

# Exploring Sustainability In The Religious Worldviews Of The Meiteis

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

Specific plants and animals which are within the domain of nature are considered sacred and related to different religious occasions. The connection of the duality between supernatural beings and such natural beings is executed by human action. Whilst the intersecting domains of nature, spirit, and human influence the cultural life of the people concerned. The present paper discusses on the interrelationship of the man, nature, and spirit in disseminating sustainability of the Meiteis, an indigene of Manipur in the north-eastern corner of India. Methodologically, the study focused mainly on observation and in-depth interview of key informants such as *amaiba-amaibi* (religious practioners), *piba* (lineage leader), etc. Through the thick and thin times of the Meiteis, the appeasement of the ancestor spirits known as *apokpa* and sylvan deities locally known as *umanglai* lead to forest reservation. Besides, schemas epistemologically translate the enduring of resources in the sustainable way. It may be concluded that by tapping the spiritual assets in the context of the people's own tradition, it paves a way to rethink in the sustainable consumption.

**Key words:** nature, sustainability, spirit, Meitei, ancestor worship

## Introduction

Religion is related to the recognition of one's dependence upon a supernatural being or beings for which certain actions embodied in a pattern of life and faith would be performed (Schmidt, 1930). Latin term *religare* means 'to bind' (that is, to bind men's self to God) (Fucus, 1982, p.211) and "transcendent" experience of individuals beyond normal, everyday social life (Scupin, 2012, p.143). Edward Burnett Tylor (1958) offered the minimum definition of religion as the belief in Spiritual Beings. Anthropologist Anthony Wallace (1966) opined religion as a set of rituals, rationalised by myth, which mobilizes supernatural powers for the purpose of achieving or preventing transformations of state in man and nature. Regarding 'religion in action', Haviland et al. (2005, p.622) described its functions to reduce anxiety and boost confidence so as to give survival value in reality. In brief, belief in God and spirit within the religious matrix has shaped people's mind towards certain things including their lifestyles.

Religious life adds meaning to appreciate the past, understand the present and hope for the future in translating peace and good will. However, today, rituals and beliefs in spiritual beings are often dismissed as superstitions. Another fact is that due to population explosion amidst the climatic change and socio-cultural dynamics, the term 'sustainability' becomes a global talk. Then, is there any relationship between spiritual believes and human activities towards the orientation of environmental sustainability? Gardner ((2006) talk about the building of a shrine by environmentalist monks in the Thai village of Giew Muang to invoke a Buddhist heritage for using ritual communication vis-à-vis forest conservation towards sustainable resource use. In another instance, the water temples of Bali manage agricultural farming system significantly twice a year in a way human beings interact ritually with their natural environment (Lansing, 1983; Hicks, 1995). For managing their livelihood through the appeasement of spirits, human activities, knowingly or unknowingly attempts to keep natural environment in balance.

The present study attempts to describe the relationship among nature, spirit, and sustainability in the context of the Meitei society. They are an autochthon of Manipur in the northeastern region of India. There are sizeable populations of the people settling in the other Indian states

like Assam, Tripura, Nagaland, Meghalaya, etc., in addition to their notable presence in Myanmar and Bangladesh.

### Methodology

Methodologically, the data were collected systematically through scientific technique of observation and in-depth interview of key informants such as *amaiba-amaibi* (religious practitioners), *piba* (lineage leader), *arangfam* (event arrangers), authorised attendants of sylvan deities (*Umanglai*), etc. But, the area of study was limited in the centrally valley of Manipur state where the core culture of the people endures.

### Religion of the Meiteis

There are two major religions followed by the Meiteis. They are – Traditionalism otherwise called Sanamahism and Hinduism. It is mentionable that there are also syncretic elements in both religions. For instance, the Hindus worship family God of Traditionalism called Lord Sanamahi and Goddess Leimarel while many Traditional believers pray goddess Kalimai to prevent from accidents. Despite the differences in religious faiths, the Meiteis as a whole are ancestor worshippers. Their social system lingers around the descent groups – *yek/ salai* (clan) and *sagei/ yumnak* (lineage) – which are believed to be descended from eponymous apical ancestors. All the *yeks* possess their totemic representations of different *pafals* (snake) in coercing ethnic solidarity. However, only the kin folks of Mangang clan are tabooed to consume snake, eel, etc., which are believed belonging to snake family as they are the direct descendants of Pakhangba, the snake-god. Under the sub-division of clans to lineages, another uniqueness of the Meiteis is the worshipping of their primordial ancestors under the common title of *apokpa* for which specific endemic plants are offered (Meetei, 1996).

### Conservation of Flora and Fauna in Spiritual Realm

Certain religious related plants are considered sacred to be offered to particular gods exclusively in different occasions (Hedge & Bhat, 2012). Again, in many societies, plants and animals are personified as incarnations or symbols of the spiritual beings (Niroula & Singh, 2015). The system enhances nourishment of various flora and fauna. Thus, on one hand, the religious plants are revealed to be spiritually valued; on the other hand, it preserves biodiversity that reflexes the society to a sustainable cultural setting.

The Meiteis regard religious plants as sacred species. For instance, while the Hindu Meiteis consider *tulsi* (*Ocimum sanctum*) having the power for sanctification from socio-religious pollutions while the Traditional followers treat *tairol* (*Toona ciliata*) possessing the same quality. Above all, they even worship the spirit of big trees like banyan. Tylor (1958, p.58) finds the plants having sort of spiritual souls. Religious leaders guide the process of creed and rituals (cults) and make people to understand the position of humankind in the greater world or cosmos as well as tighten the relationship between people and nature (Haverkot, 2009, p. 61). In another sense, it gears up the domestication of plants which indirectly benefits green environment.

Traditionally, the Meiteis are ancestor worshippers. The apical ancestors and ancestresses are worshipped as deities. The deities are addressed with the prefix *ibudhou* (great grandfather) and *ibendhou* (great grandmother). The cult of ancestors in sustainable development depicts leveling out social inequalities and poverty reduction (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2009, p.35). Believes among ancestor worshippers of Sub-Saharan African societies typically motivate individual and group actors in economic rationality (Fraser et al., 2015). Likewise, among the Meiteis, there is clan solidarity and lineage corporation. Lineage members share the burden of one's problem and treat as if their problem. At the shrine of their *apokpa*, there hold annual offering and enjoy feast. *Piba* (lineage head) take the responsibility of the concern paddy field known as *Lai lou* (deity's farm) of their lineage. In addition, totem and taboos confirm their affiliation as well as help in the conservation of the flora and fauna.

### Sacred grove: Conserving bio-diversity

Meitei scholars known as *amaiba* and *amaibi* describe that *Umanglai* includes Lamlai (country god) and Sageilai (lineage god) and there exists around 364 umanglai and lairema (goddess). *Apokpa laikol* is sacred grove of ancestor spirits. Sagei lai or yumnaklai is in charge of *piba*, the hereditary head of the sagei or yumnak. For instance, Naotheringkhong is the sageilai of Kanghujam sagei. Besides, Apokpa is the sageilai of every sagei.

Traditionally *umanglai laikol* is the undisturbed sacred grove of sylvan deity. In the book entitled *Notes on Meithei (Manipuri) Beliefs and Customs* edited by John Parratt (1998, p.116), the writing of Higgins, J.C. in 1895 again referring H.St.P. Maxwell mentioned that the Heingang hill covered with pine forest had never been entered by Manipuris as it contained an Umang Lai known as Ibudhou Marjing until they were induced by the British rule to cut away the forest.

The reserve forests of umanglais maintain and conserve bio-diversity. For instance, within the shrine-estate of Konthoujam Lairemma, there are about eighty-four plant species including religiously important plants like *tairol* (*Toona ciliate*), *kurao* (*Erythrina veriegata*), *manahi* (*Terminalia chebula*), etc., and medicinal plants like *nongmangkha* (*Adhatoda sp.*), *heikru* (*Embilica officinalis*), *neem* (*Azadirachta indica*), etc., just like a living herbarium. Due to traditional and spiritual belief, no one dares to destroy the plants and trees

growing there. In the sacred site of Mongba hanba umanglai, around seventeen genera are growing. In the sacred grove of Ibudhou Mayokfa, the rare plant called *mayokfa* (*Terminalia arjuna*) associated with deity Pungjao Lakpa, an incarnation of Lord Ibudhou Pakhangba is naturally preserved for about 200 years from extinction. Its existence is related to sacred grove than rather its medicinal utility. Again, in the sacred grove of goddess Yumjao Lairembi situated at Langmeidong village in Kakching district environment friendly plants like siris (*Albizia lebbek*) and cluster fig (*Ficus racemosa*) which can conserve high amounts of nitrogen, phosphorous, magnesium and calcium in their leaves, are growing.

### **Liberating Fauna: A Religious Means of Solution for Miseries**

Human life is full of uncertainty for which man seeks supernatural help as precautionary or preventive measure. The Meiteis look religio-magical means to overcome disasters. *Yening thaba* is the release of rooster for the goodness of the locality during *lai haraoba* by *amiba* and *amaibi* or letting free of cock for individual to prevent from evil eyes. *Usin* is another alternative means to avoid undesirable incidence. It is an offering to god to avoid one's misfortune.

Unexpected accident or death at the critical conjunction of a man's life is called *langpham*. A ritual to substitute the life of a person with a *ngamu* (*Channa gachua*) to exempt the *langpham* is called *ngamu ushin sinba* (Devi et al., 2019). *Ngamu usin sinba* lets free of *ngamu* to take away the misfortunes of an ailing person also. The fish is believed to be created by the supreme god to take away human misfortunes. Such type of *usin* for each and every individual members of a family is also done on *cheiraoba* (New Year festival) to observe his or her fate in the coming year. It is also performed by *maiba* during the ritual-festival of *laiharaoba* (Singh & Singh, 2018). The movement of the released fish is read to predict the fate of the individual on whose behalf it is offered. In another case, in marriage ceremony, *luhongba nga thaba* is letting free of pairs of *ngamu* representing wife and husband to observe their future fate. Some describe it to be a *ngamu usin* for the happy and prosperous lives of the newlywed couple. Further, the importance of the fish is that *ngamu* is a special food prescribed for illness and mother in postpartum. Its food content is believed to give strength during the period. So, the practice of releasing the fish to carry off the ill-luck of persons has economic rationality in the food habit of the people. In other words, this religious practice stewards sustainability of the important fish.

*Usin* is done by offering to god with plants also. *Uhal* (*Albizia odoratissima*) *sanakhongnang* (*Ficus religiosa*), and *kokal* (*Alangium chinese*) are sacred plants for carrying out *usin* ritual to carry away the concerned person's sufferings. *Tairen* is also a plant related to the relieving of sufferings.

Another instance of releasing animal for the welfare of human to please spiritual beings is the release of cattle known as *kao thaba*. In 2015, a bull christened Engba was released during the Kaorel Lamthaba ceremony held at Khwairamband Ima Market ("Kaorel Lamthaba", 2015). In past days, the Hidu Meiteis released cattle in association with religious proceedings. In the beginning of 1960s, one Shrimati Laimayum Ongbi Keli Devi, offered a bull to lord Govindaji and released it to stay in the *keithel* (market). She purchased the bull from one Mikhu of Singjamei Chongtham leikai and devoted to God with a big ceremony locally known as *Auhoratri*. Later, they brought the bull in a prompt procession accompanied with a band party led by one Pishak from Thangmeiband and an orchestra comprising of Oja Biswarup and Oja Gopalmacha who played *meitei pung* (a kind of percussion instrument) and Oja Ngangom Jugindro, a popular *sankitan* singer of the time (Neken, 2011).

*Khunu thadokpa* is release of dove. It is done by owners of vehicles. At the temple of Kali mai, the black mother goddess, the owners of newly bought car or heavier vehicles and ill-fated vehicle owners pray her and free doves to prevent from deadly circumstances. Non-Hindu vehicle owners also perform the freeing of dove to appease spirits for not encountering casualties.

### **Schemas and Sustainability**

In a society, there are routine activities that we see without much thinking. These patterned and repetitive experiences are schemas. Among the people in context, there prevail certain schemas which bear sustainable value. Saving something in kind or cash from outflow is a recurring schema. While measuring rice to cook for the daily meal, *cheng hanjinba* - to return three *mut* (handful) of rice in the *chengfu* (pot for storing rice) is a daily routine activity. At the end of taking out paddy from the granary, three *khubam* (palmful of jointly held hands of a person) of paddy are kept back in the granary. *Peisa hanjinba* is the schema of giving back a small amount when paying certain big sums. For instance, at the time of paying to pujari bamons (Brahmin cooks) for public or ritual feast, they give back a small lump sum amount. These return back money are received by the family members specially *yumburembi* (the mistress of the family) into a pocket made with her *inaphi* (cloth wrapping her upper body).

Some other recognised experiences are also produced here. For cutting long lived big trees, they seek prior permission from the spirit of trees to cut it down. Such long lived big trees are regarded as possessing spirit with the prefix 'laioiraba' meaning 'becoming deity'. There is taboo to pluck *tulsi* and vegetables in night. There are restrictions to pluck leaves of certain plants, for instance, one cannot pluck leaves of

*nongmangkha* on Sunday; leaves of *tulsi* on Sunday and *akadasi* that is, the 11<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> day of a lunar month while bamboos cannot be fallen on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. Even though there is not restriction to pluck leaves of plants, for instance, *langthrei* (a kind of medicinal shrub), one cannot pluck its leaves without the permission of the owners.

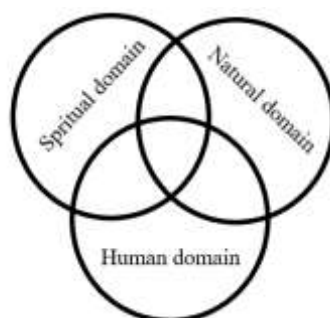
Again, *Mangda hangam hunba* is casting mustard seeds in grave after cremation to observe the coolness of the site for deceased may rest in peace. If mustard seedlings grow, the family members of the deceased think that the soul rests in peace.

Killing of toad is prohibited due to the belief that the soul after death will cross the large river Beitarani on the back of toad. *Houdong hatpa*, *san hatpa touheide* conveys the meaning that killing cat and cow commits unpardonable sin. Cat is a very tricky pet that eats or spoils fish and other food items whenever it gets an opportunity. So, many persons frequently feel to kill the animal. But it is a big sin to kill a cat. The taboo to kill cat saves its life and lingers its existence. Cattle are sacred domesticated animals for Hindus and beef is tabooed to consume. Even the traditional believers of the Lois and Chakpas (scheduled Caste Meiteis) do not take beef while pork is the meat for public feast.

*Ahanna hei thaba* is planting fruit bearing plants by old man. His age would not permit him to taste the fruit of the plant. He grows it for the coming generations. In this way, there are chunks of experiences that coherent to sustainability. 'Sustainability model' which suggests the societies throughout the world need environments and technologies for sustenance encompassing the future generations is just opposite to 'Logic-of-growth model' which assumes inevitable progress of economy and technology (Scupin, 2012, p.382). In the tradition of the agrarian Meiteis society, there lies a trend of sustainable model depicted through their schemas.

### Cosmovision in Relation to Nature, Spirit, and Human

In fact, in nonwestern cosmovision, real world is understandable in terms of three inter-related and inseparable domains of natural world, social world, and spiritual world (Haverkort, 2009). In their traditionalism, the Meiteis keep sacred groves specially for *umanglai* deities. For the Meiteis, gods, spirits, ancestors, leaders, sacred groves, lands and shrines, fertility, ritual crops, animals, and food items are all interrelated. In their cosmovision, the natural world provides the habitat for the spirits who sends message to the human world.



**Figure: Cosmovision of the Meitei**

The three domains - spiritual, natural and human – form the real world. Spiritual domain consists of divine being, invisible world, supernatural forces, ancestors, etc. Natural domain includes thematic fields of natural resources, agriculture, and other practices. Human domain includes culture, social system, economy, management of natural resources, language, conflict resolution, etc. The three domains intersected each other and remain interrelated. The intersecting domains form sub sets of human-spiritual, human-natural, spiritual-natural, spiritual-human-natural domains (Singh, p. 2020). It indicates that the domains do not remain in separation; rather the integration hold firmly within the cognitive level. Sustainability is possible in the sub set of spiritual-human-natural as there exhibits the elements of the three domains.

### Conclusion

It can be concluded from the above discussion that religion is not against sustainability which is very much needed in the present era. Spirits in their religious worldview is to bring solidarity, peace, and continuing sustainability. Among the Meiteis of Manipur in India certain flora and fauna are surviving despite the challenges to extinction. Sacred plants are domesticated and conserved while certain animals are freed. Natural resources for living on one hand and fear and respect of spirits on the other hand are very much reflected in human activities. For instance, sacred grove is reserved for spiritual site and it conserves biodiversity due to the factor of spiritual message; the human activity benefits a friendly and green environment. Besides, schemas recur unknowingly but translate the enduring of resources in the sustainable way. Thus, it comes to our knowledge that by tapping the spiritual assets in the context of the people's own tradition, it paves a way to rethink in the sustainable consumption.



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