

ISSN: 2395-4132

THE EXPRESSION

An International Multi-Disciplinary e-Journal

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access e-Journal



Vol. 3 Issue 3 June 2017

Impact Factor 1.854

Editor-in-Chief : Dr. Bijender Singh

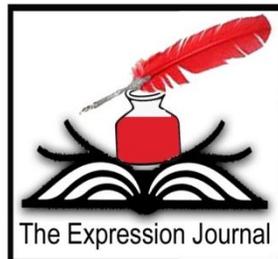
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The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

(A Peer Reviewed and Indexed Journal with Impact Factor 1.854)

www.expressionjournal.com

ISSN: 2395-4132



THE REPRESENTATION OF ANIMALS IN MANIPURI/MEITEI SOCIETY

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Abstract

As human society is structured through its interaction with animals, we need to understand the whole relationship of human beings with animals and the natural world. The roles played by various animals in the religious and cultural evolution of various ancient societies/civilisation need to be studied. In this paper, some animals and their associations with Manipuri/Meitei culture and religion that are discussed are: Manipuri pony (*Equus ferus caballus*), Manipuri Brow Antlered Deer or Sangai (*Rucervus eldi eldi*) and the Python/*Poubi Lai* (the Mythical Manipuri animal). Ancient Manipuri/Meitei society recognises the rights of animals to co-exist with humans. They believe that their Gods and ancestors incarnate in various forms of animals, both real and abstract. Some of the seven clans of the Manipuri/Meitei were found to use various species of animals as their representations. There is need for further in-depth study to understand the objective meaning of animals and their representations and significances in Manipuri/Meitei society.

Key-Words

Meitei society, Clans, Manipuri Pony, *Sangai*/Manipuri Brow
Antlered Deer, Python/*Poubi Lai*

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Vol. 3 Issue 3 (June 2017)

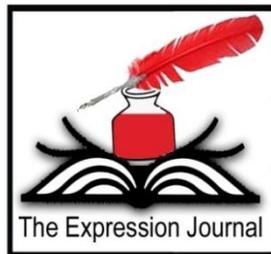
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(A Peer Reviewed and Indexed Journal with Impact Factor 1.854)

www.expressionjournal.com

ISSN: 2395-413



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Man is a social animal who is in need of company of others, both human and non-human animals. Man also depends on various life forms for his survival. Throughout history, the complex relationship that men have with animals is evident in myths, legends, history, anthropology etc. Depending on the social setup, the relationships between men and animal have changed from time to time. The industrialization and modernization of human society have impacted the relationship to the extent that in recent years many have started working on the conservation and welfare of wildlife. It is because of the fact that much of the human society is structured through its interaction with non-human animals, and since human society relies heavily on the exploitation of animals to serve human needs, human-animal studies have become a rapidly expanding field of research (DeMello, 2012). Our modern society, particularly the industrial West (America and Europe) has started to recognize issues as animal welfare, animal rights movement, biodiversity conservation and environmental issues as matters of widespread public and political concern. Thus, we have to re-look at our complex and intertwined relationship with animals and the natural world. Animals have influenced our thoughts and way of life since time immemorial. Some animals are admired and some feared. Humans are very much influenced by the physical and behavioural characteristics of animals, such as size, bravery, speed, grace and strength. In the light of the above backgrounds, we need to re-examine the roles played by various animals in the religious and cultural evolution of various ancient societies/civilization. In this paper, an attempt has been made to discuss the relationship between animals and human society. For this purpose, three animals (including abstract form, such as *Poubi Lai*) which play significant role in Meitei society are selected and their association with Meitei culture is discussed.

Vol. 3 Issue 3 (June 2017)

Editor-in-Chief: Dr. Bijender Singh

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www.expressionjournal.com

ISSN: 2395-4132

Meitei Society

Meitei society is an ancient society which dates back to 33 AD. Meiteis are the major community of Manipur and live mainly in the valley area. Originally, the Meitei society consisted of seven clans (*yek* or *salai*) namely Khuman, Luwang, Mangang, Moirang, Chenglei, Angom and Khaba-Nganba. Each clan consists of a number of *sageis* (meaning surnames). There are about 446 *sageis* of the Meitei and almost each *sagei* has an *Umanglai* (deity of the forest). *Umanglais* are the ancestors or ancestresses of the respective *sageis*. Most of the acts of worshipping were done by the *amaiba* (priest) and *amaibis* (priestess). There are great social distinctions among the Meitei *sageis*. But there are no political distinctions among the *sageis*. As a matter of fact, they are at par with one another. Everybody can hold a post however high it may be.

The early settlers of Manipur had no formal religion. In the pre-Hindu period, the traditional religion was loaded with belief and practices associated with spirits, animistic and naturalistic faiths. Most of the people worshipped natural objects like Fire, the Sun, the Sky and a number of gods and goddesses. *Pakhangba* (pythons/snakes are treated as incarnation of *Pakhangba*) was also one of the most popular Gods of the Meiteis. The traditional cult of ancestor worship is also prevalent in Meitei society.

Meitei society is also an inclusive society where there is coexistence of numerous life forms. The place of animals in the society is revealed through various legends and myths. In the creation myth of Moirang, one of the principalities, *Thangjing* (the Supreme God) came down from heaven in the shape of a boar and created Moirang and later ruled as king of Moirang. In Manipur Royal Chronicles, the worship of stones as *laipham* (abode of god) and the *Kangla Sha* (the great *Nongsha* or animals of the Sun) who guarded the *Kangla*, the royal palace were also mentioned. In the famous *Khamba Thoibi* legend of Moirang, there is the evidence of the intimate relationship between humans and animals: *Shamu* (elephant), *Kao* (bull or ox), *Kei* (tiger), *Sagol* (horse) were mentioned and treated as parts of the ancient Meitei society.

The followings are the three animals (including abstract form, such as *Poubi Lai*) that are discussed for the purpose of this paper:

1. *Sangai*

The *Sangai* or the dancing deer or the Manipuri Brow-antlered deer is an endemic rare and endangered deer (*Rucervus eldi eldi*), which lives in a unique habitat of Keibul Lamjao National Park, Manipur, located in the southern parts of the Loktak lake, the largest freshwater lake in eastern India, and also a Ramsar site (included in *Montreux* record). *Sangai* thrives on the *phoomdi*, a biomass with soil or a vegetation growth formed by the accumulation of organic debris. The deer feeds on several types of vegetation that grow on the *phoomdi*. The *phoomdi* also gives shelter to *Sangai* and other habitats in the park. *Sangai* is also the state animal of Manipur.

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ISSN: 2395-4132

The name *Sangai* is derived from the Manipuri word (the noun) *sa* which means animal and (the verb) *ngai* meaning awaiting. The peculiar posture and behavior of the deer while running, particularly the males, even when running for its life, it stops occasionally and looks back as if waiting for someone. This is the reason for the coining of the name *Sangai*.

In early Meitei belief system, *Sangai* was held sacred and embedded in the legends and folklore of the Meiteis. There was intimate relationship between humans and the animal and the deer was considered as the binding soul between humans and nature. Killing the *Sangai* was an unpardonable sin symbolizing the breaking up of the cordial relationship between humans and nature. There are various stories related with the deer. According to a version, a legendary hero *Kadeng Thangjahanba* of Moirang, an independent kingdom ruled by successive kings through the ages, captured a pregnant *Sangai* from *Torbung Lamjao* during a hunting expedition (*sa tanba*). He brought the deer to give to his beloved *Tonu Laijinglembi*. However, to his dismay he found his beloved married to the king. Consequently, the heartbroken hero released the deer free in the wild of Keibul Lamjao. From that day onwards, the place became the home of *Sangai*.

In another version, a prince called *Pudangkoi Punshiba*, the elder brother of the celebrated *Luwang Punshiba*, the chief of *Luwang* clan sat idle and did not work in time. He later transformed himself into a deer which later on came to be known as *Sangai*. During a hunting expedition, *Senba Mimaba*, a *Khuman* chief killed *Sangai*. Later, *Luwang Punshiba* prescribed that the head of *Sangai* be carved at the prow of the royal boat called *Hiyang Hiren* (used in the boat race called *Hiyang Tannaba*) in memory of his elder brother *Pudangkoi*.

Sangai is a peace loving animal and it depicts the life of a Manipuri/Meitei who is very peace loving, has high moral values and excels in art and culture and various forms of activities, such as dance, sports, etc.

2. Manipuri Pony

The Manipuri pony, one of the rarest breed of ponies of the world, is the descendent of Asian wild horse and is reared in semi-wild system. It is the only recorded and living original polo pony of the world. Ponies were also used as cavalry horses throughout the 17th and 18th centuries as mentioned in the Manipur Royal Chronicle, 1584.

In Manipur, polo was introduced as early as 17th century and Manipuri ponies were one of the first breeds used in the game. In the monumental work *The Meitheids*, T.C.Hodson writes about Manipuri pony and polo: "In the reign of *Khagemba*, circa 1600, the great and the famous game of polo was introduced in Manipur. The ponies are strong, wiry little creatures rarely more than twelve hands in height, and are fed on grass, with now and then an allowance of paddy". The British learned of polo during the 19th century while watching

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www.expressionjournal.com

ISSN: 2395-4132

it played on Manipuri ponies in Cachar, India. Later, in 19th and 20th centuries they were in demand by the British for use as polo ponies. In the history of Manipur, there are evidences of pony being treated as an inseparable part of Meitei society. The animal is present in the social life of the people and is also a very popular animal among the people of Manipur. In mythology and ancient Manipuri literature pony is figured prominently.

According to a legend, the Manipuri pony was created when its ancestor *Shamadon Ayangba* (the archaic name of Manipuri pony), a sacred winged mythological beast was captured and had its mane and wings cut off for causing destruction to the homestead of *Konglouton Louthiba*. This legend of flying horse is still narrated by the local storytellers today. The domestication of Manipuri pony is also found in the ancient manuscript *Ougri* which recorded:

After completion of creation of earth by *Ashiba*, his father, the almighty god *Atiya Shidaba* asked his brother *Apanba* to create human beings to own the earth. *Apanba*, who was also known as *Konglouton Louthiba*, in consultation with his wife *Leinung Chakha Khongjombi* started plantation of beans on earth. *Asiba* became jealous and created *Shamaton Ayangba* (First pony on earth) to destroy *Apanba's* creation of Human Beings and their agricultural works. *Apanba* then fought with *Shamaton Ayangba* and his wife *Leinung Chakha Khongjombi* helped in his conquest. Later, he cut off the wings and mane and tamed the pony to be used by human beings.

In Meitei myth, *Lord Marjing* is the lord of horses. He is the chieftain of the *Chenglei* clan. It is believed that the *Chenglei* clan was the first clan who had domesticated and bred the ponies and, who later on encouraged the equine culture in Manipur. At present, the statue of the legendary flying horse, *Samadon Ayangba* adorns Heingang, the abode of *Lord Marjing* which is situated at Imphal East District, Manipur.

The Manipuri pony was used in polo games, rituals of *Lai Haraoba*, horse race in *Lai Haraoba* and in warfare as cavalry horses known as the Meitei *Arambai* (dart-wielding Meitei cavalry). In the *Khamba Thoibi* legend, we have also found the use of pony when *Thoibi* tries to escape from *Nongban* on her pony and when returns from her exile from Awa (now Myanmar), known as *Loi Kummakpa* on her pony.

The pony has intimate relationship with the Meitei society. The use of the pony in the folk songs and the rituals of *Lai Haraoba* signifies the deepest involvement of ponies in the history of human civilization.

3. *Poubi Lai*

Poubi Lai is another animal which is closely connected with the Meitei society. It is the manifestation of the python cult, a cult which has metaphysical and divine origin. *Poubi Lai* has great significance in the history of Kege Moirang, the cradle of Meitei culture and history. Moirang is a small kingdom situated on the bank of the Loktak Lake and to the south of Imphal valley in Manipur. Moirang has its own unique history and culture, quite

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different from the other clans. According to folktales and legends, *Poubi Lai* is a huge size mythical form of a python who suddenly appeared at the Loktak Lake. Later, he started killing the people around as he wanted to destroy the kingdom of Moirang. To save the situation, the king of Moirang bends to the creature's demand for a human being and a bag of rice every day. Consequently, the people of Moirang suffered a lot. To appease *Poubi Lai*, *Chaohi Leirong Apanba* had to go to the animal to serve as his daily meal with the bag of rice. Being a brave and a fearless youth, he decided to fight back instead of accepting his fate. In order to save himself and the kingdom of Moirang, he visited *Kabui Salang Baji*, the revered *shaman* of that time, who lived in the neighbouring Kabui village in the western Salangthel hill ranges of the Loktak Lake for help. Using a *tou* (an aquatic plant), *Salang Baji* made a deadly weapon called *Long* (a kind of nine headed javelin) to kill the animal. With the help of *Long*, *Kabui Salang Baji* tamed and killed *Poubi Lai* striking at his heart. Later on, peace prevailed once again in the kingdom of Moirang. Still today, in many houses of Moirang, *Long* is kept at one corner of their houses to protect from the evil spirit.

The story of the python cult is orally transmitted through the ages. Earlier, there were no idol or image of *Poubi Lai*. However, in 2003, late Karam Dineshwar, who was a successor of the royal karigar and a wood carver by profession, carved the image of *Poubi Lai* from the root of a tree. His sculpture was a product of his dream vision, in which *Poubi Lai* told him to carve an idol from the root of a particular tree found on the banks of *Leimatak* River. This was the first visualization of *Poubi Lai* in the form of a wooden structure which has the body of a snake and the head of a dragon.

In Meitei society, the python cult is still relevant today. Pythons are closely associated with the glorification of imperial power and they are also depicted as an important cultural icon in the folklores of Manipur/Meitei society. The Meiteis believed python to be the greatest life form on Earth. Legends had narrated about the personage of the godly king of ancient Manipur, *Nongda Leirel Pakhangba* that he had the power of changing his shape into pythons and snakes. The people of Manipur/Meitei society highly revered the pythons and snakes that they are worshipped as divine creatures till today. It is a taboo to kill a snake/a python and a snake is also not called by its name (that is, *Lin* in *Meiteilon/Manipuri* language) at night.

On the whole, the Meitei society considers animals as an integral part of their life. Animals are of paramount importance in their belief system and culture. We cannot deny the role played by the animals in the history of human civilization. They are regarded as instrumental in the cultural and social integration of the people of Manipur. The close relationship of Meitei society with the animals discussed above shows the animistic and naturalistic faiths of traditional Meitei society which remains to exist in some form or the other even though changes have been witnessed with the passage of time.

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Notes:

1. Abstract forms of animals: Some forms of animals described by the ancient Manipuri/Meitei society are hardly found in the classification of modern Zoology.
2. *Ougri* is a particular kind of song recited/sung by the Meitei priests before the court of the King. The tuneful song was later accompanied by a rhythmic dance in a circle. It is also known as *Leinol Ngongloi Eshei* which is an anonymous and undated poem written in archaic *Meiteilon/Manipuri* language.
3. *Phoomdi*: The floating mass of entangled vegetation formed by the accumulation of organic debris and biomass with soil. This unique habitat is found in the Loktak Lake, Manipur.
4. *Leikai*. It is a ward or a sector in traditional Meitei kingdom.
5. *Pakhangba*: The founder of the Ningthouja principality and a very long dynasty in 33 A.D. His descendants ruled Manipur for nearly 2000 years. He is to be distinguished from the God of the same name.

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