

## **Kinship Terminology in Meiteilon: a Sociolinguistic Study<sup>1</sup>**

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### **1.0 Introduction**

This paper examines, from a sociological perspective, the changes that have taken place in the kinship terminology of Meiteilon, since the advent of Hinduism in the kingdom of Manipur in the 18th century. First of all, it describes the changes that have taken place after the kingdom of Manipur was merged into the Indian Union in 1949. In other words, this paper attempts to spell out the processes whereby a complex of changes in parts of a social system determines a complex of changes in the corresponding parts of a linguistic system.

Friedrich (1966) has demonstrated that changes in the kinship terminology of Russian were the consequence of major changes in Russian society, namely the emancipation of serfs, the Revolution, and the two World Wars. Such major social changes have radically transformed the nature of Russian kinship and have thereby caused a drastic diminution in both the size and repertoire of the kinship terminology and the semantic specialization of the individual terms.

1.1. Prior to our discussion of the changes in the Meitei kinship terminology, it is quite relevant to have a rough idea of the complexities inherent in Meitei social structure itself.

The inhabitants of the Valley of Manipur comprise the following groups: (1) Hindu Meiteis, (2) Meitei Lois and Taithibis (scheduled castes), (3) Brahmins, (4) Mayangs (people of non-Manipur origins), (5) Kabui Nagas (scheduled castes), and (6) Pangans (Muslims).

There was no caste system during the pre-Hindu period in Manipur. Instead, there was a class system. When Hinduism was introduced into Manipur, the caste system was also brought along with it, but it was not as rigid as in other parts of medieval Hindu India. Over the past two hundred years, however, the Meiteis living in the shadow of Brahmanic caste values have acquired a great deal of caste consciousness in their habits and life

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<sup>1</sup> Meiteilon, the language of the Meiteis, is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in the state of Manipur in northeastern India. It is the official language of the state, alongside English. It is also the medium of instruction in schools up to the tenth standard. As Manipur is also the home of many other "hill tribes", Meitei serves as a *lingua franca* for the diverse population of the state. Meiteilon is also spoken in the adjacent areas of the neighboring states of Assam and Tripura, as well as in adjacent areas of Bangladesh and Burma.

style. The Brahmins do not accept cooked food or water from the remaining groups, as they are considered of low caste. The Brahmins can have a hypergamic relationship with Meiteis by marrying a Meitei woman, but a Brahmin husband maintains his ritual distance from his wife by not accepting food cooked by her.

1.2. For our present study we will consider only two groups, the Brahmins and the Hindu Meiteis. The Hindu Meiteis consist of three sub-groups: (1) the RK's (Rajkumars and Rajkumaris), (2) the Leimas, and (3) the Commoners. This study will not consider the remaining groups as they do not reside in Imphal town or its outskirts.

### 1.2.1. *The RK's*<sup>2</sup>

The Meitei RK's are the descendants of male members of the royal family. Since the advent of Hinduism they have been known as Rajkumars 'male royal descendants in the male line', and Rajkumaris 'female royal descendants in the male line'. In Meiteilon they are called *Ningthemcha* 'royal descendants'. These Rajkumars and Rajkumaris are not actually the children of kings, but the fact that a man or woman is a descendant of Garibniararaj (18th century) through the male line is sufficient to entitle a man to be a Rajkumar, and a woman to be a Rajkumari (N. Tombi Singh, 1975). The legitimate children of kings are referred to as Maharajkumar 'prince', and Maharajkumari 'princess' (in shortened form, MK), and are addressed as *məja-ibung* and *məja-ibəmə*. They have enjoyed the highest status among the royal descendants. The RK's, too, have enjoyed special privileges, such as the right to wear special types of dress, and to be provided with special seats on important occasions. This group of people claim to belong to the Meitei Kshatriya (warrior) caste group.

### 1.2.2. *The Leimas*

These people are related to the RK's. They are the descendants of female members (i.e. Rajkumaris) of the royal family. The term Leima is generally considered to refer only to the daughters of females, since this term is mostly associated with women-folk, but the group of people that can be established here on the basis of kinship usage includes both male and female children of Rajkumaris. This group also claims to belong to the same caste group as the RK's.

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<sup>2</sup> I am including the MK's (below) in this group.

### 1.2.3. *The Brahmins*<sup>3</sup>

The Brahmins form a distinct social group, as reflected in the usage of kinship terms. They have traditionally enjoyed the highest ritual status. They originally migrated into Manipur from North India. As they were naturalized in the Meitei community, they became conversant in Meiteilon.

### 1.2.4. *The Commoners (Meitei Hao Aranba)*

The Commoners form the fourth level in the hierarchy. They wear the "sacred thread" by which they also claim membership in the Kshatriya caste.

1.3. The kinship terms show distinct sets of variables corresponding to the social distinctions mentioned above. In present Imphal society, we can see a four-fold distinction in the structure of kinship terms which can be correlated with the four-fold social system, namely, the RK's, the Leimas, the Brahmins, and the Commoners.

The kinship terms used by the RK's differ from those used by the Commoners in the following points.

1.3.1. When they refer to elders (either of higher generations or the same generation), the RK terms generally take the honorific suffix -si:

<b>Terms used by the RK's</b>	<b>Gloss</b>	<b>Terms used by the Commoners</b>
ima-si	'mother'	ima
inem-si~ine-si	'paternal aunt'	ine
indon-si	'maternal aunt'	indon
icem-si	'elder sister'	ice
mam-si	'maternal uncle'	mame
ibuṅ-si	'elder brother'	ibuṅ

1.3.2. However, there are some terms belonging to this category which do not take this honorific suffix -si:

<sup>3</sup> I have put the Brahmin caste in the third category of the social hierarchy because they use the same suffixes with kinship terms as do the Leimas. Nevertheless, it is the Brahmins who enjoy the highest ritual status in the caste hierarchy, as in other parts of India.

Terms used by the RK's	Gloss	Terms used by the Commoners
pabuŋ-sənəkhwa	'father'	pabə
sənəkhwa-pure	'grandfather'	ipu-bok
yambuŋ	'elder brother'	tadə

The term pabuŋ-sənəkhwa 'father' was conventionally restricted to a king (i.e. in the RK groups) and his immediate relatives, such as his brothers.

1.3.3. It may be noted that the honorific suffix -si is never used in terms for younger kin in ego's generation or descending generations. For example, it is not used in terms like inaw 'younger sister' (for female ego), or ica 'child'. In other words, the suffix -si is attached to the basic kinship terms in order to denote respect to elder kinfolk (whether in ego's generation or ascending generations).

1.3.4. In the case of kin younger than ego (i.e. younger kin in ego's generation or descending generations), honorific suffixes, namely, ibuŋo 'my dear (male)', and ibemə 'my dear (female)', are attached only in the immediate circle of kings, e.g. inaw-ibuŋo 'younger brother' (for a female ego), inaw-ibemə 'younger sister' (for a female ego), etc.

Furthermore, there are other terms derived from the kinship terms which have non-kin connotations, namely, məja-ibuŋo 'prince', and məja-ibemə 'princess'. These two terms have been derived from the kinship terms məca-ibuŋo 'his son', and məca-ibemə 'his daughter', respectively.

1.4. The Leima group uses the same set of honorific suffixes that are used in the case of younger kin of the RK's (only the RK's who are in the immediate circle of kings). But in the case of the Leima, the suffixes are attached only to the elder kinship terms (whether in ego's generation or ascending generations), e.g.

Terms used by the Leimas	Gloss	Terms used by the Commoners
taybuŋo-tamo	'elder brother'	tadə
khura-ibuŋo	'paternal uncle'	khura
indo-ibemə	'maternal aunt'	indon