

**Discovering Tibeto-Burman Linguistic History through
Pre 20th Century Meithei Manuscripts**

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This paper is a multifaceted philological study of important documents in the Meithei language. Meithei, also known as *Manipuri* and *Meitheiron*, is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in the Indian state of Manipur which is bordered by Myanmar to the East, Mizoram to the South, Nagaland to the North, and Assam to the West and Northwest. Early Meithei manuscripts are yet to be studied by anthropologists or linguists on a large scale. However, it is clear that the study of these manuscripts would reveal much about the linguistic, anthropological and literary history of Meithei. Here, we present information on seven aspects of the manuscripts:

- (1) number and genre
- (2) script
- (3) dating
- (4) authorship
- (5) housing and ownership
- (6) paper and condition
- (7) status in the culture

Table 1: Categories and manuscripts per category
listed in *A Catalogue of Old Manipuri Manuscripts*
(Snahal Singh 1992)

Administration	22
Astrology and Astronomy	35
Charms and incantations	105
Craftsmanship	2
Creation Myths	17
Genealogy	61
Hills with religious and/or cultural significance	15
History	82
Literature	65
Medicine and Physiology	7
Miscellaneous	35
Prophesies and predictions	11
Religion	130
Songs and Dances	13
Topography	13

Table 2: Sample list of political and civic chronicles divided
according to traditional categories

Kunthoklons (Immigration Accounts)

Poireiton Khunthokpa (Immigration of Poireiton), an epic about the migration of Poireiton and his people to Manipur. He was invited to rule a small principality under the control of the Ningthouja clan.

Ningthou waris (Accounts of wars)

Takhelgnamba, an account of war between the Manipuri King Garibniwaj and the neighboring states Ningthouon Lambuba (Road taken by the king) which details the expeditions of the kings of Manipur. Although events are listed chronologically, no dates are provided.

Ningthourols (Royal chronicles)

Chainaron (The rules of fighting) outlines rules of chivalry and tells stories about the settling of conflict through deadly duels. The manuscript was written in the 16th century.

Cheitharol Kumbaba (Account of the years) records astronomical events, epidemics, and the results of wars. It records events from 33 to 1660 A.D.

Loiyamba Shilyen (Loiyamba oversees work), written during the rule of Loiyamba between 1074 and 1122 A.D., it lays out a plan for assigning occupations to families. Loiyamba is credited with improving the economic condition of Manipur.

Yumdaaba Puyaa (Family Genealogies)

Each head of household was (and still is) given a copy of the family genealogy as recorded by the Royal Archives. Approximately four hundred and seventy genealogies from the pre20th century period are available at the Manipuri Sahitya Parishad (Khelchandra 1984).

Salaai meihourols (The Clan Chronicles)

Moirang Kangleiron (The story of Moirang Clan)

Chengleirol (The story of the Chenglei chiefs)). The Chenglei clan is one of the seven original clans of Manipur. The stories recorded here go back to the 4th and 5th century.

Table 3: Sample list of legends and creation stories

Khongjongnubi Nongaron (translation unknown), the legend of six girls who are ostracized by their parents for marrying men of their own choice. They are physically transformed into animals and transported into heaven.

Nungban Pombi Luwaoba (translation unknown), the story of a lover who brings back the soul of his dead wife by overpowering death.

Leithak Leikharon (The way of the world underground), a traditional creation myth influenced by Hindu creation mythology.

Table 4: Sample list of botanical and environmental treatises

Hidaklon, (Medicine language) a list of medicinal herbs and the ailments these can cure.

Salkau, (Cattle call) treatise on cattle and the respect that should be shown to them.

Leiron (Flower language) a description in verse of the many flowers that grow in Manipur.

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