



RITE OF PASSAGE OF THE LOIS IN MANIPUR

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Abstract

The Lois as an indigenous community of Manipur performs certain ceremonies and rites at different stages of life. Their different ceremonies starts from the time of pregnancy (Mironba), next is birth (Yupan thaba), first feeding of solid food (Chakumba), ear boring ceremony (Nahutpa), marriage ceremony (Luhongba) and dead ceremony (Shorat/Karma). In short, from birth to death a Lois life is marked by a series of rituals. In this paper, an attempt has been made to discuss the rite of passage of the social and cultural life of Lois.

Introduction: According to the Article 341(1) of the Indian Constitution, Lois are recognized as a Scheduled Castes in 1950. Initially the Government of India recognized only eight villages as Lois, namely, Sekmai (Awang), Phayeng, Khurkhul, Leimaram, Leimaram Khunou, Andro, Koutruk and Kwatha. However, in 1992, some villages also claimed that they were also Lois and tried to get status of Scheduled Castes. As a result, Kakching Khullen, Pallel, Waikhong, Kakching Khunou, Chairel, Wangoo, Sugnoo, Moirang, Khamaram, Thanga, and 16 other Manipur villages were designated as Lois of Manipur.

Some scholars identified Lois as an independent tribe that once ruled the valley whereas some scholars considered them as part and parcel of the wider Meitei community. Based on oral testimonies, it is understood that the Lois belonged to one of the seven clans of Manipur. When Pakhangba (33 AD), the first king of Manipur subjugated all other clans, most people accepted him as the ruler of the seven clans and subsequently, Meitei, a composite term for all the clans came to be used. But some people belonging to these clans refused to be absorbed into the Meitei fold, and hence were exiled, and had to pay tribute to the king. Probably, these people who had been subjugated and exiled at the time of Pakhangba came to be known as the Lois. The Lois segregation became more stringent at the time of King Pamheiba (18th century) when they refused to embrace Hinduism, and wanted to retain their original identity. However, with the passage of time, the Meitei have become more and more Hinduised while the Loi have preserved their indigenous traditions. So, with a hope to know the detail

social and cultural life of the Lois, the present paper is presented here in the following.

Pregnancy and Child Birth:

Right from the moment a woman is ascertained to be pregnant, she has to follow a number of restrictions. The Lois pregnancy mother and her husband has some dos and don't s during pregnancy for safe delivery. The pregnant woman should not look at any handicapped person or at monkeys. The pregnant woman and her husband also should not kill any living being. The husband of the pregnant women should not stop any drain or running water in the field or anywhere else by making barriers, and also should not fill any pits. It is because the pregnant woman would face difficulty while giving birth to the baby. When the woman reaches seven or nine months of pregnancy, her natal family invites her for a feast by cooking her favourite dishes and the parents of the expecting mother bless their daughter for long life and safe delivery of the baby. Just before the baby is due, a purification ceremony called *kokthok chamthokpa* is performed so that the expecting mother will not undergo any trouble during the delivery.

Childbirth:

In the olden days a mid-wife (*maibi or chabokpi*) of the village used to be called to assist the expecting mother in delivery. Childbirth was carried out either in a separate room or near the bed of the pregnant woman by making a temporary bed for the purpose. As per customary practice, the husband of the pregnant woman calls the mid-wife but in his absence, anyone will go and call her. A group of four or five person is required to assist the labouring woman. Now-a-days with the coming of ASHA

facilitators, the Loi villages are also taking advantages of modern ways of safe delivering babies at nearby Primary Health Centre or at Private or Government Hospitals.

Yupanthaba (Faklokpa): Yupanthaba (Faklokpa) is a purification ceremony to remove the pollution within the family and lineage caused by the birth of a child which affects not only the mother, but also to the whole family. The rite also serves as the first initiation ceremony of the child into the world. This ceremony is usually performed in the morning. Relatives or neighbours wash all the dirty clothes used by the mother and the child. While this goes on, the baby is taken to the courtyard. After taking bath, the baby is made to worship the sun and the moon and the three great deities: Koubru, Nongpok and Thangjing, who are worshipped to bring long life and prosperity to the child. On the night of *yupanthaba*, there is another ritual performed to Soraren, the sky god, and Prithi Nongdamba, who decide the chances of survival and welfare of the human being.

Chakumba (first feeding of solid food): Loi people perform Chakumba ceremony when the child reaches three months of age. The ceremony can be performed with or without priest. So, the parents of the child request the priest (*maiba*) to perform the ceremony or they themselves feed the child after ascertaining an auspicious day. This ceremony is not an elaborate one but they just pray to the household deities, Sanamahi and Leimaren and thereafter, the child is fed with the meals prepared out of offerings made to these deities. This day is considered to be auspicious to buy silver utensils for the new born baby.

Earlobe boring ceremony (Nahut Nareng Tamba): When the child reaches 3, 5 or 7 months or years the ceremony of ear boring ceremony is carried out on an auspicious day. The ears of the child can also be bored on the day of *yupanthaba*, which is celebrated on the fifth or sixth day of child birth. In the conception of the Lois, child is like a god. If a child, male or female, does not have a hole in the ear, then the villagers believe that the child is not fully human but is in a state of limbo between god and human being. This ceremony signifies that the child has become a complete human being and after this ceremony the child is fully incorporated into the society.

Marriage: When a person reaches the age of adulthood, he or she can performed marriage. It involves commitment to a permanent union, which is recognized by tradition and custom. It carries with it a new status and behaviour pattern in terms of sex, responsibilities, privileges, and

cultural systems to secure the family's survival. As a result, children born to a married couple are regarded their legitimate descendants. When it comes to inheritance and succession, legitimacy is crucial.

Mode of Spouse Selection: There exist different modes of selection of mate in the Loi society also. We can identify three distinct forms of mate selection among the Lois viz: (1) Mutual Consent (Haina Singnaba) (2) Elopement (Chenba) and (3) Capture Chingba).

Types of Marriage: There are different types of marriage which have been practice by the Lois. They are (1) *Luhongba*. (2) *Keinakatpa*, (3) *Loukhatpa*, and (4) *Laitin-thaba*.

Luhongba: Luhongba is the bigger form of marriage. It was emerged among the Loi society in 1950s, as an influence of Hinduism. There are many stages of rituals prior to the ritual of *luhongba*. Waroipt is held when both the sides agree and fixed the date of marriage, as a sign of agreement between groom's side and bride's side. It is held at bride's resident. The groom's family and relatives bring gift items to the bride's house and enjoy together. The day of Heijingpot is a very important ceremony that takes place a few days before the wedding. To properly confirm the announcement, the groom's family pays a visit to the bride's home with all of their relatives and friends along with offerings to the household deities, village deities and eatables to feed the people.

The Day of Luhongba Ceremony: On the day of marriage

ceremony, the bride wears *potloi* or *phanek mayeknaiba* (bridal dress) on the waist and a velvet blouse is worn on top. The groom usually wears a turban and a white dhoti and kurta. The marriage ceremony starts when the bride walks around the groom seven times. The bride also showers flowers on the husband at the end of each round, folding her hands and bowing her head in front of him. She then drapes two jasmine garlands around his neck, one of which is removed by the groom or groom's caretaker and draped around the bride's neck. The bride's house ceremony is now complete. The bridegroom's house has arrange some eatables for the guests who participated the marriage ceremony.

Mama Macha Unaba: On the day of Luhongba, as a tradition, the bride's mother could not go to her daughter' in law's house to see off. So, on the day just after marriage bride's mother with some of her relatives and friends visits her daughter's new home and meets her daughter and new relatives.

Mapam Chakouba: Mapam chakouba means a feast organised by bride's family. In this occasion the bride's family invite their newly married daughter and her family with relatives and friends. It is normally conducted on the fifth day of marriage, and without it, the marriage is seen incomplete. It is the first day for both the bride and groom to go to bride's home after marriage. On this day the newly married couple also meet their friends and relatives again after marriage.

Keina katpa: Keina katpa is also a form of marriage with less expenditure. The keinakatpa ritual is usually held in the kitchen or on the porch (mangol) of the girl's house. The bride simply wraps two strings of jasmine (kundo) flower around the groom's seat. The bridesmaid's guide (borsennaba) separates the two garland strings and gives one to the groom to present the girl. The couple then bows to the elders present at the ritual as well as the bride's residential deities including Sanamahi, Leimaren, Apokpa, etc.

Loukhatpa:

Loukhatpa is the eloped couple's reception ceremony hosted by the bride's family. On the day of Loukhatpa the bride is likewise seated in a courtyard corner and is not permitted to enter the house until the ceremony is over. When all of the invitees have arrived, the piba (lineage head) rises from his seat and gently touches the groom's head, saying "se se loukhatpire changaklo laklo," which means "acceptance" and allows him to enter the bride's house. Following that, the bride and groom bend the knee in front of the elders as well as the deities of the mother of the bride home.

Lai-tin-thaba:

Lai-tin thaba is older form of marriage which the Lois had performed since time immemorial. On the day of the ceremony, the groom is called inside the house to light the fire with some straw under the tripod placed in the *phunga*. The groom is asked to push the straw three times. This act signifies that from that day onwards, he has become the son-in-law of the household and the fire is the witness.

Death: Death is the last rituals performed in one's life. It is considered to be very important not only for the deceased person but also for the remaining family members. The ritual involves a series of sacrifices starting from the time life ceased to function in the body till the performance of the last rite called Karma.

Burial Ground:

The Lois believe that proper performance of cremation rites incorporates the deceased's souls

into the world of ancestors. Therefore, before the body is taken for cremation, a man from the lineage goes along with few other members in search of a suitable place to prepare the furnace. He carries a big knife (*thangjou*) in his right hand and on his left hand holds a hen egg, which is thrown up at the cremation ground and the site where it falls is taken as the right place for the purpose.

Yumsengba (Purifying the House):

The ceremony is presided by the priest. Worship is observed at the cremation ground to the deceased followed by offerings made to the ancestors who have died earlier and to the deities: *Mangang*, *Luwang*, *Khuman*, nine *Laipanthous* and seven *Lainuras*. Eggs and chicken are offered in these ceremonies. By sprinkling water with a bunch of sacred leaves over the people and all around the house, the *khoidousaba*, or priest, purifies it. With this ritual, the house of the whole group is considered to be purified.

Karma: The last rite of death ceremony performed by Lois is called *karma*. The central topic of karma is to invite the deceased person's soul and ancestors to the ritual held in his or her honour. Food to be eaten and clothes to be worn by the deceased in the other world are provided by the *maiba* on this day. The main purpose of performing *karma* is to ensure that the deceased live happily with the ancestors in the other world.

Conclusion:

Thus, variety of rites are performed by a Loi concerning the events of birth, marriage, and death to mark the passage of a person from one stage of life to another or from one social position to another. These ceremonies are important not only to validate the change of status brought about by these events but also to soften the psychological and social crisis that often accompany such changes. By ritualizing the event, it helps to integrate the individuals concerned into the new situation. As mentioned in the chapter, the Lois routinely observe *kokthok chamthokpa*, a pregnancy rite which is performed to ensure the 'safety of the pregnant mother and unborn child, *nahutpa*, the ear boring ceremony that marks the passage of a child from a god-like status and its formal incorporation into the world of human beings, and the series of rituals performed at the time of marriage and death of a person.

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