dominance of the priests. The

traditional priests of Manipur are called the “Maibas”. The maibas (priests) and maibis (priestesses) are from the Meitie community. The co-existence of both is a peculiar nature of socio-religious context of Manipur. The Meities even after coming under the fold of Vaishnavism, they could carry out their animistic traditions by propagation. Thus the traditional Maibaism could survive even under the fold of Vaishnavism (Panchali 1987: 99). Maibaism is related to the animistic faith. It must have evolved as a functional necessity to meet the religious needs of the people of the society to whatever degree it must have existed in Manipur. Those who excelled in performing the rituals of animism were in demand in the society, since they could only appease the Gods and Goddesses in order to enjoy a trouble free life, to have a great harvest, for prosperity and so on. They were accepted in both religious and social performances of rituals. But in particular reference to Maibaism, the priestess must be pioneer of the system. It may be so because women were highly regarded in the society. They must be consulted for advice on various matters. Gradually, they must have monopolized the performance of the animistic rituals. The Maibis play a pivotal role in performing various rituals in temples and in the society. Hodson describes Maibisim in these words, “there exists the priests and priestesses of the animistic faith who are called Maibas and Maibis, a word which connotes nowadays the practice of the healing art because, as the language of the people clearly tells, a man is said to be ill (a-na-ba) when he is possessed by a ‘nat’” (T. C. Hodson, 1968: 109). McCulloch believed that the maibis are descendants of a princess of ancient times (McCulloch 1859: 21). The maibis were of genuinely Manipuri origin and at last assimilated into the Meitie social system. They are not a separate caste (Paratt 1980: 96).

The major group, the Meities, while accepting and practicing Hinduism continued to practice their pre-Hindu religious cult which may be termed as “Sanamahī (traditional God of the Meities) Cult. Therefore they have two sets of office of priesthood.

While for the Hindu religious activities they have priests from Brahmin caste whose ancestors came two centuries ago from Bengal and for their pre-Hindu traditional rituals there are priests and priestesses known as Maibas and Maibis (ibid: 76).

The Maibas and the Maibis play a very important role in the pre-Hindu traditional temples like those of Sanamahi, Pakhangba and Thangjing, etc. where the priestesses role is more significant than the priests'. But women pundits are not found in Vaishnavism. In a Hindu society the purohits have the monopoly over ritualistic performance in temples and houses of Hindu (Panchali 1987:102). The Hindu women were not permitted to study the Vedas, nor were they allowed to conduct religious ceremonies. The reason for their not being permitted to do so is common biological events such as menstruation and child birth which are regarded as key sources of pollution and during which they were strictly segregated. The visiting guru of the Jawaharlal Nehru Manipuri Dance Academy Smt. Y. Yumshangbi and who was also once the head of the royal palace's institute of maibism has defined Maibis as "someone who communicates with the God or Goddess through dreams and is believed to be the wife of the God" (Ekashini, Ng. 1988: 11). They have certain supernatural powers by which they foretell or even treat the mental and sometimes physical problems of the general people.

Again, there is differentiation between the Maibis who have "bell" and who do not have it. Most significant thing is that the maibis who are associated with the maibis who have bell are well recognized by the king. And they are believed to know the rituals of the "lai haraoba" in detail.

V1.2.a. The Rituals Performed by Maibas and Maibis

The maibas and maibis as priests and priestesses respectively play the key functions in the religious institutions and social customs. Their presence is so essential that without them any rituals or social customs are considered incomplete. They play a very

significant role in a public function called the “Lai Haraoba” which literally means “pleasing the God”. Nilakanta Singh (1961: 30) believes that it is ‘the merry making of the gods and goddesses’. The Lai Haraoba is a composite festival which consists of episodes of diverse origin. In this festival it portrays the life-cycle of the ‘lai’ (God) from conception to creation. It is also believed to be an ancestral ritual. It is a complicated festival and may be performed in honor of most of the principal lai in the Meitie Pantheon. But it may also be carried out at a village level for a host of lesser deities. The essence of the ritual is that it is performed to gain the favor of the ‘lai’.

On mornings a maibi sits before a pot of water from which the ‘lai’ is to be called up, chanting and ringing a handbell. This procedure called “laimang phamba” (sitting before the lai) may last for over an hour. The maibi usually falls into a trance and speaks in unintelligible syllables. These are interpreted in terms of the welfare of the village and people. After this the lai ikouba (calling up of the lai) takes place.

Traditionally there are certain minute rituals which need to be performed exclusively by the maibas or the maibis separately but some rituals need to be performed by them together. For instance, in the lai haraoba the maibas participate in the first part of the ceremony, and then the maibis will do the change of clothes of the gods and goddesses, making offerings and other important functions. Again at times, exclusively the maibas are to perform certain functions like relating a series of riddles and narratives starting with the shout ‘hoi’ (when a maibi enters into trance and starts to convey God’s message to His people the word ‘hoi’ is used, indicating to call out someone).

V1.2.b. Maibis Role in Lai Haraoba

The maibis wrap the “ishaifu” the earthen pot, inside which a banana leaf has been placed protruding at the neck of the pot and it is tied with hand woven thread of a

fathom's length. She then dances the laihou jagoi (opening dance) to the tune of the pena, a kind of one stringed fiddle.

On arrival of the water, two preliminary rites are carried out by the maibi. Firstly, the yu-khangba ceremony is performed which consists of the offering of zu (rice beer) to the lai i.e. the God. Secondly, the offering of the khayom (consist of fruit, flour and kabok mixture) and various food offerings are carried by women, who stand with the rest in two rows facing the water.

The maibi invokes the lai by throwing the offered Konyai (gold and silver coin) into the water and calls that his people will celebrate his merrymaking. Now she takes the thread from the ishaifu, unwinds it and ties the leiyom (three layers of banana leaf, fourteen buds of the langthrei (*Blumea balsamifera*) plant to a wooden spindle thread stick three times.

The main episode of the Haraoba is the laibou jagoi during which the maibi dances a movement known as the khayom jagoi. This portrays the life-cycle of the lai from conception. Then the building of the body parts in thirty eight stages. After each stage the maibi and other participants perform a short dance (leishi jagoi) step turning to each of the four directions. Finally the infusion of the spirit into the body is presented.

The maibi leads a communal dance in single file which is called the "Lairen Mathek" or the python curve. The line of dancers move in a circular pattern around the shrine and it should not be broken until the pattern is completed.

One further rite which is observed before the lai returns to his place is the selection of a wife of the lai. The maibi becomes possessed as the lai enters her. She then utters oracles. The actual choosing of the girl is done by the maibi who points her out with the aid of a stick. The girl so selected will join the maibi in leishi jagoi and thereafter herself becomes a maibi.

It is believed that, women are more likely to become possessed. A woman may become a maibi either through this process or by being directly possessed by the lai. In the case of the maiba, the second is the only case. A girl may become possessed at an early age, as young as seven years. Such are usually thought to make the best maibis (Panchali 1987: 97). Even a woman of forty or sixty can also be chosen. Married and unmarried women are accepted. At the initial stage possession leads to abnormal behavior like singing, dancing, pull their hairs, shouting, speaking in an unusual tongue and fall into trance. A similar kind of example has been cited (ibid: 101) about the female possessed by Bijali Mahadev of Kulu Valley of Himachal Pradesh. There are several females, called Hesans, who are said to be possessed by the deity. They always move with the deity in procession. The possession by the goddess of a female and her becoming 'cheli' is a common practice in Kangra, Kulu and Garhwal.

The maibis dress themselves very distinctively all in white clothes with colorful flowers decorating their hairs. More significantly when a man becomes possessed by the lai which is mostly through direct possession he will wear the clothes of the female maibi and maybe spoken of as a "male maibi".

In the lai haraoba festival the maibis play a more important role as Mrs. Paratt believed (1980: 96) and according to Shakespeare (1913: 429, 1910 a: 354) the lai is thought to take more pleasure in female ritual functionaries. And without the ritualistic performance of them in several social traditions the ceremony is considered incomplete. Thus, there is no doubt that the maibi was originally far more important than the maiba.

VI.2.c. Maibis Role as a Fortune Teller

Besides the ritual functions, a maibi may act as a kind of fortune teller. Maibis act as mediums, communicating with the dead and passing on their message to living relatives (ibid: 100). Another function is to call back the five souls which signify the

fire, water, air, sky and the earth and the sixth one i.e. the shadow in order to cure the seriously ill persons. This may be done by the non-cultic maiba, who also practices other methods of healing such as the use of massages and herbal medicines, besides driving the evil spirits away from the house.

VI.2.d. Maibis Role in Domestic Festivals

In Manipur there are three types of domestic festivals where we can see the important role played by maibis (priestesses) in the rituals.

The first is the lai chaklon katpa, the festival in honor of the sagei (clan or extended family group). Here, a maibi is called to officiate the festival. The clan god is offered a hand of bananas with rice called the chaning. The chaning is later eaten by the piba i.e. the male of the clan who is the eldest and on no account must be consumed by the females of his family. If so happens then it is thought they will become more prosperous than the piba.

Among the Meities there is a common saying that “Oldness is Godliness” (Mee Ahal Laini). So, they believe in worshipping of forefathers or showing etiquette to the elders, which certainly bring some prosperity and respect for their youngsters and this belief is being preserved (Laiba 1992: 13). A second domestic festival, known as the apokpa khurumba, is held in honor of the ancestors of the family. In this rite the woman also play an important role. The food should be cooked by the piba himself or by his wife or a married woman of the household. It must never be cooked by an unmarried girl. The woman who cooks has also the task of carrying into the house a pot of water drawn from a place which is regarded as sacred to the sagei.

And lastly, the ritual held for the household deity, Sanamahi, takes place atleast once a year and is obligatory during Cheiraoba, the Manipuri New Year. At this the

household as a whole worships Sanamahi usually through the eldest woman in the family who also performs the monthly Sanamahi rituals.

VI.2.e. Maibis Role in the Rites de Passages

Vaishnavism had a considerable effect upon the rites de passage as practiced in Manipur society. The role of maibis in the rites of birth and death are very significant. The rites of passage today follow the basic Hindu pattern but retained at several points, local traditional elements which go back to pre-Hindu times (Paratt 1980: 76).

VI.2. e. i. Birth Rituals

Hodson remarked that Manipuri birth ceremonials are those commonly observed by Vaishnav Hindus, with the addition of a small household puja to the lai (1910: 112).

In Manipur, the midwives were also called maibis, but are different from the maibis who carry out the religious rituals. The maibis cut the umbilical cord. Before doing this the maibi invokes the six souls to take up their place in the child. On the morning of the sixth day the ceremony of Epanthaba (Epan means menstruation and Thaba means offering) was given to the God after menstruation. On this particular day the priest or the priestess has offered a vegetable salad with fish to the Gods and Goddesses of Meities and it is also offered to the newly born kid (Laiba 1992: 24). The maibi then simulates the washing of the child's mouth six times in order to please the six souls. The maibi then place the child on the winnowing fan, after removing the food. The yotsubi (a three legged tripod, used for placing food on when cooking over the fire) (Photo VI.1) is then brought into the room where the mother is. A fire is lit under it. The maibi then moves the winnowing fan with the baby in it, above the fire. The mother is asked by the



Photo VI.1. A Tripod

maibi whether she wants to keep the child or the fan and whether she will accept the valuables in exchange for the child. The mother asks for the child.

V1.2. e. ii. Marriage Ceremonials

In the marriage ceremonials the maibas or the maibis do not have any significant role to play. But the significant role and the status of women of the society can be clearly seen in this ceremony. After the marriage date is fixed the bridegroom's family, relatives and friends come to the bride's house with fruits, flowers and some gift for the bride. This is known as 'lei chanda' (lei=flower, chandan=Santalum album (Imoba 2004: 297)). The 'lei chandan' which is placed on a plate has to be carried only by an unmarried girl. On the day of marriage, the marriage procession is to be led by a married woman who carries the 'jatra' (foundation). She is known as the 'jatra pubi'. The woman should be someone whose eldest child must be a son and still living, who is not a widow, and who had been married according to the correct rites. When the bridegroom reaches the mandap (an open shed, wherein any public function or ritual ceremony is held) (ibid: 297) where the marriage ceremony was to be held, the bride's mother and few of her friends come and receive the bridegroom with blessings. This is known as 'maya okpa' (receiving the son-in-law). The kanya daan (giving the hand of the girl to the boy) is to be given by the father or elder brother of the bride. For this the right hand of the bride is to be placed on the right hand of the bridegroom. To tie their hands which is known as 'daan punba' (tying the hand of the girl to the boy) a married woman, who could be the sister of the bride, mother or any close relative who had sons as their first born, has to come in the center and perform it. For tying the daan the woman would be gifted a shawl by the bridegroom's side. The boy's parents approach the girl's parents. If the marriage is settled the bridegroom's party brings food to the girl's house so as to make the impending marriage known to all. The wedding ceremony takes place in the girl's house. And the groom is conducted in by a

woman, whose eldest child must be a son and still living, who is not a widow and who has been married according to the correct rites.

VI. 2.e. iii. Death Rituals

According to Hodson (1910: 116) the Meitie's method of disposal of the dead have been extensively Hinduized and today they are firmly under the control of the Brahmins.

The maiba and the maibi do play an extensive role only in cases of untimely or unnatural deaths, where the traditional customs are practiced. Person who committed suicide by hanging was previously simply exposed in the jungle as being unfit for proper disposal. Certain ceremonies were performed to ward off the malignant spirits from the living for children dying in infancy and women at childbirth.

The bodies of infants or children below three years old were not cremated but buried in graves in an isolated spot. The maibi also buries some roasted peanuts, along with the body, not to return until the peanuts were grown. Another ceremony performed is called laiypanthaba in which the libation of a small amount of rice beer is poured out to the spirits. It is believed that it prevents the dying of the next child in similar manner (prevents the dead child returning and re-entering the mother's womb).

A different ceremony is officiated for mothers dying in childbirth. The purpose is to ward off the influence of the spirit of the deceased from the living, especially the husband. For this ritual a maiba sits in front of the verandah of the house and to his left, but at right angles to him, three clothes are set. In these a hand of bananas is set, and is covered with three further clothes so as to represent the body of the deceased. Mats are placed before the clothes, and behind each offering a betel nut and cups and pot containing rice and limes are also placed. Between these articles and the maiba a pot of water is placed. Five small discs of salt are suspended before the verandah which are later

discarded at the boundaries of the village and are believed to give protection against evil influences.

The actual ceremony begins when a sister of the deceased woman brings offerings of flowers and a little rice. The maiba dips a bunch of leaves in water and sprinkle this on the hearth. After walking three times around the hearth the earth is discarded and fresh earth is put in its place. The husband is then sprinkled the water with the bunch of leaves indicating purification by the maiba. The ceremony is now complete.

Through certain actions of occultism, rites, rituals and ceremonies, celebrations accompanied with offerings, prayers they propitiate for the society to enjoy a trouble, anxiety or tension free life. They are so intertwined that their role as a priestess has become an essential and integral part of social life and social organization. In certain rituals and festivals the maibis play a far more vital role compared to her male counterparts. One significant thing about the Meitie traditional religion is that the women can officiate the rituals and enter the temples too as against the practices of their Hindu counterparts. Hence they enjoy a higher status within the society in general and within their priestly community in particular.

The ritual experts of the Meitie Vaishnav followers wear washed white or saffron dhoti-kurta. They do not wear any symbols or badges while officiating. But the Meitie traditional priestesses wear badges to show their seniority and wear only white full-sleeves blouse, white round skirt and lots of flowers to decorate their hair. The respondents said that the experts', of both the indigenous and Vaishnav religions, services could be repaid in cash or in kind, like in the form of dakshina (which may include fruits, vegetables, clothes, money, etc.). Other materialistic things are also given.

The Brahman priests have to observe some special diet like not taking non-vegetarian food, not eating with the non-Brahman caste, should not eat or take food

cooked by a non-Brahman or food cooked without taking bath, etc. While the maibas and maibis did not follow any such restrictions.

In the Meitie society only it has been found that women play an important role in the rituals of the household and religious ceremony. In the household ceremonies, the woman has to cook and feed her husband as no one else can cook the food in her place.

VI. 3. Non-Manipuri Men and Women in Ritual Practices

For the non-Manipuri society the ritual officiants and experts are also all males. The reason for women not being priestesses among the non-Manipuris is due to pollution. According to all the respondents in their society they did not have much preference for older or younger priests. As for the non-Manipuri society, all the respondents said that it all depended on acquaintance with the priest and during auspicious season in the availability of the officiants. It also depended on popularity and credibility and nature of the individual. So there was no preference of older or younger priests. Those who were well versed in the Veda-Shastras or their particular Holy Scriptures were generally preferred.

The ritual experts of the non-Manipuri communities wear washed white or saffron dhoti-kurta. They did not wear any symbols or badges while officiating. According to the non-Manipuri respondents the experts' services could be repaid in cash or in kind, like in the form of dakshina (which may include fruits, vegetables, clothes, money, etc.). Other materialistic things are also given. The Brahman priests have to observe some special diet like not taking non-vegetarian food, not eating with the non-Brahman caste, should not eat or take food cooked by a non-Brahman or food cooked without taking bath, etc. In the non-Manipuri society women do not have an important role to play but they are the ones who make all the arrangements for all ritual ceremonies. The responses of the

Kuki , Meitie and non-Manipuri respondents regarding the role of priest and priestesses in ritual practices is given in Table VI.1.

Table VI.1
Role of priests and priestesses in ritual practices

Name of the group	Only male played the major role	Only female	Both	Total
Kuki	175 (97.22 %)	0	5 (2.77 %)	180
Meitie	0	0	60(100 %)	60
Non-Manipuri	60 (100 %)	0		60
Total	235	0	65	300

Among the Kukis only males were the ritual experts and women were not considered capable of being a priestess, since they made sacrifices and appeased the spirits at their dwellings which were mostly in the rocky hills, river, jungle, precipices, etc. These places must have been very difficult to reach. Among the Meities, they did not have to make sacrifices or appease the spirits. They only have to communicate with the God. And as the maibis are also believed to be the wives of the Gods they could become ritual experts. As for the non-Manipuri women other than making the arrangement for the ritual they had no other role to play in the ritual ceremonies. The main reason for this may be that the women are not allowed to read the Holy Scriptures.

VI. 4. Status of Women in the Society

Every known human society has two sexes, male and female. This is one brute fact of the universe. Differentiation based on sex is one of the most fundamental features of human society. The existence of two sexes, a biological differentiation, results in what is also one of the most important kinds of social differentiation. In no society males and females do the same things, occupy the same statuses, share identical interests,

conform to the same norms, or aspire to the same kinds of achievement. No society treats its men and women exactly alike (Rao 1997: 350).

The general belief everywhere is that man is the dominant sex and the woman is the weaker sex. The woman is called the second sex. The philosopher Nietzsche regarded women as the 'God's second mistake'. Robert Bierstedt writes: 'In all societies it is woman who has been subjected and slave; man who has been ruler and master. Woman is vessel, receptacle, utensil. She is conquered, subdued, vanquished, in sexual encounter as in life. Man takes, woman gives; man acts, woman waits' (Rao 1997: 351). Though these general beliefs may still affect any known societies even in India, but the scenario seems to be different in the north-eastern corner of the country. Especially the women of Manipur, both from the valley and the hills, to some extent, enjoy a certain level of freedom. In the book, "The Gazetteer of Manipur" Dun, described the women of Manipur in the following words, "They are very industrious. Most of the work of the country except the heaviest is performed by them. It would be difficult to find a more industrious woman in India than the Manipuri"(Dun. 1957: 17). Mrs. Grimwood also spoke of the Manipuri women in her book 'My Three Years in Manipur', "The Manipuris do not shut up their women, as is the custom in most parts of India, and they are much more enlightened and intelligent in consequence" (Grimwood 1975: 58-59).

The status of women in their society is a significant reflection of the level of social justice in that society. Women's status is often described in terms of their income, employment, education, health and fertility as well as the roles they play within the family, the community and society (Rao1997). In 1978, the Indian Anthropological Society brought out a regionwise survey of tribal women. It points out that the studies of tribal women have either been ignored or when discussed, such discussions have been brief and sketchy. Except in some works by Elwin, Furer-Haimendorf and a few others,

there has been no explicit discussion on the 'status of women' in tribal society. Over the last two decades there has been a steady rise in the number of studies dealing with tribal women (Xaxa 2004: 347). Such as-K. Mann, 1987, J.P. Singh, N.N. Vyas and R.S. Mann, 1988; A. Chauhan, 1990 (Basu 1993). The study of tribal women cannot be ignored. It becomes important because the problems of tribal women differ from a particular area to another area owing to their geographical location, historical background and the processes of social change (Chauhan 1990). The myth of gender equality or higher status of women in tribal societies has also been critically viewed through an examination of customary law in respect of property, marriage, inheritance and so on (Nongbri 1998).

Status has been discerned in two broad views. The first refers to women's role in the system, which entails rights and duties. Status is linked with a role in the system. The other usage of the term is in the sense of prestige and honor, which may be studied in terms of their legal status and opportunities for participation (Xaxa 2004: 348). A tribal woman occupies an important place in the socio-economic structure of her society. The Dhebar Commission Report (1961) mentions that the tribal women is not drudge or a beast of burden, she is found to be exercising a relatively free and firm hand in all aspects related to her social life unlike in non-tribal societies. The tribal women in general and in comparison with castes, enjoy more freedom in various walks of life. Traditional and customary tribal norms are comparatively more liberal to women. The status of tribal women in matrilineal societies has been observed to be somewhat better than that of women in a patrilineal society, e.g. their legal status is much higher than that of their counter parts in patrilineal societies and they have a significant role in the tribal economy (Dhebar 1961).

The significant role played by the Manipuri women in the history of the state could be seen in the various aspects of social, economic, political and religious

systems. According to Bimola Devi, women of Manipur held a very high social status in the primitive period. Earlier all the necessary clothes of the household were made by the women of the family. In the present day society of Manipur, the educated women take up governmental services and teaching. Some women also became social workers while others are engaged in semi-governmental organizations. But majority of the women population are still engaging in small internal trade and commerce, weaving, agricultural and other domestic works. Women as a collective group e.g. Meira Paibi (Meira=torch, Paibi=holders; this is a group of women of a locality, irrespective of their profession gather every night and act as moral police especially against immoral activities), Nisha Bandh (group of married women of each locality who acts against the use and sale of alcohol, drugs, etc.), etc. are also contributing a lot for the eradication of social evils (Bimola Devi 1995: 161).

Rice is the principal staple food of entire population of Manipur. Hence paddy obviously is the principal agricultural produce. People in the valley practice wet land cultivation with proper irrigation and the hill people practice either jhum cultivation or terrace cultivation (Ghosh 1997: 111). It is a common sight to see women working in the paddy fields from early morning. Among the valley people ploughing is done by men usually. While in jhum cultivation, women dominated in this occupation except in respect of heavy and odd jobs like clearing fields, etc. Majority of the tribal and Meitie women could be seen selling their farm produce like vegetables and fruits in the local markets. Weaving is another source of income for women of both valley and hilly areas. Embroidery, rice pounding, fishing and helping in house-building are other economic activities of women.

Manipur witnessed two women movements, popularly known as Nupilan (Nupi=Women; Lan=war) in her political history. Both these movements took place

during the time of British Superintendency i.e., the first in 1904 and the second in 1939 (Bimola Devi 1995: 168).

According to 60% urban and 72.67% of the rural Kuki respondents who mainly belong to old aged and middle aged groups, traditionally, the position of women in the Kuki society was very low. Like the Israelites, women were not considered as equal among the Kukis added an old aged man. Women were looked down. Their words were not considered seriously. Their condition and status was below that of men. Women were not allowed to attend village meetings. Their position was not good in their society as compared to their Meitie counterparts. They were not consulted in family decisions and were deprived of the custodial rights of their children after divorce. If a woman could not give birth to a son she was given divorce by her husband. And her parents had no saying in this matter. Even her own son could send her away if she was not of good character by compensating a cow to her parents. Women did not have any right for property inheritance. Only the sons inherited and believed to carry on the family lineage. Though she participates, helps in agricultural work besides taking care of the household, their voices were not heard in taking decisions affecting family or public life. And, they were debarred from taking direct part in many socio-religious ceremonies. They also actively helped their male members in agricultural activities. But this group of respondents added that now, after the coming of Christianity their conditions have changed. But, now they go to the church and pray along with their male members of the society irrespective of age. Women's associations, within the church, carry out religious and socio-economic welfare activities. Education was also imparted to them and came along with it the prospects of government jobs; give private tuitions to children and earn some money. Now the husbands just cannot give divorce to their wives on the ground of barrenness or not

bearing a male child. Now they enjoy a better position. But the 2% rural non-converts from this group did not assert to the last opinion.

But 40% urban and 27.33% rural of the Kuki respondents comprising mainly of young and middle aged group were of the opinion that the position of the women in their society was remarkably high and quiet good.

The position of women in the Meitie society has been high since the olden days according to all the converted and no-converted Meitie respondents. They are respected and placed equal to man and they contribute a lot to the economy of the society. Women of the traditional Meitie society were the only ones to have some significant role in the ritual practices of the society. According to 98.33% of the non-Manipuri respondents, in their communities the position of women is not bad but not either equal or higher than the men of their societies. Women are respected and considered as “Lakshmi” among the Nepalese. The position of women in Muslim society is not better than compared to the status of women in Meitie society. Socially they have many restrictions regarding dress, education and marriage said the 1.67% Muslim respondents. The Muslim women remained backward in the field of education for a long time due to the strict use of Purdah. And Purdah also became a potent factor responsible for their feeling of inferiority and mental deficiency (Sinha 1982: 140).

It has been also observed that the women of the three groups not only take care of the household chores but also look after the domestic animals. The rural women of these groups also played a major role during the cultivation besides the above mentioned activities. The Kukis who live on the hills have to come down to fetch water in the bamboo rods which they carried in bulk in their sam (bamboo basket carried at the back with the help of a strap put on the head). Some of them carried along their small children too when they come down. Data collection was in the season of Christmas, and many girls

were found at their homes weaving their traditional shawl, phanek (women's dress worn around the waist) and ties for gifting as well as for sale. The Meitie and the Kuki women were found to be more enterprising than their non-Manipuri counterparts who could be seen in the local markets where these women come and sell their garden produce or clothes.

Table VI.2
Status of women

Name of the group/opinion of the respondents	High status		Middle status		Low status		Total
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Kuki	127	70.56 %	0	0	53	29.44 %	180
Meitie	60	100 %	0	0	0	0	60
Non-Manipuri	0	0	59	98.33 %	1	1.67 %	60
Total	187	62.33%	59	19.67%	54	18%	300

Among the women of the three communities, only the Meitie women seem to have a high status as compared to her other counterparts. The reason for the high status of women in the Meitie society probably may be because of their economic, social and political contribution to the society in general and to the family in particular. Their political contribution can be known from the history of Nupilan; they are seen to work hard in the field, for they are entrepreneurs and the main market in the Imphal city is run by them only which become their source of income and become independent, thus contributing to the economy of the family; socially look after the family. Among the Kukis, though the women played an important role in the agricultural, animal husbandry, crafts, etc. But they could be easily divorced by their husbands on the ground of not giving birth to a male child. After the divorce also the women did not have any rights over their children. So, all such factors led to slow status among the Kuki women. But now after the

coming of Christianity this scenario has been changed and it has brought some upliftment in their status.

CASE STUDY

RURAL

Haogasei Haokip

68 years, Female

Illiterate

Moreh ward no. 7

Chandel District

Haogasei Haokip, is a widow, and she can not read or write. She knows Manipuri language and some Kuki dialects too. She stays with her two married sons and two unmarried daughters and five grandchildren. They are carrying on their traditional occupation as cultivators. But the income from the cultivation was not sufficient for the survival of such a big family. After the sudden demise of her husband, her life became more miserable with the four children. They have migrated to Moreh from Ukhrul district in 1992. Here, she started a business of charcoal. Charcoal from Moreh is famous in the state and is a good business during the winter season. This business helps her in supporting the family when the harvesting season is over.

When, Mrs. Haogasei she was 18 years of age she got converted to Christianity just before her marriage. In her village she knew there was a church but was never inclined or interested in visiting the church, nor was she interested in knowing what it was. But one day her father (who had been preached several times by some evangelists) all of a sudden decided that he will accept Christ as his God and worship him. After that many proposals came for her and two years later she got married in the church. Mrs. Haogasei thought that her father must have accepted Christian faith for her marriage which was stuck-up for they were no-converts. "Naturally, any Christian would prefer only a Christian believer as their daughter-in-law or wife", opined Mrs. Haogasei. Initially she had problems adjusting with the new faith and the new family. Her father's faith in Jesus became more firm seeing her and her family prospering in their little world. She said, "Though God does not give surplus but we get enough for our daily needs so I am not worried about tomorrow". Now her faith in Jesus is unalterable.

In spite of her being a firm believer she holds the opinion that knowledge of their traditional religion which still holds good for the well being and togetherness of the people should be acquired. According to her, the custom of bride-price is a healthy way for maintaining the relations from both the sides. She gave bride-price when her sons got married and said she will also take when her daughters get married

CASE STUDY

Lunkhunei Sarto

57 years, Female

VIIIth Std.

Kharam vaiphei, Saitu Gamphazol Block

Senapati District

Mrs. Lunkhunei Sarto belongs to the Kom tribe. She belongs to Sarto clan. Her husband Ngurjapao, who is 60 years old, is a chowkidar by profession. Lunkhunei can speak all the tribal dialects besides the Manipuri language. She believed that they originated from the Chin-Hills. They migrated to Kharam Vaiphei in the year 1964 from Langkhong Khunou of Tamenglong district. She accepted the Lord and got converted to Christianity in 1945. According to her, their traditional religion is known as Kasa i.e. made of pig's head, a small kharai (an iron pan in net form), umm, and some hen's feather tied together. Their traditional occupation is cultivation. Since her husband has to go for job she takes care of the field mostly, protecting it from the cattle. She said that in her society there is a belief that if cows eat up the crop it grows up again but if buffaloes eat up then those crops will not bear any fruits.

Lunkhunei is happy that, though she could not give birth to any child, her husband never thought of divorcing her or remarrying again. For this she expressed her thankfulness to Christianity. She said, "Women in the Kuki society are very hard working. We have to work hard a lot from taking care of the children to collecting fire woods from the forest. Every woman knows weaving since their traditional shawl is a must for them in every occasions". She also added that she weaves clothes during monsoons as she get ample time to finish the work after planting the crops. She is happy with the respect they get in their society, which makes her proud of being a Kom woman. What she does not like at all about their society is that when a couple gets divorce, the woman will not get the custody of the children which is not a case among their counterparts in the Meitei society. She holds the opinion that mother should be given the right to be with the children.

VI. 5. Conclusions

In the Kuki and the non-Manipuri societies, only male ritual experts and officiants were there. While in the Meitie society, both male and female ritual experts could be found. In the Meitie society, the priestesses could be chosen from the young age of 7 to even 60 years. The priestesses played a significant role in the Meitie Sanamahi religion which is still worshipped and followed by the Meities besides Vaishnav Hindu religion. In the Kuki society women were considered weak to interact with the spirits at any time of the day and incapable of taking up the responsibilities of the thiempu. As for the Meities and the non-Manipuri Vaishnav Hindu followers, the absence of priestess was because of the restrictions on woman from reading their respective Holy Scriptures.

The maibis perform various rituals like in the Lai Haraoba (merry making of the God) where she comes in contact with the lai; leads the dance which portrays the lifecycle of the lai from conception to the infusion of the spirit into the body; choosing of the wife for the lai; as fortune teller; communicating with the dead and passing on the message to living relatives; in domestic festivals where ancestor worship is done; ritual for the household deity, Sanamahi, atleast once a year; in rites de passage-birth rituals, marriage ceremonials and death rituals, etc.

Kuki ritual experts do not wear any special symbols unlike the maibis who wear only white dresses and badges according to their seniority. The Vaishnav Hindu priest wore washed white or saffron dhoti-kurta. In the Kuki society the priests were paid in kind while in the Meitie and the non-Manipuri societies the ritual experts were paid in cash and kind for their services. The Kuki ritual experts did not observe any social restrictions.

Except the Meitie women, women of the Kuki society do not have any significant role to play in the household or any ritual ceremonies. In the Kuki society, in

certain rituals where women had role were either associated with their husband or only some rich women could afford to perform the ritual. Though women in the traditional Kuki society played an active part in the household chores, animal husbandry and agricultural work, did not have any role in decision making of the family; could be easily divorced by her husband if she did not give birth to a male child; deprived of their children's custody after divorce; etc. Rights of inheritance are restricted only to males since theirs is a patriarchal patrilineal society. But after the coming of Christianity and modern education the status of Kuki women has been uplifted. They can now worship and pray along with their male counterparts in the church. Position of the Meitie women has been high since ancient days and took active part in rituals, socio-economic-political affairs of the society. Non-Manipuri women do not enjoy an equal status in their patriarchal society. The Kuki and the Meitie women were found to be more enterprising than the non-Manipuri women of the state.

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