Taboo in Meiteiron

N. Pramodini
Manipur University, India

INTRODUCTION

Meiteiron taboo words reflect the values and beliefs of Meitei society. Which words become taboo is determined by various religious, social, and psychological factors. This study classifies Meitei taboos into those on using personal names, on using kin terms, on the use of certain names, on naming certain animals, on naming certain diseases, on using certain words connected with spirits, on using certain terms at night, on religious constraints on using certain words, and on using words connected with sex. Some words are taboo because of their phonetic similarity to taboo words. Taboo on words which are phonetically similar to the tabooed words. And, finally there are semi-taboo words. The understanding of taboo requires examining these taboos not only in terms of how they are presently viewed but also in terms of the way they were at earlier times and how they have changed, due to factors like education and outside contact.

Taboo, namujbo, in Meiteiron, is embedded in Meitei society. Taboo is a socio-cultural phenomenon, with linguistic taboos the result of earlier social taboos. Therefore linguistic taboos vary with social changes. Thus, our study of linguistic taboos will be examined in a wider contextual framework. First, however, some examples of taboos are given below (â = low tone; ā = high tone). Note that some of these are taboos; others are more superstitions.

1. Meiteis are the inhabitants of Manipur valley; their mother tongue is Meiteiron
1. tōwhāydābā
   tōw-hāy- dā-bā lit. ‘tell not to do’
   dōₕ -tell- neg-inf
   ‘forbidden to do’. Killing an animal or even a fly without reason is
tāhāydābā ‘forbidden to do’.

2. sēthāydābā
   sēt-lu hāy - dā - bā lit. ‘tell not to wear’
   wear-tell-neg-inf
   ‘forbidden to wear’. It was forbidden for a commoner to wear a
phanek (Sarong type; thānbal mācu ‘colour of lotus’) striped hori-
zontally with pink (the more dominant colour), red and black. Only
queens and their immediate kin had the privilege of wearing it.

   cīlhāydābā
   cīłu-hāy -dā - bā lit. ‘tell not to wear’
   wear-tell-neg-inf
   ‘forbidden to wear’. A girl should not wear a flower in the morning
out of the fear that she will get an old man for her life partner.

3. cāthāydābā
   cālłu- hāy - dā - bā lit. ‘tell not to go’
   go-tell-neg-inf
   ‘forbidden to go’. It would be inauspicious for one to go south on
Thursdays.

4. tāhāydābā
   tāw-hāy- dā-bā lit. ‘tell not (to) listen’
   listen-tell-neg-inf
   ‘forbidden to hear’. It is forbidden to hear about unwanted or nega-
tively sanctioned acts such as abortion and some abusive expres-
sions referring to sex are forbidden.

5. hāyhāydābā
   hāyu- hāy- dā- bā lit. ‘tell not to tell’
tell-tell-neg-inf
‘unutterable’. -or-

ŋúŋhóydôba
ŋúŋu-háy-da-bô lit. ‘tell not to speak
speak-tell-neg-inf
‘unspeakable’ -or-

pólhádôba
pólu-háy-da-bô lit. ‘tell not to mention’
mention-tell-neg-inf
‘unmentionable’

It is also forbidden utter the words for miscarry, abortion, or for deadly diseases such as cholera and small pox.

6. cáhóydôba
cáw-háy-da-bô lit. ‘tell not to eat’
eat-tell-neg-inf
‘forbidden to eat’. For example, the Mangang clan of Meitei community is prohibited from eating sabot lin manbi (a gourd which looks like a snake) ‘snake gourd’. Pakhangba, the first king of the recorded history of Manipur, who ruled in 33 A.D. and who belonged the Mangang clan, was believed to be able to transform himself into a snake. And, in fact, a snake is a totem of this clan. Thus, by extension, the snake gourd, whose name has the word lin ‘snake’ in it, cannot be eaten by members of this clan.

7. yéhóydôba
yélu-háy-da-bô lit. ‘tell not (to) look’
look-tell-neg-inf
‘forbidden to watch’. For example, it is forbidden to watch while a
Brahmin priest changes the clothes of, for instance, Vishnu.

Taboos on the use of personal names

There are four different personal names with prohibitions on their use: a deceased person’s name, one’s husband’s name, an older person’s name, and a secret name.

1. Prohibition of deceased person’s name

Under normal circumstances, uttering a deceased person’s name is prohibited in the presence of relatives of the deceased. If it is necessary to refer to a deceased person, a circumlocution is used such as $\text{lých} idrâba ‘the person (male) who is no more alive’ along with appropriate kin term (if the deceased person is older than the speaker); if the deceased person is younger than the speaker, then the phrases used are $\text{lých} idrâba ibujo for ‘males’ and $\text{lých} idrâbi ibema for ‘females’. Both are respectful terms ‘my dear’ to refer to the dead.

To refer to dead people who were around seventy or more, the terms used are baysiařa (borrowed from the Sanskrit word vaysenav) for ‘males’ and baysiařabi for ‘females’. These circumlocutions show not only respect to the deceased but also to the relatives. Similar prohibitions are widespread. Such prohibitions are found amongst the Australians and Polynesians, the Samoyedh of Siberia, the Todas of Southern India, the Mongols of Tartary, the Tuareg of the Sahara, the Ainu of Japan, the Akamba and Nandi of central Africa, the Tinguians of the Philippines and the inhabitants of the Nicobar Islands, of Borneo, of Madagascar and of Tasmania (Frazer, 1911b:353).

2. The use of these terms indicates that the Meiteis are followers of the Vaisnavite faith.