



# Manipuri Legend Panthoibi and the Social Content

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**Abstract:** Legend is one of the components of oral literature or folk literature. There is no specific term in Manipuri to designate the English term 'legend'. However, in Manipuri, the equivalent of the term 'legend' is known as *thaja-wari* (a tale to be believed by the narrator and his/her audience). This Manipuri term *thaja-wari* is being used as an equivalent for the English word 'legend' by the majority of Manipuri folklorists. Legends are traditional prose narratives transmitted through oral tradition from one generation to another generation. They are regarded as true by the narrators and by majority members of the society which they narrate. One of the indispensable elements of legends is that they are to be believed as a fact by the teller and his/her audience. They are more often secular than sacred. Their principal characters are human. The legend differs from the myth in that the former is about events in a more recent past, the human rather than supernatural characters, and does not evolve sacred beliefs other than the suggestion of such beliefs in some saints' legends.

It may be said that if we study legend of a community, we can understand some aspects of the culture of that community. As a matter of fact, the elements of culture of the community have been embedded in the legends. Therefore, if we study the Manipuri legend of 'Panthoibi', it plays an important role of exploring the lives of the Manipuris in various aspects like social customs, economic and social standards, beliefs, religious faiths, domestic articles, occupation, costumes and ornaments, utensils, marriage system, disposal of death, food habits, etc.

**Keywords:** Legend, R. M. Dorson, Mythological legend, Panthoibi, Nongpok Ningthou.

The fabulous and land-locked land of Manipur, small but beautiful and secluded, lying in the extreme north-eastern corner of India, has rich traditional folk narratives particularly legends transmitted from generation to generation through oral tradition. This paper is an attempt to find out the social content embedded in one of the Manipuri legends called Panthoibi.

There is no exact Manipuri term equivalent to the English work 'legend'. In Manipuri, the equivalent of the term 'legend' is known as *thaja-wari*. (a tale to be believed by the narrator and his audience). This term *thaja-wari* is being used by the majority of the Manipuri folklorists as an equivalent term of legend in Manipuri. According William R. Bascom, "Legends are prose narratives which, like myths, are regarded as true by the narrator and his audience but they are set in a period considered less remote, when the world was much as it is today."<sup>1</sup> Generally speaking, legends are orally transmitted from generation to generation and more often secular prose narratives supposedly based on facts with an intermixture of traditional material dealing with a person, a place or an incident. In the opinion of Richard M. Dorson, 'a legend is a traditional oral narrative regarded as true by the teller and by many members of the society in which it circulates, but containing remarkable or supernatural elements that follow a pattern.'<sup>2</sup> Legends also deal with persons, places and events. They have always a basis in some historical reality. Generally historical and factual, associated in the minds of the community with some unknown individual, geographical land mark or particular episode are legends. The member of a particular social group can recall a tradition either in brief or elaborate from after hearing it. This has become one of the main lists of a legend that it to be known to a member of people united by their area of residence or occupation on nationality or facts. These groups of people keep alive and also pass from generation to generation by word of mouth.

The classification of legends varies from one country to another or one place to another as different places have different culture. Legends are found abundantly in the valley of Manipur. Manipuri legend Panthoibi has been put in the category of mythological legend. According to Richard M. Dorson, "The student of popular legend and

tradition cannot fail to be impressed with the fertility of imagination with which man has viewed the world around him. The simple tale teller of today, receiving much of his legendary material from an even more unlettered past, finds ready for his use a wealth of accounts, not only of the marvels of the present world and remarkable happenings of historic times, but also even of the very beginnings of the earth and the establishment of the present order of animals and men".<sup>3</sup> In this paper an attempt is made to point out the social content embedded in the Manipuri mythological legend Panthoibi. Therefore, it will be pertinent to put here the story of Panthoibi before any systematic analysis starts:

‘Panthoibi was the lone daughter of Lairen Taoroinao and Lairenba Namung Nammungbi. She has seven brothers. When she grew up, she became a beautiful girl. There was a king called Nongpok Ningthou in the Nongmaiching hills situated in the east of Imphal. One day while Panthoibi was working in jhum cultivation, Nongpok Ningthou also came there, they fell in love with each other. However, they two could not get the opportunity of getting married. When Panthoibi was a marriageable age, many deserving men come asking for her hand. At first Shapaiba, a king of the western part of the land asked for her hand but she did not agree. Then Khaba Shokchrongba and his queen Manu Teknga sent a proposal to the parents of Panthoibi for their son Tarang Khoinucha. This time the proposal was sent with sweets and fruits. The proposal was accepted by the parents and the elder brothers. Thus, Panthoibi was married to the Khaba prince Tarang Khoinucha with pomp and grandeur. After the marriage, the bride was escorted to the groom’s house with a basket of cooked rice, a pot of meat, a pitcher of wine, etc. At her new home, so many relatives and guests assembled for the marriage that her father-in-law was unable to feed them properly. Panthoibi rescued her father-in-law from public humiliation and she fed all the relatives and the guests from her basket of rice, pot of meat, a pitcher of wine, etc. Her basket, pot and pitcher refilled themselves as soon as the contents were taken out of them for distribution. Thus, this may be the possible example of treating her as the goddess of plenty too. The marriage ended with peace and satisfaction for all concerned. Then, the trouble started Panthoibi could not conform to the general norms of the life of a married woman. There was something wrong in her married life. She was always in an active, free and playful mood. At home she failed to establish any kind of normally reciprocal physical and emotional intimacy with her husband. Panthoibi appeared to be ugly and fearful to Khaba Tarang Khoinucha. Once, quite early in the day she left the house to catch fish from the streams. When she came back quite late in the evening, her mother-in-law wanted to know what she had caught on that day and groped into the *toongon* (container of raw fish). She was shocked and surprised to find cut-off heads and fingers of dead infants in it. She thought that the woman was some kind of demon or fiend. From that day onwards Panthoibi was in some way, segregated from the other members of the family. She was made to sleep a separate bed. In the meantime, the hidden love trysts continued unabated. And this naturally angered the in-laws who become deeply suspicious of Panthoibi’s conduct. One day while Panthoibi was bathing in a steam, her lover Nongpok Ningthou came to visit her. He was clad in tiger skin and wore a live snake around his neck for his garland. He carried a trident in his hand, a pair of bronze scissors and his hair was matted. He was riding a bull Panthoibi has fallen in love with Nongpok Ningthou before her marriage to Khaba Tarang Khoinucha. Therefore, when she was at the residence of Khaba, she always thought of her lover Nongpok Ningthou day and night. Whenever they met, her lover proposed to her to elope with him but she expressed her inability as that would tarnish the good name of her parents. However, she promised to meet him and fixed a time and a place for it. On the appointed day, she came out with the permission of her mother-in-law and met her lover, Nongpok Ningthou at the appointed place. He again asked her to elope but she refused it, again, she asked him to come and meet her on an appointed day. On this day, her lover came in disguise of a Tangkhul but they could not meet each other as they forget to fix a place for it at their last meeting. Thus, both of them returned disappointed. One day while Panthoibi was waiting for her lover Nongpok Ningthou by the side of a brook, all on a sudden, it began to rain in torrents and she went through and through. When the rain stopped, Panthoibi removed her clothes including intimate ones and dried there in the sun keeping only a piece of indispensable cloth on her person. During this time, her lover appeared before her. Only that piece of cloth obstructed him from a full view of her feminine beauty. So she stooped her head in shame. In this way, the love affairs of Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi went on through she was married to Khaba Tarang Khoinucha. In the meantime, her father-in-law pretended to die just to get an opportunity to admonish her. His wife bewailed loudly. Everything was ready for a funeral rite and this news of his death spread to the locality. Panthoibi heard the news of his death spread to the locality. Panthoibi heard the news and hastened home. She came to know that it was a clever ruse to bring her from her tryst. But taking the advantage of the situation, she accused her father-in-law of even pretending to die an account of his hatred for her. Thus, she left her husband’s home. On the way she met her lover Nongpok Ningthou who had come there dressed like a Tangkhul and she also eloped to him by crossing the river, then, Khaba Tarang Khoinucha chased her by following the footprints. But at last Khaba Tarang Khoinucha came to know that Panthoibi was a goddess. Panthoibi’s poor father-in-law and mother-in-law too came, bowed down to them and also begged to be forgiven. When Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi were united at the Nongmaiching hill, all gods and goddesses came there to call on them. They two were superior to all

other gods. Therefore, they are still worshipped by the people. And Khaba Tarang Khoinucha preserved the comb with hair and the cloth used by her.’<sup>4</sup>

The above story of the legend has the ability to reflect some aspects of Manipuri culture. Agriculture is one of the important occupations of the people of Manipur. From time immemorial Manipuri folk have been undertaking the activities of cultivation in the society. This legend shows that since the time to Panthoibi jhum cultivation is prevalent in the Manipuri society. In this context, there is an anecdote concerning the cultivation of rice with Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi as the leaders of feuding parties and cultivation is known. The underlying motif of recounting such episode is fertility and a plentiful catch of crops. On the last day of *Lai-Haraoba*, one of the oldest festivals of the Manipuris, the *maibi* performs Panthoibi dance which describes the romantic meeting between Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi. In continuation with the dance performance exhibiting the story of Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi, the *maibi* shows various techniques dealing with the stages of agricultural practices. In the Manipuri society proposed marriage system is prevalent. At first the parents of the groom send the proposal to the parents of the girl (bride) with sweets and fruits, But, if the proposal is not accepted by the parents of the bride, there is no betrothal ceremony. It may be said that the Manipuri parents rarely try to force their daughter to marry man whom she dislikes. However, if the proposal of the parents of the groom is accepted by the parents of the bride, their daughter can be married to the proposed man. After the marriage, the bride is escorted to the groom’s house by the relatives and the guests. These relatives and guests are generally fed at her. In the case of Panthoibi’s marriage when her father-in-law was unable to feed to the relatives and the guests, Panthoibi rescued her father-in-law from public humiliation and fed them from her basket of rice, pot of meat and a pitcher of wine, Her basket, pot and pitcher refilled themselves as soon as the contents were taken out of them for distribution. This is a clear example of treating her as the goddess of plenty. From the above, we may say that the Manipuris have been observing marriage ceremony from time immemorial. Over and above, it shows that in the pre-Hindu period meat eating and wine drinks are allowed in the Manipuri society. Manipuri women catch fishes with a basket like contraption called *long* in the streams and shallow waters. This legend reveals the practice of fishing prevalent in the Manipuri society during the time of Panthoibi. In the Manipuri society, a married woman is not free and as such, she has to take permission from her husband or her in-laws whenever she wants to come out from her residence, In other words, a married woman has to conform to certain norms and customs of the life of a married woman of the Manipuri society. If she cannot conform to the general norms and customs of the life of a married woman, a trouble of the newly married couple starts. This has been described clearly as an example in the legend of Panthoibi. In the Manipuri society, as death occurs, the members of the bereaved family start wailing loudly. At the time of the death of a person, a funeral rite is generally performed. This system has been observing from the time of Panthoibi in the Manipuri society.

In the Manipuri society, there is another form of marriage called *Chelhong* (marriage by elopement). A boy may plan elopement with the girl of his choice, a woman may not be happy with her husband and if she desires to leave him, she can elope with the man of her choice. This legend reveals that Panthoibi had fallen in love with Nongpok Ningthou before her marriage to Khaba Tarang Khoinucha. When she was at the residence of Khaba, she always thought of her lover Nongpok Ningthou day and night. Whenever they met, her lover proposed to her to elope with him. At last Panthoibi eloped to her lover Nongpok Ningthou by crossing the river. It proves that another form of marriage called marriage by elopement has been observing in Manipuri society from the time of Panthoibi. It may be said that later on the Khaba came to know that Panthoibi was a goddess. When Panthoibi and Nongpok Ningthou were united at the *Nongmaiching* hill, then almost all the important gods and goddesses sang, danced and acted in memory of the acts of creation. Some scholars are of the opinion that this may be the motivation behind the origin of the most important traditional religio-cultural festival of the Manipuris known as *Lai-Haraoba*. In the legend of Panthoibi the life of the Manipuris in various aspects like social customs and beliefs, economic and social standards, domestic articles, utensils, dresses, food habits, religious faiths, etc. are reflected.

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