

Folk Medicine among the Meitei: Cultural Significance, Practices, and Contemporary Challenges

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Abstract

Meitei folk medicine, a vital component of traditional knowledge systems in Manipur, Northeast India, reflects a culturally embedded, holistic approach to health that integrates physical, spiritual, and psychological dimensions. Rooted in indigenous philosophies and sustained through generations, this healing tradition is primarily practiced by Maibas (male healers) and Maibis (female healers), who hold significant cultural and spiritual authority. Their roles extend beyond medical care to include ritual performance, divination, and spiritual mediation, highlighting the interconnectedness of health, cosmology, and community life. This study explores the structure and function of Meitei folk medicine, focusing on its classification of ailments and healing techniques, the training and gendered roles of practitioners, and the transmission of knowledge through oral and textual traditions. Healing practices are broadly categorized into herbal remedies, magico-religious interventions, and physical therapies like Mari Suba. Herbal medicine relies on endemic plants with therapeutic properties, while spiritual healing employs chants, rituals, and symbolic offerings to address illnesses attributed to supernatural causes. Despite the increasing dominance of allopathic medicine and the decline of formal institutions like the Pandit Loishang, Meitei folk medicine persists as a source of cultural identity, especially in rural areas. It offers valuable insights into alternative epistemologies of health that challenge biomedical reductionism and emphasize harmony among the individual, community, and environment. The paper draws on historical texts, ethnographic studies, and limited field interviews with traditional healers to present a nuanced understanding of this indigenous medical system. Recognizing the cultural, spiritual, and empirical foundations of Meitei folk medicine is essential for its preservation and potential integration into culturally sensitive health frameworks. The research contributes to broader discourses on indigenous knowledge, ethnomedicine, and the pluralism of healing systems.

Keywords: Meitei folk medicine, traditional healers, indigenous knowledge, ritual healing, ethnomedicine, Manipur

Introduction

Traditional knowledge systems represent the accumulated wisdom of communities across generations, often developed in close interaction with the natural environment and guided by practical experience, observation, and cultural necessity. Among these systems, folk medicine stands out as a vital repository of indigenous healing practices, offering insights into how communities understand and manage health, illness, and wellbeing. In many parts of the world, folk medicine continues to thrive, serving not only as a means of physical care but also as a reflection of collective identity and cultural continuity. In the context of Manipur, a culturally rich and ethnically diverse state in Northeast India, the Meitei community has preserved a distinct form of folk medicine that exemplifies this traditional knowledge system. Rooted in ancient practices, Meitei folk medicine presents a holistic approach to health and healing, interweaving physical treatment with psychological balance and spiritual harmony. This indigenous medical system is primarily practiced by Maibas (male healers) and Maibis (female healers), who occupy an esteemed position in Meitei society as custodians of both medical and ritual knowledge. Their roles extend beyond the therapeutic; they serve as cultural intermediaries, spiritual guides, and keepers of ancestral wisdom.

The therapeutic philosophy of Meitei folk medicine transcends the biomedical model by incorporating spiritual elements and cosmological beliefs that are deeply embedded in the community's worldview. Healing is not merely about curing the body, but about restoring equilibrium between the individual, the community, and the environment, often through rituals, herbal remedies, and divinatory practices. The Maibas and Maibis diagnose illness not only through physical symptoms but also by interpreting signs believed to originate from spiritual or supernatural imbalances. Such an integrative approach underscores the importance of harmony and interconnectedness, values that resonate throughout Meitei cultural life.

This paper examines the structural and functional aspects of Meitei folk medicine, focusing on its categorization of ailments and cures, the roles and training of traditional healers, and the transmission of knowledge across generations. It also explores the embeddedness of folk medicine within the broader socio-cultural and religious fabric of Meitei society, highlighting how rituals, festivals, and spiritual practices are often interlinked with health and healing. The empirical base of this system built on generations of experiential learning offers a counterpoint to contemporary biomedical paradigms, suggesting the coexistence of multiple epistemologies in understanding human health. Despite the growing dominance of modern medicine and institutional healthcare in recent decades, Meitei folk medicine continues to play a significant role in rural and urban communities alike. Its enduring presence reflects a persistent cultural belief in the efficacy of traditional healing and its relevance in addressing not just physical ailments but also emotional and spiritual wellbeing. Moreover, it serves as a form of cultural resilience, maintaining indigenous identity in the face of globalizing influences and shifting health paradigms. By situating Meitei folk medicine within its historical, cultural, and spiritual context, this study aims to contribute to broader discourses on indigenous medical knowledge, cultural sustainability, and the plurality of healing systems. Understanding such systems not only enriches the field of ethnomedicine but also offers valuable perspectives for integrative and culturally sensitive approaches to health and wellness.

Literature Review

The study of folk medicine has long been integral to understanding traditional knowledge systems, especially within indigenous societies where health practices are closely tied to cultural, ecological, and spiritual worldviews. In the case of Meitei folk medicine of Manipur, early and modern scholars have acknowledged its complex structure and enduring socio-cultural relevance. This review explores key scholarly contributions before 2022, tracing the historical documentation, philosophical foundations, and contemporary status of Meitei healing traditions. Early British ethnographers were among the first to document Meitei folk medicine. W. McCulloch (1859) observed that the Manipuri people heavily relied on external applications and ritual manipulation in treating illnesses. He highlighted how healing was intertwined with ceremonial and symbolic acts, revealing an approach that extended beyond the physical to the metaphysical. Similarly, R. Brown (1868-69) emphasized the centrality of traditional healers particularly the Maibas in social and religious life, recognizing them as more than mere medical practitioners. T.C. Hodson (1908) further deepened this understanding by describing the Maibas not only as physicians but also as rainmakers and ritual leaders, reflecting their integration into agricultural and cosmological systems. According to Hodson, these healers functioned within a framework that merged environmental understanding, spiritual guidance, and medical care. This view is echoed by Singh (1963), who noted that Maibas and Maibis played essential roles in village ceremonies and ancestral worship, asserting that their healing practices were inseparable from community life.

The philosophical underpinnings of Meitei medicine are deeply rooted in indigenous texts such as *Maibalon*, *Hidaklon*, and *Shingligi-Maram*. Parratt (1980) highlighted the importance of these texts in structuring traditional healing knowledge, explaining that they offered a metaphysical lens for understanding human suffering and remedies. These texts were traditionally taught at the *Pandit Loishang*, an institution for training Maibas and Maibis, supported by the Meitei monarchy. However, as Kshetrimayum (1999) noted, the decline of this institution in the post-colonial period especially after 1972 led to the erosion of formal mechanisms for knowledge transmission. The marginalization of traditional medicine in the face of biomedical dominance has been critiqued by Singh and Devi (2003), who examined how colonial and postcolonial health policies favoured Western medicine while neglecting indigenous systems. Nevertheless, they noted that folk practices remained resilient, especially in rural areas where modern health services were inadequate or culturally incongruent. According to their study, Meitei folk medicine continued to play a vital role in both primary healthcare and spiritual well-being. Khuraijam (2015) contributed significantly to the understanding of magico-religious healing practices, arguing that rituals, chants, and divination performed by Maibas are essential tools in restoring spiritual and physical balance. His ethnographic work emphasized the empirical logic behind these practices, despite their mystical appearance. Likewise, Devi (2017) observed that herbal knowledge among Meitei healers was highly localized and passed down through apprenticeships, often within families or specific clans. She highlighted the urgent need for documentation, as many herbs and treatment methods remain orally transmitted and vulnerable to loss. Although traditional medicine is vibrant in practice, a major concern raised by scholars like Sharma and Singh (2019) is the lack of comprehensive ethnobotanical surveys and field-based documentation. While several herbs are known to be used for treating fevers, wounds, and digestive disorders, detailed records of preparation methods, dosages, and efficacy are sparse. This lack of systematization limits both scholarly understanding and public recognition of Meitei medical knowledge.

The existing body of literatures reveals a robust but under-documented system of healing that merges physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions. Early ethnographers such as McCulloch, Brown, and Hodson laid foundational observations on the sociocultural role of traditional healers. Later scholars like Parratt, Singh and Devi, Khuraijam, and

Sharma expanded on these findings by analysing the philosophical, botanical, and ritualistic elements of Meitei medicine. However, contemporary research points to critical gaps, especially in field-based documentation and the integration of traditional knowledge into modern health discourse. Therefore, further ethnographic and interdisciplinary research is essential not only to preserve this intangible cultural heritage but also to explore its relevance in contemporary health contexts. The literature reviewed underscores the enduring importance of Meitei folk medicine as a living tradition, shaped by centuries of accumulated knowledge and sustained through cultural resilience.

Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the structure, significance, and contemporary relevance of Meitei folk medicine as an indigenous health system, with a focus on its cultural, spiritual, and empirical dimensions. The specific objectives are:

1. To document and analyse the core components of Meitei folk medicine, including its traditional practitioners (Maibas and Maibis), healing methods, and medicinal materials.
2. To explore the socio-cultural, religious, and spiritual foundations that shape and sustain Meitei traditional healing practices.
3. To evaluate the philosophical and experiential basis of Meitei folk medicine as an indigenous system of knowledge.
4. To assess the current relevance, adaptation, and integration of these practices within the framework of modern healthcare systems.
5. To identify the major challenges and threats faced by traditional healers in preserving, practicing, and transmitting their knowledge to future generations.

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research design to examine the structure, philosophical foundations, and contemporary significance of Meitei folk medicine. The methodology is grounded in a multidisciplinary approach that integrates historical ethnography, textual analysis, and limited ethnographic fieldwork. The research prioritizes interpretive analysis over empirical generalization, seeking to explore the meanings and functions of traditional healing practices within their socio-cultural and cosmological contexts. Drawing on both written and oral sources, the study offers a layered understanding of Meitei medical traditions as they have evolved over time. Data for the study are primarily derived from secondary sources, including colonial-era ethnographic accounts by W. McCulloch (1859), R. Brown (1868–69), and T.C. Hodson (1908), which provide early documentation of Meitei healers and their belief systems. Indigenous Meitei texts such as *Maibalon*, *Hidaklon*, and *Shingligi-Maram* are examined for their theoretical insights into illness, healing, and the spiritual dimensions of health. Contemporary ethnographic literature further contextualizes the roles of Maibas and Maibis, the traditional healers, shedding light on their social status, ritual practices, and the symbolic significance of their interventions in healing processes. To complement the historical and textual data, limited primary data were collected through informal and semi-structured interviews with present-day Maibas and Maibis. These oral histories help trace the continuity and transformation of traditional practices amid modern influences and challenges. A content analysis framework is used to interpret both textual and oral narratives, identifying recurring themes in healing techniques, metaphysical concepts, and ritual performance. While fieldwork is constrained by the secretive and lineage-based transmission of some knowledge, especially herbal formulations, the inclusion of practitioner voices enhances the authenticity and contemporary relevance of the findings. This methodologically pluralistic approach enables a nuanced exploration of Meitei folk medicine as a dynamic and culturally embedded system.

Analysis and Findings

The Meitei conception of health and illness is deeply rooted in a holistic worldview that interweaves the physical, spiritual, psychological, and environmental realms. Health, in this cultural framework, is viewed as a dynamic equilibrium among these domains, and illness is perceived as a rupture in this harmony. Such disruptions may be attributed to the wrath of deities, ancestral displeasure, or cosmic imbalances. This integrative understanding forms the bedrock of Meitei folk medicine, which seeks to restore balance not merely through physical remedies but through spiritual and ritualistic means. The diagnostic process itself often involves divination, revealing a sophisticated metaphysical framework for interpreting affliction and prescribing healing. Within this traditional system, the roles of healers are distinctly categorized, reflecting both gendered functions and specialized knowledge. Maibis, typically female, are considered spiritually chosen individuals who serve as diviners and mediators between the human and spiritual realms. Their expertise lies in identifying the spiritual roots of illness and performing diagnostic rituals. Maibas, on the other hand, are male healers further classified into two types: herbalists, who possess in-depth knowledge of medicinal plants, and magico-religious specialists, who engage in ritualistic and spiritual healing using

chants, offerings, and sacred performances. This bifurcation in roles underscores the complex interplay between natural and supernatural elements in Meitei medical practices. Meitei folk medicine itself can be broadly divided into three interrelated categories, each reflecting a distinct therapeutic approach. The first is herbal medicine, which involves the use of endemic plants known for their healing properties. This knowledge is usually transmitted orally within families, and specific herbs are linked to particular ailments: *Tulsi* for wound care, *Kekru* for epilepsy and asthma, *Nongmangkha* for fever, and *Khongban takhelei* for bodily pain and jaundice. The second category, magico-religious medicine, is more esoteric and involves the treatment of ailments believed to be caused by supernatural forces. Healing rituals in this domain require the invocation of deities through mantras, symbolic offerings, and sacrificial rites, and are performed exclusively by trained Maibas. The third category, Mari Suba, is a form of traditional physiotherapy that employs nerve manipulation techniques to address muscle stiffness, indigestion, and menstrual discomfort. In many cases, these physical manipulations are performed in conjunction with incantations, reflecting the inseparability of the physical and spiritual in Meitei healing.

Institutional support for traditional healing once came from the *Pandit Loishang*, a formal body responsible for the training and regulation of Maibas and Maibis. However, following political changes in 1972, this institution began to decline, leading to a gradual fragmentation of the knowledge system. Despite this setback, there are ongoing revival efforts initiated by community elders, cultural preservationists, and traditional healers to document, standardize, and re-legitimize Meitei folk medicine. These initiatives are crucial in preserving the epistemological heritage embedded in healing practices. Nonetheless, the survival of Meitei folk medicine faces significant contemporary challenges. Chief among them is the lack of formal recognition and integration into public health policy, which limits institutional support and funding. The erosion of intergenerational transmission, exacerbated by modern education and shifting value systems, further threatens the continuity of this knowledge. Additionally, the dominance of allopathic medicine and its association with scientific progress often marginalizes traditional practices as archaic or unscientific. Despite these pressures, Meitei folk medicine remains a vital component of cultural identity, particularly during rites of passage such as childbirth and funerals. Its continued relevance attests to the enduring value of holistic, culturally embedded healing systems in addressing both individual and communal well-being.

Discussion

The study of Meitei folk medicine provides rich insights into the intricate relationship between indigenous health practices and broader cultural, spiritual, and ecological worldviews. This research affirms what early ethnographers like McCulloch (1859), Brown (1868–69), and Hodson (1908) first documented that Meitei medicine is not simply a system of physical healing but an integrated practice deeply embedded in the community's cosmology and social life. Their foundational observations underscore the roles of Maibas and Maibis not only as medical practitioners but also as ritual specialists and custodians of spiritual balance. This holistic approach challenges reductionist biomedical models and highlights the value of culturally contextualized health systems that address not only physical ailments but also spiritual disharmony and social cohesion. Contemporary scholarship builds upon this legacy by emphasizing the complex philosophical underpinnings and localized knowledge sustaining Meitei folk medicine. Parratt (1980) stressed the significance of indigenous texts such as the *Maibalon* and *Hidaklon*, which articulate a metaphysical framework where health is understood through a synergy of natural and supernatural forces, reflecting a worldview in which illness results from disruptions in cosmic and ancestral relationships. This perspective aligns with ethnographic studies by Khurajam (2015), who highlighted how healing rituals mantras, offerings, and divination, function not only as therapeutic interventions but also as social performances that reinforce community identity and continuity. The gendered roles of Maibas and Maibis further illustrate a nuanced division of labor within traditional healing, where empirical botanical knowledge and ritual expertise coexist and complement one another. Devi (2017) similarly observed that herbal knowledge is localized and passed down through apprenticeships, underscoring the sophisticated epistemology integrating experiential learning, spiritual insight, and ecological awareness.

However, despite the resilience of these traditions, significant challenges confront Meitei folk medicine today. The decline of formal institutions such as the *Pandit Loishang* after 1972, noted by Kshetrimayum (1999), symbolizes a broader marginalization of indigenous knowledge amid modern state structures and biomedical dominance. Singh and Devi (2003) critically examined how colonial and postcolonial health policies favored Western medicine, relegating traditional systems to the periphery. This led to erosion in mechanisms for systematic transmission, especially as younger generations increasingly orient toward biomedicine and modern education. Furthermore, the secrecy surrounding specific herbal formulas and ritual practices complicates ethnographic documentation and wider dissemination. Sharma and Singh (2019) emphasized the lack of ethnobotanical surveys and pharmacological studies, which limits efforts to scientifically validate and preserve this knowledge, thereby hindering its integration into mainstream health services. Nevertheless, the persistence of Meitei folk medicine in everyday life and ritual practices signals its deep cultural embeddedness and adaptive capacity. Singh (1963) and later scholars noted that it remains

central to rites of passage such as birth and death ceremonies and serves as a vital source of primary healthcare in rural areas where biomedical access is limited or culturally less appropriate. Revival efforts led by community elders and cultural organizations, as documented by recent researchers, indicate growing recognition of the need to protect and institutionalize this heritage, balancing respect for tradition with contemporary health challenges. Such initiatives exemplify how indigenous healing systems can negotiate modernity without losing their epistemological foundations.

Summary and Conclusion

This study has examined Meitei folk medicine as a holistic indigenous health system that seamlessly integrates physical treatment, spiritual belief, and social practice. Rooted in a worldview that sees health as a balance between the body, mind, spirit, and environment, Meitei healing traditions reflect a deep understanding of both natural and supernatural dimensions of illness and wellness. The findings illustrate that healing among the Meiteis is not a purely medical act, but one that also restores spiritual and communal harmony. The traditional healers—Maibas and Maibis—play a pivotal role in maintaining this balance. Maibis, primarily women, act as diviners and spiritual mediators, while Maibas are male healers who may specialize in herbal knowledge or magico-religious rituals. Their specialized roles and practices underscore a culturally embedded system of knowledge transmission and ritual expertise that addresses a wide spectrum of human ailments, from the physical to the metaphysical. Meitei folk medicine encompasses a range of healing modalities. These include herbal remedies based on locally available medicinal plants, magico-religious healing involving rituals and mantras to appease deities or ancestral spirits, and nerve manipulation therapies used to treat physical discomforts. Each method reflects a sophisticated empirical and spiritual understanding passed down through oral traditions, sacred texts, and apprenticeship systems. The study also sheds light on the historical decline of formal institutions such as the Pandit Loishang, which once played a crucial role in training and legitimizing traditional healers. This institutional erosion, along with the dominance of modern biomedical systems and changing socio-cultural perceptions, has marginalized traditional medicine in contemporary society.

Nonetheless, Meitei folk healing remains vital in key life events such as birth, illness, and death, symbolizing its ongoing cultural relevance. To ensure the continuity and revitalization of this living tradition, there is an urgent need for documentation, community engagement, and policy support. Indigenous knowledge systems like Meitei folk medicine must be recognized not only as cultural heritage but also as complementary health practices that can enrich modern healthcare. An inclusive, respectful approach to health, one that values both biomedical science and traditional wisdom—is essential for building a more holistic and culturally sensitive healthcare system for future generations.

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