

The Language of Spells: A Study in the Rituals of Thanga

Naorem Brindebala Devi, Ph.D.

Department of Linguistics

Manipur University

An ICSSR Post-Doctoral Fellow

Email: brindebalanaorem@gmail.com

Abstract

The paper discusses the language usage in the spells of some of the rituals used in Thanga. Thanga is an island village in the Loktak lake in Manipur, India. In this study village, people still believe in spells, chants, and incantations often attributed with supernatural elements. So, rituals are performed whenever there is illness or some kind of mental or spiritual imbalance. The language used in spells is precise and mostly in verse form. The use of honorific words is found less but the concerned deities are praised and acknowledged recurrently. The language used in the spells appears to be a direct conversation between the practitioner and the invisible spirit/ the concerned deity, so use of vocative words, second person reference terms and second person pronominal markers are found. It is believed that any illness or such imbalance is occurred due to the ill will of the concerned deity or the spirit, so it has to be driven out with some sort of induced command of the Master, the Almighty. It starts with a hyperbole and usually ends with harsh instruction to get the desired result and concludes mostly with some magic words.

Keywords: Manipur, Loktak Lake Island, Thanga, Ritual, Spell, Deity, Spirit, Language usage

Introduction

Thanga, a small hilly island village, comprises a group of hills. It is located in the Loktak lake in Bishnupur district of Manipur, in north-east India. It has a population of 14, 316 (according to 2011 census of India) at a distance of about 53 km from Imphal, the state capital. Their main occupation is fishing. The people of this study village were once segregated from the

mainland Meeteis. Since they are inhabited in the middle of the lake, segregated in the hilly island, their belief in gods and goddesses, deities, spirits and supernatural elements were very high. Still today, with the development and advancement of science and technology, communication and medical sciences, the belief in traditions, rituals, prayers, etc. are deeply rooted in their cultural heritage and people's mindset (folk belief).

In *Oxford Learner's Dictionary* it is stated that ritual is a series of actions that are always performed in the same way, especially as part of a religious ceremony. Martha C. Sims and Martine Stephens also comment,

Rituals are repeated, habitual actions, but they are more purposeful than custom; rituals are frequently highly organized and controlled, often meant to indicate or announce membership in a group. Most rituals bring together many types of folklore: verbal, such as chants, recitations, poems or songs; customary, such as gestures, dance or movements, and material, such as food, books, awards, clothing and costumes (2005: 95).

Ritual is believed to be incomplete without incantation. Incantations and spells take a major part in performing a ritual. Here, we are going to analyze the language of spells associated with Meetei rituals prevailing in Thanga. To study the language used in spells, some spells are collected. The spells include (i) healing spells like in stone case, blindness, dental problem, sticking fish bones, enhancing breast milk, nose bleeding, fungal acne, skin lump (epidermoid cyst), cyst, headache, tonsillitis, to expand lifespan of teeth, stomach upset, etc.; (ii) spells to protect from evil spirits; (iii) to get attention or attraction or to be loved; etc.

Let us study the language usage of spells.

Precise and Verse Type

The healers want the spells to be precise and effective. The spells are uttered in verse type. It is good in listening and makes the listeners interested.

Let us take up a spell used to protect from the evil spirits.

Lai si-re

The spirit is dead

| | |
|-------------------|------------------------|
| <i>Mi hing-le</i> | Human beings are alive |
| <i>Lai si-re</i> | The spirit is dead |
| <i>Mi hing-le</i> | Human beings are alive |
| <i>Lai si-re</i> | The spirit is dead |
| <i>Mi hing-le</i> | Human beings are alive |
| <i>Hinglap</i> | <i>Hinglap</i> |

Let us take up another spell used for the treatment of blindness (this spell is also used for getting attraction/attention or loved by all) .

| | |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <i>Ema Leimarel Sidabi</i> | O! Mother Leimarel Sidabi |
| <i>Naya yaren khudinggi</i> | Each of your teeth |
| <i>Sanagi hajang yeiribi</i> | Is plated with gold |
| <i>Natu tubum khudinggi</i> | Each of your body hair |
| <i>Hera mani thillibi</i> | Is gilded with diamond and pearls |
| <i>Sanagi konphunungdagi</i> | From within the golden pot |
| <i>Mittreng tanoubi</i> | Let the eyesight |
| <i>Mitmit nouna houbirak – u</i> | Revitalize so fresh and anew |
| <i>Gurugi yathangni.</i> | It is the command of the Master. |

The rhythm and rhyme scheme of the above lines of the spell give a melodious effect in listening. The words used are precise, but the quality or the ability of the goddess is acknowledged and praised recurrently. Likewise, another spell used in the treatment of stone case,

| | |
|------------------------------------|--|
| <i>Hai Khamlangba</i> | O Lord Khamlangba |
| <i>Yotpu chagem saibagum saiba</i> | you eat iron as if it is rice porridge |
| <i>Nungbu thum tuppagam tuppa</i> | you eat stone as if it is salt |

God Khamlangba is regarded as the god of iron who is considered to be the pioneer of iron smelting in Manipur.

Initialisation

The incantation of the spells starts with a high tone (hyperbole) attracting the listeners. It helps in making a serious environment which helps in concentration. It seems that this concentration is needed for the healer to communicate with the deity possible.

The spell of protection from evil spirits starts with the utterance ‘*Hung Shidaba Mapu*’. According to Meetei cosmogony, there was nothing except Tengbanba Mapu (Lord of the Universe) who has many names and was a combination of Hayi (Hei) and Haya (Ha). He was Hayum (Hum/Hung) (Sanatomba, 2012). The Hung sound emits a vibration and seems to be exhaling (breathing out) the negative energy from the body before entering into the world of spiritualism. It is a sacred sound of the Meeteis (Sanamahism). It might be compared to the Hindu word **Om**, the powerful sound, an invocation in Hinduism to stimulate the divine energy and consciousness.

We find some spells begin by calling out the names of the deity concerned. Votive words are found to be attached in some spells. For instance,

| | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------|
| Hai Khamlangba | O Lord Khamlangba | (treatment of stone case) |
| Hai Ereima | O Goddess Ereima | (treatment of nose bleeding) |
| <i>He Thawai mangamak</i> | O five Souls | (treatment of gastric problem) |
| <i>HeThawai manga</i> | O five Souls | (to be loved by people) |

Choice of Diction and Arrangement

The words are chosen with skill. The language includes both archaic and modern. The archaic words are retained mostly in praising the deities.

For instance,

- (i) In the spell of curing blindness, the term *hajang yeiribi* 'plated with' is used in the line *Sanagi hajang yeiribi* 'plated with gold'. The term is no longer used in today's society.
- (ii) In the spell of curing stomach upset, the term *tokpa waba sabi* is used which is now difficult to understand and translate for local rustics.

- (iii) Likewise in the spell of treating epidermoid cyst (hard lump under the skin), the term *nongjanaba* ‘be in a confused state’ is used to modify/describe the noun *pari* (son), and *nungonbi* ‘a feeling or evoking an internal change’ is used to describe the *imom* (daughter). Both these *nongjanaba* and *nungonbi* are regarded as poetic and are not used in day today parlance.
- (iv) In the spell of treating gastric problem, poetic words like *khomlen leima* (goddess of slumber) are used.
- (v) In the spell of curing blindness, poetic words like *mittreng tanoubi* (fresh eyesight) are used.
- (vi) In the spell to be loved by people, poetic words like *mit naha tarangba* (shining pupil) are used.

It shows the skill of the practitioner or the healer and a feeling of superiority. Further it gives a positive impact on the listeners. The archaic terms are no more used in present days. They are retained only in spells, rituals, poetic expressions, etc. It is believed that archaic language is the language of gods and goddesses. The practitioners or the healers choose these kinds of words and arrangements which help in drawing the listeners’ attention.

Further, there are words or utterances which give melodious effect but are foreign or unfamiliar to common people and difficult to translate. For instance,

| | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <i>Phet chit sna; haying haying</i> | (treatment for gastric problem) |
| <i>Kining; kining leishem</i> | (treatment for epidermoid cyst) |
| <i>Sarei horo; keiti sakok</i> | (treatment for stomach upset) |
| <i>Hing lap</i> | (to protect from evil spirit) |
| <i>Tap tap tap; lap lap lap</i> | (to be loved by people) |

However, such words help in bringing a good sound pattern and impress the listeners.

Use of Magnificence

When the deities are praised magnificence words are found to be used. Sometimes, deities need to be praised. It is believed that when deities are pleased they shower blessings and

goodness upon man. The best way known to man to please them is to appreciate them by acknowledging their qualities, identity, power and capabilities.

| | |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------|
| <i>Nungbi</i> (<i>nung + mapi</i>) | ‘mother stone’ |
| <i>Nunglen</i> (<i>nung + len</i>) | ‘great stone’ |
| <i>Tubum</i> (<i>tu + mapum</i>) | ‘whole body hair’ |
| <i>Yaren</i> (<i>ya + len</i>) | ‘great tooth’ |

Use of Personification

It is believed that the healers possess some supernatural powers; they can directly communicate with deities or spirits concerned; and the elements involved are treated as person and dealt directly.

For instance,

| | | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|---------------------------------|
| <i>Ya nang</i> (teeth you) | ‘you teeth’ | (lengthening lifespan of teeth) |
| <i>Lei nang</i> (tongue you) | ‘you tongue’ | (lengthening lifespan of teeth) |
| <i>Mitnaha nang-gi</i> (pupil your) | ‘Pupil, your’ | (to be loved by people) |

Use of Second Person Pronominal Marker and Second Person Pronoun

The healer is believed to be the mediator between the mundane world and the spiritual world. There is a direct conversation between the deity and the healer. When the deity is approached second person pronoun and second person pronominal marker are used in most of the spells.

For instance, second person pronouns are used,

| | | |
|--------------------|-------------|------------------|
| <i>Brahma nang</i> | ‘YouBrahma’ | (fungal ache) |
| <i>Lai nang</i> | ‘You God’ | (fungal acne) |
| <i>Numit nang</i> | ‘You Sun’ | (to woo a woman) |

Second person pronominal markers are also used:

| | | |
|--------------|------------------|-------------------|
| <i>Na-ya</i> | ‘your teeth’ | (the treatment of |
| <i>Na-tu</i> | ‘your body hair’ | blindness) |

| | | |
|--------------|---------------|---------------------------|
| <i>Na-ma</i> | 'your mother' | (the treatment of |
| <i>Na-pa</i> | 'your father' | longer lifespan of teeth) |

In the above utterance, Goddess Ema Leimarel is pleaded by using second person pronominal marker. In Meetei society, use of second person pronominal marker to the deities or elders or higher rank profile is absurd. Honorific terms are used according to the usage or the nature of the spells. However, when there is direct conversation, second person pronouns are found to be used for the sake of effectiveness.

Influence of Hinduism

With the advent of Hinduism in the 15th C during the reign of King Kiyamba, various changes and modifications in language, culture and rituals are evidently found in Meetei society. Being a part of Meetei society, this influence has not excluded the people of Thanga. Accordingly, we find Indo-Aryan loan words in some of the spells as well as mentioning the names of Hindu worshipping deities.

Loan Words

Indo-Aryan loan words like, *guru, prabhu, om, heera, mani, kleem, naam, sakshi, garbha*, etc. are found. But most of them are simplified and localized. For instance,

| Indo-Aryan words | Localized words |
|------------------|-----------------|
| <i>Om</i> | <i>ong</i> |
| <i>Heera</i> | <i>hera</i> |
| <i>Kleem</i> | <i>kling</i> |
| <i>Sakshi</i> | <i>sakhi</i> |

In the spell of treating epidermoid cyst, one particular term *kining* is used as in *kining leishemdo kairo* 'break down the *kining* creation.' This *kining* may be derived from the term *kling* simplifying the consonant cluster *kl* by inserting vowel /i/. Further the phoneme /l/ changes to /n/ as it is one of the common phenomena to switch /n/ and /l/ in Thanga.

kling > kiling > kining

Hindu Deities in the Spells

With the adoption and belief of Hinduism, Hindu deities have been started to worship in Meetei society. Accordingly, Hindu deities are found to be prayed and pleaded to in the rituals. People started believing and considering the Meetei deity Nongpok Ningthou as an incarnation of Shiva Mahadeva. Moreover, Hindu deities like Shiva Mahadeva, Brahma (Brahmanta), Chaitanya (Cheiteinya), Krishna, etc. are also found to be present in the narratives and the beliefs.

Direct Order

As we have said earlier, it is believed that any ill happenings or illness or bad omens are caused due to the ill will of the concerned deity or the evil spirits. The ill will or the act of the evil spirit is ordered to be driven out making the misfortune or the illness to be cured. For instance, in the spell of curing tonsillitis, the spell is like,

| | |
|------------------------|---------------------------|
| <i>Ong shiro</i> | Om, may you die |
| <i>Ong tummo</i> | May you be destroyed |
| <i>Tingang tingang</i> | Tonsil, tonsil |
| <i>Tingang tummo</i> | Tonsillitis be destroyed. |

In the spell of stone case treatment,

| | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| <i>Nungbi nang tum-o</i> | Dissolve you mother stone |
| <i>Nunglen nang kai-ro</i> | Break down you grand stone |
| <i>Kairo kai-ro</i> | Break down, break down |
| <i>Kaida kai-ro</i> | May you be destroyed |
| <i>Set kai-ro</i> | Break down at one go |
| <i>Segak kai-ro</i> | Break down completely. |

Here, the command word is used repeatedly ordering again and again to achieve the target. The command marker –o/-ro is used without any honorific marker or request indicating word.

In the spell of curing nose bleeding,

| | |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <i>Ereima ethong thingbi</i> | Ereima who blocks the blood vessel |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------|

Ethong thing-o Block the blood vessel

...

Hai thing-o Block it'

Here also, command marker -o is used without any request marker. Further, the term *hai* is used here which is used when speaking to the subordinates.

In the spell of the treatment of cyst,

Ong leikhong hakhong Om leikhong, hakhong

Nongdon leiton Nongdon, leiton

Littharakpa ya-roi You are not allowed to slip down

In the spell, the illness causing agents are instructed not to cause any disease. The term *yaroi* indicates strong negative command in Meetei society. These kinds of strong command words are also found using.

In the spell of curing stomach pain and fungal acne,

Ong Brahma nang chak-o Om Brahma, may you be burnt

Ong Brahma nang tum-o Om Brahma, may you be destroyed

Here, even lord Brahma is cursed, because the illness or the disease is believed to be caused by the ill will of Lord Brahma. The illness or pain causing agent is ordered to get out and break down. The command words are used recurrently. It shows the extremity of the spell and desperateness of the practitioner. The deity concerned should be pleaded to and compromised with.

Ending Words

It is considered to be the magic word - *Gurugi yathangni* which means 'It is the command of the Master (Supreme God, the Almighty).' Most of the spells end with such utterance. However, a few spells have this utterance both in the beginning and the ending.

Ong Om

Guru-gi yathang-ni It is the command of the Master, the Almighty

Ya nangbudi leina hanna pok-e The tongue comes before you, O teeth

Nama sidaringeida Before your mother's demise

| | |
|--|--|
| <i>Macha siba hounabara haiye;</i> | Is it normal for the child to die; |
| <i>Napa sidaringeida</i> | Before your father's demise |
| <i>Macha siba hounbara;</i> | Is it normal for the child to die; |
| <i>Lei nang</i> | You, the tongue, are requested |
| <i>Nacha-nashu chetna lang-gonbiyu</i> | To look after your wards |
| <i>Gurugi yathang-ni</i> | It is the command of the Master, the Almighty. |

Everything is under His control. So, the ill will of the deity should be compromised.

Nowadays, the loan word “guru” has been started to be replaced by the indigenous term *mapu* as in 'Mapugi yathangni'.

Conclusion

When the collected spells are analysed, we find that the words used are precise but effective. Request/honorific terms are found using in less number. It is believed that any illness or disease or any unwanted situation is caused by the ill will of the deity or the evil spirits or, we can say, by an invisible power. So, the negative effect causing agent must be compromised or driven away. Meetei philosophy, thought, culture, faith, belief, customs, history, etc. are reflected in the spells. In short, Meetei community can be identified from its prevailing rituals and their practices.

According to Meetei creation myth, Tengbanba Mapu is the Supreme God; everything is under His control. So, His powerful subordinates are mostly compromised in the name of the Supreme God. However, most of the spells used in healing practices are accompanied by some way of treatments whether it is of physiological, medical (herbal medicine), or such.

=====

N.B. This paper is published as a part of post-doctoral work under the sponsorship of ICSSR.

Local Consultants:

Dr. Laishram Amarjit Singh (38 years of age): a teacher

=====

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 24:3 March 2024

Naorem Brindebala Devi, Ph.D.

The Language of Spells: A Study in the Rituals of Thanga

Khwairakpam Ranjit Singh (56 years of age): a local healer

Laishram Ningthemba Singh (70 years of age): a fisherman by profession.

TongbramNingol Laishram OngbiThoibi Devi (60 years of age): fisherwoman.

=====

References

Bell, Catherine. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. Oxford University Press, 2009

Devi, Kongbrailatpam Sadhana. *Mahoushadagi Chatnarakpa Meiteigi Ana Laiyeng Amasung Hidak Langthak*. Unpublished Ph. D Thesis, Manipur University, 1994.

Meetei, Nameirakpam Arunta. *Laininglaishon-gi Oiba Meitei Khunnung Thajanabishing: Neinaba Ama*. Unpublished Ph. D Thesis, Manipur University, 2007.

Sanatomba, Sapatmcha (@ Bheigy). *The Sanamahism: History of Sanamahi Religion and its Philosophy*. S.R. Institute of Manipur Studies, 2012.

Sims, Martha C. and Martine Stephens. *Living Folklore: An Introduction to the Study of People and Their Traditions*. Utah State University Press, 2005.

Singh, Laishram Amarjit. *Belief Narratives in the Cultural Context of Thanga: A Study*. Unpublished Ph. D Thesis, Manipur University, 2023.

Stephenson, Barry. *Ritual: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press 2015.

TaVarez, David. *Ritual Language in the Cambridge Handbook of Linguistic Anthropology*. CUP, 2014.

=====