



Research Paper

Pre-Natal Beliefs and Rituals Within Sanamahism Among Meetei Society Of Manipur

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ABSTRACT: Many cultures around the world observe specific pre-natal rituals to ensure wellbeing of both the expectant mother and the unborn baby. Pre-natal rituals are those cultural beliefs and practices performed before birth of the baby. This qualitative systematic review has examined the literature describing and explaining pre-natal religious beliefs and practices within Sanamahism among Meetei society of Manipur. Traditionally it was firmly believed that these rituals were performed to avoid unwanted complication at the time of birth. In fact, they are meant for the expectant mother and the unborn baby to be cared for a period of time before birth. Another aspect is that they facilitate the transition to motherhood. They also play an important role in building personal and cultural identity of Meetei community. In today's society with modernization, performance of such rituals is becoming very uncommon. The present paper tries to find out the underlying facts and significances of pre-natal rituals among the Meeteis of Manipur through the perspective of traditional Meetei religion i.e., Sanamahism. The understanding of traditional practices can inform the need for culturally competent services during pregnancy.

INDEX TERMS: Birth, culture, expectant mother, identity, Meetei society, pre-natal, rituals, sanamahism, traditional religion, unborn baby.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Different religious groups and communities in this world have their own life styles and beliefs that are replete with ritual practices. A ritual is a ceremony or action performed in a customary way. It conforms to religious rites which are the sacred ways of celebrating a religion or culture. Mircea (1959) observed that rituals are those conscious and voluntary, repetitive and stylized symbolic body action that are central on cosmic structure and/or sacred presence. Thus, rituals are part of the religious aspect of man. Sociologists and anthropologists use the term ritual to denote two separate sets of religious activities: 1) prayer, ceremonial worship, chanting, a range of gesture movements, activities with sacred objects, etc. all done with specific intention of spiritual communication with a supreme being. 2) Religious activities associated with an individual life cycle as they move from one social setting to the next over time, from one role or social position to another integrating the human and cultural experiences with biological facts: birth, reproduction and death. Such life cycle rituals are termed as "Rites of passage". Rituals performed at birth, puberty, adulthood, marriage, death, etc. are included in this set of religious activities.

Rites of Passage often function within a religious framework and are, therefore, regarded as religious events. There are various forms of life cycle rituals and ceremonies. According to Van Gennep (1966), the rites can be categorized into three distinct types: transition, incorporation, and separation. The transition stage is the transitional period in which the individual ritually loses the former status but has not yet assumed the new one. Rituals performed during pregnancy and initiation rites fall in this category. Incorporation stage is the period the concerned individual formally assumes the new status and is re-incorporated into the society. Such ritual is prominent in birth ritual and marriage ceremony. The stage of separation is the period in which the individual is symbolically separated from his or her previous status. These rites of separation are prominent in funeral ceremonies. Gennep found that life cycle ceremonies were to be found in all societies. This view implies that the performance of religious activities associated with an individual's life cycle is a universal phenomenon.

After reviewing the previous studies, it is found that the beliefs and practices associated with the life cycle rituals of an individual are prescribed by his or her belief on a particular faith, and such practices have its own interpretation and significance in the society. Certain ritual activities have to be performed when an individual enters into a particular stage of life. For instance, in Hindu society certain Samskaras have to be performed during the pre-natal and post-natal period of a pregnant woman to protect the mother ensuring an easy delivery, to bless the unborn child with health, long life and intelligence. During this period, certain pregnancy taboo has to be observed and certain restrictions have to be followed. Pandey (1976) has pointed out that the variety of rites and rituals related to the Hindu Samskaras indicate the Hindu views of life which considers the ecological environment and spiritual belief as being equally important for welfare of a person.

As part of cultural beliefs and practices, certain restrictions have to be also followed when an individual enters into a particular stage of life. Among Oraon tribal Bihar, pregnancy taboo with regard to sex, food and movement were observed; cohabitation was not permissible after four months of pregnancy (Sarkar, et al., 1955). Sinha (1984) reported about pregnancy taboos of Bhilala tribe of Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Rajasthan. Crossing a broom-stick and tying ropes of horse, Ass and mare were forbidden. Eating of ginger root by a pregnant woman was not permitted for fear of deformity of limbs (Rud, 1960). Similarly, eating twin things was prohibited among the Kabui tribe mothers of Manipur (Rashitombi, 1996) for fear of a child being born with double finger or toe.

In this way, certain beliefs and practices are generally observed in many societies during pregnancy.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine and interpret the pre-natal ritual beliefs and practices adopted by the Meetei/Meitei Sanamahi community in Manipur.
2. To highlight the social significance of core components of those rituals viz. the ritual space, the participant, ritual artifacts, ritual items, etc.

III. LAND AND PEOPLE: THE COMMUNITY UNDER STUDY

Manipur is situated at the North-eastern corner of India on the Indo-Myanmar border. It is one of the seven north-eastern states commonly known as seven sister states of Indian Union. The state lies between the 90°03' to 94°78' east longitudes and 28°83' to 25°68' north latitude covering a geographical area of 22,327 square kilometres. It is bounded by the Indian states of Nagaland to the north, Mizoram to the south and Assam to the west. The state has a population of almost 3 million including the Meetei/Meitei who are the majority group in the state, the Meetei/Meitei Pangals (Manipuri Muslims), Naga Tribes, Kuki/Zo Tribes and other communities who speak a variety of Sino-Tibetan languages. Here, 'Meetei' and 'Meitei' are two terms used by the people of Manipur to denote the same ethnic group. Geographically, the state can be divided into two regions: the oval shaped valley at the centre which is of approximately 2000 square kilometres, and its surrounding parallel hill ranges which constitute more than 90% of the total geographical area of the state. The Meetei/Meitei people is an ethnic group native to the state of Manipur and they primarily occupies the valley region. They present about 53% of Manipur's population. According to census of India 2011, out of the 2,855,794 people in Manipur, there are 1,181,876 (41.39%) Hindus, 239,836 (8.4%) Muslims, 1,179,043 (41.29%) Christians, 1,527 (05%) Sikhs, 7,084 (.25%) Buddhists, 1692 (.06%) Jains, 23,767 (8.19%) Other religions and 10969 (.38%) Religions Not Stated. As far as religious composition of ethnic group is concerned, the Meetei Hindus constitute the largest ethnic group of the state.

Sanamahism is the traditional religious faith of the Meetei people. It is a cult-a system of religious beliefs, practices or behaviour which are not part of any established religion. It is an animistic, ancestor worshipping, shaman-led religious tradition found among the Meetei people in Manipur state of India (Otojit Kshetrimayum, (2009). The term is derived from "Sanamahi" (lit. "Spreading like liquid everywhere"), the most important Meetei deity (Parrat, 1974). Sanamahi is the name of the almighty Lord given by the Meetei. He is regarded as the king of all deities, the creator and controller of the universe. Sanamahism is basically based on the worship of God Sanamahi which is socially and legally recognized form of religion. It comes under the category of ORPs (other Religions and Persuasions) in Manipur's religious census report. The followers of Sanamahism among the Meetei/Meitei community are recognized as Meetei/Meitei Sanamahi people and currently they occupy 8% of Manipur's religious population according to census 2011 data.

IV. METHODOLOGY

In order to make an in-depth study of the present research work, the mixed method of the descriptive and the explanatory research design is employed. The relevant data, both primary and secondary, have been collected employing purposive sampling, snowball sampling as well as different techniques of qualitative approach. Primary data collection is done with the help of key informant interviewing method, interview guides, overt- participant observation as well as non-participant observation method. Interviews were conducted with

the help of schedules with Amaibas (Priest), Amaibis (Priestess), Arangphams (arranger/architect of rituals) and resource persons who have a good knowledge about Meitei religion and life cycle rituals. Necessary secondary data have been collected from earlier monographs, books, journals, ancient Meetei Texts and Chronicles.

V. DATA ANALYSIS

In the process of investigation, a number of cultural beliefs and practices have been come across. And, those ritual beliefs and practices with observed components have been analysed and interpreted along with social significances of the practices.

VI. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Meetei Sanamahi people have been performing certain life cycle rituals as a cultural tradition since the time immemorial. Significantly, such rituals explain the importance of a particular stage of an individual member among the community determining his or her cultural identity and status in the society. Moreover, the beliefs and ritual practices very often explain our understanding of the relation between everyday life of the community and their ecological environment. Life cycle rituals interpret, make them meaningful, functional and connect them with life. From the time of conception to the birth of a child, a number of rituals are performed by the Meetei community. These rites of childbirth seek to ensure the wellbeing of the child and the mother to reintegrate the latter to her new position in the society as a mother. The present study ventures to gain a deep insight into the cultural practices and elements associated with pre-natal beliefs and rituals performed by the Meetei community who follow traditional religion also known as Sanamahism. It also seeks to find out various components of each ritual and explain their significances.

Pre-natal beliefs and rituals:

1. Pregnancy taboo:

Right from the moment a woman is ascertained to be pregnant, the woman has to observe a number of taboos as a cultural tradition. The expectant mother should not be engaged in such activities as lifting of heavy objects, running, jumping, etc. Doing excessive house-hold work is avoided. It is all done to avoid miscarriage. She is not allowed to do any harmful activities such as quarrelling, fighting, stealing, cheating and killing any animal (Bhagyachandra, L., 1991). Doing the works of cutting, stitching, etc. are also avoided by some. Her husband is also not allowed to do such activities. The belief is that if they do any of these refrained activities, their child shall be born with joined fingers or toes and cleft lips. In fact, it is assumed that psycho-effect related to such activities may occur to the child developing inside the womb of the mother. During the first trimester, the pregnant women should eat only nutrient foods that are easily digestible. She should not eat all kinds of foods which are very hot, very cold, very sour and very bitter to taste. Some indigenous vegetables such as Peruk (*Centelia Asiatica*), Nongmangkha (*Adhatoda Vasica*) and some fruits especially Papaya and Pineapple are restricted to eat. The beliefs are that taking of such food items lead to miscarriage and eating excess of pineapple affects the eyes of the new-born. Eating twin things is also prohibited for the fear of the child being born with double finger or toes (Gunadhor, 1983). She is warned not to look at any physically and mentally abnormal living beings because it is believed that if she looks at them, the unborn child might suffer from physical or mental disorder. Whenever she goes out, she has to cover her head as it is fear that she might come into contact with evil spirits. In practical sense, such beliefs are observed to prevent the pregnant mother from unwanted environments causing from sun light, air, wind and dust. The most important taboo is with regard to killing snakes because snakes are believed to be the descendants of God Pakhangba, one of the important deities of Meetei Sanamahi people. It is believed that she should follow all such restriction to ensure the wellbeing of the child. Socially, imposition of such restrictions shows that the Meetei Sanamahi people use to have broad knowledge about the proper health care taken up for both the pregnant woman and the unborn child. The importance of avoiding from violent activities resulting into the maintenance of close relation between human beings and their ecological environment has also been emphasizing by the Meitei community since the time immemorial.

2. Purification rituals:

To save the blooming baby from miscarriage or abortion, they used to perform some rituals during period of pregnancy on certain specific months although it is little observed at the present time. The first ritual 'Warding off Lai-Amangba (Evil spirit)' is performed when the pregnant woman attains the 3rd month. It is believed that such a spirit causes the abortion and premature death. Next, an elaborate ritual known as 'Kokthok-Chamthokpa' is performed. It may be performed on the 5th or 7th month of pregnancy. On the appointed day, an Amaiba (Priest) is called to conduct the ritual. As the beginning of the ritual process, he purifies himself and all ritual items by chanting Nahailol (specific ritual hymns for purification). For this purpose, he sprinkles to his own body and those ritual items by holy water i.e., water in which leaves of Tairen

(*Cedrela toona*) and Pongphai (*Dactyloctenium aegypticum*) are dipped. These leaves have a very important place in Meitei rituals and ceremonies. They are compulsorily used for purification purposes be it peoples or items for the rituals. They are also plants used in Meitei folk medicine. After such purification is made, the practice of 'Kokthok- Chamthokpa' continues. In this, the expectant mother is seated, and her husband stand behind her, moving a burning piece of pine wood behind her head. He manipulates this torch until the shadow of his wife's head falls on her lap. The light is then extinguished. The Amaiba then brings a pot of water which is placed in the centre of the house. Then, prayer is offered along with some betel nut and fruits. The sacred water is used to wash the woman's hands and face. The reason for the ceremony is given as enabling the woman to retain her strength during pregnancy and childbirth. Meitei believe that a man has five Thawais (souls) and a Mi (Shadow). Each thawai is none else than five Gods viz. Koubru, Thangjing, Marjing, Wangbren and Apanba. The shadow is regarded as a part of the personality, and it is said that the object of the rites is to prevent the five souls and the shadow, with its vital power, from becoming dissociated from the body. It is also said that the five Thawais or Gods are nothing but the five basic elements of all living beings viz. fire, air, water, earth and sky.

There is another mode of Kokthok-Chamthokpa (purification) ritual which is performed on the 9th month of pregnancy, the ritual takes place at the centre of the veranda of the house. The Amaiba (priest) makes offering to an earthen pot filled with water. The pregnant woman is seated behind the pot holding a white garland in her hand. She manipulates her head until her image falls on the water of the pot. As soon as she sees her image on the water, she wears the garland on the pot and pray to it to carry all the evils from her. The figure (earthen pot) is thus seen as a substitute for her and is expected to carry all the evils which might occur during gestation period. At the end, the earthen pot is made broken to ensure the well-being of the pregnant woman. Another customary practice is that in case earthquake occurs, a bathing ritual is performed to protect the pregnant woman and unborn baby from evil spirits.

It is believed that if these rituals are properly performed, then no unwanted incident can happen to the child and the mother during childbirth. Performance of such rituals, in fact, lead to remove anxiety from the mind of the expectant mother and helps in deepening the spiritual insight. Another point of interpretation is that the prescribed specific months on which rituals are performed are found to be most important developmental stages of the unborn baby inside the mother's womb. When we study human embryonic development in Biological science, the prescribed months are found to be the most critical and remarkable development stages of the baby. By the end of 3rd month, the formation of all organs are almost complete, and organs will continue to become mature and functional. On the 5th month, the expectant mother experience the first movement of the baby inside the womb. Thus, it seems likely that the Meitei forefathers might be having some advanced knowledges about remarkable stages of the baby's development since the time of conception, and that is why proper cares for the mother as well as the baby have been taken on these specific months by performing religious rites and rituals.

3. Chakouba (Invitation for feast):

When the woman reaches 5th or 7th month of pregnancy, her natal family invites her for a feast by cooking her favorite dishes. Some people observe it on the 9th month also. Whenever she is invited for the feast, Sareng (Wallogo catfish) and Laphu (Banana stem) must be included as main food items because of their nutritive and medicinal values for human diet. After the feast, the parents of the expecting mother bless their daughter for a long life and smooth delivery of child. The event is based on the theme of strengthening the bond of love and responsibilities between the expectant mother and her paternal families. Scientifically, this tradition is followed in order to get a healthy child by enhancing the mental and spiritual satisfaction of the mother. No doubt, it is a cultural practice that serves the pregnant woman with proper diet to improve her health as well as that of the unborn baby.

4. Soul calling rituals:

When the pregnant woman attains 6th month, a soul-calling ritual is performed by an Amaibi (priestess) which is known as 'Thawai-Mi Kouba' ritual. Ritual items include six Ngamu (*Orientalis schneilder*) and an earthen pot with some water in it. The Amaibi, first purifies all the items with Tairen-Pongphai leaves using holy water and then picks up one ngamu by chanting spells: "Hey Universal Lord! The creator of day and night, she (mentioning the mother's name) bears a child in her womb. So I am calling the five souls (thawai) and the shadow (mi) for both the mother and the child, come! Come! Come!" And, in this way, the oracle picks up and puts the six Ngamu (the fish) inside the pot one by one while chanting the same spell six times. Here the six Ngamus represent the six main elements of a human being which are fire, air, water, earth, sky and shadow. After this, the pregnant woman has to eat one cooked Ngamu every day for six consecutive days as a part of the ritual process. Culturally, the Meitei community chooses Ngamu as a special fish for ritual purposes. This kind of fish has been given importance for nutrition, especially for the mother on maternity. This fish is also associated with the creational theory of the Meitei tradition and culture.

5. Chaphu-Uyan Thinba ceremony:

It is the cultural practice of presenting special household kitchen items: - Chaphu (earthen rice pot) and Uyan (earthen curry pot), now replaced by metal pots, as gifts to the expected mother by her parents' family by the time she attains 7th or 9th month of pregnancy. As a tradition of Meetei Sanamahi, this particular Chaphu and Uyan are used for making food for the mother after childbirth. The practice of this culture strengthens the bond of love between the pregnant woman and her paternal family. It is believed that, the pot 'Chaphu' symbolically represents the woman's father and 'Uyan' signifies her mother. Apart from these, other items presented include 'Phanek' (traditional wrapper) to be worn by the mother at the time of delivery, an earthen pot for keeping the umbilical cord safe, a fine cloth locally known as 'Naokol- phee' for covering the baby and placenta just after the delivery, and some well-made soft cotton cloths or towels locally known as 'Ningtha Phee' for the baby. This custom shows the deep concern and affection for the mother and the baby by the parents' family. Generally, it is believed that 7th or 9th month of pregnancy is the appropriate time for presenting such gifts because the Meetei community has some advanced knowledge in their mind that a baby, in case of premature birth, is likely to survive after this particular month. Clearly, the high chance of survival of a baby born after seven months of pregnancy is mentioned in human embryonic science.

6. Mei-Okpa ritual:

This ritual is performed inside the delivery room or house by a Wangon Amaibi (mid-wife) who conduct the delivery or by an assistant (Mayoknabi) just before the delivery time to ward off evil spirit. Here, 'Mei' means "Fire" and 'Okpa' means 'Welcome'. So, it is a ceremony welcoming the sacred fire to ward off the evil spirit. In the process, sacred fire and smoke are produced by burning leaves of 'Khoiju' (*Ternstroemia* D. Don) and 'Leikham' (*Goniothalamus sesquipedalis*) on a small earthen plate called 'Kambi'. The produced fire and smoke are used for fumigation to sanctify the pregnant mother and also the delivery room. In traditional Meitei society, both the 'Khoiju' and the 'Leikham' are important traditional sacred plants having mythological folklore about their origin. In fact, they are known for their great medicinal values. Thus, it is a ritual to purify the delivery room, the expectant mother and all the attendants present.

7. Ritual to expedite a birth:

Normally, Meitei woman used to bear children without great difficulty and pain at home. When she attains 9th month of pregnancy, certain cultural rituals are performed for smooth delivery of the baby. A 'Phambal', a specified place for the Almighty Lord 'Lainingthou Sidaba' is made in the middle of the Sumang (courtyard) or Mangol (verandah) by an Amaiba (priest). Offerings of fruits and flowers are made to the 'Phambal'. The priest uses an earthen pot filled with sacred water. He sprinkles sacred water by using leaves of 'Tairen' (*Cedrela toona* or Red cedar) and 'Pongphai' (*Dactyloctenium aegyptium* or Crow foot) to all the attendants specially the pregnant woman and to the established religious artifacts also. 'Tairen' and 'Pongphai' are two important sacred plants of the Meitei having their own mythological origins. They are also known for their great medicinal values. Then, he starts narrating the 'Apoklon', a religious folklore about the creation of human beings to which the pregnant woman has to listen attentively. It is believed that the spiritual purification of the woman is attained by performing such ritual.

When the pregnant woman starts feeling labour pain, arrangements for birth are made as quickly as possible. The local mid-wife (locally known as Chabokpi) and an assistant (locally known as Mayoknabi) attend her to accomplish the process of birth. If there seems trouble while delivering the child, a special ritual is performed. The mid-wife uses an earthen pot filled with some water. Then she put into the pot a mixture of four leaves of four different plants, namely

- Kurao (Coral tree)
- Uhan (*Rhombifolia* Linn.)
- Kokal (Chinese Lour. Harms.)
- Lulu-kok (*Adenosfemma Lavenia*)

The water mixed with these four leaves is sprinkled to the body of the woman by pronouncing:

"O! Kokal, you save her; O! Lulu-kok, you forgive her; O! Uhan, you make go away the evil spirit; O! Kurao, you make enlarge the birth canal. "

It is performed to avoid unwanted complication at the time of child birth. There is also a belief that for a safe delivery of the child, all the doors, windows, cupboards, rice-pot, baskets, etc. will be kept open believing that there should be no obstacle on the journey of the child from the mother's womb to the Malem (Earth).

In traditional Meitei society, it was firmly believed that if these rituals were properly performed, then no unwanted incident could happen to the mother and the child at the time of delivery and this tradition has been passed down for generations. However, these rituals are gradually becoming more uncommon. In today's

society with modernization, some of these rituals are still carried out with the use of some new modern tools instead of the old ones while retaining the actual cultural beliefs and practices.

VII. CONCLUSION

Like in any other communities around the world, the Meetei Sanamahi community has elaborate life cycle rituals. The pre-natal rituals are also an important aspect of Meetei socio-cultural life. They play an essential role in building and indicating personal and cultural identity of the Meetei people. In fact, they are very significant parts of Sanamahi culture. Culture, being a complex whole, has many aspects, and pre-natal rituals are also the most important part of it. In each and every part, cultural traits have their respective function and role for the proper functioning of that culture as a whole. These pre-natal rituals mark the important stage of life of the expectant mother and the unborn baby. Through these rituals, they pass from one stage of life to the next one. Through these rituals both the individual and the community make visible their most basic needs, values and aspirations. The interplay between culture and biology is also determined by rituals. These rituals are indispensable aspects of Meetei life as they help to highlight the socio-ethnographic description of Meetei Sanamahi people.

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