

RITE OF THE MEETEI ESHEI

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Abstract : This study has been undertaken to explore the importance and significance of *Meetei Eshei* and its profound connection to cosmological thought. It examines how *Meetei Eshei* reflects traditional understandings of the formation of the universe, the creation of living beings by the Almighty, and the intricate relationship between humanity and the divine. Furthermore, the study considers how these cosmological and spiritual concepts continue to shape contemporary practices of worship, devotion, and service to the Almighty among living beings.

IndexTerms – Meetei Eshei, Luhongba, Lanna Thouram, Mei Eratpa

INTRODUCTION

This study undertakes a comprehensive exploration of *Meetei Eshei* within a broader theological, cosmological, and cultural framework. It seeks to examine not merely the artistic value of Meetei Eshei as a musical tradition, but its deeper philosophical significance as a medium through which the Meetei worldview interprets the origin of the universe, the creation of living beings, and humanity's enduring relationship with the Almighty. By situating Meetei Eshei within indigenous cosmological narratives, this research highlights how sacred song functions as both theological expression and cultural memory, preserving metaphysical concepts across generations.

From a theological perspective, the universe is understood as the manifestation of divine will and omnipotence. The Almighty, as the supreme creator and sustainer, is believed to have brought forth the cosmos and all living beings, establishing a harmonious order in which every entity participates in divine purpose. Worship, therefore, is not confined to human activity alone; rather, it is perceived as a universal phenomenon. All living beings—and even the natural environment—express devotion in their own distinct ways. Some offer praise through song, others through ritual performance, sacred dance, and ceremonial observances, while the rhythms of nature itself symbolize silent reverence. The creative prowess of the Almighty renders the existence and continuity of the universe possible, and His vision encompasses all beings with impartiality and justice. No creature is beyond His sight or grace. Among all creations, human beings occupy a distinctive position. Endowed with consciousness, language, and symbolic thought, humanity has thrived from ancient times to the present, evolving not only in physical form but also in patterns of behavior, systems of belief, social institutions, and cultural traditions. This evolution has given rise to complex modes of worship and artistic expression, through which communities articulate their understanding of the divine and their place within the cosmic order.

Within this broader human context, Manipur—anciently known as Meitrabak—occupies a unique cultural and spiritual position. With a civilization that traces its origins to antiquity, Manipur has nurtured a rich heritage shaped by centuries of continuity and transformation. This historical depth has fostered the development of refined and sacred traditions, distinctive forms of worship, devotional music such as Meetei Eshei, ritual and classical dance traditions, traditional attire, seasonal festivals, and elaborate religious performances. These cultural expressions are not isolated artistic phenomena; rather, they are deeply embedded in the spiritual consciousness of the people.

NEED OF THE STUDY.

In the Manipuri worldview, the presence of the Almighty permeates every stage of human life—from birth rites marking a child's first breath to the final ceremonies that accompany life's conclusion. Thus, worship is not a periodic act but a continuous lived experience. Through Meetei Eshei and related cultural practices, metaphysical beliefs concerning creation, divine justice, and cosmic harmony are rendered audible and performative, transforming abstract theology into embodied tradition.

By analyzing these interconnections, the present study aims to demonstrate that Meetei Eshei is not merely a musical genre, but a profound cultural text—one that encodes cosmology, theology, ethics, and communal identity within its poetic and performative structures.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

After conducting thorough research and engaging in detailed discussions with experts and specialists in the field of *Meetei Eshei*, I was able to successfully complete and publish this journal. Personal meetings and conversations with knowledgeable

practitioners and scholars served as the primary source of information, providing valuable insights, interpretations, and firsthand understanding of the subject.

In addition to these primary sources, various previously published books, souvenirs, research articles, and written records were consulted as secondary sources. These materials helped support and enrich the study by offering historical context, documented knowledge, and comparative perspectives. The combination of expert consultations and established literary references contributed to the accuracy, depth, and authenticity of this journal.

1. Critical Analysis: Genesis of Meetei Eshei

Among the diverse human communities of the world, the Meetei society constitutes a distinct and historically rooted cultural group. The Meeteis possess a refined and highly systematized body of traditions, encompassing social conduct, customary attire, language, ritual practices, and artistic expression. Their cultural framework reflects a long process of social organization and philosophical development, resulting in a cohesive and sophisticated civilizational identity.

Traditionally, Meetei society is structured around seven principal clans (Salais), namely: Mangang, Luwang, Khuman, Angom, Moirang, Khaba Nganba, and Sarang Leishangthem. According to indigenous cosmological belief, these seven clans trace their origin to a common divine progenitor, Pakhangba, often reverentially addressed as Epudhou Pakhangba. He is believed to have united with seven divine consorts—Puksi Khombi, Huimu Leima, Thongai Lembi, Pithet Leima, Khaojao Lombi (or Lonbi), Tali Leima, and Nonghainu (also known as Lili Leima). From these sacred unions emerged the seven clans, whose descendants continued through successive generations, eventually shaping the socio-political and cultural landscape of present-day Manipur. This mytho-historical narrative not only establishes kinship ties among the clans but also reinforces the theological understanding of a shared divine ancestry.

The Meetei people are thus traditionally regarded as descendants of the divine, a belief that profoundly influences their worldview and ritual life. Since ancient times, numerous religious and ceremonial practices have been observed to honor and serve the primordial father of the clans. These devotional expressions frequently take performative forms—most notably sacred songs, ritual recitations, and traditional dance performances—which function as vehicles of theological remembrance and communal cohesion. Within the tradition of Meetei Eshei (devotional and ritual song), multiple forms of worship are performed according to specific ritual contexts and ceremonial occasions. These include Numit Tenghaba, Ahonglon Eshei, Ogri Eshei, Ogri Hangel, and Pakhangba Tengtha, among others. Each form carries distinct liturgical, historical, and symbolic significance, embodying narratives of creation, divine authority, and ancestral continuity. These performances, transmitted orally across generations, remain integral to the spiritual and cultural life of the community and continue to be practiced in contemporary times.

Through these ritualized musical traditions, the Meetei society articulates its cosmology, affirms its sacred lineage, and sustains a living connection between mythic origins and present-day identity.

2. Meetei Eshei: Relationship with Everyday Life, Culture, and Tradition

Every society possesses its own distinctive mode of serving the Almighty, expressed through its language, cultural practices, and inherited traditions. While the outward forms of worship may differ, the inner impulse of devotion—rooted in faith, reverence, and moral commitment—remains universal. Each community upholds its beliefs with sincerity and seeks to follow what it understands as the deeds and teachings of the Divine. In this regard, the Meetei community is no exception. Through the tradition of *Meetei Eshei*, devotion is articulated in poetic, musical, and performative forms that embody both spiritual philosophy and cultural identity.

It has long been regarded as a sacred responsibility within every society to transmit its beliefs, values, and ritual practices to succeeding generations. Such transmission ensures not only cultural continuity but also the preservation of theological understanding and ethical frameworks. Among the Meetei people of Manipur, this responsibility is fulfilled through oral traditions, ceremonial performances, and communal participation in religious observances, where sacred songs play a vital role in educating and spiritually shaping the young.

A fundamental belief shared across many societies is the existence of one supreme God. Though names, symbols, and ritual forms may vary, the underlying conviction affirms a singular divine source of creation and sustenance. Differences in worship arise not from division in divinity, but from diversity in cultural expression. Humanity's existence itself is understood as sustained by divine grace, and the blessings of the Almighty are believed to transcend boundaries of geography, language, and community. The Divine is perceived as impartial and all-encompassing, regarding every creation with equal vision and compassion.

Within this theological framework, the soul present in all living beings is often understood as a manifestation or reflection of the Almighty. Thus, every act of reverence, every expression of compassion, and every preservation of tradition becomes not merely cultural practice, but participation in the sacred essence that permeates creation itself.

3. The role of Meetei Eshei in the worship of the Almighty

Human existence may be understood as both a biological reality and a profound metaphysical journey. Many philosophical perspectives suggest that every human being consists of both a physical body and an intangible essence often described as the soul. The body functions as a temporary vessel, bound by time and nature, while the soul represents continuity, consciousness, and identity beyond the limitations of the material world. When life reaches its inevitable conclusion, the physical form returns to the earth, becoming part of the soil and reentering the natural cycle from which it emerged. The essence, however, is often believed to reunite with a greater universal reality—an ultimate source of being from which all life originates.

The idea that existence extends beyond physical death has provided comfort and meaning to humanity for centuries. Whether understood metaphorically or spiritually, the notion that the soul continues, transforms, or becomes part of a greater whole emphasizes the continuity of existence rather than its abrupt end. In this sense, death is not solely a termination, but a transition within a larger cosmic order.

Human life, though temporary, is marked by extraordinary potential. The capacity for thought, compassion, creativity, and moral reasoning enables individuals to shape both their own destinies and the world around them. These abilities may be viewed as blessings—gifts that allow humanity to survive, progress, and coexist. Yet, regardless of achievement or status, mortality remains an inescapable truth. Life is finite, and its brevity gives it urgency and meaning. No one can ultimately avoid the course of fate, and when the end arrives, even the deepest love cannot alter its certainty.

The experience of loss reveals the fragility of human attachment. Those who remain are left with memories, grief, and reflection. Their sorrow underscores the depth of connection that defines human relationships. In moments of separation, individuals confront the limits of their power and the universality of mortality. Such realizations often inspire introspection about the purpose and value of one's own life.

Life, therefore, may be understood as a sacred responsibility. We are not merely born to exist, but to contribute—to cultivate peace, harmony, and mutual respect among one another. Ethical living, compassion, and service to others become essential components of a meaningful existence. The true measure of a life may lie not in its duration, but in the goodness, it generates and the legacy it leaves behind.

From a broader perspective, human existence forms part of an intergenerational continuum. Each generation inherits the achievements, lessons, and consequences of those who came before. Thus, individuals bear a responsibility to leave positive imprints for the future—acts of kindness, advancements in knowledge, and examples of integrity that will guide those who follow. Ultimately, while human life is temporary, its significance is enduring. The body returns to nature, the essence merges with the greater whole, and the influence of one's actions continues to echo through time. Awareness of life's impermanence should not lead to despair, but to purpose. If existence is a blessing granted for only a short span, then every moment becomes an opportunity—to act justly, to love sincerely, and to leave behind a legacy worthy of remembrance.

4. EVENTS INVOLVING MEETEI ESHEI

Meetei eshei has been an integral part in the various events in the Manipuri society, it has held a long legacy and is still practiced beautifully till date. Some prominent event in the Meetei society is Pokpa, Luhongba, Mei Eratpa, Lanna Thouram, etc.

4.1 Pokpa:

The word *Pokpa* literally means “birth,” and it holds deep cultural and spiritual significance in the traditions of the Meetei community of Manipur. In Meetei society, the arrival of a child is not merely a biological event but a sacred occasion that brings joy, gratitude, and religious devotion to the entire family and community. One of the most important cultural elements associated with childbirth is *Meetei Eshei* (traditional devotional songs), which plays a central role in rituals and ceremonies connected to the birth of a child.

Among these ceremonies, a special ritual known as *Epal Thaba* is observed on the sixth day after the child's birth. This event is both a religious and social gathering, marking an important milestone in welcoming the newborn into the community. During *Epal Thaba*, elders, family members, and neighbors come together to offer prayers and blessings for the well-being of the child. The atmosphere is filled with reverence, hope, and celebration.

Meetei Eshei forms the spiritual heart of this occasion. These devotional songs are performed as an offering to the divine, expressing gratitude and seeking protection for the newborn. Through these sacred melodies, the community prays that the child may be blessed with good health, prosperity, wisdom, and a long life. The songs also serve to strengthen communal bonds, as they reflect shared faith, tradition, and cultural identity.

In essence, the rituals surrounding *Pokpa* and the observance of *Epal Thaba* demonstrate how deeply intertwined religion, music, and social life are in Meetei culture. The performance of *Meetei Eshei* during childbirth ceremonies not only invokes divine blessings but also preserves and passes down the rich cultural heritage of the Meetei people from one generation to the next.

4.2 Luhongba

The literal meaning of *Luhongba* is “wedding,” and it represents one of the most sacred and celebrated institutions in the culture of the Meetei community of Manipur. Marriage is not regarded merely as a social contract between two individuals, but as a holy union that unites two families and strengthens the bonds within the community. On this significant occasion, *Meetei Eshei* (traditional devotional songs) plays a prominent and meaningful role.

At the beginning of their married life, the bride and groom step into a new phase filled with shared responsibilities, hopes, and aspirations. During the wedding ceremony, *Meetei Eshei* is performed to worship the Almighty and seek divine blessings for the newly married couple. Through these sacred songs, prayers are offered for their welfare, harmony, prosperity, and a healthy, long-lasting relationship. The devotional music creates a spiritual atmosphere, reminding the couple of the sacredness of their vows and the divine presence guiding their union.

In Manipuri society, marriage is traditionally arranged with the mutual consent and blessings of both families. The parents play a vital role in approving the union, and their blessings are considered essential for a successful married life. The wedding ceremony is conducted in the presence of relatives, elders, and members of the clan, making it a community-centered celebration. During the ritual, the couple takes solemn promises to uphold love, respect, and responsibility toward one another. They also receive heartfelt blessings and good wishes from elders and well-wishers.

Throughout the ceremony, performers of *Meetei Eshei* sing devotional songs dedicated to God while participating in the religious and traditional rites of the wedding. These performances not only enhance the spiritual significance of *Luhongba* but also preserve the rich cultural heritage of the Meetei people. Thus, the integration of music, faith, and tradition in a Meetei wedding reflects the deep-rooted values of unity, respect, and devotion that guide married life in Manipuri society.

4.3 Mei Eratpa

The literal meaning of *Mei Eratpa* is “Worship of Fire.” It is a sacred ritual observed in the Meetei community of Manipur, performed for the well-being and protection of a child. Although it is associated with childbirth, the ceremony is usually conducted when the child reaches the age of three or five years. This stage is considered an important period in the child’s growth, and the ritual is performed to seek divine protection and blessings for a healthy and prosperous life.

In *Mei Eratpa*, the God of Fire is worshipped with deep reverence. Fire is regarded as a powerful and purifying element that drives away darkness, evil spirits, and negative influences. By offering prayers to the deity of fire, the family seeks protection for the child from misfortune and harmful forces. The ritual symbolizes the hope that the divine light of fire will illuminate the child’s path, bringing wisdom, strength, and long life.

In Meetei belief, worshipping the God of Fire ensures that the child is blessed with vitality, good health, and spiritual guidance. The ceremony is conducted with devotion and solemnity, often accompanied by the performance of *Meetei Eshei*—traditional devotional songs that form an essential part of religious and cultural life. The performers sing sacred hymns related to the ritual, praising the divine and invoking blessings upon the child. These songs not only enhance the spiritual atmosphere but also preserve the rich oral traditions of the community.

During the ceremony, special praise is also offered to Lainingthou, regarded as the King of Gods in Meetei cosmology. In addition, the five fundamental elements—Fire, Water, Air, Land, and Sky—are worshipped and honored. These elements are believed to sustain life and maintain balance in the universe. By venerating them, the community expresses gratitude and seeks harmony between the child and the natural world.

Thus, *Mei Eratpa* is not merely a ritual of fire worship; it is a profound spiritual ceremony that reflects the Meetei worldview, where nature, divinity, and human life are deeply interconnected. Through prayer, music, and devotion, the ritual embodies the community’s enduring faith in divine protection and blessings for the younger generation.

4.4 Lanna Thouram

The main idea of *Lanna Thouram* is the funeral ceremony, an important and sacred ritual in the Meetei society of Manipur. It is not merely a moment of mourning but a profound spiritual observance that reflects the community’s beliefs about life, death, and the eternal journey of the soul. In this ceremony, *Meetei Eshei* plays a central and meaningful role, guiding the ritual through devotional music and sacred expression.

According to Meetei belief, God has assigned a temporary period to every human life. When that destined time comes to an end, death becomes inevitable. Rather than viewing death as a complete end, the society considers it a transition from the earthly world to a divine realm. The life of the departed person is remembered through their deeds, character, and contributions to the community. It is believed that after death, the soul becomes united with the divine and finds peace in the heavenly abode.

During *Lanna Thouram*, performers sing devotional songs to worship God and to honor the memory of the departed. These sacred songs express faith, surrender, and hope for the peaceful rest of the soul. The sounds of traditional instruments such as the *Pung* (drum) and *Kartal* (cymbals) fill the atmosphere with solemnity and spiritual resonance. It is believed that these sacred sounds reassure the family and community that the soul of the deceased is resting peacefully in heaven.

In addition to worship, songs reflecting the hardships and struggles of human life are also performed. These songs remind those present of the temporary nature of worldly existence and the inevitability of death. The ceremony carries a moral message for the living: that all human beings are mortal and will one day depart from this world. Therefore, one should live a virtuous life, perform good deeds, and leave behind a legacy of kindness and righteousness for future generations.

Thus, *Lanna Thouram* is both a farewell and a reflection—a sacred moment that combines grief, remembrance, devotion, and wisdom. Through prayer, music, and shared faith, the Meetei community reaffirms its belief in the continuity of the soul and the enduring importance of living a meaningful and honorable life.

4.5 Firoi Thouram

The main idea behind *Firoi Thouram* is the observance of a death anniversary. It is an integral and deeply meaningful ritual in the Meetei community of Manipur. This solemn ceremony is conducted to honor and remember the departed soul, and *Meetei Eshei* forms an essential part of the observance.

During *Firoi Thouram*, prayers are offered to God while flowers and other symbolic offerings are presented in memory of the deceased. The ritual reflects the belief that sincere devotion and remembrance help the soul attain eternal peace in heaven. This centuries-old tradition has been carefully preserved and passed down from one generation to the next, and it continues to be practiced with great respect and devotion even today.

The family members of the deceased play a central role in organizing and performing the ceremony. Relatives gather to pray and pay tribute, expressing love, gratitude, and remembrance. Alongside them, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances also come forward to offer their respects. Their presence demonstrates the impact the departed individual had on the lives of others and reinforces the strong communal bonds within Meetei society.

It is also believed that through heartfelt prayers and offerings, the departed soul may attain peace and, according to traditional belief, be reborn into a new life filled with happiness and fulfillment. The performers of *Meetei Eshei* guide the ceremony by singing devotional songs that reflect on different stages and experiences of human life. These songs carry profound spiritual meanings, emphasizing that life and death are part of divine destiny and that mortality is inevitable for all.

The lyrics of these sacred songs often convey moral and spiritual teachings, reminding the community of their duties toward God and toward one another. They highlight the importance of compassion, gratitude, and righteous living. The songs also gently remind everyone present of the invaluable role of parents and family in shaping one's life, encouraging individuals to cherish their loved ones and value every moment spent together.

Thus, *Firoi Thouram* is not only a ceremony of remembrance but also a reflection on life itself. Through prayer, music, and collective devotion, the Meetei community honors the departed while reaffirming timeless values of love, unity, faith, and meaningful living.

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