

A Brief Study on Meitei Rituals: Their Development, Functions, and Relevance

Vivek Paonam

(Junior Research Fellow Department of Sociology, Dhanamanjuri University)

Abstract:

The paper explores the evolution and significance of Meitei rituals in modern history, their sociological functions, and their relevance in the 21st century. Meitei rituals have been an integral part of Meitei culture and society for centuries, shaping their social, religious, and cultural practices. Despite the influence of modernisation, urbanisation, and globalisation, Meitei rituals continue to be an essential part of Meitei culture and identity. However, the decline of traditional Meitei rituals is a concern, and efforts are being made to revive and preserve them. This study examines the factors contributing to the decline of traditional Meitei rituals, including religious assimilation, cultural exchange, and political transformations. It also explores the sociological functions of Meitei rituals, including community bonding, social norms, and spiritual fulfilment. The paper argues that Meitei rituals continue to be relevant in the 21st century, serving as a connection to the past, a way to honour ancestors and the gods, and a means of passing on cultural traditions to future generations. Additionally, Meitei rituals have played a significant role in promoting social cohesion and community bonding, and have been recognised by the Indian government as an important part of India's cultural heritage. This study aims to analyse the growth and development of Meitei rituals, their sociological functions, and their relevance in the 21st century, highlighting the importance of preserving cultural heritage and recognising the significance of traditional rituals in promoting social cohesion and community bonding.

Keywords: Meitei; ritual; Sociological Functions; Modernisation; Cultural Identity

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I. Introduction

Introduction Meitei rituals have been an integral part of Meitei culture and society for centuries, playing a significant role in shaping their social, religious, and cultural practices. The history of Manipur dates back to the 1st century AD, and over time, various rituals have evolved, reflecting the influence of different religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity.

This paper explores the evolution of Meitei rituals in modern history, their sociological functions, and their relevance in the 21st century. It also examines the factors contributing to the decline of traditional Meitei rituals and the efforts being made to revive and preserve them. The study of Meitei rituals offers valuable insights into the social, cultural, and political dynamics of traditional societies in the face of modernisation and globalization. By examining the evolution and significance of Meitei rituals, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complex interplay of factors that shape cultural identity and social norms. This paper aims to analyse the growth and development of Meitei rituals, their sociological functions, and their relevance in the 21st century.

II. Review of literature

Rituals have been presented as the overall performance of ceremonial acts prescribed through culture or sacerdotal decrees. Ritual is, in layman's terms, a specific, observable mode of behaviour exhibited through all recognised societies. Many theorists from disciplines like anthropology, sociology, history, and cultural studies have studied and proposed the roles and functions of rituals.

Bell, C. (1997) Explored various approaches to studying ritual, including functionalist, symbolic, and poststructuralist perspectives. He examines the role of ritual in shaping identity, community, and power dynamics.

Douglas, M. (1966) analysed the concept of purity and danger in relation to ritual practices and social boundaries. She also examines how ritual practices maintain social order and reinforce cultural categories.

Durkheim, É. (1912) Explores the role of ritual in maintaining social solidarity and reinforcing collective values. Examines the concept of the "sacred" and its relation to ritual practices. Moreover, he discusses the importance of ritual in shaping moral and social norms.

Eliade, M. (1957). Explored the dichotomy between the sacred and profane in relation to ritual practices. He also examined how ritual practices shape our understanding of the world and our place in it.

Geertz, C. (1973) emphasises the importance of understanding ritual practices within their cultural context. Geertz also explains how ritual practices shape meaning and interpretation. He discusses the role of ritual in reinforcing cultural norms and values in most of his works. Manipuri society has a rich cultural heritage, and rituals have played a significant role in shaping their social, religious, and cultural practices.

The history of Manipur dates back to the 1st century AD, and over time, various rituals have evolved, reflecting the influence of different religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity. One of the most significant rituals in Manipuri culture is the Lai Haraoba festival, which celebrates the creation myth of the Meitei people. This festival is a classic example of how rituals have been used to reinforce social and cultural norms.

According to Singh (1988), Lai Haraoba is a ritual that recreates the myth of creation and reinforces the social and cultural values of the Meitei people. Rituals have played a vital role in shaping the social, religious, and cultural practices of the Meitei people and continue to be an integral part of their lives

III. Methodology

To complete the paper, information has been collected through secondary data. That is, information was collected from books and journals. The hermeneutic method has been used to analyse the latent functions of ritual regulation. After this, the accumulated content has been used further to propose and extrapolate the possibilities of cultural hegemony. Doing so, through identifying and comparing the regulations of religious rituals and life cycle rituals within the Meitei communities in history.

The Objective of the Study

Considering the significant roles rituals play in understanding societies of the past, the paper discusses the following objectives about the history of Manipur

1. Analysing the growth and development of some Meitei rituals.
2. Analysing the Sociological Functions of Ritual in the History of Manipur.
3. Understanding the relevance of Meitei rituals in 21st century.

Meitei rituals in Modern history

Meitei rituals have undergone significant changes throughout modern history, influenced by religious assimilation, cultural exchange, and political transformations. While religious rituals have played a crucial role in Meitei society, other types of rituals, such as life cycle rituals, community customs, and animistic traditions, have continued to exist and evolve independently (Thounaojam Caesar, 2021).

The introduction of Hinduism in the 18th century, for instance, led to the creation of new rituals and the modification of existing ones. The monarchs, priests, and religious bodies have historically used religion to dictate their preferences, often misusing and weaponizing it to maintain power (Kabui, 2014). The regulation of rituals has been a means of controlling and influencing the masses, with religious assimilation being a significant factor (Parratt, 2005).

Despite the influence of religious bodies and monarchs, some rituals have continued to exist independently, such as the use of traditional healers and animistic practices (Singh, 2017). The contrast between regulated and unregulated rituals strengthens the possibility of ritual being used as an ideological tool for spiritual assimilation (Thounaojam Caesar, 2021).

Examples of Meitei rituals that have developed in modern history include the use of water from holy rivers in Hindu rituals, the planting of Tulsi plants in Vaishnavite rituals, and the continuation of traditional animistic practices such as the use of white material on rocks to appease the rain god (Thounaojam Caesar, 2021). Additionally, life cycle rituals such as birth and marriage ceremonies have continued to evolve, incorporating new practices while maintaining traditional elements.

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Some Meitei rituals and their functions

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Meitei rituals and its relevance in the 21st century

Meitei rituals have been an integral part of Meitei culture and society for centuries. However, their relevance in the 21st century is a topic of debate among scholars and practitioners. Some argue that Meitei rituals have lost their significance in modern times, while others believe that they continue to play an important role in Meitei identity and cultural heritage.

Meitei rituals have undergone significant changes over the centuries, influenced by religious assimilation, cultural exchange, and political transformations. However, he argues that despite these changes, Meitei rituals continue to be an essential part of Meitei culture and identity. On the other hand, Parratt (2005) suggests that Meitei rituals have lost their relevance in modern times, particularly among the younger generation. He argues that the influence of modernisation, urbanisation, and globalisation has led to a decline in the practice and significance of Meitei rituals. However, Thounaojam Caesar (2021) disagrees with Parratt's view, arguing that Meitei rituals continue to be relevant in the 21st century. He suggests that Meitei rituals have evolved over time, incorporating new practices and meanings while maintaining their traditional significance.

For example, the Meitei ritual of "Lai Haraoba" (a ritualistic performance to appease the gods) has been adapted to modern times, incorporating new music and dance forms while maintaining its traditional essence (Thounaojam Caesar, 2021). Similarly, the Meitei ritual of "Nupi Haiba" (a ritualistic ceremony to mark the birth of a child) continues to be an important practice among Meiteis, despite the influence of modernisation and urbanisation.

There may be differing views on the relevance of Meitei rituals in the 21st century, it is clear that they continue to play an important role in Meitei identity and cultural heritage. Meitei rituals have evolved over time, incorporating new practices and meanings while maintaining their traditional significance. Meitei rituals have also been influenced by globalisation and modernisation. For example, the Meitei ritual of "Heijingpot" (a ritualistic ceremony to mark the marriage of a couple) has been adapted to modern times, incorporating new practices such as the exchange of wedding vows and the wearing of western-style wedding dresses.

However, despite these changes, Meitei rituals continue to be an important part of Meitei culture and identity. They serve as a connection to the past, a way to honour ancestors and the gods, and a means of passing on cultural traditions to future generations. In addition, Meitei rituals have also been recognised by the Indian government as an important part of India's cultural heritage. For example, the Meitei ritual of "Lai Haraoba" has been recognised by the Indian government as a "National Festival" and is celebrated annually in Manipur. Moreover, Meitei rituals have also played a significant role in promoting social cohesion and community bonding. For example, the Meitei ritual of "Nupi Haiba" (a ritualistic ceremony to mark the birth of a child) is an important social event that brings together family, friends, and community members to celebrate the arrival of a new life.

Meitei rituals continue to be an essential part of Meitei culture and identity in the 21st century. While they have undergone changes over time, they remain an important connection to the past, a way to honour ancestors and the gods, and a means of passing on cultural traditions to future generations. Additionally, they have also played a significant role in promoting social cohesion and community bonding, and have been recognized by the government as an important part of Manipur's cultural heritage.

Here are some more Meitei rituals that have died down:

1. Laibou Chaiba (a ritualistic ceremony offerings are made to the ancestors, seeking their blessings and guidance)
2. Khamnu Aiuba (a ritualistic ceremony celebrating the union of families and reinforces social bonds, making it an essential part of Manipuri heritage.)
3. Thawan Shinaba (a ritualistic ceremony to mark the full moon day)
4. Wakat Meiraba (a ritualistic ceremony to mark the death anniversary of a person)
5. Chapa Thapa (a ritualistic ceremony to mark the initiation of a new member into a clan or family)

These rituals were an integral part of Meitei culture and tradition, but have largely been replaced by more modern forms of celebration and mourning. However, efforts are being made to revive and preserve these rituals, and to

pass them down to future generations. It's worth noting that the decline of these rituals is not solely due to modernization and urbanization, but also due to other factors such as:

- **Christianisation and Westernisation:** The influence of Christianity and Western culture has led to a decline in the practice of traditional Meitei rituals. Many Meiteis have converted to Christianity and have adopted Western customs and practices, leading to a decline in the importance of traditional rituals.
- **Hinduisation:** The influence of Hinduism has also led to a decline in the practice of traditional Meitei rituals. Many Meiteis have adopted Hindu customs and practices, leading to a decline in the importance of traditional rituals.
- **Urbanisation and Modernisation:** The increasing urbanization and modernization of Meitei society has led to a decline in the practice of traditional rituals. Many Meiteis have moved to cities and have adopted modern customs and practices, leading to a decline in the importance of traditional rituals.
- **Government Policies and Development Projects:** Government policies and development projects have also contributed to the decline of Meitei rituals. For example, the construction of dams and other development projects has led to the displacement of Meitei communities and the erosion of their cultural heritage.
- **Lack of Documentation and Preservation:** The lack of documentation and preservation of Meitei cultural heritage has also contributed to the decline of Meitei rituals. Many Meitei rituals and customs have not been documented or preserved, leading to a loss of cultural knowledge and practices.
- **Aging Population and Lack of Interest:** The aging population and lack of interest among younger generations in preserving traditional rituals and practices have also contributed to the decline of Meitei rituals. Many younger Meiteis are not interested in learning about or practicing traditional rituals, leading to a decline in the importance of these rituals.
- **Globalization and Cultural Homogenization:** The increasing globalization and cultural homogenization of Meitei society has also contributed to the decline of Meitei rituals. Many Meiteis are adopting globalized customs and practices, leading to a decline in the importance of traditional rituals.

The evolution of Meitei rituals in modern history reflects the complex interplay of social, cultural, and political factors. The influence of religious assimilation, cultural exchange, and political transformations has led to the creation of new rituals and the modification of existing ones. This has resulted in a diverse range of rituals that serve distinct purposes, such as community bonding, social norms, and spiritual fulfilment.

From a sociological perspective, Meitei rituals can be seen as a form of social capital, fostering community cohesion and social norms. They also play a crucial role in maintaining social order and reinforcing cultural identity. The decline of traditional Meitei rituals can be attributed to factors such as modernization, urbanization, and globalization, which have led to the erosion of cultural heritage and the adoption of more modern forms of celebration and mourning. Furthermore, the decline of Meitei rituals also reflects the impact of social change on traditional societies. The influence of external factors such as Christianization, Hinduization, and Westernization has led to a decline in the practice of traditional rituals. Additionally, government policies and development projects have also contributed to the decline of Meitei rituals, leading to the displacement of Meitei communities and the erosion of their cultural heritage.

Overall, the study of Meitei rituals offers valuable insights into the social, cultural, and political dynamics of traditional societies in the face of modernization and globalization. By examining the evolution and significance of Meitei rituals, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complex interplay of factors that shape cultural identity and social norms.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, Meitei rituals have played a significant role in shaping the social, religious, and cultural practices of the Meitei people. Despite the influence of modernization, urbanization, and globalization, Meitei rituals continue to be an essential part of Meitei culture and identity. However, the decline of traditional Meitei rituals is a concern, and efforts are being made to revive and preserve them. It is essential to recognize the importance of Meitei rituals in promoting social cohesion and community bonding and to take steps to ensure their continuation. By understanding the evolution and significance of Meitei rituals, we can gain a deeper appreciation for the rich cultural heritage of the Meitei people and work towards preserving it for future generations.

The study of Meitei rituals offers valuable insights into the social, cultural, and political dynamics of traditional societies in the face of modernization and globalization. It highlights the importance of preserving cultural heritage and the need to recognize the significance of traditional rituals in promoting social cohesion and community bonding. As we move forward in an increasingly globalized world, it is essential to ensure that traditional rituals like Meitei rituals continue to thrive and remain an integral part of our cultural identity.

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