

Gender Inequality, Power, and Resistance: A Study of the Socio-cultural Location of Transgender Nupi Mannbis of Manipur

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Abstract:

Nupi Maanbis are transgender women of Manipur, in North East India. Like many of their counterparts in different parts of the world today, the nupi maanbi community faces extreme marginalisation in various socio-cultural and economic aspects of Manipuri life. In very recent times, discrimination against nupi maanbi subjects has been inscribed in the sanctified space of faith and rituals, a trend that has not been seen in the past. The newer text of exclusion is rooted in the outmoded, double-edged paradigm of masculinity/femininity, a veritable fountain of inequality for the subjects. However, nupi maanbis have argued against the myopic cultural rationality of sex/gender binary; the argument is advanced through the modern discourses of human rights and democracy, and the legitimacy endorsed towards the prototypical transgender subjects in the historical past of the Manipuri society. Additionally, the nupi maanbi community, like other transgender communities in India, has contested inequality and marginalisation implied in the recent queer legislation in India. These contestations engage the community in the traffic between power and resistance. Consequently, the paper explores this dialogic between socio-cultural marginalisation and the voice of resistance against the very marginalisation, an equation that has created the location of nupi maanbis in Manipur today.

Keywords: gender, identity, nupi maanbi, transgender, culture.

Introduction

Nupi maanbis are transgender women of Manipur, in North East India. The visibility of the nupi maanbi subjects has gone through multiple phases in the social history of Manipur. During the time of the Meitei kingship in early and medieval Manipur, gender non-conforming persons assigned “male” at birth (although “male” as both a noun and an adjective should be used with caution in order to avoid objectification of the subjects; additionally assigning male and female

to transgender people is misgendering), were highly revered by royalty and the common people alike. (The paper specifically focuses on man to woman transgenders). During this period gender variant persons were called pheitas. The loss of royal patronage following the Third Burmese Invasion of Manipur (1819-1826 AD) and the consequent coming of the British colonial influence might have subsequently led to the subversion of the presence and privileges of the gender variant persons in Manipuri society (Yumkhaibam 2019). In 20th century Manipur, there was the possibility for the public expression of a transgender identity on the stage of Shumang Leela¹, in the garb of the professional female impersonators called nupi sabis. Those who have the talent for the mimetic art of acting and theatrical impersonation have the cultural and artistic licence to cross the rigid boundaries of gender, on the spatial and temporal stage of Shumang Leela. Thus, throughout the most part of the 20th century, cross-gendering on the stage of Shumang Leela was the only culturally perceptible form of transgendering in Manipur society. Beyond the stage, transgendering was considered a visible form of deviance that was stigmatized. Interestingly, transgender persons during this period conveniently used the term nupi sabi to refer to their gender identity. However, the term nupi sabi when used in the context of transgender persons is inadequate; a nupi sabi is essentially an artistic identity. A talented transgender person can become a nupi sabi actor, but not all nupi sabi actors are transgenders. Nupi sabi actors might have shared some similarities with transgender persons, mainly evinced by “cross-dressing”, but the term does not adequately convey the gender subjectivity of the person.

The present term for transgender women, nupi maanbi, is of recent origin and it became popular only towards the second decade of the 21st century. The term nupi maanbi emerged out of a long struggle of resistance to marginalisation and inequality of the transgender identity. In the context of Manipuri society, nupi maanbi connotes a person assigned “male” at birth but chooses to live in the feminine gender as a social identity. Here, we can say that nupi maanbi identity at an individual and private level must have been in existence for a long time, although the term’s social existence did not exist prior to the 21st century. Talking about a similar situation of naming human erotic practices in the contexts of homosexuals and heterosexuals in the West, Jeffrey Weeks (2000, 145) wrote, “. . . heterosexuality and homosexuality may have existed if we take those terms to apply to general sexual activity, but ‘homosexuals’ and ‘heterosexuals’ have not.” In the similar manner, nupi maanbi is a historicised term, but nupi maanbi as a gender identity is as old as human history.

Alongside the visibility of nupi maanbis in the public life of Manipuri society in the last 15 or so years, the marginalisation and unequal treatment of the community have not remained uncontested. The 21st century shows a parallel existence of exclusionary attitudes towards the subjects and increasing visibility of the same subjects. Consequently, it is important to enquire into the politics underlying this contradictory pull. In order to explore this inevitable pull, this paper discusses the twin threads of gender inequality and prejudices against the subjects and the consequent emergence of the identity politics of the nupi maanbi subjects. The first part of the paper discusses the gradual disappearance of gender plurality and the roots of the present day inequality of the nupi maanbi subjects. The second part addresses the hegemonic exclusion of the nupi maanbi subjects in the domain of cultural expressions and the subjects' resistance that follows. The concluding part addresses the emerging concern of nupi maanbi agency.

The roots of transgender inequality

The prejudices against the nupi maanbi community and the conterminous rigidity of sex/gender schema in Manipuri society have a very modern origin. The structured inequality existing between men and women in Manipuri society is further extended towards the nupi maanbi subjects who are perceived as the “other” of sex/gender linearity, a system that validates gender on the basis of biology/sexed anatomy. In this system, there is not much scope for diverse legitimacy for gender expressions. However, in traditional Manipuri society, the administrative functionary of the Meitei kings provided a vital context for gender plurality. Gender non-conforming people, pheitas, were employed in the kings' administration for performing exclusive tasks². It is important to note that right from the time of King Loiyamba (AD 1074-1122), men and women performed different tasks according to the clan one belongs to (Singh, 1975), and the tasks performed by men, women and pheitas were put within the framework of what we have come to call instrumental “functionality” in modern sociological enquiries. A vital source of legitimacy accorded to pheitas was derived from their association with the sanctified space of Kangla, the ancient capital fort of the Meitei kings. The Kangla was both a domestic space and the sacred seat of the king's political power, and the pheitas' prerogative to inhabit this space, a privilege not granted to men and women, invested extraordinary power and privileges which they nevertheless performed under the pleasure of the royalty. However, pheitas were not merely the secular functionaries of the Meitei kings; those pheitas who had the power of divination were sent to Maibi Loisang (Office of the Shamans) to perform the rituals of worship and they thus became shamans. The various domains in which pheitas got legitimacy

have clearly suggested that gender plurality was endorsed from both the secular (administrative) and the sacred domains. It can be said that in the context of the relationship between traditional Manipuri society and gender plurality, functionality of labour is more relevant than concepts of equality, rights and freedom, ideas that have come to define modern movements for queer rights and inclusion. Although crime and punishment for pheitas were rigid, this hinted at signs of control over the subjects (Yumkhaibam 2019). Every subject lived under the “protection” of the king, and the king was obeyed. Moreover, Manipuri kings were considered sacred figures, and this provided a case for strict punishment for pheitas as well as the other subjects.

As mentioned in the introduction, the Third Burmese Invasion of Manipur (1819-1826) decentred the importance of Kangla that had remained as both a sacred space for the king and a source of power and legitimacy for pheitas. With the Burmese occupation and the devastation of the valley of Manipur, pheitas, who were the “perfect servants” of the kings, must have decentred from the spatial domain of the Kangla as well as the functionary of the administration. Since pheitas were the bastion of gender plurality, their decline must have also led to the disappearance of gender plurality and the subsequent strengthening of the heteronormative structure that has come to define the socio-cultural rational of the contemporary Manipur.

Through sociological imagination, we can hypothesise that from the mid-19th century when Manipur was liberated from the Burmese intervention with help from the British colonial power, and the consequent intervention of the British empire in the North East Frontier of India, new pre-occupations must have set in the administration, social concerns, cultural priorities, and so forth. Around this time, with the ongoing process of Hinduisation and the resulting changing relationship between the king and the common people, and the emerging relationship between Meitei society and the new British colonial influence, traditional Manipuri society must have undergone a drastic change (although meticulous research needs to be done in the area of the relationship between gender and the new order in Manipuri society). We have yet to see any conclusive relationship between the Meitei concept of gender plurality and the colonial policy of criminal tribes law (Criminal Tribes Act, 1871, 1876), which criminalised gender non-conforming identities like hijra. Whether these laws influenced the North East Frontier also needs better scrutiny. At this stage of research, we are still suffering from a lack of adequate documentation. Existing literature on colonial and postcolonial times is resoundingly silent on gender non-conforming people in Manipuri society. We need to marry the merits of history, sociology and anthropology to accomplish this required documentation and interpretation.

From our oral sources, it can be said that by the second half of the 20th century, living a gender non-conforming life in public has become a much-taboo subject in Manipur. In absence of an endorsed identity erstwhile provided by the administrative roles, gender variant people were no longer a part of the larger functionality of the society, and hence socio-cultural legitimacy of gender diversity became an alien concept. Gender non-conformity came to be seen as personal eccentricities and “defects”. Another problematic concept is that in the imaginary of the Manipuris, gender-variant people (transgender women in this case) are seen as males desiring male partners. This assumption is problematic for two reasons. First, focusing on the sexed identity of a gender variant person is inaccurate as it can lead to misgendering and subversion of one’s social (gender) identity. Second, unconventional gender expressions came to be flagged in the domain of eroticism, which casts the subjects as stigmatised homoerotic persons, another faulty assumption. Such tabooed perceptions have kept the people closeted, except on the stage of Shumang Leela where transgenering is an artistic feat, not a subjective identity. Stigmatisation on the basis of sexual taboos became incisive by the end of the 20th century. Around the late 1980s, transgender subjects were taken over by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in the advocacy of HIV/AIDS. In this medical paradigm, which aimed at the documentation of risk populations and the prevention of further spreading of the disease, the nupi maanbi community came to be cast in the light of death, disease and “moral corruption”, hinting at the sexual route of the transmission of the disease, although there are many other routes for HIV transmission. Nupi maanbis came to be discriminated not only for transgressing gender boundaries but also for their perceived “sexual promiscuity”. Discrimination on the basis of gender and disease has made the crucial issue of gender identity invisible.

These are the historical processes through which inequality, marginalisation and stigmatisation of transgender subjects have concretised in modern Manipuri society. The mode of symbolic violence towards the nupi maanbi community became more hegemonic in the 1990s through the advent of cultural artefacts, a more effective way of interpolating the discrimination and prejudices against transgender persons in the minds of the populace. In this manner, stereotypical, comic depictions of transgender women (that the audience enjoyed) became another mode of disseminating nupi maanbi identity in the public domain, and such depictions were filled with transgender identity erasure. Popular artefacts like comic spoofs, and visual and audio satires represented the subjects on the basis of the mediated prejudices. Some of these prejudices are exaggerated femininity, an erotic desire for men, the futility of transgender identity, and the resultant negation of the subjects. Overall, such depictions are a form of the “symbolic annihilation”³ of the subjects.

By the turn of the 21st century, with the gradual coming of organisations run by many nupi maanbis, and with the funding sanctioned by national and international NGOs, the community started addressing gender and sexuality rights. With this new momentum, nupi maanbis are increasingly seen as disturbing the “culture and heritage” of Manipuri society. Culture becomes a ground for contestation of nupi maanbi identity and legitimacy.

Socio-cultural exclusion of nupi maanbis and the resistance movement

As mentioned before, society became rigid for gender non-conforming people by the 20th century, leading to further exclusion and marginalisation. One of the most important features of modern Manipuri society is education and prospects of employment, which is supposed to bring success and dignity to the individual. The unequal treatment, mockery and hate crimes against nupi maanbis have prevented many young nupi maanbis from acquiring degrees in education. If we underlie the functionalist character of education in which young people are trained in skills required for specialized roles in society (Durkheim 1973; Parsons and Bales 1956), nupi maanbis are significantly labour under lack of resources. This has ultimately led to the economic backwardness of the future generation of nupi maanbis, and a significant lack of nupi maanbi participation in the employment sector. Despite the low participation in educational and employment, by the turn of the 21st century, many nupi maanbis were able to establish a niche in beauty parlours, which became hugely successful in fashion-conscious Manipuri society. This is an interesting phenomenon in which a group at the margins of a society is able to manipulate a particular niche for “cultural capital”. However, the success in beauty parlours does not signal an acceptance of nupi maanbis in the socio-cultural field. In today’s Manipur, tolerance of nupi maanbis is based on their measure of economic success, whether the nupi maanbi is a beautician, a weaver, or any income-earning job. Therefore it is a “role-based identity”⁴ that is tolerated: the nupi maanbi as breadwinner. Gender subjectivity, a crucial aspect of one’s identity, has not been considered a major marker of the nupi maanbi. Therefore, it is a cautious tolerance that frames a nupi maanbi identity, and it is far from social acceptance.

The social and familial exclusion that a nupi maanbi faces is inextricable from the concept of *nupa thokpa*, masculinity, in the deep-seated patriarchy of Manipuri society. There are cultural expectations that require men to show determination and valour in different areas – chivalry, physical strength, and responsibility towards family and community. Such holistic approaches to being a man, hegemonic masculinity, encapsulates what Patricia Sexton writes: “male norms

stress values such as courage, inner direction, certain forms of aggression, autonomy, mastery, technological skill, group solidarity, adventures and considerable amount of toughness of mind and body” (quoted in Donaldson, 1993, 644). While many nupi maanbis are already successful in fulfilling the economic role of material provider, they are perceived as failures in the cultural role - being masculine, being a man. Nupi maanbis are expected to repress their gender expressions and to show the masculine valour found in the domain of physical culture and heterosexual conjugality. This exclusion from the sphere of hegemonic masculinity brought daily shame both to the family and to nupi maanbi persons.

At the same time, nupi maanbis are denied womanhood. The subjective feminine experience of nupi maanbis are denied on the assumption of an essentialist linkage between biology and gender. Many Manipuris hold the opinion that nupi maanbis despite being “beautiful like women” are unaffected by the biological and cultural consequences that define and constrain one as woman in the society. In this manner, refusing to accept nupi maanbis within the cultural boundary of womanhood, a 38-year-old woman voiced a stock response, “Being a woman is not about simulating breasts, wearing make-up, or wearing long hair. They do not even know the daily constraints we go through, not even menstrual cramps.” Further, women often insist on the “lack of feminine sentiment” among the nupi maanbis. However, such a perception of what is feminine is the product of Manipuri society wherein women are supposed to display modesty in dress, behaviour, speech pattern, etc. While men antagonise nupi maanbis for forgoing masculinity, women reject nupi maanbis for “false and risky appropriation” of femininity. In this crossroads, nupi maanbis are always projected as the “other” of our culture, dangerous outsiders. Ultimately, society projects nupi maanbis as too outrageous to be feminine and too inadequate to be men. It is a double-edged discrimination, a confusing dualism, which has made them impossible subjects of sex/gender symmetry. Here, it should be noted that all the excesses that are feared in the womenfolk of Meitei culture are projected on the figure of the nupi maanbi – risqué behaviour, sexual promiscuity, immodesty, etc. In this manner, a nupi maanbi identity is excluded from the scheme of society; they are made to be existing beyond the permissible Manipuri imaginary. Eventually, it is the inherent misogyny in the patriarchal society of Manipur that casts out any man who does not honour the privileges of being a man.

The exclusion of transwomen as a project of feminist study is problematic. Who is a woman? The crisis in feminism regarding the subject of feminist analysis has decentred the idea and embodiment of who is a woman. If we say that womanhood is determined by natal sex, we are not far removed from the foundation the patriarchy is built upon - the sex/gender construct. One

of the harshest criticisms against transwomen has been advanced by Janice Raymond in *Transsexual Empire* (1979). Raymond declared that male to female transsexuals are “patriarchs in drags”, and “All transsexuals rape women’s bodies by reducing the female form to an artifact, appropriating this body for themselves.” Sandy Stone (2006) rejects Raymond’s assumption. For Stone, a transsexual’s/transgender’s idea of his/her gender through artistic practices like sex change surgery is not only acceptable but it must be celebrated as an enabling and a capacitating technology.

Following the essentialist understanding of womanhood, nupi maanbis are excluded from cultural spaces meant for Manipuri women, such as thabal chongba (a communal dance festival of Manipuri women and men) and beauty contests. However, in the 21st century, this exclusion has not always resulted in repression. Nupi maanbis in many locales organise thabal chongba and beauty contests at the state level. These events are not merely an entertainment affair. They are a subversive space for countering the hegemony of patriarchy. For example, thabal chongba and beauty contests redefine the traditional icons of womanhood, beauty and romantic love (Yumkhaibam 2019 b). These sub-cultural spaces have the moral responsibility of countering the prejudices and marginalisation against the nupi maanbi community.

Does the Meitei patriarchy stand as a mere audience? No. Alongside the gradual assertion of their space in the Manipuri society today, nupi maanbis are simultaneously coming under the vista of moral and cultural censorship. Civil society groups are becoming a critical spectator to what nupi maanbis are doing, how they are behaving in public, and what they are wearing. For example, in recent times, various civil society vigilantes have demanded nupi maanbis dress modestly, thereby respecting Manipuri womanhood. The visibility of the nupi maanbis cannot be ignored by the dominant group anymore. In the critical scenario of visibility and invisibility, the recent unprecedented emergence of the nupi maanbi community reflects the complex relationship between power and resistance, as Foucault explored in his work:

A total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions; it incites, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; in extreme it constraints or forbids absolutely; it is nevertheless always a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action.

Contemporary nupi maanbis subjects are “acting subjects” capable of asserting their space and identity. They are not the docile subjects of the 20th century. The fact that nupi maanbis have

started asserting their presence in Manipuri society makes the various expressions of nupi maanbi identity a target of repression. Such attitudes are found in the emerging “moral panic” among the patriarchal bastions of Manipuri society. When groups and people from the margins of society come forward and try to consolidate their presence in society, it starts giving threatening signals to the establishment and the dominant sections panic, and hence “moral panics” are launched.

In the Manipuri society, attempts at heteronormativising the nupi maanbi subjects are becoming a caustic challenge for the community. One of the most recent examples of the “moral panic” is felt in the sphere of worship rituals, specifically Lai Haraoba⁵. This needs an analysis here. Umanglai Kanba Lup (UKAL), an organisation for conserving the heritage of Lai Haraoba, held a public consultation for the place of transgenders in Lai Haraoba, in 2019. While the organisation did acknowledge the place of transgenders in Manipuri society, it expressed the need for society to maintain the status quo of the man/woman binary in the ritualistic space of Lai Haraoba (Sangai Express 2019); it avoided the importance of transgender inclusion in the ritualistic space. Moreover, the stress given to the man/woman binary contradicts transgender inclusion. It talked in terms of assimilation rather than maintaining the autonomy of the transgender community. Further, UKAL stressed the importance of the people of Manipur to adhere to dress codes aligned to the sex/gender binary, a move that could be seen as insinuating against the transgender community. This could ultimately lead to the segregation of the transgender community, which implies a deep distrust for the femininity and womanhood of the nupi maanbi community. One cannot miss the language of exclusion couched in deep transphobia. The ambiguity of the organisation’s vision about nupi maanbis raises many questions – Is it an attempt to censor nupi maanbi identity from the ritual space? Is it an attempt to deny the womanhood of nupi maanbis? Are nupi maanbis polluted subjects? Santa Khurai, an activist for nupi maanbi rights who participated in the discussion, recounted the humiliation which was meted out to the nupi maanbi participants (which the media did not report): she said that nupi maanbi participants were not allowed to speak, and when their protests continued, “some of the youths tried to beat up the protestors with chairs and the shamans abused them” (Khurai 2019). The incident has not found wider media coverage; however, Santa Khurai said, “It is a people’s movement. I will not let these patriarchs win. We will fight for our identity” (Personal correspondence 2019). The nupi maanbi community immediately resisted the decision of UKAL as a trenchant attempt to dishonour their dignity and rights.

In the legal and cultural tradition two arguments can be advanced against the cultural hegemony of UKAL - the argument that nupi maanbi identity is a continuation of the gender plurality embodied by pheitas; nupi maanbi transgenders are protected by the Supreme Court verdict of 2014 that directs the government to restore dignity and rights of trans persons (Mahapatra 2014). The nupi maanbi community voiced their right to identity and cultural participation:

Thus Nupi Maanbis have the right to identify themselves as women or trans women not only in the context of post-colonial Indian law, but also in terms of the existence of gender plurality in traditional Manipuri society. Such humiliation of Nupi Maanbis as exhibited by UKAL has deeply hurt the sentiment and dignity of the community. It is also a gross violation of the right to freedom of speech guaranteed by the Indian Constitution (Khurai 2019).

The incident is remarkable for the deep sense of threat that the patriarchal bastion of society faces in the wake of the greater visibility of the nupi maanbi community in the 21st century. The nupi maanbi community does not hide their loneliness and suffering anymore in their private lives; the personal struggle of nupi maanbis are no longer a private affair. The noteworthy traffic between power and resistance suggests that the time has come for the queer movement in Manipur - “a movement whose time has come” in Leslie Fienberg’s vision (1992).

Conclusion: resistance and agency

This simultaneous exclusion and visibility suggests that nupi maanbis exist at the intersection of socio-cultural resistance. The interplay of marginality and resistance is thus the location of nupi maanbis in the 21st century. In Western discourse on the queer since the 1990s, the construction of identity and agency is focused on debunking the myth of essential biology, the sex/gender linkage. Here, biology is neither the destiny nor the absolute for expressing one’s gender identity; rather, one’s identity lies in one’s subjectivity, the seat of agency. The sexed anatomy does not essentially commensurate with one’s gender anatomy. This poststructuralist turn in looking at gender and eroticism is further complemented by the discourse of human rights. In many traditional societies, gender plurality and gender agency existed in alliance with traditional practices rooted in worship, labour, royal patronage, administration – Ottoman eunuchs, the eunuchs in Imperial China, eunuchs as “perfect servants” in the Roman Empire, the spiritual power of *berdache* in Native American society, and *fa’afafine* in Samoan Islands are a few examples. However, today all over the world we are talking about human rights for

queer subjects. Here we can ask - is democracy in India and the current legalisation on transgender subjects adequate for the autonomy and dignity of transgender people? The answer is bleak. Recent legalisation, namely the Transgender Persons Bill, 2019 (henceforth, the Bill), has been vocally criticised by transgender communities as undermining the freedom and dignity of transgender individuals.

In Manipur, the provisions of the Bill were criticised as undermining the native transgender identity (Khurai and Yumkhaibam 2019; *The Imphal Free Press* 2019). Here, it is important to note that transgender identity is far from being uniform across the various Indian societies; and the law does not always guarantee a fair provision for all. Nupi maanbis do not always share socio-cultural expressions with hijras, the dominant transgender identity in North Indian regions. However, nupi maanbis have expressed their view that the Bill privileges hijras (Santa Khurai, personal correspondence 2019), quoting the different socio-cultural environments between the two transgender communities. These epistemological differences are also becoming a challenge for both legalisation and the various transgender communities in India. In this scenario, how are the legal identity and agency of nupi maanbi constructed? As the essay has argued all along, identity and agency among the nupi maanbis are constructed with the traditional idioms of gender plurality which the popular sentiment tries to suppress, democratic discourses of human rights, and economic activities of the transgender persons. However, these have often failed to honour the rights and dignity of nupi maanbi persons in the last decade or so. In this scenario, one of the most potent grounds is emerging from the concerns of ethnicity and contesting nationalism between India and the Manipuri state. Here, a nupi maanbi identity will not be just a gender identity, it will also become a regional, ethnic identity, thereby tying this gender different identity to the idea of Manipur as an ethnic entity. This will emerge as a strong tool to counter the present patriarchal prejudices and to maintain a regional ground. Gender identity and autonomy will emerge as deeply discursive in the future.

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"Nupis Maanbi Thabal: A Brief Commentary on Gender and Cultural Subversion." *Yendai*, Issue: *Subversion*.

¹Shumang Leela is one of the most popular performative art forms in the Manipuri cultural archive. One of the most distinguishing features of Shumang Leela is the art of female impersonation, where in male actors play the role of women characters through the mimetic art of impersonation.

²Pheitas performed crucial tasks, such as guarding the significant quarters of the royal palace, looking after the dispensation of justice among the royal ladies, guarding the safety and security of the king, etc. Such tasks have been a common commission for gender non-conforming people in many civilizations, such as the Ottoman Empire, China, Rome, etc.

³"Symbolic annihilation" is termed used in media studies to refer to the systematic erasure and invisibilisation of the subject. It was first used by Gerbner (1976) to describe the underrepresentation of subjects in media, based on race, sex, class, gender, etc.

⁴Igor Kopytoff (1990) identifies role based identities as such identities derived from what roles people do perform in society, such as a priest or a politician.

⁵A festival of Manipur, dedicated to the celebration of the Umang Lai, deities of the Meitei Pantheon.