



POUBI LAI

The story of a giant Python

21st July to 31st August, 2015
Exhibition Hall – 2, National Museum

Python is seen not merely as a living creature but also regarded as one of the greatest life forms on Earth by the Meitei people of Manipur. It has a dominant place in the Meitei culture and the cult traditionally associated with Python has metaphysical and divine origin. According to a Meitei belief, the godly king Nongda Lairen Pakhangba lived as human at night and he could transform himself into a divine form of Python called *Paphal*. This spiritual prowess of a royal decree and his divine forms are available in the form of an illustrated manuscript called *Paphal Lambuba*. The manuscript contains 364 diagrammatic representations of Pakhangba and they are known as Paphal. These assumptions are attributed as *Umang Lai*-the controlling deity of places. Paphal as the divine form of ruling deity has a very significant role to play in the socio-religious and political structure of Meitei society.

Some forms symbolize evil and some auspicious sign. The sacred texts written in between 17th and 19th century describe in detail seven aspects of Paphal in accordance with seven salais or clans. The Meitei Puranas contain incoherent and peculiar ideas about their origin and birth. In Thoklon (treatise on medical practice) it is related that the pythons (seven in numbers) are the sons of king Khoidong of Yaral lake and wife Khoidombi. They were driven out of the house by the stepmother when Khoidombi had another husband. Elsewhere they are spoken as the off-spring of Lirel Kaksaba by one of his three wives. In Meitei belief seven species of egg family, viz, snake (Cobra), tortoise, lizard, Hankok (a kind of reptile), Takto (a reptile carrying the sound of Takto) and python must lay seven eggs at a time according to a divine decree. The number can neither be increased nor decreased. One

Lai (python) must emerge out of these seven at a time. A female cobra or a female lizard can bring into a being Lai (God or python) from the first egg along with some snakes or lizards. The divine nature made it evident that a python can come out of the egg of these groups without reference to the species of the mother¹.

Apart from the association of Pythons with the glorification of imperial power, they are also portrayed as an important cultural entity into the folk lores of the people of Manipur. Stories filled with conflicts, love and romance with human and Python are abundant.

The Kuki, Chothe, Kom, Aimol and Kabui tribe of Manipur have folk lores deeply entailed Python and some of which portrays affairs of love while some depicts as demon. There are stories of legendary Kabui Salang Baji who could control the malicious spirit of Python and use as a pet.

Variant myths and lores of Python continue to thrive among the folk and tribal people of Manipur. They are orally transmitted from generations after generations. The manifestation of these intangible aspects of culture in a tangible form began to flourish with several forms of expressions of art like theatrical presentations, dance dramas, paintings, wood carvings etc. by artists in the late 20th century.

In 2003, (Late) Karam Dineshwar, one of the successors of the royal karigar and a wood carver by profession had carved a life size crawling posture of the giant Poubi Lai Paphal. His expression of a Poubi Lai was based on the dream he had. One day, Poubi Lai came in his dream and asked him to sculpt his image. Owing to the divine instruction of the deity, Dineshwar left his home in search of the wood required to sculpt the structure of Poubi Lai. He could locate one root of a big tree near the bank of Leimatak River as forecasted in his dream. The root looked exactly the same character of the image he had dreamt. He spent about 6 months to bring out the image of Poubi Lai².

The sculpture was first of its kind that drew attention of a large audience to console themselves with the live presentations of Poubi Lai which they have ever heard only in the stories. The Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya, Bhopal in collaboration with the Manipur State Museum, Imphal, Govt. of Manipur and Pandit Loishang, Imphal jointly

organized a seminar cum exhibition on “Paphal of Manipur”. An illustrated manuscript containing 364 diagrams of Paphal (assumptions of Pakhangba) which was held by the Pandit Loishang (royal guild) was exhibited for the first time at Manipur State Museum, Imphal in 2003. Later, the sculpture of Poubi Lai was recommended for collection into the permanent collection of the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya as an object of National Importance. The object is now registered under the AA categories of Museum Collections. This collection has also travelled France for an exhibition.

According to the Meitei Python Lore, Poubi Lai is a huge size mythical form of a Python who live in the core of Loktak Lake. Incidentally, the spirit was awakened with collective fishing activities held under the patron of the Moirang King. Out of anger this giant spirit began to destroy the fishermen’s habitat and started killing the people around. He decided to destroy the Moirang kingdom. The terror of this giant creature had grieved the surrounding chiefdoms and the Moirang kingdom. He threatened the King of Moirang to provide one Shangbai (basket) of rice and a person for his daily meal. This understanding in turn had led the people to live in a great despair. When there was a turn for a handsome lad of Moirang called Chauhi Leirong Apanba, he visited the most remembered Shaman called Kabui Salang Baji to seek his help. Salang Baji, who lived in western Salangthel hill ranges of Loktak Lake promised to save Moirang kingdom from the evil act of Poubi Lai. Under his magical power, Salang Baji transformed a Tou (an aquatic plant) into the form of a deadly weapon “Long” (a kind of nine headed javelin). It is said that, this malevolent spirit was tamed and killed by the most revered Shaman called *Kabui Salang Maiba*³.

Over the centuries, communities preserve their folk lores and the narratives of which were handed down from one generations to other by means of oral transmission. It is amazing that several lores on human interaction with a species of Python are articulated into the cultural fabric of Manipur from early times. Multiform and diverse expressions of Python cult in this land covers not only the cosmological views and religious beliefs but also entails high degree of expressions on social values, political power, art and aesthetics of the people of this region. To some scholars, the relevance of Python cult with socio-religious and political structure of royal lineages in Manipur is as much as important with the folk belief of originated by different groups in the region. They cannot be looked in isolation. Apart from

the Hindu faith of Naga and the Dragon cult of China, the Python cult of Manipur portrays a unique blend of culture.