THE NATIVE TRIBES OF MANIPUR.

BY

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Manipur is the foreign, the Hindustani name for the country which the people themselves call the *Meithei Lei-pak*, the broad land of the Meitheis. The Burmese call it *Kathay* or *Kassay*, while the Bengalis and Assamese call it *Moglai*—a variant on its Naga name *Mekli* or *Mekri*.

The Meitheis themselves have—since their conversion to Hinduism—put forward a claim to descent from Arjun, one of the Pandavas, who once visited the valley and, like many a foreigner since, married a woman of the country who became the ancestress of the race. In support of this claim they point to an obscure passage in the *Mahabharat*. We may safely reject this claim because their own records prove that prior to the advent of Hindu missionaries in the beginning of the eighteenth century the Meitheis were very much what the hillmen are to-day, only with a greater amount of material civilization and culture. The language is unmistakably allied, and that closely, to the Chin, Lusei, Kuki dialects. The people are in feature of the Mongoloid type and in no way resemble the Aryan or Aryanised peoples of Hindustan.[1] Among all the hill tribes in State is current a tradition which declares the Kuki to be descended from the eldest of three brothers. The youngest brother is the ancestor of the Manipuris and the descendants of the middle brother are the Nagas. In one or two Tangkhul villages, side by side with this tradition, I have heard a story which brings the Nagas from the valley whence they emigrated to the hills because they found the heat and the mosquitoes quite unbearable.

Among all primitive peoples the holder of the kingly office is a person of the greatest importance and interest. I hope to show that Manipur is no exception to this rule, and my notes will mainly deal with the mysterious and interesting ideas and ceremonies connected with the position of the king in Manipur. The word for king itself (*Ningthou*) seems to mean "the person who may do the thing he will, and is a very apt word to use of a being who is regarded and addressed as one but little inferior to the gods themselves.

I do not know, and I have not been able to discover, when or by whom was started the belief that the rule of succession to the throne of Manipur was that of brother succeeding to brother. The records disclose a very different state of things. If there was any rule at all, it was that of primogeniture, modified very considerably by the theory that might is right. There is, however, a good deal of interesting mystery about the succession of Garib Nawaz or Pamheiba, whose

[1] For physical measurements of the Meitheis (Mitais, Maithais) see Waddell, *Journ. As. Soc. Bengal*, lxix, Pt. iii, p. 114 (Calcutta, 1901).—[Ed.]

predecessor was Churai Rongba, who coquetted with Hinduism and finally reverted to his pristine creed. It is said that in a dream or from a prophecy Churai Rongba learnt that he was destined to be slain by his own son. He determined to avoid his fate if possible, and therefore whenever one of his wives presented him with a son and heir, the babe was promptly put out of the way. It fell out that the principal Rani was delivered of a son at a time when the Raja was away on an expedition. A stillborn child—a boy—the son of one of the Raja's slaves, was shown to the world as the royal babe, and the living infant was stealthily conveyed by night to a Naga village in the hills, where it was reared. In the course of time, Churai Rongba discovered that he had a living heir. He then invited all the Naga children of the age of his son, to look on at some boat races. They were treacherously massacred, but the young prince somehow managed to escape. A little later, Churai Rongba came across his son, and, struck by the lad's intelligence and courage, all unwittingly made him one of his personal attendants. Pamheiba then heard of the prophecy and of his royal origin, and succeeded in killing or some say accidentally and in ignorance killed his father when they were out hunting together. Pamheiba, too, was in his turn killed by his son Ugut Shah. The Naga village Maikel, which in this tradition is said to have afforded shelter to the prince, was given the privilege of precedence above all other Naga villages on the day when the great annual Naga sports are held, as a reward for their protection and help. This village has a monumental stone which they say marks the place whence the common ancestor of the Nagas, the Manipuris and the Kukis, emerged from the darkness below.

An educated Manipuri once told me when we were discussing this story that there was another legend that the son of Pakhongba, the snake king, the semi-divine ancestor of the royal clan, unwittingly killed his father, mistaking him for a snake. For this reason, the taint of parricide clings ever to the royal house of Manipur. Among the Tangkhul Nagas, when a son marries, his parents and the rest of the family have to move out from the old house and build themselves a house somewhere else. This rule too applies to the succession of certain hereditary village offices which are now-a-days sacerdotal rather than regal.

On the restoration of Gurusham, the representative of the lineage of Garib Nawaz, it was found necessary to associate with him in the kingly office his younger brother Jai Singh, because, so tradition says, Gurusham was a cripple and therefore not altogether fit to exercise royal functions which then as now include a good deal which in more elaborate societies are reserved for the priest.

The coronation of the Raja of Manipur is by all accounts an imposing and interesting affair. There are in Manipur seven clans, four of which own kings, titles even now of considerable dignity but historically survivals from the time when these clans still preserved their independence. The Angom Ningthou, or king of the Angoms, is generally, by some accounts he must be, a relative by marriage of the Meithei Ningthou, and custom demands that his coronation shall precede that of the Raja by a few days.

The Raja and his Rani go to their coronation clad in a costume which, but for the greater sumptuousness of the royal apparel, is that of the Kabui Nagas. The Raja is always attended by one or two Manipuris wearing Naga costume, and in the royal enclosure is a house built in Naga fashion. The state head-dress is adorned with a protuberance somewhat like the curious horn into which the Marring Nagas wind their hair. Wrestlers, too, when performing before the Raja (and only then) wear a *pagri* done up in this curious way.

To return to the coronation ceremony. With great solemnity the Raja passes between two massive stone dragons which stood (they stand no more) in front of the coronation house. Somewhere inside this building was a mysterious chamber containing a pipe which led, so men said, to the depths of a cavern below where dwells the snake god, the deified ancestor of the royal family. The prosperity and length of the Raja's reign were believed to depend upon the length of time he could manage to sit upon the pipe enduring the fiery breath of his forefather in the place below. His troubles were not over with this ordeal, for outside were gathered the soothsayers and wise men of the country, who carefully watched where and on what stones he trod as he passed out. Thus they knew the fortune of the reign.

In Manipur they have a noteworthy system of keeping count of the years. Each year is named after some man, who—for a consideration—undertakes to bear the fortune good or bad of the year. If the year be good, if there be no pestilence and a good harvest, he gets presents from all sorts of people, and I remember hearing that in 1898, when the cholera was at its worst, a deputation came to the Political Agent and asked him to punish the name giver, as it was obvious that he was responsible for the epidemic. In former times he would have got into trouble. Sometimes a special ceremony was observed by which a criminal obtained a remission of his punishment by taking upon himself the sins of the Raja. A large scaffold was erected and on the upper story the Raja and Rani bathed. Below sat the criminal and his wife receiving the royal ablutions. After the bathing operations were finished the pair below were given the old soiled raiment of the purified people above, and these carried with them the sins and the guilt of the royal consciences.

In Manipur the prosperity of all classes depends on the strength and the regularity of the rainfall, and we find, therefore, that in the valley and in the hills there are many rites and ceremonies to secure a proper rainfall. In Manipur where Hinduism prevails, despite the prolonged existence of the earlier religious system, we find rain ceremonies with Brahmins as the chief agents, and other more primitive ceremonies at which the representatives of the primitive religion preside. Indeed, I have found that whenever we find a ceremony exclusively in the hands of the *maibas* or *pibas*, the ministrants of the earlier system, we have to deal with a survival from pre-Hindu times. Where rain is wanted, 108 girls milk 108 cows in the temple of Govindji, the incarnation of Krishna most popular in Manipur. If this fails, the women throw their *dhan*-pounders into the nearest pool, and at the

dead of night take their clothes off and plough. These are ceremonies known in India, in Behar, where too, as in Manipur and among the Kabui Nagas, men perfectly nude wander about at night allowing themselves the widest extravagance in the way of abusive language that oriental imagination can run to.

Surely the rain-gods that sleep or are careless of mankind will listen to these tales of woe; but if these artifices fail, the Raja, almost a deified person himself, and the descendant of a semi-divine hero king, must play his part and save his people. He may, like the common herd, attempt to move the obdurate powers to pity his sorrow and inglorious nakedness. He may lead a procession to Nong-maiching, the great hill that rises sheer and steep from the plains east of the capital, where he must perform a magic rain-compelling rite, transferring water from one spot to another and worshipping a quaint stone which is believed to have a mysterious connection with the rain, and according to imaginative people is shaped like an umbrella. Every year a great procession worships at this hill, but its special efficacy depends upon the presence of the Raja. Etiquette requires that a special vocabulary should be used in addressing the Raja, who is in all matters regarded as semi-divine. His children are all called *sena* or golden, an adjective of great sanctity, and even his grand-children are called the god-like.

The Meitheis are divided into seven exogamous clans, and there is a good deal of evidence to show that at least three clans have disappeared. The head of the clan enjoys a peculiar position. He performs acts of worship on behalf of the clan, and represents it in all matters that pertain to the jurisdiction of the greater gods, not Hindu deities, but the great nature gods of the older religion. The head of the family manages the relations with the lesser deities, while the head of the house looks after the interests of the house god. Before a sacrifice of any sort the *piba*, or head of the clan, must become spiritually pure. Vexatious, indeed, are the many restrictions to which he must submit. All the clans worship a tribal deity who is very obviously the eponymous ancestor. Each of these tribal deities has his special flower, fruit, fish, and animal, which (and no others of their kind) are acceptable offerings.

There is a tabu object to each clan. In one case only is it an animal. In two cases each it is a fish or a bird or a vegetable object. Should any member of the clan touch the forbidden object, he is supposed to become speedily afflicted with some mysterious disease. Special tabus can be created. A man once fell from a mango tree and was killed. The *piba* of his clan then declared that particular tree to be "sacred" to his clansmen, and none of them ever now come near it. Near Imphal, the capital, are two fine peepul trees, beneath which, according to tradition, lie the bones of the Moirang tribesmen who fell in the great decisive battle which nearly five centuries ago terminated their struggle with the Meitheis. No man of the Moirang tribe will, to this day, dare to walk between them.

All the passes over the hills to Manipur are crowned with abodes of the hill-spirits, who protect and help the weary traveller. Manipuris as well as Nagas deem it wrong to pass these spots without laying an offering of rice, or occasionally

a pice or two, upon the stone which marks the abode of the spirit. They regard as very sacred the groves of trees, which here and there are found on the top of bare knolls. Many a tale is told of the malignant spirits that dwell in the deep pools of rivers. There is a profound belief in vampires—*hing chabis*—things that, as the name shows, eat live people, and dwell in dark secluded glades. The Manipuris attach great importance to omens, dreams, and soothsaying of all sorts. Great reverence is paid to the Maibis, women who are specially devoted to the worship of Pakhongba, the snake personification of the apotheosised ancestor of the royal clan. When the snake appears in a tiny shape, all is well with the State. His head is golden in colour and is shaped like that of a bird.

Excluding the Brahmins as the priests of a foreign cult, we find that the sphere of influence of the *piba*, the head of the clan, is strictly religious and sharply separated from that of the *maiba*, who deals only with the magical side of the supernatural and is often a specialist, having become the doctor of the community. I regard it as probable that in former times some form of ancestor worship was practised in Manipur. The records say that the conversion of Garib Nawaz to Hinduism was followed by the exhumation and cremation of the bones of his ancestors. Is it possible that the Manipuris are, in a way, right when they say he did this because he revered his ancestors, and was convinced that, although they had not known Hinduism in their lives, they had yet a chance of immortality in the Hindu heaven if their pious descendant were to dispose of their remains in the Hindu fashion.

The Naga tribes in Manipur are all divided into exogamous groups which are said to derive their origin from brothers or near relatives, the eponymous ancestors of the *khel* or group. Relationship is reckoned by male agnatic descent and the rule of exogamy is strictly followed.

When a child is born, both parents remain in seclusion and are considered unclean for a period which varies from five days to a month. Some tribes insist on a longer period of seclusion when the child is a boy or for the first-born child whatever its sex. It is generally usual to give a child a name, some sort of a name (not necessarily or by any means the name which it is to bear through life), as soon as it is born, because a child without a name is particularly liable to be annexed by some wandering homeless spirit, of which there are plenty about. One tribe, the Marrings, does not give individual or particular names to the children, but has a rule by which the eldest son is called Moba, the second son Tewa and so on, girls as well as boys having names fixed for them by the priority of their birth. Nicknames from some personal peculiarity serve to distinguish them, but if at any time in later life the parents fancy a special name for a child, they may change the name if they can afford to provide a *mithun* and thirty jars of rice beer with free rations of salt and rice for the entertainment of the whole community. Sometimes the luck of the name proposed for a child is ascertained by consulting omens or by having regard to the parent's dreams.

Among all the tribes, it is customary for the husband to pay a price for his

bride to her parents. Sometimes the price is fixed by custom, but among the Kukis the rank and status of the bride's family are factors of considerable importance in fixing the lady's price. Should a couple run away together, some, but not many tribes, insist on turning them out of the village altogether, but in most cases they are only forbidden to enter the house of the girl's parents until the price has been paid together with something extra by way of fine.

Among the Kukis and Tangkhul Nagas is found what may be regarded as a survival from the times when women were systematically captured and made the wives of their captors. The bride is escorted to the bridegroom's village by a posse of young men of her clan or tribe. They meet and wrestle with the champions of the bridegroom's village. They believe that the longevity of the bride and bridegroom depends on the success of their friends in this friendly contest. There are other villages which observe this custom, but only when the bride comes from another village, never when she comes from a different group in the same village. In the case of the Kukis and the Kabui Nagas, when a man's wife dies, he has to pay her parents or their heirs a fixed sum which is called the price of her bones. This price is the same in amount as that originally given at the time of the marriage.

When the eldest of a family of brothers dies, leaving a widow, the Kukis make the younger brother marry her, but the elder brother may not take the widow of his younger brother.

All the hill tribes bury their dead, but in the case of a Raja or specially great and influential man, the Kukis have a rather unusual method of disposing of the body. They place the body in a hollowed trunk of a tree, plaster it carefully with mud, then carry it thrice round the village, and then, amid the wailings of the women, the noise of gongs, cymbals, horns and guns, deposit the box upon a *machan* or raised stage. To dispose of the products of decomposition, they insert a bamboo pipe leading from the box to the earth. After a month or so, they wrap the bones and skull in a new cloth and bury them. Provision has always to be made for the comfort of the deceased in the world hereafter. In earlier times slaves were put to death, nowadays fat animals only are slain. The clothes worn by the man in life, his weapons and implements, are buried with him. There is never the same degree of elaboration in the funeral ceremonies of women as in those of the men.

Special rules exist for the burial of special cases of death. Women who die in, or from the effects of childbirth, those who are slain by an enemy, or are killed by a wild beast, or who die far from their home, of cholera or some disease or who chance to fall from a tree and are killed, are regarded as peculiarly unfortunate in their deaths as the manner of their end betokens that they owe their fate to the hostility of some powerful and malignant spirit. The graves of the dead who die in the ways I have enumerated, are dug by a special class of people, sometimes only by the oldest men and women, and in some cases only by the near male relatives. Their graves, too, are nearly always apart and away from

the graves of the ordinary dead. Among the Tangkhuls, when a man is killed by a tiger, they kill a hunting dog and put a sharpened thorn and a strong spear in the grave, that the deceased may have a helper and weapons to defend himself if he should chance to meet with a spirit tiger on his way to heaven. In another case, for three nights after the burial of a man who has been killed by a tiger, his brother or some near male relative keeps watch and ward over the grave, lest the tiger come. A man, too, who has been killed in war is buried outside the village on the side opposite that where his enemies live.

If a woman dies in childbirth, and the child survives, it is or was customary among the Kabui Nagas and among the Kuki Lusei tribes to bury the living infant with the mother because the child is so obviously possessed by an evil spirit that its instant removal is necessary.

Among several of these tribes is found the custom of secluding for a period the inmates of a house where an animal has had young or has died. The period of seclusion varies greatly, as a rule it is most for a cow and least for a dog. Nearly all of them treat the cat with some respect, at least when a cat dies, it is wrapped up in a cloth and buried amid lamentations in a grave dug for it by the old women.

There are many interesting prohibitions, ordinances, and regulations among the hill-folk. There is one village, once the powerful head of a very large group, which believes itself to be descended from a lady of a porcine figure. It, and the villages subordinate to it, are therefore forbidden to eat of the pig. The Tangkhuls never eat goat in their own villages, because they think they would run the imminent risk of madness, and all sorts of illness. Indeed, more than once have I been told that they look on goats and their kids as very human. These are general prohibitions, but there are special rules for classes of persons, and for individual cases as well. The scale of diet allowed by custom to the *ghennabura* or religious head of the village is always extremely limited. The savoury dog, the tomato, the *murghi*, are forbidden to him. Unmarried girls are not allowed to eat dog, or in some cases the male of any kind of animal, while nobody knows the awful misfortunes that await the woman who when about to become a mother should eat bear. If a man is wealthy enough to feast his whole village, and erect a memorial stone, he is entitled to become subject to the same dietary disabilities as the *ghennabura*. He wears the same special clothes, and for the space of a year at least he must not use a drinking horn, but must take his daily drink from a bamboo cup. So is it that there, as here, there are penalties on greatness.

All sorts of things cause these periods of seclusion to occur. If the village is burnt, if they lose a member of the village in some remarkable way, if a woman dies in childbirth, or if there be an epidemic of sickness, the *ghennabura* orders the village gates to be shut. In fact, whenever an event occurs which interests or alarms the community as a whole, especially if it be explicable only as a manifestation of some supernatural influence, a period of seclusion is necessary. The village gates are shut and all strangers, who at the time happen to be inside

the village, are necessarily refused egress. If by inadvertence a man should violate any one of the many rules that must be observed on these occasions, he has to pay a fine, generally to provide a substantial repast for the village elders.

The *ghennabura* of a Naga village has a good deal of indirect authority, in virtue of his power to close the village and to declare a *ghenna*. There are of course annual festivals, when the stranger that is within the gates may not go forth, and the friend that is without must stay outside. These are festivals connected with the crops—before the rice is sown, when the blades appear, and as harvest thanksgiving. Drunkenness and unusual licence characterize these scenes. Among the Tangkhuls we find a curious custom. Before the crop is sown, and when it is reaped, the boys and girls have a tug-of-war with a tough rope of twisted creeper. Great jars of rice beer are set ready, and the severity of their ordinary morality is broken by a night of unbridled licence. The Kabuis, however, insist upon the strictest chastity on these occasions, most especially from the *ghennaburas*, who as among the other tribes have to sow first, to reap first, and always take the omens on behalf of the village. The Kabuis, I may explain, live in permanent villages, but subsist on *jhum* cultivation. There is a regular sequence which determines the fields and areas to be cultivated year by year, but in spite of this the omens are always carefully taken.

The two *ghennaburas* in clean clothes sit opposite one another holding twigs of cane in their hands. When the twigs begin to turn, they declare where and in what direction the cultivation is to be. There are many ways of taking omens. Some people break eggs, and from the resultant mess declare the prospects of the harvest. Others kill a fowl and watch the convulsive struggles of its feet in its death agony. If the right foot crosses over the left all will be well. I have seen omens taken by splitting a leaf, and by cutting chips off a piece of bamboo. Some Nagas foretell the success of an intended hunting expedition by their success in kicking small flat stones on to the top of a bigger stone. There is of course a profound belief in dreams as affording distinct unerring indications of the intentions of Providence.

In general they regard the future world as very similar to this. The Tangkhul who can afford it always kills a buffalo at his father's funeral because the God who keeps the gates of Heaven appears to have had enough of the amiable Tangkhul, and endeavours to keep the gates shut against them. The buffalo, of course, butts the gates open and lets the deceased and the expectant crowd of other souls in. That explains why they never or very rarely kill a pig at a funeral. It is a tiresome animal to manage, and is as likely as not to wander off with its master and owner to some very undesirable spot. They say that if a man has been brave and courageous in this life, he is welcomed in the after world by those who have gone before, but the coward is met with groans and jeers. The Tangkhuls are most precise in the localisation of their heaven. The way to it leads up the steep spurs and over the mighty crest of Sirohi-furar, a peak that dominates the scenery of their country.

They are particular to see that the cloth that is buried with the body intended as a present for the God of Heaven is not torn and is thus distinguished from the property of the deceased. If a Tangkhul's parents predecease him, when he dies, in his grave are put a flask of rice beer and a plate of rice to be given to his parents when he meets them.

The Eastern Angamis, however, regard heaven as a place with a number of compartments, one reserved for the worthy dead, another for those who fall on the field of battle. All the women who die in childbirth congregate together. The men whose ears are split or torn have a place set apart for them. I may add by way of explanation that nearly all the hill tribes regard a split or torn ear as a mark of special disfavour of some superior being.

There is a very common belief in the idea of re-incarnation, but they all strenuously maintain that no man can return to this world whose death shows him to have incurred the hostility of the powerful spirits.

Each tribe has its own method of inducing a regular and plentiful supply of rain. The Tangkhuls cut a pig up into eleven portions, and the women make eleven rice cakes. The head of the village, with five men and five women, goes outside the village and offers these delicacies to the powers that be upon one of the memorial stones. Sometimes he has to gather eleven water-worn stones from a river-bed and wraps them up in river-weed.

Other tribes practise a ceremony of symbolical transference of water, as if they wished to explain to the powers in charge of the rain that they desire him to imitate exactly what they are doing. In some cases a pig, with its feet tied securely together, is drowned in a pool near the village. I have come across a fish hung up on the village gate as a rain-making rite, and was in one case told that it was usual to cut a fish, generally an eel, into small bits which were scattered on the irrigation cut, and on the river bank.

The Chirus catch a crab, tie a thread to a claw and put it in an earthen pot filled with water. The head of the village goes to the village gate, and keeps on lifting the crab out of the water, and lowering it into the pot again until tired.

In an interesting Eastern Angami village I was told that when they wanted rain the head of the village takes a brand burning from the fire, puts it on the grave of a man who has died of burns, quenches the brand with water, and prays for rain.

While the crops are on the ground, no hunting or fishing is allowed. They may not trade, they may not perform on their bamboo bugles, nor indulge in any pastime. Grass and trees must not be cut, nor may the women weave.

I hope at some future time to publish a full account, historical and ethnographical, of these people.

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