

CHOTHE THAOWON SAAMTHARNU ALIAS NUNGTHIL CHAIBI: THE LADY WITH BEAUTIFUL HAIR

CHEITHOU CHARLES YUHLUNG¹

¹Department of Anthropology, Gauhati University, Guwahati, Assam, INDIA.

ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on one of the most controversial identity issues prevailed in Manipur. As a paradigm it attempts to highlight the ethnic identity of Sorha alias Thaowon Saamtharnu the biological mother of King Pamheiba (Garib Niwaz) of Manipur that was conceal for more than three centuries which is proven only by the Chothe folklore. It explains how because of her controversial marriage life, politico-religion and primogeniture issues in the king's court her true identity was concealed. It also highlights, how her story served as a living example for such anonymity and suppressive attitudes of the valley people in the process of cross-cultural marriage system, especially towards the tribal women of Manipur. The paper analyses both the oral narrations as well as few literatures to substantiate the point of view. Thus, highlighting the prevailing superior and inferior suppressive attitude and culture in Manipur based on politico-religious ground that was developed and rooted from early 18th century with the arrival of Vaishnavism/Hinduism in Manipur, and that continues to be so by some.

KEYWORDS: Chothe, Thaowon Saamtharnu, Nungthil Chaibi, Pamheiba, Meitei.

INTRODUCTION

The Chothe is an old indigenous tribe of Manipur, located in the North Eastern region of India. The tribe has been in the anthropological map for their distinctive prescriptive marriage system. (Dasgupta, 1985) The North-East India comprises eight states inhabited by more than 220 communities. It is predominantly inhabited by tribes. The state Manipur has 32 scheduled tribes, besides Meitei the general community and other minor categories. The Chothe inhabits in the districts of Bishnupur and Chandel. In the past, they claimed to have huge population but now they share only 3585 (1706/M-1879/F) souls with a literacy rate of 69.79 % (Census of India 2011).

Since early days, various historical accounts of Manipur states that the Chothe had maintain close matrimonial, political and economic relationships between various hills tribes and valley people, especially the Meitei since their contact.¹ However, the close relationships with Meitei got completely estranged by 18th century on the ground of political and religious upheavals of Hinduism in the state. Ever since then, the inter-marriage between various ethnic communities between hills and valley people became alienated because of religious consciousness unlike in the past. It is said that the matrimonial relationship in the past between two or more tribal groups was established formally on mutual

understanding after acknowledging ones cultural identity. Any cultural group hill or valley not respecting the cultural norms of other is considered uncivilised and they would keep distance from future political, economic and matrimonial connections. Thus, prohibiting especially free inter-marriage or exogamy with the specific ethnic group in order to maintain their status-quo.

For example, if a boy of a different clan or cultural group did not respect the status-quo of a girl's family or her society and forcefully marries her by breach, and moreover, if the boy did not reconcile at the earliest the most probable outcome would be a war or a heavy penalty imposed upon the boy's family. In such cases, often friends become foe, relatives or neighbouring village/community becomes estranged as enemy. The classic tragic love stories of *Khamba-Thoibi* and *Pidonnu* of Manipur are good examples. In certain extreme cases, when enmity cannot be settled between the two parties, either the boy or the girl, or both may even be expelled or ex-communicated from the family or village depending upon the decision taken by the village council based on their customary marriage rules.

In olden days, any extreme behaviour like criminal act, breaches of marriage were seriously taken and expulsion becomes compulsion in order to preserve their cultural status-quo. However, these days with the influence

of education, westernisation, globalisation and modernisation many hill tribesman and valley people of Manipur have re-established their cross-cultural matrimonial ties, some even compromises their religious differences for the sake of love. For example, Meitei men marrying tribal Tangkhul or Rongmei Christian girls, while tribesmen marrying Meitei-Hindu girls are observed. Such relationship re-strengthens their socio-cultural and political ties after the estrangement.

Therefore, the story of 'Thaowon Saamtharnu' the lady with beautiful hair reflects the transitional stage in the ethno-history of Manipur. She was believed to have been forcefully married by a Meitei king, despite her traditional engagement to a Chothe boy. Soon after the king forcefully married her, her true ethnic identity was immediately concealed by giving her a new name on account of her inferior social and cultural status by the assimilated Meitei-Hindu group.

Many similar tragic love stories, untold controversies and concealing the identity of a girl exist not only among the Chothe, but also found among different communities of Manipur. Since, medieval times such suppressive ethnic attitudes of inferior and superior on the ground of socio-cultural and politico-religion have caused many controversies and enmity among the various ethnic inhabitants of Manipur, often confusing people in establishing their ethnic origin.

This paper attempts to analyse the ethnic identity based on the folklore 'Thaowon Saamtharnu' the lady with the beautiful hair, also popularly known by the Meitei as 'Nungthil Chaibi' the biological mother of Pamheiba (Garib Niwaz) the great medieval king of Manipur. The focus objective being, why Thaowon and her son Pamheiba's true genealogical identities had been concealed for more than three centuries by the Meitei scribes.

THE CHOTHE FOLKTALE (THAOWON SAAMTHARU)

According to the some Chothe village elders like Makan Neilut, Parpa Roushi, Hiyang Thambaljao, Khiyang Leikhamchou, Mrs. Thao Tharaklei, Yuhlung Maipak, Marim Rimril, Yuhlung Standhope, Parpa Chandbabu (Vincent) and others claimed that the folklore (ballad) "*Thaowon Saamtharnu*" is a very popular historical tale of Chothe once upon a time. The ballad is a lamentation of wishes and regrets expressed by Chungthang her lover who longs for his love Thaowon after she was captured by king's men in latter 17th century.

Accordingly, the Chothe elders claimed that Thaowon's birth name was called 'Sorha'. But she was commonly known to them as "Thaowon Saamtharnu" meaning "The Thao girl with a beautiful hair", because she had an exceptionally long beautiful black hair. Her hair was so long, beautiful and black that even her brothers helped in drying her hair on the bamboo bar meant for drying clothes. That Thaowon not only had a long beautiful black hair, but she was also an attractive girl.

The Chothe elders claimed that the story of *Thaowon Saamtharnu* occur amongst a section of the Chothes who earlier settled around Imphal/ Kangla (probably at *Yangpalkung*) during 16-17th century when they had closed political relationships. (Yangpalkung, 1988) They further said that Sorha/ Thaowon was already engaged to a young handsome Chothe boy called Chungthang Yuhlung/ Yulung who was serving his three years traditional marriage labour service at her parent's house (Yuhlung 1986: 35).

Accordingly, Mr. Makan Neilut (Satrapa) narrates the folklore '*Thaowon Saamtharnu*', that Thaowon as usual went to wash and bath along with her friends in the nearby (Nambul) River of Imphal where some of her loose hairs fell into the river. Unfortunately, one day a fish from that river perhaps swallowed one of her long loose black hair, and the fish unable to digest the hair floats down the river drowning. However, some of the soldiers at Langthabal (an old princely palace of Manipur) who were washing themselves below in the same Nambul River saw the drowning fish and caught it for dinner.² But when the soldiers cut open the stomach of the fish they were astonished to find inside a single string of hair, which was extremely long and black that filled the entire brim of a brass/ copper bowl. The soldiers so amazed took the hair to their King Charairongpa (when he was a prince). The king after seeing such exquisite beautiful hair presumed that the girl must be exceptionally beautiful too. So, he immediately ordered his soldiers to search for the girl among the nearby settlers upstream. The soldiers could not find her in their initial search. So, Charairongpa re-ordered them for an extensive and intensive house to house search in the area. It is said even flowers were distributed to girls of nearby villages by parading them on the pretext of finding Thaowon (Nungthil Chaibi).

Makan Neilut said that during one occasion of the searched while Thaowon (Chaibi) was weaving cloth at her house a soldier happened to spot her and became suspicious, who therefore reported to the King

Charairongpa. Soon, the king along with his soldiers came to the Chothe village to capture her. But the advancement of the king with his soldiers to capture her was already learnt by her villagers, so she was immediately forced to leave the house, where she went hiding. Despite the intervention and request made by the Chothe village chief and the girl's parent to the prince/ king by explaining the condition that she had been engaged to their Chothe boy and to leave her, the king refused to accept their plea and rather insisted his soldiers to continue the hunt for her. After an intensive search the soldiers found from her hiding place and forcefully captured in her escape, where she was taken to the king's palace. The king seeing her attractiveness and beautiful hair is said to have fallen in love and pledge to marry her, where marriage was immediately solemnised.

The other version according to Thambaljao is that the king's soldier captured some pretty maidens from the nearby villages including Chothe and brought to the king's presence. When the king examined one by one, Thaowon despite her wretched and dull looking face accidentally dropped her fasten hair knot. Then, the king being suspicious ordered his women helpers to clean her up and brought to him again. Later, after noticing her beauty and sensuality the king fell in love with Thaowon and immediately solemnised the marriage.

Makan Neilut continued his folk narration that, subsequently Thaowon (Sorha or Chaibi) bore a son in the king's palace (Kangla). And on her child's naming ceremony, her father (the boy's maternal grandfather) visited the palace with a Chothe traditional shawl (*Awa-ampi*) and even gave the child a Chothe name 'Waireng' as part of their age-old custom and tradition.³ Neilut further said that, Thaowon called back her father to the palace soon after the ceremony, her father soon visited the palace and after meeting her daughter Thaowon (Sorha) he returned to the village with her child and both quietly fled among some relatives (*Lai Sangkong* country) on the western hills.⁴

Subsequently, few years later when the situation in the palace was informed to be calm and peaceful Thaowon's father (Khommu) brought his grandson (Waireng Pamheiba) and briefly introduced him to his biological mother (Thaowon or Chaibi).⁵ They said that Thaowon overwhelmed by emotion refused to let her son return to the village with his grandfather. Therefore, an arrangement was made in which Thaowon's father was asked to work (as gardener/ helper) in the palace on the

pretext of a guardian of the boy after a request was made to the king. However, within short period of time, the identity of the young boy was identified by some people of the palace. And so the boy and his maternal grandfather immediately went hiding again among the Koireng a cognate of Chothe tribe. Yet, because of the constant hunt for the boy, both escaped again amongst the Thangal Naga tribe living on the north-western side of Koireng.⁶

It is said that much later, his grandfather brought the young boy to the palace again as assured by the mother and the king. But several secret life attempts were made on him by the head queen who fortunately escaped the death threats always. The young boy seems to be on run always until his adopted father King Charairongpa died and succeeded him.

The Chothe people, in spite of having the knowledge about the secrecy and hideouts of the boy child and his grandfather they did not talk much about it, which is why, the true story remains concealed till dated. It is believed that those Chothe did not recount much of the later story because after the controversial marriage issue and the new political-religious (Hinduism) upheaval and subjugation going on in the Imphal valley the Chothe left the village and migrated towards Chandel district.

Moreover, the reason why the child and his grandfather fled to some neighbouring villages and why his mother Thaowon was ignored by the local historians, however, is explained vividly in some local literatures that it was because a loyal member of the king's court defiled the marriage, and also because of the primogeniture issue in the palace and the prophecy of death of King Charairongpa of Manipur in the hand of his son. Hence, to prove all these statements let us analyse them below.

THE MEITEI VERSION OF NUNGTHIL CHAIBI (THAOWON SAAMTHARU)

According to Sapam Chaothoi (M/68) of Imphal, who was the Conventor of '*Kangla Apunba Lup, Imphal*' a local organisation said that 'when the soldiers of King Charairongpa brought Nungthil Chaibi (Thaowon Saamtharnu or Sorha) to the palace after she was forcefully captured, Charairongpa fell in love with her beauty and immediately solemnised an informal marriage, and gave her a new name as "Nungthil Chaibi" meaning 'a modest lady of afternoon', in Meitei. Actually before Charairongpa married Nungthil Chaibi, he was engaged to Numit Leima the sister of his good friend Houbam Makok Selungba (the Finance Minister). When Selungba heard the news that

Charairongpa had married Thaowon or Chaibi secretly without informing him, he took it as a personal insult, an act of breach and also as disgraced to his royal family. So, he consulted the advocate of Vishnavist Goswami and befriended him in pursuing Charairongpa to marry Numit Leima on the account of the formal matrimonial contract made earlier with him or faced complete disgrace. Ultimately, Charairongpa submits to Haobam Makok Selungba and reluctantly married Numit Leima (Selungba's sister) officially and made her his first wife the Head Queen. While Thaowon/ Chaibi was forced to stay in the palace harem temporary, subsequently in the course of time she probably became the concubine of Goswami the spiritual leader of Vaishnavism (Hindu) on the direction of Selungba's treaty. However, Charairongpa being deeply in love with Chaibi re-married her and made her the second queen of the palace as *Apanbee* meaning 'the married lady' (see also Hodson 1908: 76).

LITERATURE ON NUNGTHIL CHAIBI AND HER SON KING WAIRENG PAMHEIBA

Few available literature of Manipur supports and provides hints to the Chothe oral history that *Thaowon Saamtharnu/ Sorha* or Nungthil Chaibi was one of the wives of King Charairongpa who belong to a Chothe tribe. She is considered as the biological mother of King Waireng Pamheiba (Garib Niwaz 1709-48). But the prevailing controversy is whether Pamheiba was the child/son of Chaibi and Charairongpa or was he born of a different father (Goswami).

According to T.C. Hodson (as described by the king's supporters to him) "The father of Pamheiba was, they say, the Raja Churai Romba himself; the name of his mother was Nongthil Chaibee, one of the Raja's wives, but not the head wife or Ranee" (1908: 78). In connection M.T. Laiba claimed that "Chaibi or Nungthil Chaibi a Marim ningol the daughter of Chothe Marim's chief was the former wife of King Charairongpa. She (Chaibi) had no son and daughter. But she (Chaibi) had one secret son (i.e. Pamheiba)" (1992: 61). Laiba further described that "Charairongpa was treacherously murdered by Pamheiba (a secret son of Bishnu Goswami and Chaibi)" (ibid: 60-61). This proposition of Laiba is supported by McCulloch statement that King Charairongpa (son of King Paikhompma) was murdered in 1714, "Pamheiba shot his adopted father, accidentally while hunting and succeeded him" (1857: 6).

According to *Cheitharol Kumpapa* manuscripts, Pamheiba was born in 1690, and his mother Nungthil Chaibi (Thaowon) died in 1696 (ibid: 239, Parratt 2005: 105). Chaibi or Thaowon died when Pamheiba was probably six years old and after her re-marriage to King Charairongpa. However, W.I. Singh also provides information that Nungthil Chaibi was the second wife of King Khagemba (1597-1652) and the most beloved of the four wives who has a son by the name Sana Waipihal, in which the other wives were jealous of her (1986: 398, 400). Singh's statement seems in consonance except the king's name who lived much before the issue.

While Gina Shangkhram writes that when the Chothe and Kharam tribes settled around Imphal and had disagreement and fought at *Khawramban Bazaar*, the Kharam "appealed to the Meitei king who they say was either the son born of the Chothe lady and the Meitei king or the Meitei king himself who took a Chothe lady as his wife" (2006:45). Here we find that all the scholars pointed out that Chaibi was undeniably a Chothe girl.

Gangmumei Kabui argued the remarks of Hodson, McCulloch and Laiba that Waireng Pamheiba was the adopted son of King Charairongpa. Kabui attempts to justify that 'Pamheiba ascended the throne of Manipur in August 1709 forty days after his father's death at the age of twenty. He was the eldest son of the five sons of the four wives of Charairongpa and the first queen, while Nungthil Chaibi of Sapam family, and that, the rumours and doubts well established about Pamheiba's parentage in the 18th century is ill founded and false' (2003: 239). Kabui's argument here seems to have certain logical flaws, which may be re-analysed below.

Hodson, in another case wrote that King Garib Niwaz/ Pamheiba was considered as a Naga boy since at one time the Manipuris used to marry 'Naga' girls from the great village of 'Marim' (1908:11). As stated above many ethnic hills tribal girls were married by the immigrants from time to time. The inference of Pamheiba as 'Naga boy' is seen because his grandfather took refused among the Thangal Naga and stayed for a while when he was hunted to be killed during the primogeniture issues, as explained herein.

Moreover, the other word "Marim" mentioned by Hodson and Laiba in citing Pamheiba or Garib Niwaz mother's ethnic identity need clarification too. Based on the Chothe folklore Thaowon or Chaibi definitely belong to great Chothe village under the chieftainship of Pu

Punem Marim, but to infer as the daughter of Marim chief seems incorrect. Neilut said according to the Chothe folklore Thaowon (Chaibi) belongs to Thao's clan (not Marim). He said Thaowon (Sorha or Chaibi) belongs to Chothe 'Thao' clan as her local nick name suggest; 'Thaowon Saamtharnu' means 'the Thao girl with the beautiful hair', and not as 'Marim-nu' (the Marim girl). This must have been confused by outsiders and mis-identified her parents with the then famous Chothe King Pu Punem Marim/ Mareem, since the Meitei are familiar with him".

NUNGTHIL CHAIBI AND PIDONNU

The book '*Chada Leihui*' that records the genealogy of the mother's line of the various early kings and queens of Manipur described that Nungthil Chaibi was known as "Pidonnu" the mother of Pamheiba or Garib Niwaz (Singh 1966). On the contrary, Roushi said that "the assumption and insertion of Pidonnu for Chaibi (Thaowon) is another big mistake made by early Manipuri scholars, who confused for another Chothe girl".

According to the Chothe elders like Parpa Roushi, Makan Neilut, Mrs. Thao Tharaklei, Hiyang Thambaljao, Yuhlung Maipak and Marim Rimril and others said that the folktales of *Thaowon Saamtharnu* and *Pidonnu* (*Pitonnu*) are completely two different tragic love stories of Chothe that occurred at different places and times. Maipak said that "the story of *Pidonnu* or *Pitonnu* occurred between Chothe and Moirang (the old name is Yangoi/ Wangoo) before 15th century when the Chothe settled around *Nungsuk* near Henglep Churachandpur Block interior of Leimatak river basin in the remote south-western region, much earlier to Chaibi's incident".

According to Mrs. Tharaklei (98/F), "The story of *Pitonnu/ Pidonnu* is that she was the daughter of a Chothe chief, who was deadly against the love relationship with the Prince of Yangoi/ Moirang, where the Chothe chief mistakenly killed her own daughter while seeking revenge of the Yangoi Prince". The Meitei also have a different version about this tragic love story of *Pidonnu*. The *Manipur Drama Artist Association (Manipur Sahitya Academy)* even staged this great tragic epic *Pidonnu* from time to time. Shri Hoibam Tomba Singh (1964) wrote this drama *Pidonnu* based only on folklore, and without using any scientific research method. (Singh, 1964)

But the tragic love story of *Thaowon/ Chaibi* according to the Chothe elders occurred when a section of Chothe settled around Imphal or Kangla before they

further moved down southeast to the present Chandel region (Shangkham 2006). On the basis of various primary and secondary sources mentioned herein, the story of *Thaowon/ Chaibi* occurred in late 17th century when Charairongpa was a prince and lived at Langthabal, while his father King Paikhompa (1666-1697) was maintaining the close matrimonial and political relationships with the Chothe like his predecessors did by frequently visited the Chothe villages. (Parratt, 2005)

The folktale *Thaowon Saamtharnu* is also seen interpreted differently by the Meitei as "Haoran Leisha Saphabi" meaning 'Hunting a tribal girl like an animal'. This story is even enacted as a very popular drama (play) and even made a movie of it. The movie portrayed how a valley/ Meitei prince after sighting a beautiful tribal (*Hao*) girl (*Leishabi*) in an expedition to the hills areas pursuit his soldiers to find that girl and bring her to him. The soldiers hunt and captured her in the hills while escaping logically like an animal (*Sa-phabi*) and brought her to the palace, whereby, the prince marries against her wish and will by appeasing the tribal chief and her parents.

This story portrayed the kind of matrimonial relationship occurred between various hills tribal (*Hao*) like Chothe, Tangkhul, Anal, Koireng, Kharam, Rongmei and with the valley (Meitei) people. It depicts how the kings and princes of Manipur captured beautiful tribal girls to be their wives and concubines. McCulloch mentions that the latter Meitei kings had three to seven, and even up to forty wives put in their harem. (McCulloch, 1857) This Meitei folktale *Haoran Leisha Saphabi* closely resembles the Chothe folktale of *Thaowon Saamtharnu*, since the story lines runs parallel as to how she was captured by the king's men and was immediately married off.

From the above explanation, it suggest that *Thaowon Saamtharnu* and *Pidonnu/ Pitonnu* are two different tragic love stories of Chothe and Meitei that occurred at different period, time and places. The confusion probably arise because both are Chothe girls of ancient days and no immediate record or scientific study was made at that time, and probably due to the rigid period in which people did not provide all the details, subsequently intertwined by various latter oral narrators to be the same. However, the Chothe folktale *Thaowon Saamtharnu* has a parallel story line with the Meitei folktale *Haoran Leisha Saphabi*.

WAIRENG PAMHEIBA (GARIB NIWAZ)

It has been pointed out that Thaowon Saamtharnu or Nungthil Chaibi had a son Waireng Pamheiba (Garib Niwaz) who became one of the greatest kings of Manipur in the medieval period. However, the genuine identity of his biological father is still shrouded in mystery and the argument still continues among several local scholars. The story about King Pamheiba had been mentioned by many British Political Agents, besides numerous local scholars on different accounts of his life. Mystery and controversies surrounds him from birth till death like *Chothe Thangwai Pakhangpa* (Nongda Leiren Pakhangba).⁷ Parratt wrote that according to *Cheitharol Kumpaba* Pamheiba or Garib Niwaz was born on Saturday, the 22nd month of Poinu (Nov-Dec) in 1690 (2005:100). Kabui describes that before Pamheiba was known as Garib Niwaz, his regal name was “Nongpok ‘Waireng Pamheiba’ Thongnang Mayamba”, found inscribed on a stone in his eldest son’s name as *Chourjit Singh “Waireng Pamheiba”* (2003: 240, Kamei 2004: 64).

According to Chothe folklore Pamheiba’s maternal grandfather (his mother’s father) attended on his child naming ceremony with a traditional shawl (*Awampi*). So, it is most probable that his grandfather gave him a Chothe name too as “Waireng”, meaning ‘bright/ brave king’ as part of their age-old naming custom. (Yuhlung,2010) In this context, Lt. Col. H. Bhuvan Singh (Retd.) too in his article ‘*Whither Manipur*’ stated that “King Pamheiba was perhaps a Chothe”.(Singh,2009)

CHOTHE FOLKSONG (THAOWON SAAMTHARNU)

The Chothe folklore ‘*Thaowon Saamtharnu*’ is substantiated by their folksong (ballad) also called as “Thaowon Saamtharnu”. Neilut said the folksong is a lamentation song dedicated in memory of his beloved fiancé Thaowon (Sorha) by Chungthang Yuhlung (the Chothe lover). Chungthang mesmerised his fate unlucky, why he could not marry the one he love most in spite of his engagement with her. He expressed how his happy life with his fiancé was so short lived, since it suddenly turned out to be a lonely, pathetic and miserable life. That his life became a curse after the king’s soldiers discovered his fiancé’s beautiful hair inside a fish stomach.

Makan Neilut explains that in the first part of the folksong Chungthang described that Thaowon Saamtharnu was captured by the Meitei (*Wanchei*) king because the soldiers had found her long beautiful black hair inside the stomach of a fish that had swallowed it from the river which “fill the entire brim of a brass/ copper bowl” (*Kori*

wanshang shiye tiye).⁸ The king, after acknowledging the beautiful hair of Thaowon proclaimed in exhilaration to his soldiers that he had found a true lover (*Adid tul pha-ainge, adid tul pha-aingne*).

The second part of the folksong emphasizes on their short relationship. Chungthang laments that they could have parted formally by tying their bonds of love and friendship with gold and silver gongs (*Thaowon no lupa sum, kon anui sum...*), so that no one could break them. He should have applied the paste/ fragrance of their favourite flower on each other as a symbol of their true love (*Thaowon no taineren, rei leibe yui-o, teye...*). He then utters his helplessness against the king’s soldiers who outnumbered him in the tussled.

In the third part of the folksong, Chungthang laments about his first meeting with his lover Thaowon at *Kakwa* market after she was captured and forcefully married against her wish and will.⁹ Chungthang expressed his constant love for her and his willingness to accept her as his wife again, though she was already pregnant. In case she returns to him, he even insist to do away with “the child of the black foreigner with the brass” (*Kori Mayang wanchei chanoute*).¹⁰ He expounded that she appreciated his sincere love, but she refused the idea of doing away with the child. She replied that she could not escape because she was closely watched by the king’s men. Before they parted, he earnest requested her to stay for little longer with him but she gave him a bundle of tobacco leaves and bid him farewell.¹¹ He said that the traditional act of bidding farewell moved him with tears.

As the folksong ‘*Thaowon Saamtharnu*’ continued, Chungthang emphasis that no one knows Thaowon better than he does. He assured to identify her even among thousands of women even if she disguised herself because of the deep scar mark (*pasek*) on her left breast (*nachung*). He said the deep scar mark was the marked left when he fondle her breast in the initial stage of their love relationship.

Then, Chungthang describes about the second meeting of his ex-fiancé (Thaowon) at an occasion how she appeared sober and sad, and that he wanted to console her but was totally incapacitated. Moreover in spite of noticing his presence she hid away her face and avoided him intentionally. He lamented that he did not quite understand her strange behaviour and the reasons behind her strange act. This particular stage of the song reflects her controversial marriage issues happening in the Imphal

(Kangla) palace, where she was forced to live with another man in the palace harem. Thus, the folksong *Thaowon Saamtharnu* still continues on, where part of it is given below with free translation to substantiate the account:

Thaowon Saamtharnu

“Thainu Saamsang ngo tuiraka tanye –ye;

Adid tul pha-ainge, adid tul pha-ainge;

Kori wanshang shiye tiye;

Thainu saamsang ngo tuiruka tanye;

Adid thul pha-ainge, mai pheingnge;

Kori wanshang shiye; (2)

Adid tul mai pha-aingnge; ...’;

‘Chinrui-o Thaowon no o-ye;

Thaowon-no lupa sum, kon anui sum; kon aroi hui no o-ye;

Thaowon-no taineren, rei leibe yui-o, teye Thaowon no; ...;

Korpa mayang wanchei chanoute-ye, ...;”.

They said my sweet girl’s (Thaowon) long beautiful hair flows down the river;

That they found a lover, found a lover;

They said it (her hair) filled the brass bowl.

They said my sweet girl’s (Thaowon) long beautiful hair flows down the river;

That they found a lover, while washing their faces,

They said it (her hair) filled the brass bowl... (2).

Found a lover while washing their faces.

Oh come Thaowon let us elope;

Oh Thaowon we should have tie our love knot with gold and silver gonds to

unbreak us;

Oh Thaowon we should have applied the fragrance of our favourite flower to our

symbol of true love;.....,

They said her child is the son of the brass man the Bengali-Meitei man, ...;

Here, three salient features are identified from the above ballad *Thaowon Saamtharnu* folksong. First, Sorha or Thaowon a beautiful Chothe girl known for her beautiful long black hair was forcefully captured by the Meitei King Charairongpa and immediately married her off by breach, despite being engaged to Chungthang. On her marriage day, she was given a new name as ‘Nungthil Chaibi’ and became the second queen of King Charairongpa in the Imphal (Kangla) palace. Thereafter, her true ethnic identity was concealed on cultural and religious ground as she was assimilated to Hindu-Meitei fold.

Secondly, Chungthang lamented that after his fiancé was captured by the king’s men he had led a pathetic, lonely and miserable life. He proclaimed his true love for her, nostalgias about his romantic days when they were together. He laments that had they tie their love knot traditionally with gold and silver gonds and apply the fragrance of their favourite flower on each other no one should have broken their relationship.

Thirdly, it describes about his serious second proposal to re-marry her after his first meeting in a market place. And that if she agrees to return with him, he even suggested Thaowon to help her do away with the Bengali-Meitei priest’s child (*Korpa mayang wanchei chanoute*), in case, she did not want the (Hindu priest) child in her womb. Thus, this definitely points out the genuine parental identity of the child (Pamheiba) are Thaowon Saamtharnu (Nungthil Chaibi) and a Hindu priest (either Shanti Das or Bishnu Goswami).¹² The child was believed to have conceive while she was put temporary in the palace harem since the Haobam Makok Selungba and Numit Leima (Selungba’s sister) the Head Queen both challenges King Charairongpa’s on his infamous marriage to Thaowon.

CONCLUSION

Thus, from above analysis it is found that the Manipur queen Nungthil Chaibi the second wife of King Charairongpa or the Chothe girl Sorha, *alias* Thaowon Saamtharnu the lady with beautiful hair ethnically belongs to Thao clan of Chothe tribe. She had a controversial marriage life with three different persons. That is, she was initially engaged to a Chothe boy Chungthang, secondly she was captured and formally married to King Charairongpa and became second wife, and thirdly, she bore a child of a Hindu priest (Shanti Das) during her stay

at palace harem. Thaowon marriage life and her son Pamheiba stories recounts a similar ancient tales of Chothe Thangwai Pakhangpa who is popularly known as Nongda Leiren Pakhangba the first historical king of Manipur story and her Chothe mother.¹³

However, in addition to the above, it is believed that after Charairongpa's breached of marriage to Thaowon, the Chothe who settled at Yangpalkung around Imphal and the Meitei developed discrepancy and estrangement. Moreover, with the beginning of Hinduism in Imphal and shortly after the death of Thaowon (Chaibi) the Chothe cut off all the matrimonial, political and economic ties with the Meitei. Thus, leaving their Imphal settlement and migrated to south-eastern region of Thoubal and subsequently to Chandel district, Manipur.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Special thank you goes to the Chothe village elders interviewees especially, Parpa Roushi of Salemtar, Makan Neilut of Old-Wangparal, Khiyang Leikhamchao and Mrs. Thao Tharaklei of Palel, Hiyang Thambaljou and Yuhlung Maipak of Lamlanghupi, Parpa Wailum, Parpa Vincent of Purum Tampak and Marim Rimril of Lunglu besides others for their invaluable information and insights into the folktale and folksong of "Thaowon Saamtharnu" or Nungthil Chaibi. Part of this folksong is recorded by the researcher in his Mp3 Field record No. 27, to substantiate the evidence provided herein.

ENDNOTES

¹ *Matrimonial relationship*: It is said that in early days matrimonial relationships occurs between Chothe, Koireng, Tangkhul (*Angom*), Burmese (*Ava*), Tripuris, Bodo-Cacharis, Kege-Moirang, Rongmei and even Pong (the Thai-Burmese-Chinese of Kabaw/Khampat) and also with the Meitei according to their oral folklores and ancient Manipuri manuscripts (see Parratt 2005; and G. Kabui 2003: 258).

² *Langthabal*: It is considered an old first principality of Pakhangpa before he annexed Kangla (Imphal) from the Khaba-nganba (Maring or Funal/ Fhalum or Poi tribe) located about ten km south of Imphal or on the western side of Manipur University Campus, Canchipur. When some archaic objects were discovered at the place a decade ago the state has made into a Historical Heritage Site.

³ *Waireng*: The name "Waireng" is distinctively a Chothe indigene name as it is still used by many Chothe like "Waireng, Wairen, Waithou, Waipu, Waichung, etc. used

by Yuhlung clan. This name is probably given by his grandfather or Sorha/ Thaowon's father on the child naming ceremony day. G. Kabui/Kamei said that the name is found in the eldest son's name Chourjit Singh as Waireng Pamheiba found in a stone inscription with a foot print, preserved in the Manipur State Museum, Imphal (2003: 240, 2004: 64).

⁴ *Lai Sangkong*: Thaowon's father is believed to have gone hiding secretly with his young grandson (Pamheiba) initial in the country or village of *Lai Sangkong* among his distant relative living on the western hills (Hodson 1908: 78-79). In Meitei, *Lai Sangkong* means 'in the land where God's herd exits' which probably refers to Kharam (*Tusuk* means descendant or grandchildren) or Koireng or Liangmei who have similar origin with Chothe (see Parratt 2005, Kabui 2003, Singh 1986:103, Shangkhram 2006:30,35,44).

⁵ *Nungthil Chaibi*: This is a name given by the Meitei to Sorha (Thaowon Saamtharnu) on the wedding day after she was forcefully married by King Charairongpa. It is said that once a tribal girl is married to a Meitei-Hindu (valley people) boy, the girl's name is should be changed on the marriage day itself to signify her complete assimilation to the Meitei-Hindu fold on account of superior socio-cultural and religion. The change of name also symbolizes suppressive attitude considering the tribes as inferior community. This tradition is still widely practice by the Meitei who marry tribal girls.

⁶ *Koireng*: In early days Chothe, Kharam, Koireng, Tarao, Liangmei, and Hmar tribes are all considered a cognatic group since they share similar genealogical origin, culture and historical backgrounds and migrated from Mizoram (Lushai hills). The other allied groups who migrated to the southern Manipur a little latter after them and have closer ties are like the Maring (Poi), Kom, Aimol and Chiru who also have similar origin with the Rangkhoh, Reang, Chakma, Karbi, etc. and had matrimonial relationship with Tripuris and Bengali-Cacharis in their sojourn. While the Anal, Moyon, Monshang, Lamkang are believed to have migrated a little latter compared to them from the from Khampat eastern region who share similar origin and culture with the Shan/ Pong of Kabaw valley in Myanmar (see, McCulloch 1857:64).

⁷ *Pakhangpa*: Nongda Leiren Pakhangpa or Chothe Thangwai/ Thangmei Pakhangpa is considered to be the first Sovereign ruler of Imphal (Kangla) Kingdom, Manipur valley. He is considered an illegitimate child of a mysterious snake man (unknown) and a Chothe girl

Daishin (*alias* Khamlangtaopi or Thamoilempi) the daughter of a Chothe Chief Surou and Lenghoinu (Shaw 1929). Pamheiba's life is also filled with mysteries and controversies from birth to death like Pakhangpa, where many versions are established in identifying his genuine parentage and ethnic origin. Pakhangpa is brought up by his estrange mother and foster father Kongding the Moirang king, who thereby succeeded Khongding as Thingkri Nachouba. Till date Pakhangpa's biological father's identity cannot be established like Waireng Pamheiba who is also assumed to have help escaped and guided by his maternal grandfather (See, Yuhlung Cheithou Charles. 2010. *Indigenous religion of the Chothe of Manipur: A Sociological study*, Department of Sociology, North Eastern Hills University, Shillong, Unpublished Thesis). So, ever since the time of Pakhangpa till the time of Chandrakriti (1823-1886), the Chothe and Meitei have had good relationship though there are certain estrangements in between. Various ancient literature substantiates it that various kings and prince of Manipur visited the Chothe villages, and sometimes the Chothe provides boats and other materials time after time for them (Parratt 2005: 98,110; Laiba 1992: 60), (For details see Yuhlung, Cheithou Charles. 2010, unpublished thesis).

⁸ *Wanchei*: It is ancient coded term locally used in conversation by Chothe to refer to the Meiteis.

⁹ *Kakwa*: It is an old sub-town near Langthabal or Singjamei, Imphal. It is located on the Indo-Myanmar road near Manipur Central University Campus, Canchipur.

¹⁰ *Mayang*: In Chothe language lit. *Korpa* - brass man, *Mayang* - Bengali, *Wanchei* - Meitei, *Chanoute* - child. The Chothe refers the dark complexion migrants of Bodo-Cachari or Bengali origin as *Mayang* to mean dark faces or outsiders or foreigners. The term seems to have derived from "*Meehang*" (black people) or "*Maihang*" (dark/black face). They are early traders or war captives from the west (Cachar or Sylhet/ Bengal) who came via old-Cachar trade route to Myanmar (see McCulloch 1857:14; and Singh 1986: 423-4).

¹¹ *Tobacco leave (Thakna)*: It symbolise the age-old Chothe custom and tradition of bidding farewell among friends or lover or relatives signifying to remember them until they meet again. This custom is symbolically practice even today in Lamlanghupi village on the last day of the *Achui-rhin* a youth festival celebrated in September.

¹² The identity of Hindu priest the assumed biological father of Waireng Pamheiba or Garib Niwaz is unclear till

today, since a group of prominent Hindu priests stayed in the king's court of Manipur during those initial days. Therefore, some believed to be Bishnu Goswami while other claimed it to be Shanti Das.

¹³ See chapter four, Yuhlung, Cheithou Charles. 2010. *Indigenous religion of Chothe of Manipur: A sociological study*. Unpublished thesis. Department of Sociology, North Eastern Hills University, Shillong - 22.

REFERENCES

- Census of India, 2011.
- Das Gupta, Biman, K 1985 *Proceeding on the symposium on Purum (Chote) revisited*. Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India.
- Hodson, T. C 1908 *The Meiteis*. Delhi: Low price Publications (Abridge of London: David Nutt, 57, 59 Long Acre).
- Kabui, Gangmumei 2003 *History of Manipur: Pre-colonial period*. Vol.1. New Delhi: National Publishing House.
- Kamei, Gangmumei 2004 *History of the Zeliangrong Nagas (From Makhel to Rani Gaidinlu)*. Guwahati, Spectrum Publications.
- Laiba, M.T 1992 *The geography of Manipur*. Imphal: Public Book Store, Paona Bazar.
- Manikchand, Kongsam 1988 'The Evolution of the Meitei state: Confederacy through the last two millennia'. In Naorem Sanajouba, *Manipur: Past and present*. Vol.1. Delhi: Mittal Publications. (145-159).
- McCulloch, M 1859 *Account of the valley of Manipur*. Calcutta: Selection from the records of the government of India. No. xxviii.
- Naorem, Sanajaoba 1991 *Manipur: Past and present*. Vol.1. New Delhi: Mittal Publications.
- Parratt, Saroj Nalini Arambam 2005 *The court chronicle of the kings of Manipur: The Cheitharon Kumpapa*. London: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group.
- Shakespeare, John 1912 *The Lushai-Kuki Clans*. Delhi: Suman lata, Cultural Publishing House.
- Shangkham, G 2006 *The Ethno-History of the Kharam Tribe*. New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House:
- Shaw, William 1929 *The Thadou - Kuki*, Assam, Published on behalf of the Government of Assam.

- Singh, Sri Hoibam Tomba 1964 *Pidonnu*. National Book Store: Imphal, Manipur
- Singh, Bhagashore Oinam 1982 *Moirang Ningthourol Lambuba*, Imphal.
- Singh, N. Khelchandra 1966 *Chaida Leihui*. Imphal.
- Singh, Wahangbam Ibohal 1986 *The history of Manipur (An early period)*. Imphal: Manipur Commercial Co.
- Singh, H. Bhuban (Lt. Col. Retd.) 2009 *Whither Manipur*, Courtesy: The Imphal Free Press, www.e-pao.com. (Accessed on: 12-5-2009).
- Tensuba, K.C 1993 *Genesis of Indian tribes: An approach to the history of Meiteis and Thais*. New-Delhi: Inter-India publications.
- Yuhlung, Standhope 1986 *Chothe ngei athouna yongna*. Imphal: Directorate of tribal development and backward classes, Government of Manipur.
- Yuhlung, Cheithou Charles 2007 'Matrilateral cross-cousin marriage among the Chothe of Manipur', in *Sociological Bulletin*. Jan-April, Vol. 56 (1), Pp.46-64.
- Yuhlung, Cheithou Charles 2010 *Indigenous religion of the Chothe of Manipur: A sociological study*. Unpublished Thesis submitted to North Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Department of Sociology, Shillong