Kinship and Gender in Meiteiron

Th. Indrashakhi Devi, Ph.D. Candidate

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Ningol Chakouba (A Manipuri Festival). Picture taken from
http://manipur.nic.in/festivals.htm

Introduction

Kinship system is the system of organizing people who are relatives into different kinds of groups. This system is bound to have an important effect upon the ways in which relatives are labeled in a given society. Therefore kinship terminologies are the reflections of positions that individuals occupy within their society. In particular, kinship terminology is affected by and adjusted to the kinds of kinship groups that exist is a society.

Kinship System in Meiteiron

Kinship system is also a very important aspect of Meiteiron (known also as Manipuri or Meithei language, spoken primarily in the state of Manipur in India, but also in other states of India as well as in Myanmar and Bangladesh) and in which gender relations are manifested.

The kinship terms in Meiteiron are distinguished primarily on the basis of age, generation and gender. Kinship terminologies reflect the patterned interactions of related individuals. Here, in this article, kinship system of Meitei is presented with an attempt to show how gender relations are crystallised in the system.

Meiteiron kinship terminology is interesting in the sense that kinship terms are different for the same person based upon the gender of the speaker and the gender of the linked relative. For example, an elder cousin-brother is referred to as well as addressed by using *itəy, ibai* – 'elder male cousin' respectively by women and men. And the term *iməw* – 'niece' is used for the brother's daughter by a female ego and for the sister's daughter by

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a male by male ego. Therefore we can approach the problem of kinship terminologies with reference to the following three determinants:

1. Gender of the person addressed or/and referred to
2. Gender of the liking relative
3. Gender of ego

The gender differentiation in kinship terminology is the case of reference terms than in address terms. This may be due to the fact that the address terms undergo changes more easily with the societal changes.

Cheiraoba: The Manipur New Year Feast

The above kinship expressions are discussed as below:

1. Gender of the person addressed or/and referred to

Most of the terms specify the gender of the kin's men. In case of terms which do not specify the gender of the addresses or the person referred to, one can add distractive words, such as *nupə* – ' male' and *nupi* – 'female' to the kin terms and there by removing ambiguity.

Female	Gloss	Male	Gloss
icə-nupi	'daughter'	icə-nupə	'son'
ima	'mother'	ipə	'father'
ine	'father's sister	kʰura	'father's brother younger'
indomca	'uncle's wife' (father's younger brother)	mammə	'aunt's husband '

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Further, some of the terms which are earlier used as address and reference terms are now being retained only for the reference purpose. For example, the word *tədə* – 'elder brother' which is being used as an address term, while the native term *iyambə* – 'elder bother' for a male ego and *ibuŋ* –'elder brother' for a female ego, the terms are being used for reference purpose only.

2. Gender of the linking relative

There are certain kinship terms which can neither determined by the gender of the ego nor by the gender of the addressee, for this purpose we have to take into consideration of the gender of the liking relative. Regarding terminologies relating to the gender of the liking relatives, Pramodini (2005) opines that gender of the liking relatives are important since people are related differently through male and female links. Terms which involve the gender of the liking relatives are confirmed to ego's generation, the first ascending and descending generations.

Kinship terms in ego's generation

Liking relative	Relation	Term used by a male	Term used by a female
Mother's bother	Elder female cross cousin	itəymə	inəmmə
Father's sister	Elder male cross cousin	ibai	itəy
Father's sister	Younger female cross cousin	inaw-nupi	icən-nupi
Father's sister	Younger male cross cousin	isen	inaw
Father's brother	Elder female parallel cousin	ice	ice
Mother's sister	Younger female parallel cousin	icən	inaw (nupi)
Mother's sister	Elder male parallel cousin	iyambə	ibuŋ
Mother's sister	Younger male parallel cousin	inaw (nupi)	ipəwa
Mother/daughter	Husband	imak	iya

Kinship terms in first descending generation

Liking relative	Relation	Term used by a male	Term used by a female
Sister/brother	Nephew	imak	iya

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Sister/brother	Niece	iməw	iməw

Kinship terms in the ascending generation show no gender differentiation.

Terms used for same gender relation

Linking relative	Relation	Terms used by female
Sister/sister	Son of sister (female ego)	icanupa
Sister/sister	Daughter of sister (female ego)	icanupi
Brother/brother	Son of brother (male ego)	icanupa
Brother/brother	Daughter of brother (male ego)	icanupi

Gender of the connecting relatives is important in Meitei kinship system in the sense that collaterals tend to be merged when the gender of the relative is the same as the person addressed or referred to.

Father's brother's and mother's sister's children are classified as brothers and sisters. On the other hand, father's sister's and mother's brother's children are treated as cousins. Likewise a female's brother's children are *iya* and *iməw* – 'nephews and niece' whereas children of sister's are *icanupa* and *icanupi* – 'sons and daughter' and vice versa. In this regard, according to Pramodini (2005), "The terms which are distinguished by the gender of the liking relatives are directly related to the form of marriage (i.e. matrilineal cross-cousin marriage) embedded in the Meitei kinship terminology which is also believed to have been the practice in the earlier period."

3. Gender of the ego

Some of the terms in Meiteiron are used only by females and some are used only by males. Some examples are given below.

Female	Male	Gloss
ibuŋ	iyambə	'elder brother'
Inaw	icəl	'younger sister'
ipəwa	inaw	'younger brother'
itəy	ibay	'brother in law'

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inammə	itəymə	'sister-in-law'
iya	imak	'daughter's husband'
iya	icanupə	'brother's son'
icanupi	iməw	'sister daughter'
iməw	icanupi	'brother's daughter'

Use of Distinct Terms by Males and Females

Maibi Dance of Manipuris. http://manipur.nic.in/Art&Culture.htm

What we observe by the study of kinship terms in Meiteiron is that there are distinct terms to be used exclusively by females and males. For example, *ibuŋ* –'elder brother', *ipəwa* – 'younger brother', *inəmmə* – 'elder sister-in-law', *itəy* – 'elder brother-in-law', etc., are exclusively used by females. Terms *iyambə* – 'elder brother', *ibai* – 'elder brother-in-law', *isen* – 'younger brother-in-law', and *itəymə* – 'elder sister-in-law' are used only by males. Not only this, different terms are being used for the same person in accordance with the ego.

Age, Generation and Gender in Kinship Terms

The Meitei system of kinship terminology is consistently characterised by careful discrimination of age, generation and gender. With regard to kinship terminology, women use exclusive kinship terms. For example: *iya* – 'nephew' (for a female speaker) and *ica* – 'son' (for a male speaker), here gender of the speaker and gender of addressee and gender of linking relative play an important role.

The term *iya* – 'nephew' is for a female speaker, gender of addressee is male and gender of linking relative is also a male (brother of the female speakers). The same person is referred to as *ica* – 'my son' for a male ego, here the linking relative is a male (bother of the male speaker).

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To Conclude

A statue on Nupilal Complex, Imphal. Picture by Amal Sanasam. Taken from
http://manipurcomments.wordpress.com/2008/04/08/social-empowerment-of-manipuri-
women/

What we can conclude here is that Meitei women are viewed to be subordinate to males
as they maintain a different sub-culture. There are distinct domains for males and females
in Meitei society and the two genders do not try to cross each other's domain. And with
the analysis of vocabulary differences between the genders we can rightly conclude that
the domains are different, role and status are different for Meitei males and females.

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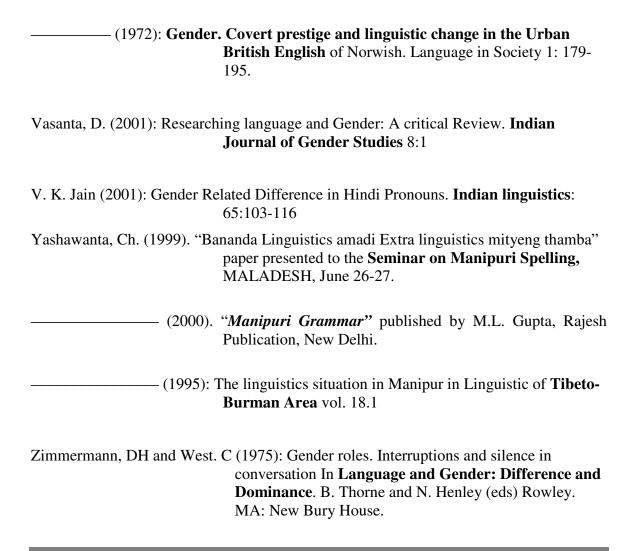**Th. Indrashakhi, Ph.D. Candidate., Kinship and Gender in Meiteiron.**

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