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### **Folk medicine and its significance in the modern world**

#### **(The case of the Meitei people of Manipur)**

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#### **Abstract**

Folk medicine or traditional medicine is the traditional art of medical treatment. Generally the knowledge of folk medicine is transmitted from one generation to the next through oral tradition. It is the outcome of generations long accumulation of medical knowledge about their environment and human body accompanied by trial and error method over hundreds of years. It is the mother of all other medical systems. This paper will discuss the significance of folk medicine in contemporary Meitei society and how it can benefit the primary health care of the people.

**Key Words:** Folk medicine, oral tradition, medical knowledge, primary health care.

#### **Introduction:**

Folk medicine that may also be known as traditional medicine or indigenous medicine is the traditional art of medical treatment which is an integral part of an indigenous cultural system passed down from generation to generation. World Health Organization (WHO) described traditional medicine as “the sum total of the knowledge, skills, and practices based on the theories, beliefs and experiences indigenous to different cultures, whether explicable or not, used in the maintenance of health as well as in the prevention, diagnosis, improvement or treatment of physical and mental illness”. It is not a later development derived from the conceptual framework of so called western or modern medicine. Usually folk medicine was transmitted generations over in the form of oral tradition. But it may found preserved in written records as well in some cases.

The traditional believes in and practices of folk medicine are intrinsically moulded by the respective socio-cultural environment. In fact, varied medical systems are integral parts of cultures. Rivers may aptly be quoted here: “Indigenous medical systems are social institutions to be studied in the same way as social institutions in general and that indigenous medical practices are rational actions when viewed in the light of prevailing causation beliefs” (W.H.R. Rivers, 1924). The major institutions of every culture are related to each other and fulfil specific functions in relation to each other. Each institution is essential to the normal functioning of the whole cultural system. Medical institutions are no exception. For instance, disease beliefs in many societies are so intimately related to magic and religion that it is not possible to separate from each other. Mythology provides cosmogonic explanation of the activities of the supernatural folk medical beings in the causations of illness. Folk medical institutions are reflected in the roles of curers and their relations to patients and their families. In short, medical systems can be appreciated only when they are construed as part of total cultural patterns.

All societies have health care systems. These consist of beliefs, customs, specialist and techniques adopted to ensure health and preventing, diagnosing and curing illness. Treatment of illness in folk medical system is invariably guided by the native theory of causation of the same. All cultures have health-care specialists. “If there is a world’s oldest profession besides hunter and gatherer, it is curer. The curer’s role has some universal features” (Foster and Anderson, 1978). Thus local curers emerge through a culturally defined process of selection and training. Eventually,

the curer is certified by older practitioners and that way acquires a professional image. They enjoy specified status in their respective societies: Shaman, priest, *maiba* (Meetei traditional curer) etc.

### **Materials and Method**

Primary data collection was done with the help of observation, interviews and case study methods. Interviews were conducted with the help of schedule with *Maibas* (male curers or practitioners), *Maibis* (female curer) and local peoples who has been treated by them in the past two years and those who have a good knowledge about Meitei folk medicine. Few case studies were also made by using non-participant observation method. Necessary aids have been taken for secondary data collection from the earlier monographs, books, journals, ancient Meitei texts and chronicles.

### **Results and Discussion**

#### *Folk Medicine and Treatment of Illness among the Meetei:*

The Meetei system of health care works in a set of juxtaposed natural and supernatural activities for an overall well-being of the people in which *Maibas* (male practitioners) and *Maibis* (female practitioners) play a vital role. The Meetei indigenous medical system has a fully developed traditional way of diagnosis and treatment. It owes its genesis in the people's creation cosmogony. A mythical personality *Atiya*, figuring in the creation myth is the most important agent of creation. What is of relevance in the present context is that this ideality is also accredited in the creation story as the founder of the office medical department (locally expressed as *Maiba Loishang*), and for that matter the late local medical practitioners are believed to represent this divine personage, thereby as the carriers of the traditions of this art of medicine laid down by him; as a matter of fact the *Maibas* and *Maibis* first invoke this high divine spirit for the efficacious results of all their healing practices. The overall Meetei culture provides a unique place therein for medical culture; a separate medical department was instituted as an indispensable organ of the larger administrative system throughout the monarchical history of Manipur. The practitioners were selected and appointed by the kings as office holders of the department of *Maiba Loighang*. This profession was opened to both the sexes with some kind of sexual division of their jobs.

Another feature of the Meetei folk medicine relates it to the religious culture of the people as it is so revealed in the people's traditional lore of medicine and methods of treatment. Three cardinal directional deities, namely *Marjing* (presiding deity of the north direction), *Thangjing* (presiding deity of the west) and *Wangbrel* (presiding deity of the south) are at the same time identified as the divine authorities of the three traditional techniques of treating diseases and illness. They are (i) treatment by massage with hand on the belly of the patient (*puk-suba*), (ii) treatment by the application of medicine prepared out of herbs and other medicinal objects and (iii) treatment by application of oral magical formulae. The mythical literature on medical culture of the people indicates that *Koubru* (the chief agent of creation, *Atiya* in disguise) whose seat is in the north supervises over the three presiding deities of the Meetei folk medicine.

The formation of the larger Meetei society was carried out possibly at the medieval period of the recorded history of the people, concomitantly with the process of establishing a state religion in which lord *Sanamahi*, double of the supreme being (*Taibangpal Mapu*) and his immediate manifestation *Atiya* become installed in its pantheon as the lord designated of the religious affairs of the mortals as well as of the immortals of the world their deity created under the stewardship of *Atiya*, following the divine will of the almighty. This immortal deity became the sovereign of the supernatural world. Thenceforth, all the supernatural beliefs and practices of the Meetei folk medicine including the

concept of disease and illness, medicine, technique and methods of treatment have been mobilized around this magico-religious personality. All the techniques of treatment are assumed to derived efficacy from the favour of this deity. Hence worship of this deity first before the application of any technique of treatment still prevails. In all cases of treatment pulsation of the patient is first read to diagnose the nature of the complaint. Pulsation is observed at certain specific points of the body, such as upper end of the index finger, wrist, armpit etc., according to the nature of the apparent symptoms of ailments. All types of illness and diseases known to the people are recorded with names in the local folk medical vocabulary.

Diagnosis of illness and its etiological determination are conjointly resorted to while dealing with both the natural supernatural approaches. The natural causes of diseases are attributed to the malfunctioning of the internal system of temperature in the physiological order of the organic body of the patient.

Illness and diseases are treated with the indigenous medicines prepared mainly from plants. Such herbal medicines are very effective in curing a number of natural diseases and a number of herbal medicines may be applied for a particular disease. *Nongmangkha Angouba* (*Adhatoda vasika* Nees), *Drita-kumar* (*Aloevera*), *Laipakngou* (*Artemesia nilagirika* pamp), *Urok-sumban* (*Basella alba* L), *Tera* (*Bombax ceiba* L), *Peruk* (*Centella asiatica*), *Kongouyen* (*Cissus aduata* Roxb), *Tinghtou* (*cynodon dactylon* pers), *Pungphai* (*dactyloctenium aegyptium*), *Langthrei* (*E. Biramanicum* D.C) and *Tairel* (*Tuna ciliata* M.Roem) are some of the plants used in Meetei folk medicine. Of these, *Tingthou*, *Pungphai*, *Langthrei* and *Tairel* deserve special mention. They are indispensable ritual items of the religious life of the Meetei people too.

### **Case study**

Meitei folk treatment on spirit possession, locally known as “*Hingchabi Changba*”:

The incident took place when the researcher was conducting fieldwork for his Ph.D. in a village under Thoubal district of Manipur. It was a village inhabited by the Meitei community. It is located around 40 km from the capital city along the national highway no. 102 (new) or 39 (old no.) i.e. Imphal-Myanmar road. It was a very rare and valuable chance to encounter such an incident during data collection. Of course it was not lucky for the patient but it was indeed a very extremely rare moment to have a firsthand experience on the scene, particularly during a period of limited period of study. It was in fact a valuable moment of observation since no one knows when this event will happen, where and to whom. So getting information and firsthand experience on this matter depends entirely on our luck so to say frankly. No matter how eager we are to get our information, we cannot just let it happen to observe. It is not a physical reaction which we can let begin right in front of our eyes. All we can do during our study is to wait. We may get a chance or two or never.

I was lucky enough to get a chance to observe how the native traditional healer (*Maiba*) treated effectively a patient by his spectacular magico-religious healing practice. It was in a late evening around 6pm when I got the news. I went to the scene with one of my key informant. The patient was a married female, around 35 years of age. She has one daughter and a son. The girl was around 6 years and the boy, around 3 years old. When we reached there, patient’s whole family members and some neighbours were there including her mother and father in laws. The patient was sitting on her bed surrounded by other family members. She seemed to be in a very strange world. She behaved like a child, talking to herself, murmuring, laughed with no reason and next moment start crying again. She kept murmuring with her hands on the head. No one knows what she was trying to say. But it clearly looked like she was with someone which we cannot

see. The neighbour said, she was a very calm, caring and loving housewife with very idealistic manners. I wondered how her behaviour suddenly changed into this in such a short period after whatever mental, physical or spiritual illness dwells upon her. That was not something anyone could possibly answer with profound scientific logic or reason.

After a couple of minutes the *Maiba* (traditional healer or priest) arrived at the house with patient's younger brother in law. The *Maiba* was a man in his late sixties. He wore a white banyan (vest) and a striped cloth called *Khudei arangba* which old Meitei men used to wear at home. He carried an old faded leather bag. It must be his medical kit. Next to him, there was a steel pot with water and some leafs in it. They were nothing but, *Tairel* and *pungphai* leafs. These leafs have a very important place in Meitei rituals and ceremonies. They are used for purification purposes be it peoples or items for the ritual. He said the patient was possessed by a spirit. She must have encountered such a person on that day, perhaps while she was eating. Now the spirit is demanding so many things to eat. The *Maiba* tried to establish a conversation with the victim. But the reaction was not so favourable as we all clearly saw it. It seemed he was not welcomed there at all, at least by the patient. I didn't know why that was.

After few minutes, the *Maiba* somehow convinced her and sat near the bed. Then he checked her pulse and asked some questions to the patient. It looked like he was talking to a spirit. I didn't know whether she did answered his questions or not but I do remember that their conversation was taking the shape of a argument, a hot one. He took out those leafs from the water pot and sprinkled water drops to her with his enchanting spells. I was told by my informant that he was trying to cast out the spirit from the patient's body but the spirit continues to struggle to stay inside her. The longer the spirit stays in the bigger the health problem of the patient.

The *Maiba* began to raise his voice of enchanting spells with physical movements. It looked like he was getting ready for a dual with the spirit. He continued to sprinkle water on her with those leafs. After some time she looked tired. She murmured in a very low voice. The *Maiba* told us that she want to have Paan (betel nut) from a very specific shop which was around 7 km away from there. He said it was the spirit, not her. Before the spirit was demanding so many things which are not possible to give and at last he could convinced and settled that he would give that paan from that very particular shop and the patient should be free in return. Patient's younger brother in law and one of his friend set off to get the paan from that particular shop. Before they leave, they were strictly advised by the *Maiba* not to accept anything from others except the said paan from that very specific shop and come back as soon as possible.

The patient continued to act strange. She talked very interestingly alone as if she was narrating her most private stories to a closest friend of her. After few minutes of self talking she talked loud. She said the owner is not willing to get up and open the shop. I thought it might be true since it was already pass 10 pm and people usually go to bed before 9 pm in these villages. She continued, yes that one, give me that biggest one, stretching her fingers. She was talking about the betel leaf of the paan, I was told. She talked as if she clearly sees what they were doing at the shop 7 km away. Around 30 minutes later they came backed. They gave the paan to the *Maiba*. He sanctified it with waterdrops from the pot and gave to her. He said take this as you wanted and leave her, be gone. He started his spells with water sprinkling all over her. She took the paan and chewed it quickly. In fact, she snatched it from the *Maiba*'s hand and chewed like eating popcorn. I don't know how she could possibly chewed those dried betel nuts just like popcorn within few seconds. I have never seen like this one. It looked like she was desperately waiting for a very long time, conserving all her energy just to chew those paans. The *Maiba* gave another one to her. That time it was little slow to finished. May be she was tired or satisfied who knows. The *Maiba* continued with his spell and at last the patient was fell asleep. He said it was all right, the spirit has left her body.

She will be fine. She will have some effects when she wakes up though, he continued. She might feel muscle pain, headache etc. And another thing, she will not remember any of those happened in that night. I wondered why and how was it even possible. Another interesting thing was there. When the patient fallen sleep, her younger brother in law and his friend started narrating how they went there, how they tried to convince the shop owner to get up and give the paan as he was not willing to get up for a single customer after he went to bed. And they selected the best and biggest betel leafs from the shop. Everyone thought what the patient told us was right. It seemed she was seeing all those through something or someone. I still wonder, will that be mere coincidences?

Next morning I heard she was all right and fine as before. She could not remember anything happened to her last night. Honestly, she could not remember anything at all or did she refused to remember, I still don't know.

But I am certain that it was quite fascinating to observe that how the *Maiba* treat some strange medical conditions like that. It is believed that those conditions or diseases should only be treated by the *Maibas* or *Maibis*. If those patients were mistakenly treated by the modern doctors or medicines the result could be very terrible. It could even result into permanent mental disorder or even death. It is called *Laiokpa*. Is is believed that these spirits are not affable with modern or western medicines and they have a very repulsive effect on them. So modern medicines only makes it worse on these cases. It was the exclusive area of *Maibas* or *Maibis*. No doubt, they can treat them very well. It is their generation long expertise field of medicine.

### **Conclusion:**

The Meetei indigenous medical system is experiencing much pressure to abandon their traditional therapy in the middle of the fast spreading modern medical system. The present study tries to serve as cultural interpreter for public health programmes, which must pay attention to native theories about the nature, causes and treatment of illness. Successful health interventions cannot simply be forced on the people (communities). They must fit into the local cultures and be accepted by the local people. When western medicine was introduced for the first time in this region people usually retain many of their old methods while accepting new ones. It can be a bridge between the modern medicine and local people. Perhaps traditional healers can help modern doctors in the areas where modern medicines are not so effective, in the meantime modern medicine can fill up the gaps of traditional medicines in the areas like surgery, TB, AIDS.etc. Thus native curers may go on treating certain conditions (like spirit possession) whereas modern M.Ds may deal with others. After all, ensuring better public health is all that matter. In fact, folk medicine has important social values in many societies. So it should be preserved and developed for the future generations.

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**Table 1: Some of the plants used in Meitei folk medicine and their uses**

Sl. no.	Local name	Scientific name	Parts used	Medicinal use
1	Ashiheibong	<i>Ficus hispida</i> L.	bark	Asthma, liver ailments, urinary diseases and inflammatory
2	Awa-kege	<i>Jatropha curcus</i> L.	Leafs and seed	Ulcer, tumour, scabies, wound, haemorrhoid, wound, splenomegaly, skin diseases, rheumatism and paralysis, Jaundice, eczema and ringworm
3	Awaphadigom	<i>Eryngium foetidum</i>	Whole plant	Digestive complaints
4	Awathabi	<i>Carica papaya</i> L.	Fruit	Insect and dog bites, digestive problems, constipation, intestinal worms and skin diseases
5	Chanam	<i>Allium sativum</i> L.	Whole plant	Pain in joints and bones high blood pressure, diabetes and gastritis disorders
6	Charoi-utong	<i>Clerodendron siphonanthus</i>	Stem, leafs	Asthma
7	Ching-yensil	<i>Antidesma acidum</i>	Leaf	Indigestion and stomach problems
8	Haa	<i>Dioscoria alata</i> (L).	Tuber	Gonorrhoea, treatment for fever, leprosy, tumours, and inflamed haemorrhoids.
9	Hameng sampakpi	<i>Galinsoga parviflora</i>	Leaf	Diarrhoea & dysentery
10	Hanulei	<i>Mussaenda frondosa</i>	Leaf, bark	Bone fractures and snake bites
11	Heikreng	<i>Celtis australis</i> L.	Fruit	Jaundice
12	Heitroi	<i>Flacourtia jangomas</i>	Fruit	Bleeding gums and tooth ache
13	Hongngu	<i>Alocasia macrorrhiza</i> (L)	Corm	Food for nursing mother and old men
14	Kekru	<i>Sapindus mukorssi</i> Gaertn.	Fruit, bark	Antiseptic, Epilepsy, cough, whooping cough and asthma, Seeds used in leucoderma.
15	Kongouyen	<i>Ciccus adnata</i> Roxb.	Leaf	Urinary stone case
16	Laibakngou	<i>Artemisia nilagirica</i>	Leaf	Mouth sores, stomach ulcer and antiseptic
17	Lam Ekaithabi	<i>Mimosa pudica</i> Linn.	Roots, leaves and flower heads.	treatment of biliousness, leprosy, dysentery, vaginal and uterine complaints, inflammations, burning sensation, fatigue, asthma etc.
18	Lam-thabi	<i>Zehneria scabra</i> (L.)	Whole plant	Jaundice
19	Langthrei	<i>Blumea balsamifera</i> .	Leaf	Gastro-enteritis and other ritual uses
20	Leipung khanga	<i>Solanum xanthocarpum</i>	Young leaf and fruit	Sore mouth and fever, fever, cough, mouth and tongue ulcer

21	Mangge	<i>Tamarindus indicus</i> (L.)	Fruit, leaf, seed and flower	Stomach disorders, general body pain, jaundice, yellow fever and as blood tonic and skin cleanser.
22	Nongballei	<i>Lantana camara</i> L.	Leaf	Controlling bleeding in injuries
23	Nongmangkha	<i>Adhatoda vasica</i> L.	Twig, leaf, flower	Cough and fever
24	Nunggarei	<i>Asparagus racemosus</i> Willd.	Roots, tubers, rhizome	piles, hoarseness of voice, cough, arthritis, poisoning, diseases of female genital tract,
25	Nungsi-hidak	<i>Mentha viridis</i> L.	Whole plant	Gastro-enteritis, Pimples, diarrhoea
26	Peruk	<i>Centella asiatica</i>	Whole plant	Irritation, inflammation of throat, blood purifier and skin diseases
27	Sitaphal	<i>Annona squamosa</i> L.	Leaf	Dysentery, lowering blood pressure
28	Tairel	<i>Toona ciliata</i> M.	Leaf	Skin diseases
29	Tandan paibi	<i>Drymaria cordata</i> (L.)	Whole plant	Sinusitis, respiratory & breathing problems
30	Terapaibi	<i>Gynura cusimbua</i>	Leaf	Antiseptic, use for stopping bleeding and fast healing, headache
31	Thaonam	<i>Cassia occidentalis</i> L.	Leaf	Diabetis
32	Tingthou	<i>Cyperus rotundus</i>	Whole plant	To expel intestinal worm in children and other ritual uses
33	Torbot	<i>Benincasa hispida</i>	Fruit	Stomach ulcer, Peptic ulcer, helps in cystitis, urinary tract infections, kidney stones and other urinary tract conditions, prevent indigestion
34	Tulsi	<i>Ocimum gratissimum</i> L.	Fresh leaves and tender shoots	Bronchitis, stomach problem, fever, cough, cold and congestion of lungs
35	Uchithi	<i>Piper longum</i> L.	Fruit, stem and root	Respiratory problems, fever, diarrhoea, piles, cough, hiccough, asthma, hoarseness of voice, consumption, flatulence, colic, vomiting, acid gastritis, pox
36	Urok-sumbal	<i>Basella alba</i> Linn.	Leaf	Muscular sprain
37	Yaingang	<i>Curcuma domestica</i>	Rhizome	Burn and skin tonic
39	Yensin	<i>Oxalis corniculata</i> L.	Whole plant	Tonic for heart diseases, kidney stone treatment
40	Yenthou	<i>Arundo donax</i> L.	Young shoot	Snake and dog bites