

Role and Status of Maechi and Maibi in the Religion of Thai (Thailand) and Meitei (Manipur)

Meena Laiphrakpam¹, Sayam Aroonsrimorakot^{1,2,*}, Anong Hambananda³,
Ratapol Sornprasert³ and Kornkanok Sarapirom⁴

¹Center for Research Assessment and Certification of Environmental Management, Faculty of Environment and Resource Studies, Mahidol University, Salaya, Nakhon Pathom 73170, Thailand

²Faculty of Environment and Resource Studies, Mahidol University, Salaya, Nakhon Pathom 73170, Thailand

³Faculty of Science, Chandrakasem Rajabhat University, Chatuchak, Bangkok 10900, Thailand

⁴College of Religious Studies, Mahidol University, Salaya, Nakhon Pathom 73170, Thailand

(*Corresponding author's e-mail: sayam.aro2560@gmail.com)

Received: 10 March 2025, Revised: 6 May 2025, Accepted: 20 May 2025, Published: 9 July 2025

Abstract

The research question of this article is: "Is there gender equality in the Meitei and Thai societies?" This article aims to discuss: 1) the role and status of Maechi in Buddhism (Thailand); 2) the role and status of Maibi in Sanamahism (Manipur); and 3) the similarities and differences of Maechi and Maibi in terms of their roles and status. This comparative study of Maechi and Maibi is important because it can be valuable for gender studies, roles, inequality, culture, religion, power, leadership, and decision-making. The study employed a rapid literature review, which involved searching and reviewing historical accounts and literature available online and in print, as well as participant observation of the daily activities of these religions. Results revealed remarkable differences between Maechi and Maibi, such as the restriction of Maechi in the decision-making process and the power hierarchy of the Thai Buddhist religious organization council, while the Maibi acts as the priestess and are the core ritual functionaries in the Meitei religious rituals and ceremonies. The study concluded that despite the Maibi's superordinate position in the traditional Meitei religion, there is gender inequality in other spheres of the Meitei society such as in the rights to property inheritance and having a son's preference. Religious beliefs of both religions have played a dominant role in defining women's roles and status. Gender roles and status, therefore, are socially constructed based on socio-cultural and religious norms.

Keywords: Maechi, Maibi, Buddhism, Sanamahism, Role and status of women, Religion

Introduction

The role and status of women is not uniform worldwide. It is important to analyze historically the relationship between religion and gender issues, because, generally, in historical analysis, religion has played a dominant role in determining women's role and status in society (Hopflinger et al., 2012). Researchers commonly observe that, despite numerous attempts and slogans promoting gender equality, gender inequality still prevails. Prevailing traditions and norms often established in the name of religion perpetuate this inequality and contribute to the subordination of women

(Klingorova & Havlicek, 2015). Religious ethics and norms influence the pattern and allocation of cultural roles and gender status (Stump, 2008).

The concept "Gender" is interdisciplinary and social as it differentiates the female and male sexes as woman and man, the interrelations between them, and defines the norms, roles, cultural expectations, behavior, etc. associated with gender (Farre, 2013). Inequality and differentiation based on gender are a global phenomenon. However, the intensity of variation and inequality differs across all cultures and countries, as

some cultures are more intense, strict, and overt. At the same time, in some, it is liberal, slight, and not pronounced (Ali et al., 2011). Inequality of gender is more obvious and overt in some societies in opportunities for social, religious, economic, and political participation (Grunow et al., 2018; Wharton, 2009; Hausmann et al., 2008). (For example, in some conservative Muslim countries, women have to cover their faces and bodies with a burqa, while in some liberal societies, women can wear the same as men). For this reason, empowering women is considered mandatory among the many drivers of social change. In recent decades, scholars and observers have noted progress in many fields, such as education, employment, etc. There have been many challenges in empowering women. For instance, the Global Millennium project listed 15 challenges, including the priority of changing the role and status of women. In other words, there are still significant differences, inequality, and discrimination based on gender in matters of economic, religious, and political participation (Millennium Project Organization, 2024), which are built and perpetuated by culture, socializing agents (parents, family, peer groups), social attitude, and religion (Iqbal et al., 2022; Hardin & Greer, 2009). So, steps have been taken globally by many agencies and organizations, such as the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) of the United Nations, to bridge the wide gender imbalance disparity, to provide equality and development, and to implement it (Brixiova et al., 2020; Maheshwari & Nayak, 2020; Song & Kim, 2013). The SDGs aim to promote development in all dimensions, including, gender equality and empowers all girls and women globally (Kim, 2017). Although the UN has made a strong effort to bring development and equality, there is still the presence of a wide gender disparity, as reported in 2016 by the GGGI (Global Gender Gap Index) (World Economic Forum, 2016). Also, the global push and progress in achieving these target goals of gender equality have been uneven, especially in developing countries (Queisser, 2016). Women are still more vulnerable to violence, discrimination, and underrepresentation in the political, economic, and business spheres (Milazzo & Goldstein, 2019). Following this, the CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) was organized with a target agenda on culture

and tradition, to reduce any gender-based discrimination. This convention states the importance of gender equality, as it will help to achieve a just, developed, peaceful society, restore human rights, and increase human potential, productivity, and growth (UN, 2024). This study, therefore, is important as it attempts to analyze the roles and status of *Maibi* and *Maechi* within the religious context of the *Meiteis* and Thais. This study can be a valuable tool for studying gender studies, gender roles, gender inequality, culture, religion, power, leadership, and decision-making.

Objectives and method

This article aims to discuss:

1. The role and status of *Maechi* in Buddhism (Thailand)
2. The role and status of *Maibi* in Sanamahism (Manipur, India)
3. The similarities and differences of *Maechi* and *Maibi*, to find out the gender roles, gender relations, and status in the religious aspects of different cultures/societies.

The article used a rapid reviewing method. It was developed by searching and reviewing the historical account and literature available both online and in printed form that contains the concepts, themes, and objectives related to the study. The researchers obtained additional information from people by using the participant observation method during temple activities. One of the researchers was a participant observer in a monastery (temple) in Pathumthani Province in Thailand. She stayed there for about three months, and during that time, she had close interaction with *Maechis*, monks, and others living there. The researcher observed the daily activities of monks, nuns, and others from morning to night in the monastery (temple). The researchers analyzed the findings and presented them descriptively in several parts: introduction; role and status of *Maechi* in Buddhism (Thailand); role and status of *Maibi* in Sanamahism (Manipur, India); discussion of the similarities and differences between the roles and statuses of *Maechi* and *Maibi*, and conclusion.

Role and Status of Maechi in Buddhism (Thailand)

Buddhism is the official religion of Thailand, and monks are responsible for preserving and perpetuating Buddha's teachings and philosophy. In Thailand, the Buddhist temple symbolizes village life, and monks are the most respected residents. Monks lead all Buddhist festivals and rituals in the temple, while neighboring community members participate by offering voluntary gifts in cash and in kind. It is customary for every Thai man who is 20 years old and above to be ordained for a certain period to practice good habits, abstain from any evil deeds, and ultimately achieve liberation from suffering. Temples ordain young children under 20 years as novices. Monks and novices must live in a monastery away from family. Precepts are the code of monastic rules, conduct, and behavior of Thai Buddhism. Monks live a celibate life and follow 227 precepts (monastic rules), while for novices, it is only 11 precepts. It is customary for monks and novices to go for morning alms (Muangkaew et al., 2021). The Buddhist temple/monastery is the major place to learn and practice Buddha's sermons and teachings. However, the role and status of women are not officially sanctioned in Buddhism. When a man becomes a monk, he leaves behind all worldly pleasure, to meditate on the path of enlightenment. Observers commonly see that because the Thai sangha maintains close relationships with both nuns and laypeople, nuns and laypeople perform reciprocal duties by providing and preparing food for breakfast, lunch, and other needs. Monks teach them the spiritual path, sermons, meditation, and other activities for those in the monastery. Meditation in Buddhism helps to train moral discipline by developing powerful mindfulness, avoiding negative actions of body, speech, and mind, guarding against incorrect attitudes, reducing egotism and narcissism, and increasing compassionate behavior. So, merit-making activities in Buddhism, including meditation, are to get enlightenment, relief from suffering, achieve higher rebirth in the next life, and be liberated from suffering and worldly problems. Looking at women's role and status, even though Thai women play a significant role in society and family, women do not enjoy equality of status in the decision-making of religious structure and organization. Women occupy a subordinate status in Buddhism compared to men exemplified by the

exclusion of women from the sangha (community of monks), even though many Thai men become monks or at least novices for some portion of their lives. This can be seen in the context of women nuns locally called "*Maechi*", who shave their heads, and eyebrows, wear white uniforms, usually live in the Buddhist monastery, dormitories for nuns, follow eight precepts, and are the only ones recognized and accepted within the religious organization of temple/monastery in Thailand (Srichampa, 2000). Please see Figure 1.

Even though *Maechis* are female Buddhist monastics in Thailand, there is no official recognition either by the laws of Buddhism or the country. *Maechis* live an ascetic life, live in the monastery, and practice *Dharma* (Buddhist teachings), the religious and moral ethics for spiritual attainment and liberation from suffering. Monks can ordain them. Historians trace the existence of *Maechis* (Buddhist nuns) back to the remote past of Buddhism in Thailand, probably more than 400 years ago (Seeger, 2022). However, the role and status of *Maechi* in Buddhism are ambivalent. Like a monk, she leaves family life and enters into religious celibacy by taking a vow of abstinence. However, the Thai Sangha Council does not legally include her in its decision making. The organization of the Buddhist religion council in Thailand does not recognize women as the decision-makers of the Buddhist religion status hierarchy. Rather, their role is confined to a subservient status, who generally perform the duty in the monastery as caretaker, server, helper, and supervisor of daily affairs in the monastery (Muangkaew et al., 2021). So, the role of *Maechi* is quite different from monks as *Maechis* are not responsible for begging alms in the morning, they act as staff, helpers, and assistants for temple chores and activities at all monasteries (temples) in the country. From a survey in 2009, there were 13,285 nuns nationwide (Tantivanichanon, 2017).

Gender demarcation in the religious affairs of Buddhism in Thailand can further be seen in the case of ordination since women's ordination is prohibited in Thai Buddhism. Ordination is the major merit-making activity of men in Buddhism. So, a woman who gives birth to a son is held with honor and high esteem as her son can bring merit to the family through ordination. Due to this, in the Thai Buddhist family and society, having a son is more valued than a daughter in terms of prestige and power. A son could repay his debt to his

parents by becoming a monk, while a daughter could repay by serving her parents as long as they are alive.

Thus, the religious beliefs of Buddhism have played a dominant role in subordinating women's status.



Figure 1 Maechi

Source: Authors

In Thai Buddhism, it is commonly observed that a man, even if married, can leave his wife and enter the monastery to become a monk without obtaining her permission. After he leaves monkhood, he can remarry another woman if he is unhappy with his wife. But this is quite contrary in the case of a wife. She can become a nun only with her husband's approval and could remarry after legally divorcing her husband. So, Buddhism and cultural elements reinforce the patriarchal system by granting men the power to dominate women, thereby subordinating women's roles and status and rationalizing the perception of men as the superior gender and women as the subordinate gender (Tantiwiramond & Pandey, 1987).

In recent decades, there have been many campaigns that try to attempt women's ordination (*Bhikkhuni sangha*) alongside and on equal terms with

men's. Since not all women accept the suppression of their liberty and power, they have actively resisted, and these campaigns have met with stiff opposition (Woodhead et al., 2003). The Ecclesiastical Council threatens any monk who attempts to ordain a woman as a *bhikkhuni* with strict punishment (Srichampa, 2000). These indicate the rough path for a *bhikkhuni*. For example, in 1920, a Thai politician who supported the ordination of women in Buddhism allowed his two daughters, Sara and Chongdi, to be ordained as *bhikkhuni*. However, Sara was kidnapped while walking around for the morning alms, then imprisoned and forced to take out the saffron dress. Additionally, unlike the monk who practices only 227 precepts, *bhikkhunis* must work harder to practice 311 precepts (Srichampa, 2000). So, to become a *bhikkhuni* is not an easy task. Since the monastic order does not officially recognize

fully ordained nuns, or *bhikkhunis*, many Thai women who wish to pursue a renunciant life become nuns or *Maechis*. They have practiced this form of Buddhist renunciation for more than 400 years (Seeger, 2022). Recently, observers have noted women campaigning for equal entry into the monastic order alongside men. Since Thai law prohibits the ordination of women, some women have sought and received ordination in neighboring Buddhist countries. Voramai Kabilsingh became Thailand's first *bhikkhuni* when she was ordained in a monastery in Taipei in 1971. In 2001, Chatsuman, her daughter, was ordained as a *bhikkhuni* in Sri Lanka (Srichampa, 2000).

Role and Status of Maibi in Sanamahism (Manipur, India)

To understand the role and status of *Maibi* in the Sanamahism religion of Manipur, it is essential to introduce the concept used in the article.

Manipur

Manipur state lies on India's northeastern border, sharing boundaries with Myanmar to the east and south, Assam to the west, and Nagaland to the north. It occupies a total area of 22,327 square kilometers. It is mostly hilly, except the 1120 square kilometers of Imphal valley, the capital city of Manipur, which forms one-tenth of the total area. The valley area is inhabited mainly by the *Meiteis*, while the various tribal populations occupy the surrounding hills. The population of Manipur is composed of many ethnic groups who speak many dialects, and follow different religions. Manipur was an independent princely kingdom till 1891, when the British occupied it and ruled the kingdom. Later, Manipur was forced to merge with the Indian Union by the British. It obtained statehood and became a full-fledged state of India on January 21, 1972 (Laiphrakpam, 1997; Lairenmayum, 1960).

Sanamahism

To understand the role and status of *Maibi*, it is essential to briefly introduce the traditional religion of *Meitei* before the arrival of Hinduism in Manipur. *Sanamahism* is a pre-Hindu religion of the *Meiteis* of Manipur. Pundits (experts) and *Maibas* (priests) embodied the philosophy of the ancient religion,

Sanamahism, in a vast body of literature written in the archaic *Meitei* language. The *Meiteis* were animists, who worshipped ancestors (*apokpa*) and deities associated with nature, such as the sun, the moon, etc. This ancient religion of *Meiteis* incorporates knowledge about the creation of the earth, beings, and life after death. Even though the majority of the *Meiteis* today are Hindus who have been practicing it for about 300 years now, they still believe and worship the traditional deities along with the Hindu Gods. In other words, they still worship ancestors and local deities (Kshetrimayum, 2009). The *Meiteis* were inducted into the fold of Hinduism in the 18th century during the reign of the monarch *Garib Niwaj* or *Pamheiba* (1709-1748). In 1724, the king was the pioneer to adopt the Hindu caste system and called himself a *Kshatriya*. The Hindu caste system is stratified into four caste hierarchies based on their occupation. They are those who work as priests (*Brahmans*), kings and warriors (*Kshatriyas*), traders, merchants, farmers (*Vaishyas*), and manual workers or laborers (*Shudras*). During the reign of *Gaib Niwaj*, large sections of the *Meitei* population were proselytized into Hinduism following an oath-taking event in 1724. Those who refused to convert to Hinduism were ostracized (Sairem, 1991). He made Hinduism the official religion of the kingdom. He took up a series of measures to wipe out the traditional religion of the *Meiteis*, such as the destruction of all temples of "Umang-Lais" (forest gods). All ancient *Meitei* literature, consisting of more than 120 precious books, was written in Archaic *Meitei* scripts on Manipur's culture, religion, history, politics, and geography were burnt to ashes in 1727 (Naorem, 1988).

Hindu missionaries and rulers forcibly converted the majority of the *Meiteis* to Hinduism. The history of Manipur, from the reign of King *Garib Niwaj* (1709-1748) to that of King *Churachand* (1891-1941) was the period of Hinduisation and took several oppressive measures (Yumjao, 1966). At that time, *Brahma Samaj*, the highest authority on religious affairs of the Hindus, used to ostracise a family or declare a whole village as unclean. These ostracized people could be readmitted to Hinduism only if they paid hefty money (Kabui, 1979). Also, some sections of the *Meitei* population who refused to be proselytized and remained contented with the traditional religion were considered outcastes by the Hindu *Meiteis*. . Another section of these outcastes

comprised those who had been punished by the king for violation of the Hindu religious practices, especially in the observance of customs and marriage regulations. The former category of outcastes was named *Loi*, and the other as *Yaithibi*. Today, both categories comprise the scheduled caste of Manipur. However, even after proselytization, the *Meiteis* maintained the continuity of their ancient religious customs and rituals, and this forms the core of the *Meitei* religion today (Konsam, 1988). In other words, the Hindu religion failed to destroy or sweep away the entire *Meitei* religion and culture altogether (McCulloch, 1859) but co-exists with Hinduism to date (Parratt & Parratt, 2002). The present-day religious practices represent a fusion of the ancient and the modern. It incorporates both the Hindu and the *Sanamahi* religious practices of the *Meiteis* (an ethnic group in Manipur) within their festivals.

Maibi

The *Maiba* (male religious performer) and *Maibi* (female religious performer) play an important part in the traditional religious rituals, rites, and ceremonies of the *Meiteis* in Manipur. Without their presence, the ceremony is incomplete. However, scholars consider the role of the *Maibi* more important than the *Maiba* because *Maibis* serve as mediums of communication between ordinary people and God, delivering oracles when possessed by the spirit (God) (Parratt & Parratt, 2002), whereas *Maibas* perform their functions based on skills and training (Akoijam, 1987). Due to this supernatural power, the *Maibi* occupies an important status and plays a unique role in the traditional *Sanamahi* religion's ritual and practice, especially in the *Lai-haraoba* (Merrymaking of God) ceremony, which is associated with the cultural life of the *Meiteis* of Manipur. Priests perform the ritual to entertain and bring pleasure to the ancient deities known as *lais* (gods). The performance is a long process that takes about 5 days or

more. At least three or more *Maibis* were present to perform the ritual of *Lai-haraoba* to bring happiness to the deity and safeguard the community from any misfortune and tragedies (Salam, 2018). *Maibis* were and even now are an essential feature of many important religious ceremonies, rites, and rituals of the *Meitei* religion in Manipur. The common people respect and address them as *ima* (mother) (Chaki-Sircar, 1984). So, the main difference between *Maibas* and *Maibis* is that the former performs their roles through training while the latter perform as if a deity or spirit possesses them. When a spirit possessed a *Maibi*, she behaved abnormally, trembled, and spoke incoherently for a few minutes until the spirit left her (McCulloch, 1859). Usually, the *Maibi*, under the possession of a spirit, delivers the oracle to the local people, which is locally called *laipao* (news from God). The local people listen attentively to all predictions made by the *Maibi*. The prediction of *Maibi* can be on matters of an individual or a locality, which symbolizes a warning to take precautions. Because of this abnormal behavior of the *Maibi*, parents attempt hard to suppress the symptoms by hiring a *Maiba* (male religious performer/priest) to perform rituals to get rid of the spirit or deity. However, the symptom may persist again if the spirit repossessed the *Maibi*. In such cases, the *Maibi* chooses a *guru* or teacher of her own to enter the *loishang* (house) of *Maibis* to become a full-fledged professional as a *Maibi* (Kshetrimayum, 2009). *Maibis* are not nuns. They live with their families and have a married life. They are not social deviants but are respected and accepted in the society. Even the husband of a *Maibi* does not restrict his wife's occupation, roles, and movement. The *Maibi* wears a white *phanek* (sarong) wrapped around her waist down to the foot, a long-sleeved white blouse, and a white cotton *inaphi* (shawl), that she uses to cover the upper part of her body (Parratt & Parratt, 2002; Panchani, 1987). Please see Figure 2.



Figure 2 Maibi

Source: Authors

Before practicing the *Maibi* profession, she gets vigorous training from her teacher, *Ima Guru*, in the art of chanting, singing, performing different rites, the process of ringing the brass bell, etc. During this training period, the teacher usually takes her to several locations to attend the *Lai-haraoba* (Merry making of God) ceremonies. (Panchani, 1987). The *Maibi* also performs *Saroi Khangba*, a ritual intended to feed evil spirits and dispel negative forces and bad omens, as well as *Thang Jagoi* (sword dance), a protective ritual conducted at night during the final stage of *Lai-Haraoba*. This ritual symbolizes the act of driving evil spirits away from the courtyard and the village. The role of *Maibi* is to perform different rites and fortune predictions for the people living in the community. Unlike the Brahmin priest of Hinduism, people regard *maibis* as possessing supernatural powers and knowledge of the animistic religion of the *Meiteis*; their position and role are achieved, not ascribed. Instead, community members believe that God selects *Maibis* to maintain a relationship with the people and protect them from evil eyes, misfortune, and tragedy (Brown, 2001). They are respected in the *Meitei* society. Even the king bows to them (Akoijam, 1987).

Despite all the above examples of *Meitei* women's roles and positions in religion, society denied them property rights—an important indicator of women's status. In addition, there were many social taboos and cultural restrictions based on gender, similar to other patriarchal societies. Gender distinctions among the *Meiteis* become apparent when one observes the daily chores or division of housework in the *Meitei* household. A *Meitei* woman usually performs the tasks of cooking, cleaning, and other household chores. Also, most patriarchal societies have a son's preference over a daughter's because a son perpetuates the lineage of his father. The *Meiteis*, being a patrilineal, patriarchal, and patrilocal society, prefer a male child. A son is expected to live with his aged parents, unlike the daughter, who moves to her husband's house after marriage. All this imparts importance to the son. The direct consequence of this son's preference ideology is that barren and sonless women are often threatened with divorce in the traditional *Meitei* society. And a divorced woman has less social esteem in the *Meitei* society. Thus, in the traditional *Meitei* society, a woman's position in her husband's family becomes secure after becoming the mother of a son (Laiphrakpam, 1997).

Table 1 Similarities and differences between *Maechi* and *maibi*

	<i>Maechi</i>	<i>maibi</i>
Appearance and dress	Shaves off hair from head and eyebrow, wears a sarong, blouse, and a shawl, clothes in white color.	Wears a white sarong(<i>phanek</i>), long-sleeved white blouse, and white cotton shawl(<i>inaphi</i>) that is used to cover the upper body.
Family life	They are nuns, leave family life, live in a monastery, and enter into religious celibacy by taking a vow of abstinence.	They are not nuns, are married, and live with their families.
Official status	There is an absence of official recognition both by the laws of Buddhism and the country. So, their roles and status are ambiguous and not uniform in Thai Buddhism.	She plays the role of a woman priestess or shaman as she possesses spiritual power. Have an important role and status in the performance of <i>the Lai-haraoba</i> (merry-making) ceremony of the <i>Meitei</i> religion.
Gender relations	Gender separation is distinct in religious affairs. The ordination of women is prohibited in Thai Buddhism. The status and role of <i>Maechi</i> are not equal to Buddhist monks.	The <i>Maiba</i> follows the literate tradition, unlike the <i>Maibi</i> , who follows the oral tradition. Both genders perform together in the singing, dancing, and various rituals of the traditional religious ceremonies. However, the role of <i>Maibi</i> is more important than <i>Maiba</i> , as <i>Maibi</i> has oracle delivery power when a spirit possesses her. She acts as the medium of communication between the community, and God.
Roles	They act as staff, helpers, and assistants for daily temple chores and activities. They usually meditate, read Buddhist texts, and listen to sermons in the evening.	They are the core ritual functionaries and are present strikingly in traditional religious rituals and ceremonies. Usually, the <i>Maibi-leader</i> and her associates participate from the beginning to the end. They also indulge in making oracular predictions and prophecies for the residents and warn them about the impending danger when they are in a hypnotic state under the control of a spirit. Such oracular powers have tremendous effects and influence on the audience and society.

Discussion and conclusion

Everywhere, there is an increasing slogan of the right to equality of genders, but practically, women are the discriminated gender in many parts of the world. This can be read and found in the daily media. This is due to the presence of gender bias in the social construction of gender, which defines the role and status of women. Gender roles, usually based on culture, religion, ethical norms, and socializing agents such as family, parents, peer groups, etc., define how a boy, girl, man, and woman, man should act, speak, dress, and behave. One can observe this gender bias in the division of household work within families. As a result,

patriarchal structures persist, marginalizing women in decision-making, assigning them subordinate status, restricting their social and economic participation, and subjecting them to domination. This is confirmed in the socially constructed role and status of *Maechi* and *Maibi*, indicating contrasting images in the two religions. For instance, as *Maechis* are prohibited legally from ordination, their socio-religious roles, status, and identity are ambiguous and not uniform in Thai Buddhism. They are restricted in the decision-making process and power hierarchy of the Thai Sangha organization council, which indicates the subordinate status of women in Buddhism compared to men.

Historically, most women were excluded from participating in religious rituals or occupying leadership positions. This is quite contrary to the case of *Maibis* in the religion of Manipur. They are an integral part of the mainstream *Meitei* culture and religion. *Maibis'* presence and participation are essential in the traditional rituals and ceremonies because the religious ceremony is incomplete without them. So, the role of the *Maibi* in the *Lai-haraoba* ceremony presents two contrasting role models of women in society. One is the image of the ideal woman as a daughter, wife, and mother making arrangements and participating in the religious rituals, and on the other is the bold image of a woman as *Maibi* or female religious performer priestess or shaman, a social position and role which gives her immense power and autonomy beyond the domestic domain. Also, the *Maibi's* liberated behavior causes no threat to the position of *Maiba's* in the patrilineal system of the *Meiteis*. Despite the *Maibi's* superordinate position in the religious activities of *Meitei* of Manipur, in terms of gender relations, *Meitei* women do not get gender equality in terms of the rights to property inheritance and household division of labor. A son is preferred to a daughter in the *Meiteis'* marriage and family based on religious ideology because a son is usually the performer of socio-religious rituals and activities of the *Meitei* society. From the above analysis, it can be concluded that gender roles and status are constructed through religion, culture, lifestyle, and socialization.

References

- Akoijam, M.S. (1987). *A Mathematical study of population dynamics with particular reference to Manipur* (Doctoral dissertation), India: Manipur University.
- Ali, T. S., Krantz, G., Gul, R., Asad, N., Johansson, E., & Mogren, I. (2011). Gender roles and their influence on life prospects for women in urban Karachi, Pakistan: a qualitative study. *Global Health Action*, 4(1), 7448.
- Brixiova, Z., Kangoye, T., & Tregenna, F. (2020). Enterprising women in Southern Africa: When does land ownership matter? *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 41(1), 37-51.
- Brown, R. (2011). *Statistical account of Manipur*. New Delhi, India: Mittal Publications.
- Chaki-Sircar, M. (1984). *Feminism in a traditional society: women in the Manipur Valley*. New Delhi, India: Vikas Publishing House.
- Farre, L. (2013). The role of men in the economic and social development of women: Implications for gender equality. *The World Bank Research Observer*, 28(1), 22-51.
- Gangmumei, K. (1979). Social and religious reform movements in Manipur. In Sen, S.P.(Ed.) *Social and religious movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries*: 411-424. Kolkata, India: Institute of Historical Studies.
- Grunow, D., Begall, K., & Buchler, S. (2018). Gender ideologies in Europe: A multidimensional framework. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 80(1), 42-60.
- Hardin, M., & Greer, J. D. (2009). The influence of gender-role socialization, media use, and sports participation on perceptions of gender-appropriate sports. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 32(2), 207-226.
- Hausmann, R., Tyson, L. D., & Zahidi, S. (2008). *The global gender gap*. World Economic Forum, Geneva. Retrieved from https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GenderGap_Report_2008.pdf
- Hopflinger, A. K., Lavanchy, A., & Dahinden, J. (2012). Introduction: Linking Gender and Religion. *Women's Studies*, 41(6), 615-638.
- Iqbal, A., Hassan, S., Mahmood, H., & Tanveer, M. (2022). Gender equality, education, economic growth and religious tensions nexus in developing countries: A spatial analysis approach. *Heliyon*, 8(11), e11394.
- Kim, E M. (2017). Gender and the Sustainable Development Goals. *Global Social Policy*, 17(2), 239-244.
- Klingorova, K., & Havlíček, T. (2015). Religion and gender inequality: The status of women in the societies of world religions. *Moravian Geographical Reports*, 23(2), 2-11.
- Konsam, M. (1988). The Evolution of the Meitei State: A confederacy through the last two millennia. In Naorem, S. (Ed.). *Manipur: Past and Present*, 1, 145-159.

- Kshetrimayum, O. (2009). Women and Shamanism in Manipur and Korea: A comparative study. *Indian Anthropologist*, 39(1/2), 17-34.
- Laiphrakpam, M. (1997). *Gender-based authority structure and power relations in the Meitei household – A search for factors affecting the status of women* (Doctoral dissertation). India: Panjab University.
- Lairenmayum, I.S. (1960). *The history of Manipur*. Imphal, India: Manipur Students' Store, Retrieved from <http://www.new.dli.ernet.in/handle/2015/465462>
- Maheshwari, G., & Nayak, R. (2022). Women leadership in Vietnamese higher education institutions: An exploratory study on barriers and enablers for career enhancement. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 50(5), 758-775.
- McCulloch, W. (1859). *Account of the valley of Munnipore and the Hill Tribes: With a comparative vocabulary of the Munnipore and other languages*. No. 27. Kolkata, India: Bengal Printing Company.
- Milazzo, A., & Goldstein, M. (2019). Governance and women's economic and political participation: Power inequalities, formal constraints and norms. *The World Bank Research Observer*, 34(1), 34-64.
- Millennium Project Organization. (2024). *The Millennium Project: 15 Global Challenges*. Retrieved from <https://www.millennium-project.org/projects/challenges/>
- Muangkaew, P., Pornpawee, C., Pimradar, T., Worraphol, W., Wilaiwan, B., & Norenia, D. (2021). Lived experience of elderly Buddhist nuns living alone in Northern Thailand. *Suranaree Journal of Science and Technology*, 28(1), 1-11.
- Panchani, C. S. (1987). *Manipur, religion, culture, and society*. New Delhi, India: Konark Publishers.
- Parratt, S., Arambam, N., & Parratt, J. (2002). *Female-spirit-possession rituals among the Meiteis of Manipur*. Imphal, India: Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre.
- Queisser, M. (2016). Gender equality and the sustainable development goals. In Patrick, L. (Ed.), *Debate the Issues: New Approaches to Economic Challenges*, 87-90. Paris, France: OECD Publishing. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264264687-16-en>.
- Sairem, N. (1991). The revivalist movement of Sanamahism. In Naorem, S. (Ed.) *Manipur Past and Present*, 2, 68-83. New Delhi, India: Mittal Publications.
- Salam, S. D. (2018). The role of the *amaibi* in the Lai Haraoba of Manipur. *International Journal of Research Granthaalayah*, 6(6), 38-44.
- Seeger, M. (2022). The Fragmentary History of Female Monasticism in Thailand: Community Formation and Development of Monastic Rules by Thai Mae Chis. *Religions*, 13(11), 1042.
- Song, J., & Kim, E. M. (2013). A critical review of gender in South Korea's official development assistance. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 19(3), 72-96.
- Srichampa, S. (2020). Thai Buddhism, women, and social change. *Journal of Language and Culture*, 39(2), 1-22.
- Stump, R. W. (2008). *The Geography of Religion: Faith, Place, and Space*. Maryland, USA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Tantivanichanon, J. (2017). Nuns: Primary Survey of Research in Thailand. *Language, Religion, and Culture Journal*, 2, 141-163.
- United Nations. (2024). *Peace, dignity, and equality on a healthy planet*. United Nations. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/gender-equality>
- Wahengbam, Y. S. (1966). *An Early History of Manipur*. Imphal, India: Manipur University Library.
- Wharton, A. S. (2009). *The Sociology of Gender: An introduction to theory and research*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing.
- Woodhead, L., Partridge, C., & Kawanami, H. (2003). *Religions in the modern world: Traditions and transformations*. London, UK: Routledge.
- World Economic Forum. (2022). *The Global Gender Gap Report*. Retrieved from https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2022.pdf
- World Economic Forum. (2016). *The Global Gender Gap Report: Insight Report*. Retrieved from

<https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-global-gender-gap-report-2016/>