

## A comparative analysis of Apokpa worship practices between the Meetei and Bishnupriya Manipuri communities.

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### Abstract:

This paper presents a comparative analysis of the worship of Apokpa, a revered ancestral deity, within the Meetei and Bishnupriya Manipuri communities. Apokpa worship is central to both groups, rooted in their shared cultural past, yet it has evolved distinctly due to their unique historical, religious, and social influences. The study explores the rituals, symbolism, and cultural significance of Apokpa in both communities. For the Meetei, Apokpa Khurumba reflects indigenous religious practices intertwined with elements of Sanamahism and Hinduism, while for the Bishnupriya Manipuri, Apokpa worship incorporates Vaishnavism influences, contributing to community identity and cultural preservation. The research sheds light on how these practices not only maintain kinship bonds and reinforce social cohesion but also serve as mechanisms for cultural resilience. By analysing the similarities and differences in the worship of Apokpa, this study contributes to the understanding of religious syncretism and cultural continuity in the Manipuri ethnic groups.

**Keywords:** Apokpa worship, Meitei-Bishnupriya religious practices, Manipuri cultural heritage.

### Introduction:

The worship of Apokpa, a revered ancestral deity, is a vital element in the cultural and religious practices of both the Meetei and Bishnupriya Manipuri communities. Rooted in a profound respect for ancestors, Apokpa worship reflects the shared heritage of these groups, despite their distinct historical developments and religious influences. For the Meetei, Apokpa worship is a central aspect of *Sanamahism*, their indigenous religion, and is practiced through rituals like *Apokpa Khurumba*—a form of ancestor veneration that predates their integration of Hindu practices. The rituals emphasize community involvement and the continuity of familial bonds, showcasing the Meetei's commitment to their ancestral lineage.

Similarly, the Bishnupriya Manipuri, though influenced by Vaishnavism, maintain a unique set of practices that emphasize their cultural identity. Rituals such as *Apokapa Dau Homa Dena* serve not only as acts of worship but also as communal gatherings that reinforce social ties and cultural continuity. These practices highlight the community's connection to their ancestry while integrating elements that reflect their distinctive identity within the broader Manipuri cultural landscape.

This comparative study aims to explore the similarities and differences in the worship of Apokpa between these two communities. By examining the historical background, ritual

practices, and cultural significance of Apokpa worship, this paper seeks to illuminate how both groups preserve their unique identities while sharing a common religious tradition. Furthermore, the research highlights the role of Apokpa worship in maintaining social cohesion and cultural resilience, particularly in the face of external religious and cultural influences. By delving into the nuances of Apokpa worship, this study contributes to the broader understanding of religious practices and cultural preservation in Northeast India.

In addition to exploring historical developments and ritual practices, this study delves into the contemporary challenges facing Apokpa worship. With increasing urbanization, globalization, and intergenerational shifts, how these traditions are adapted—or potentially lost—provides a deeper insight into the resilience of cultural practices. Furthermore, this paper examines the nuanced roles of women in preserving Apokpa worship and situates the practices within a global context of ancestor veneration.

**Literature Review:** The worship of Apokpa, a deity central to the ancestral practices of the Meetei and Bishnupriya Manipuri communities, has garnered some scholarly attention. However, comparative research exploring its distinct cultural expressions in these communities remains limited.

### 1. Study on Meetei Sanamahism and Apokpa worship

Research on *Sanamahism*, the indigenous religion of the Meetei, provides context for Apokpa's importance within their ancestral worship practices. Scholars such as *N. Vijaylakshmi Brara (2007)* have examined the place of Apokpa in the *Apokpa Khurumba* ritual, emphasizing its role in solidifying community bonds and fostering reverence for lineage. Other researchers, like *L. Suraj Singh (2010)*, discuss Apokpa within the broader framework of Meetei religious practices, noting its continuity despite external cultural and religious influences over centuries.

### 2. Bishnupriya Manipuri and Vaishnavite Influences

For the Bishnupriya Manipuri community, the influence of Vaishnavism has shaped unique approaches to Apokpa worship. According to *Bimal Phukan (2012)*, Bishnupriya practices integrate elements of Vaishnavism rituals while preserving Apokpa worship as a critical cultural link to their heritage. The Bishnupriya approach to Apokpa is observed in rituals like *Apokpa Dau Homa Dena*, reflecting a blend of Vaishnavism and indigenous customs. *R.K. Jhalajit Singh (2015)* further explores how Bishnupriya practices maintain Apokpa as a symbol of cultural resilience, balancing tradition with Vaishnavism assimilation.

### 3. Comparative Studies and Cultural Syncretism

Comparative studies of the Meetei and Bishnupriya Manipuri communities reveal insights into religious syncretism in Northeast India. Scholars like *T.C. Hodson (1928)* and *L. Joykumar Singh (2016)* have documented regional syncretic practices, noting how Apokpa worship serves as a focal point for both communities. These studies argue that while the Meetei emphasize indigenous traditions, Bishnupriya Manipuri practices reflect a blend of Vaishnavism and ancestral customs, allowing Apokpa worship to act as a bridge between identities.

Comparative studies on ancestor worship globally provide useful parallels. For instance, practices like the Chinese Qingming Festival or Japanese Obon rituals emphasize maintaining familial ties through veneration of ancestors, reflecting similar cultural values. These comparisons highlight the universality of ancestor worship and underscore the importance of preserving Apokpa rituals within the unique Manipuri cultural context.

### **Historical Context of Apokpa Worship:**

The worship of Apokpa in both Meetei and Bishnupriya Manipuri communities is rooted in ancient beliefs, where ancestor veneration formed a vital aspect of spiritual and social life. For the Meetei, Apokpa worship traces back to pre-Hindu times and is integral to *Sanamahism*, an indigenous religion centered around nature, ancestors, and protector deities. Apokpa, embodying ancestral spirits, was traditionally revered as a guardian of lineage, family harmony, and prosperity. Rituals like *Apokpa Khurumba* were practiced to maintain bonds with ancestors, ensuring that their blessings and protection would continue.

The historical trajectory shifted with Hindu influences beginning in the 15th century and expanding significantly by the 18th century. Despite this, Meetei Apokpa worship retained its core practices, reflecting the community's commitment to their indigenous traditions. The Meetei adapted certain Hindu elements, but Apokpa's role remained fundamentally unchanged within *Sanamahism*, emphasizing the importance of family lineage and protection by ancestral spirits. This fusion of traditions allowed Apokpa worship to survive as a critical identity marker for the Meetei, preserving their cultural heritage amidst religious shifts.

For the Bishnupriya Manipuri, the incorporation of Vaishnavism from Bengal introduced a distinctive element to their practice of Apokpa worship. Unlike the Meetei, Bishnupriya Manipuri rituals, such as *Apokpa Dau Homa Dena*, reflect Vaishnavite influences, combining ancestral worship with ritualistic practices rooted in Hindu philosophy. This adaptation represents the Bishnupriya Manipuri's negotiation of dual identities: honouring Apokpa as a cultural tradition while also embracing the Vaishnavism religious framework.

Historically, the Bishnupriya Manipuri community's integration of Vaishnavism was seen as a means of cultural preservation under changing socio-political pressures. While Vaishnavism influenced the form and symbolism of Apokpa worship, the community preserved the deity's ancestral significance, particularly through collective rituals that reinforce social bonds and community identity. Today, Apokpa worship for the Bishnupriya Manipuri acts as a bridge between their historical roots and adopted religious practices, reflecting resilience and adaptability.

In recent decades, migration and urbanization have altered the socio-religious landscape in Manipur. For instance, urban Meetei families often adapt Apokpa Khurumba rituals to fit modern lifestyles, reducing the scale but retaining symbolic elements. Similarly, Bishnupriya Manipuri communities in diaspora settings have reinterpreted Apokpa worship to accommodate their environments, blending ancestral practices with broader Hindu festivities. These adaptations demonstrate the flexibility of Apokpa worship in sustaining cultural identity across diverse contexts.

In summary, Apokpa worship among the Meetei and Bishnupriya Manipuri communities has been shaped by distinct historical paths: the Meetei preserved it within their indigenous Sanamahism, while the Bishnupriya Manipuri integrated it within a Vaishnavism framework. This historical evolution highlights Apokpa's enduring role as a spiritual and cultural anchor for both groups, bridging past and present beliefs.

### **Methodology:**

This study employs a comparative, qualitative approach to analyse the worship practices of Apokpa within the Meetei and Bishnupriya Manipuri communities. Data collection involved a combination of primary and secondary sources.

1. **Literature Analysis:** Scholarly articles, historical records, and cultural texts on Meetei Sanamahism and Bishnupriya Manipuri Vaishnavism were analysed to trace Apokpa's historical role and evolution.
2. **Comparative Analysis:** A comparative framework was used to examine similarities and differences in Apokpa worship, focusing on the aspects of ritual symbolism, community participation, and adaptation of practices over time. This helped contextualize Apokpa worship within each community's distinct religious and cultural identities.

### **Ritual Practices and Symbolism:**

The worship of Apokpa manifests in distinct rituals and symbolic expressions within both Meetei and Bishnupriya Manipuri communities, embodying their ancestral reverence.

1. **Meetei Practices:** In the Meetei tradition, *Apokpa Khurumba* is a primary ritual where family members gather to honour Apokpa as the protective ancestral spirit. Offerings of rice, fruits, and incense are placed at a designated shrine within the home, symbolizing unity with past generations. Each component of the offering holds symbolic significance, believed to strengthen familial bonds and secure Apokpa's blessings.
2. **Bishnupriya Manipuri Practices:** In contrast, the Bishnupriya Manipuri community incorporates elements of Vaishnavism in *Apokpa Dau Homa Dena*, where ancestral reverence is performed alongside Hindu-style offerings and chants. These rituals emphasize community cohesion, where Apokpa is invoked to provide protection and prosperity. Symbolic items such as betel leaves, flowers, and sacred fire represent purity, continuity, and the blending of ancestral and Hindu values.
3. **Comparative Symbolism:** For both communities, Apokpa serves as a cultural symbol of continuity, but the Meetei emphasize indigenous meanings, while Bishnupriya Manipuri practices reflect syncretism. Despite the religious nuances, both traditions

highlight Apokpa as a revered figure bridging past and present, honoring lineage and resilience.

- 4. Gender Roles in Rituals:** Women play a pivotal role in preserving and performing Apokpa worship. In Meetei families, women often act as custodians of the rituals, preparing offerings and leading prayers, which underscores their centrality in maintaining familial and spiritual harmony. Among the Bishnupriya Manipuri, women's involvement extends to organizing community events, reflecting their dual roles as cultural bearers and community leaders. This dimension of gender highlights the intersection of religious practices and societal structures.

### Analysis and Discussion

The analysis of Apokpa worship across the Meetei and Bishnupriya Manipuri communities unveils critical insights into their cultural identities and ritual significance.

- 1. Cultural Adaptation:** The Meetei community's adherence to *Sanamahism* allows for a more traditional expression of Apokpa worship, where rituals like *Apokpa Khurumba* focus on familial bonds and ancestral connection. In contrast, the Bishnupriya Manipuri have integrated Vaishnavism elements into their worship, as seen in *Apokapa Dau Homa Dena*, which emphasizes community participation and collective identity.
- 2. Ritual Dynamics:** The rituals highlight how each community interprets spiritual protection. For the Meetei, the emphasis is on the home and family, symbolizing a personal connection to ancestry. Conversely, the Bishnupriya Manipuri rituals incorporate communal gatherings, reinforcing social networks and demonstrating the adaptive resilience of their cultural practices.
- 3. Contemporary Relevance:** Both communities face challenges posed by modernization and globalization. Despite these pressures, Apokpa worship remains a vital cultural touchstone, enabling individuals to navigate their identities within a rapidly changing society. The persistence of these practices underlines their role in cultural preservation, providing a framework for continuity and resilience.
- 4. Global and Comparative Contexts:** Apokpa worship resonates with global practices of ancestor veneration, offering a lens to examine the universality of cultural resilience. The blending of Vaishnavism in Bishnupriya Manipuri rituals parallels similar religious syncretism seen in African Yoruba practices influenced by Christianity or Islam. This comparative framework underscores the adaptability of spiritual traditions in the face of external cultural pressures.
- 5. Contemporary Challenges:** Modernization, migration, and generational shifts present significant challenges to Apokpa worship. Younger generations often view these rituals as outdated, while urban families face logistical constraints in performing traditional practices. Despite these challenges, community organizations and cultural associations

play a crucial role in reviving interest through festivals, workshops, and publications, ensuring the continuity of Apokpa worship in modern settings.

## Conclusion

The worship of Apokpa serves as a vital thread connecting the Meetei and Bishnupriya Manipuri communities to their ancestral roots and cultural identities. Despite their differing approaches—where the Meetei emphasize familial bonds within *Sanamahism* and the Bishnupriya Manipuri incorporate Vaishnavism elements—both communities demonstrate resilience in preserving their unique practices. Apokpa worship not only reinforces social cohesion but also adapts to contemporary challenges, ensuring the continuity of cultural traditions. Further exploration of these dynamics can provide deeper insights into the evolving cultural landscape of Northeast India.

The worship of Apokpa remains a vital cultural and spiritual anchor for the Meetei and Bishnupriya Manipuri communities. This paper demonstrates that despite differing approaches—where the Meetei emphasize familial bonds within *Sanamahism*, and the Bishnupriya Manipuri integrate Vaishnavism elements—both communities showcase resilience in preserving their traditions. Gender roles, contemporary adaptations, and global parallels further highlight the dynamic nature of these practices.

The enduring relevance of Apokpa worship provides a valuable case study in cultural continuity and adaptation, emphasizing the need for continued research and documentation. Future studies could explore intersections with environmental concerns, oral literature, and digital platforms to further understand the evolution of Apokpa worship in a globalized world.

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