

AN IMAGINED GRAPHIC HISTORY OF THE MEITEI GRAPHIC NARRATIVE

—

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PREFACE



Incident 1: Out of the blue, my inquisitive four-year-old nephew asked why his black toy is black. As much as I was amazed by the question, it left me pondering. Should I narrate the chlorophyll-and-the-grass-is-green story? Or should I explain it philosophically? Will he be able to comprehend the jargon I would use? I doubt it.

Incident 2: During one of the sessions of the Methodology Workshop of the Fragrance of Peace project, Tarun Bhartiya expressed his concern over the use of jargon in academic writing that makes it inaccessible to everyone apart from its own circle.

If the first incident motivated me to conceptualize this project, then the second supplied its political relevance. In other words, if the former with a naive query on colour sets the stage for this project, which is on graphic narratives and paintings inclusive of illustrative arts, then the latter bridges the gap between academics and activism with a jargon-free political piece of writing that constitutes one of the many aims of this project. This is a creative exploratory project that imagines how the story of the genre of Meitei graphic narrative could have been. I have termed it thus because of the want of a better term. I have decided to use the more inclusive term ‘story’ rather than the gendered term ‘(his)story’. However, in my usage, ‘story’ retains the

meaning that ‘history’ carries. For this project, I trace this story (or rather, an imagined story) by examining the story of the Meitei Mayek (or Meitei script) and the (his)story of paintings of the Meiteis that predominantly began in the form of illustrative art (starting from Mutua Bahadur’s collection detailed in the next paragraph), and linking these written forms with the oral form of Meitei folk tales.

Since the 1960s, Mutua Bahadur (b.1948) has been an ardent collector of the cultural artifacts of Manipur in India’s Northeast. To house these artifacts, he established the Mutua Museum in Keishampat, Imphal (Manipur), in 1978; the Cultural Heritage Complex in Andro village, Imphal, in 1993; and a ‘living museum’ in Purul village, Senapati (Manipur), in 1990. The (his)story of illustrative arts in this project is drawn from his pioneering book *Illustrated Manuscripts of Manipur* (2005). Apart from him, Ningthoujam Bhadra Singh (1861–1927) and Rajkumar Chandrajitsana Singh (1924–2004, famously known as RKCS) are the two earliest popular Meitei artists whose paintings were realist in both themes and styles. Belonging to a family of painters, RKCS established the art studio RKCS Chitralaya in 1947 and the eponymous art gallery RKCS Museum of Arts and Craft in 2003, both in Keishamthong, Imphal. His grandfather, Rajkumar Goura Singh (1828–1922), and his father, Rajkumar Yumjaosana Singh (1870–1954) were painters, as is his son, Rajkumar Budhimanta Singh (b.1959). Budhimanta has an interest in miniature art, bottle art, innovative art, and topiary art, and he often reproduces the realist paintings of his father.

In this popular (his)story of Meitei painting dominated by the legacies of Bhadra and RKCS, women artists are absent. I critique this by introducing a contemporary artist from Manipur, Laishram Meena Devi (b.1989), who is based in New Delhi. Having earned a Master’s degree in Fine Arts, she experiments with different styles ranging from decorative and expressionist to impressionist. However, sometimes she also paints in the traditional style that emphasizes realism.

There are no Meiteilon word equivalents for the terms ‘comics’, ‘graphic novel’, or ‘graphic narrative’. Ian Gordon (2011) observed that these terms have been used synonymously but they are not the same. While Art Spiegelman was uneasy with this distinction, Gordon, in line with Joseph Witek’s observations, contends that comics refers to the genre, while a graphic novel is the marketing term for the genre (Gordon 2011)—the latter is a form within the umbrella term of graphic narratives (Chute and DeKoven 2006; Eisner 1996). Subsequently, I have used graphic narrative in the rest of this preface. For this project, Kshetrimayum Subadani Devi’s *The Illustrated Folk Tales of Manipur* (2010) is an important interventionist text in two ways: firstly, because of its language politics that finds an ally in Meitei nationalism, which I term as gendered; secondly, in the folk tales it showcases. The latter in turn could also be associated with nation making. Subadani’s book allows oral folk stories to coexist with transliterated Meiteilon writing accompanied by hand-drawn pictures that characterizes a graphic narrative. This book probably finds precedence in Anant Pai’s vision of ‘an Indian comic book series’ (McLain 2011) that got fulfilled with the publication of the first *Amar Chitra Katha* in 1969. This publication also inaugurates the entry of ‘modern Hindu nationalist ideology’ (McLain 2011) into the world of Indian comics for children. However, resisting this nationalist agenda of the Hindu Indian nation, Subadani’s graphic narrative combines the folk tales of the dominant Meiteis (the community she belongs to) with those of the Rongmei Nagas in order to remind us of a past before Christianity and Hinduism had entered Manipur, when the divide between the hills and the valley was not so sharp. As a result, I argue that through the form of the graphic narrative, Subadani provides a totalizing Meitei imagination of the polity in Manipur, which is of course not without its own problems of majoritarianism, hegemony, and exclusion/inclusion. Nonetheless, according to this imagination, the relation between the various ‘diametrical’ nationalisms (a term I borrow from Malem Ningthouja’s eponymous book *Diametrical*

Nationalisms: Rulers, Rebels and Masses in Manipur, 2015) in Manipur is hierarchical, while their corresponding collective memories (in the sense that folk tales are repositories of memories) is one of ‘rhizome’ (a term coined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 1987 that is characterized by a principle of multiplicity). I further argue that this Meitei imagination is possible because of the form of the graphic narrative. This characteristic of graphic narratives was highlighted by Nick Sousanis in his book *Unflattening* (2015). Still, this project distinguishes itself from Subadani’s text, which was created in line with the popular Western form of graphic narrative that existed before the 1970s and were imports (specifically talking about Subadani’s text here) from the United States and Britain as John A. Lent (2015) observed and about which Scott McCloud—the ‘Aristotle of comics’—theorized. This project, thus, aims to develop a new imagined graphic narrative form and to represent this development in the form of a graphic story.

Till date, specifically within the context of India’s Northeast, the theorists of graphic narratives have focused on the reception of this form (for example, in the larger context of India, E. Dawson Varughese’s *Visuality and Identity in Post-Millennial Indian Graphic Narratives* (2018)). This project focuses on their production instead—more precisely the story of their production as an author or a writer or a composer or a compiler or an illustrator or a creator—all of whom contribute towards their making. I refer to them as creators henceforth. More clearly, the political urgency of the issues in the Northeast that constitutes the content of the comics/graphics often overshadows the form, rendering the latter less significant. In my knowledge, no one so far, in the context of the Northeast, has attempted to theorize the form and its politics. This is the gap my project intends to fill. Moreover, the creators of graphic narratives on the Northeast so far have predominantly used the form to write about stories of conflict, struggle, and violence, but in this project, the form itself is used to narrate the story of the form that emerged amidst violence. In other

words, the focus here is not the politics of violence, rather the politics of the form used to critique the violence.

There is a specific politics of form deployed in the use of first person in this project. Since this story is an imagined rendition, I believe that the use of the first-person pronoun will give a sense of 'authority' to the 'marginal' narrator(s) of the story/stories who is/are simultaneously also the main character(s). Hence, there is the use of 'I'. However, there is more than one 'I' in the story. It is predominantly the 'Meitei graphic narrative' but it can also be the border design of the illustrated manuscripts, or a character from a folk tale or on a page, or an alphabet, or even me. The reason for using the first-person pronoun for so many characters in this story is also politically motivated. One common characteristic of all these characters is their marginality in their respective contexts. It is as if the story is their space to voice their concerns, assert their presence, and critique hegemony of all kinds. The violence of stereotyping women is critiqued by making the stereotyped figures speak for themselves and by making them ask pertinent questions. The violence of the hegemony of the popular Western form of graphic narratives is critiqued as I attempt to imagine the 'Meitei graphic narrative'.

The interlude on graphic narratives that has been included is intentional. Its significance lies in the fact that it gives a certain direction to the story, reminding the reader of the purpose of blending these stories with appropriate folk tales. In order to imagine this story of a form, I rely on existing relevant formal theories of the 'comics'. I found Sousanis and McCloud just as useful as Lent,, who had done extensive work on comics in Asia, including India, and Varughese. Furthermore, in a conference held at the University of Hyderabad in 2015, a fellow presenter who was working on Bengali Pattachitra art and its use in graphic narratives/comics did try to critique this concept of sequential art in comics. She demonstrated that a graphic narrative drawn in the tradition of Pattachitra art refuses to fit into the reading method prescribed for comics or graphic narratives. The story can

begin from any point on the page. There are no restrictive panels to divide or to hierarchize the page. My own imagined rendition is both influenced by and aligns with this position.

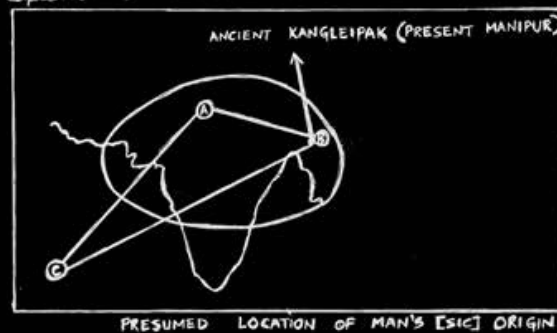
According to McCloud (1994), the defining characteristic of a comic is its sequential form of causality/development that orders a story into a beginning, a middle, and an end, and that constitutes the form of story-telling. To link this definition with the story of the Meitei Mayek, I bring in Sohini Ray (2009), who contends that ‘the central idea of the philosophy of the Meitei Mayek [script]’ is that ‘the letters are derived from the different parts of the [human] body’. This made her conclude that ‘each of the letters in the alphabet resembled parts of the human body’ (Ibid.). I argue that even if the Meitei Mayek alphabets were not sequential in this sense, the numerals were. In other words, each of the alphabets thus functions as a ‘pictorial’ image that could later constitute a comic in the sense McCloud theorized. However, on closer examination, it is found that these images only represent the first alphabets of the body parts they stand for and not the sounds of alphabets, even when these alphabets are taught along with the images. Also, the fact that they lack any ‘deliberate sequence’ disqualifies them from being considered similar to comics. The numerals, in contrast, are derived from the embryonic development of a human foetus. Each numeral represents and is represented by a stage in the growth of a foetus inside a womb. In this sense, the numerals therefore are represented by images, which are ‘deliberately’ arranged in a sequential manner. For example, ‘ama’ represents the foetus in its first month, ‘ani’ in its second month, and so forth till ‘tarah’—the foetus in its tenth month, which is pictorially represented by a foetus in its first month lying outside next to an empty womb (which represents ‘ceeno’ or zero).

Yet, the graphic narrative that I have imagined will not and need not fit in to this definition—as I have argued, or rather will argue, that the (his)story of the script is also the (his)story of paintings, including illustrative arts. I imagine them by weaving them together

with appropriate stories from the Meitei folk tales. Still, the narrative is told in the random order in which the Meitei Mayek alphabets are arranged and the (his)story of Meitei paintings including illustrative arts is represented pictorially, both of which, owing to the limitations of the form of story-telling, necessarily must constitute a sequence.

This is a story from 'Kangleipak.' It is the 'ancient' name for the Meitei Kingdom. It is now reduced to the present-day Manipur: a state in India's Northeast.

From a dot in Professor Jia Lanpo's map indicating the origin of Homo Sapiens on Earth:



To the Munnipoor of Captain Henry Yule:



This is how present-day Manipur looks on several maps:

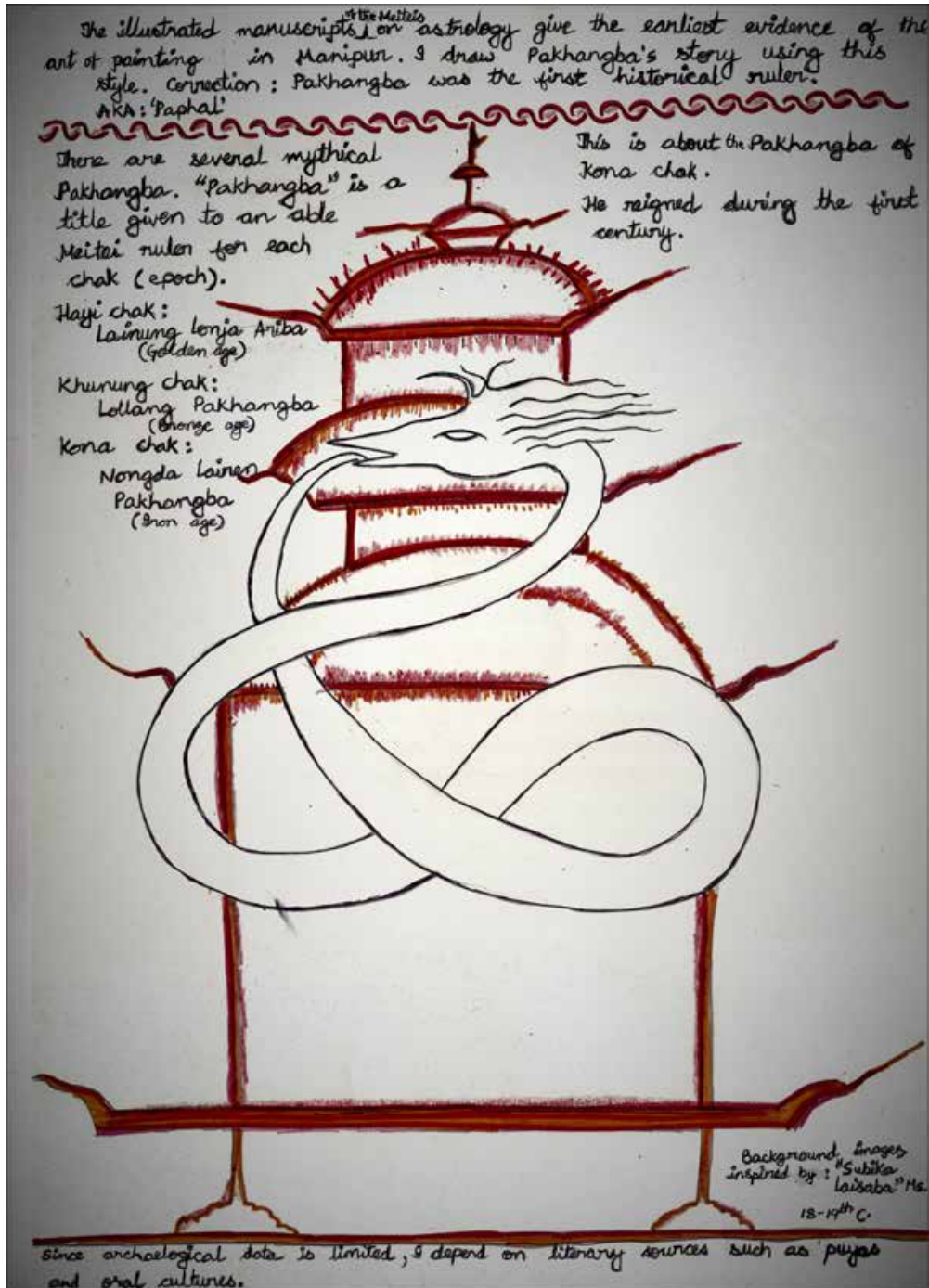


KANGLEIPAK?
xxx XUKI STATE
■ NAGALIM



Let me begin this story with the tale of Pakhangba, who was the first mythical King of the Meiteis. Nongda Lairon Pakhangba was described by the phrase: "Nungthil lai eiba Numidang Hi eiba," which means: "the one who appears as God during the day and as human at night." In order to depict the balance between creation and destruction, the symbol of Pakhangba is in the form of a serpent biting its own tail.

Courtesy: Vijayalakshmi Brara's "Politics, Society and Cosmology in India's North East"



After invoking Pakhangba, the 'real' story begins. It is the story of what, how, and when of 9, me, and myself. Oops, I forgot; by the way, I am 'Meitei graphic narrative'. So, the story of the script contains all stories. Please read the Preface for details.



Character one enters.



Hi, I am the first letter of the script. My sound is 'ka'. I am derived from 'Kok' which means the head. This head is in right profile view.

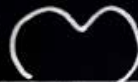


It is less known, but I also resemble 'wakon,' that is, a row of bamboo trees.



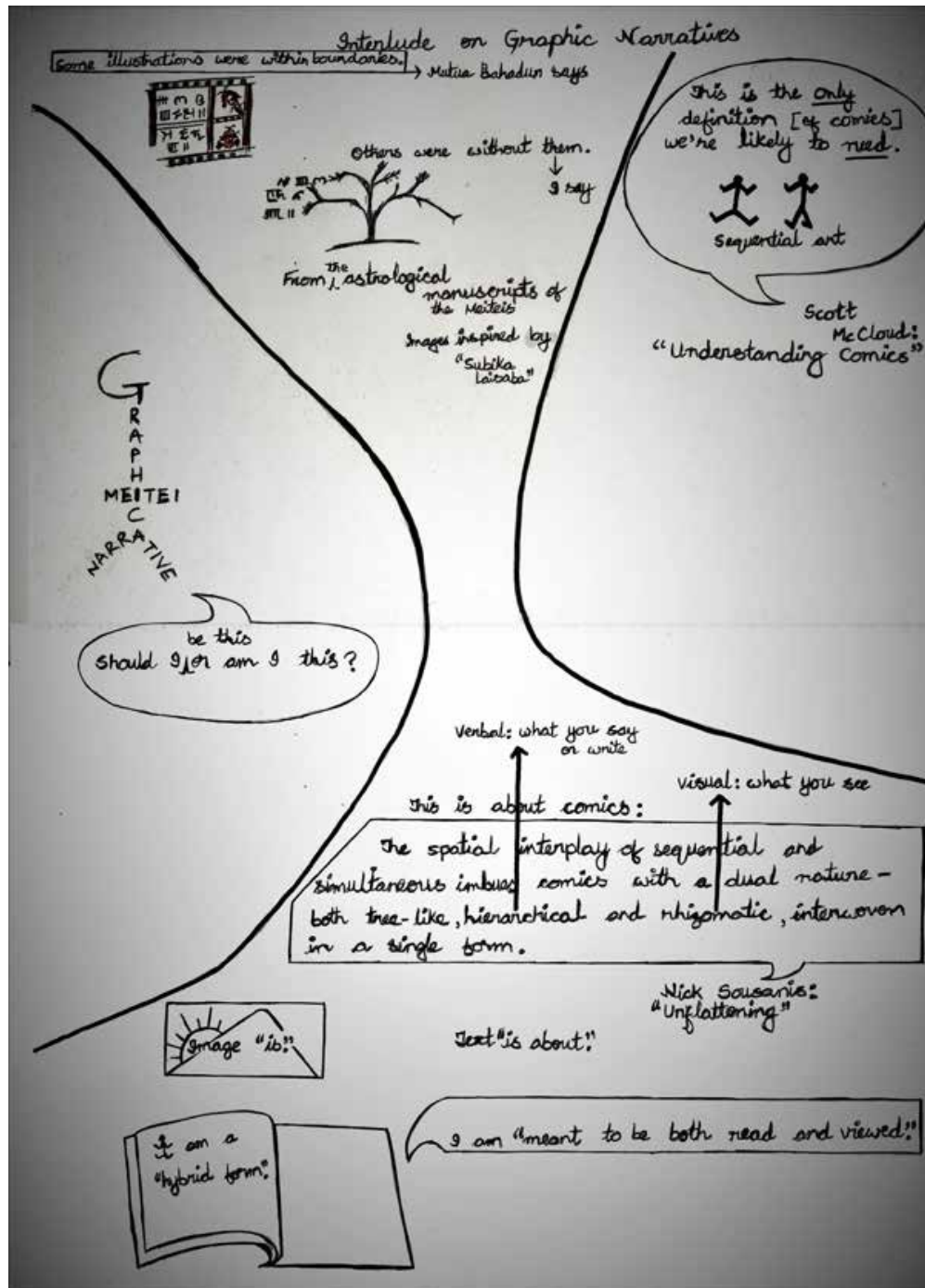
I bound the illustrated manuscripts on orthology during Khagemba's reign (1547-1652 AD).

Enter character two, derived from the 'sa' sound of the word 'bam' or hair.

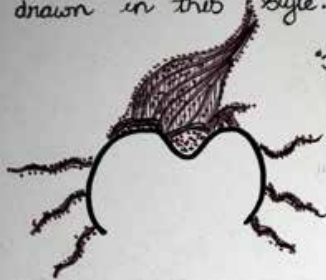


In the 18th century, I am the head of a Meitei hero; but this story is on the hair. I also come from 'singlee,' meaning nerve. This reminds of the story of 'Toro.'

→ Crown of a prawn head worn by Meitei kings during the Meitei festival of Heigru Hidongba. (Inspired by 'subika laisaba')



Painting as a movement started late in Manipur, as late as ^{the} 1860s. The paintings of Ningthoujam Chacha Singh (1861-1927) and almost all Meitei graphic narratives were realist in both themes and style. They were probably influenced by ^{or similar to} the artistic movement called Realism that began in France in the 1850s. Joro's story is drawn in this style.



"Hello, I am Joro. They call me 'the madwoman' with unkempt hair. I am considered 'abnormal'."



Khamba



Thoibi



Nongban's sister: Joro

I am a minor character in the famous Meitei legendary love story of Khamba and Thoibi.

I am the 'villain', Nongban's sister. Wait! My story is different from Ravana's sister, Supranakha's.



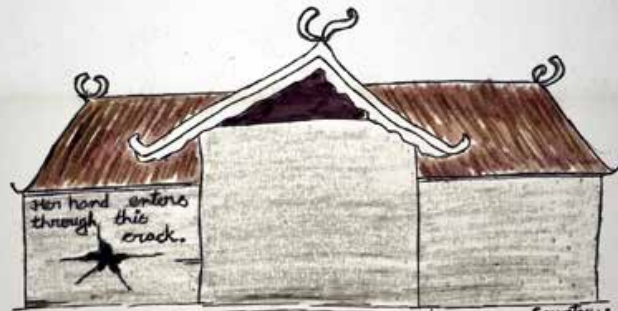
Why am I always a woman and never a man?

Figures inspired by:
Rhes and "Subika laisaba"

Next enter "lai" derived from "laibak" or forehead as well as "lai," meaning God but also painting. The following story has no relation to the "lai" of "laibak," but the sound "lai" leads me to the story of "Lai Khutshangbi." She is one "lai" or God who is not revered but feared. Her story is told in Rajkumar Chandrajitsana Singh, more famously RKCS's, style. (1924-2004)



This is her hand as represented in folk tales.



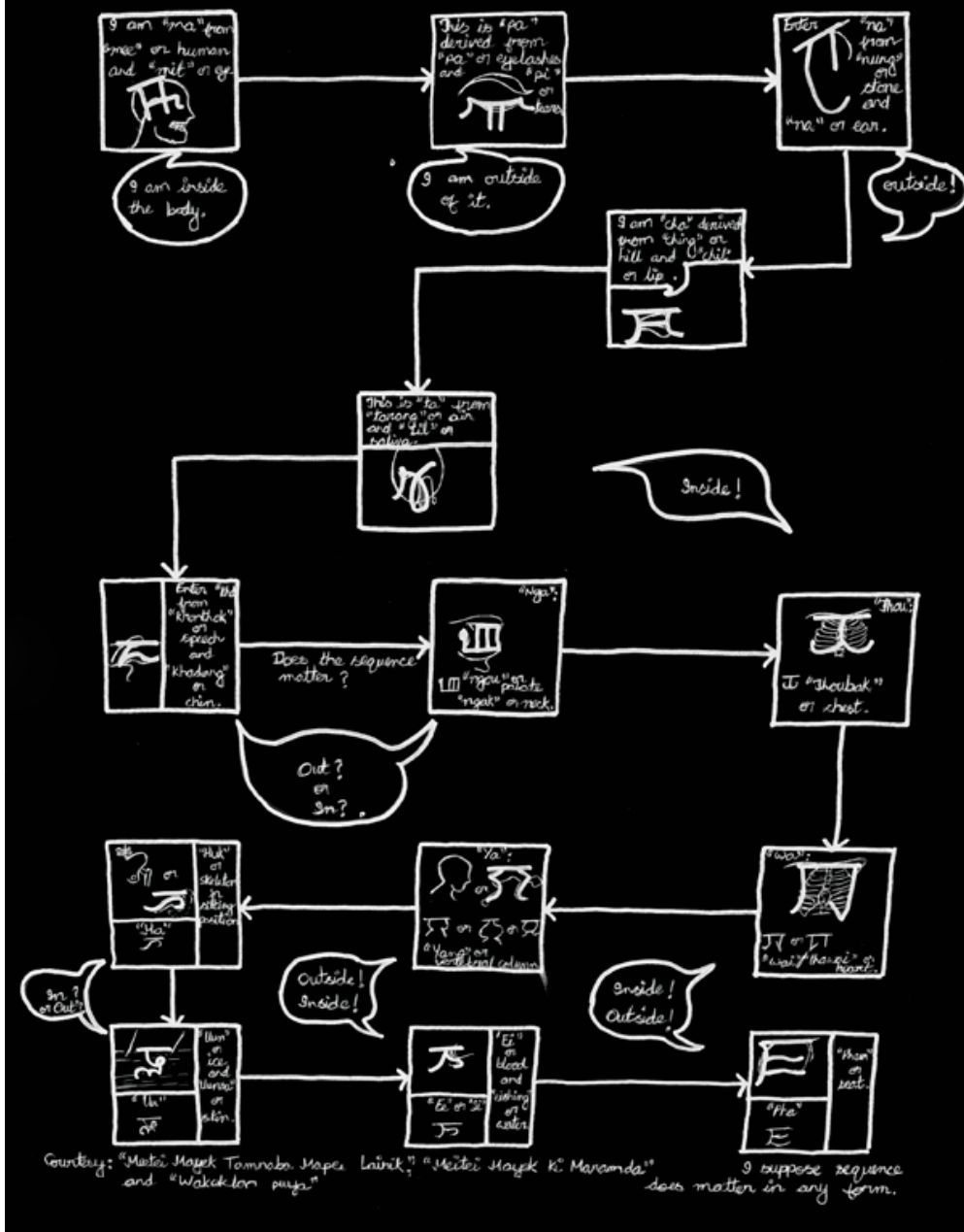
the victims are:
the weak -
women and
children.

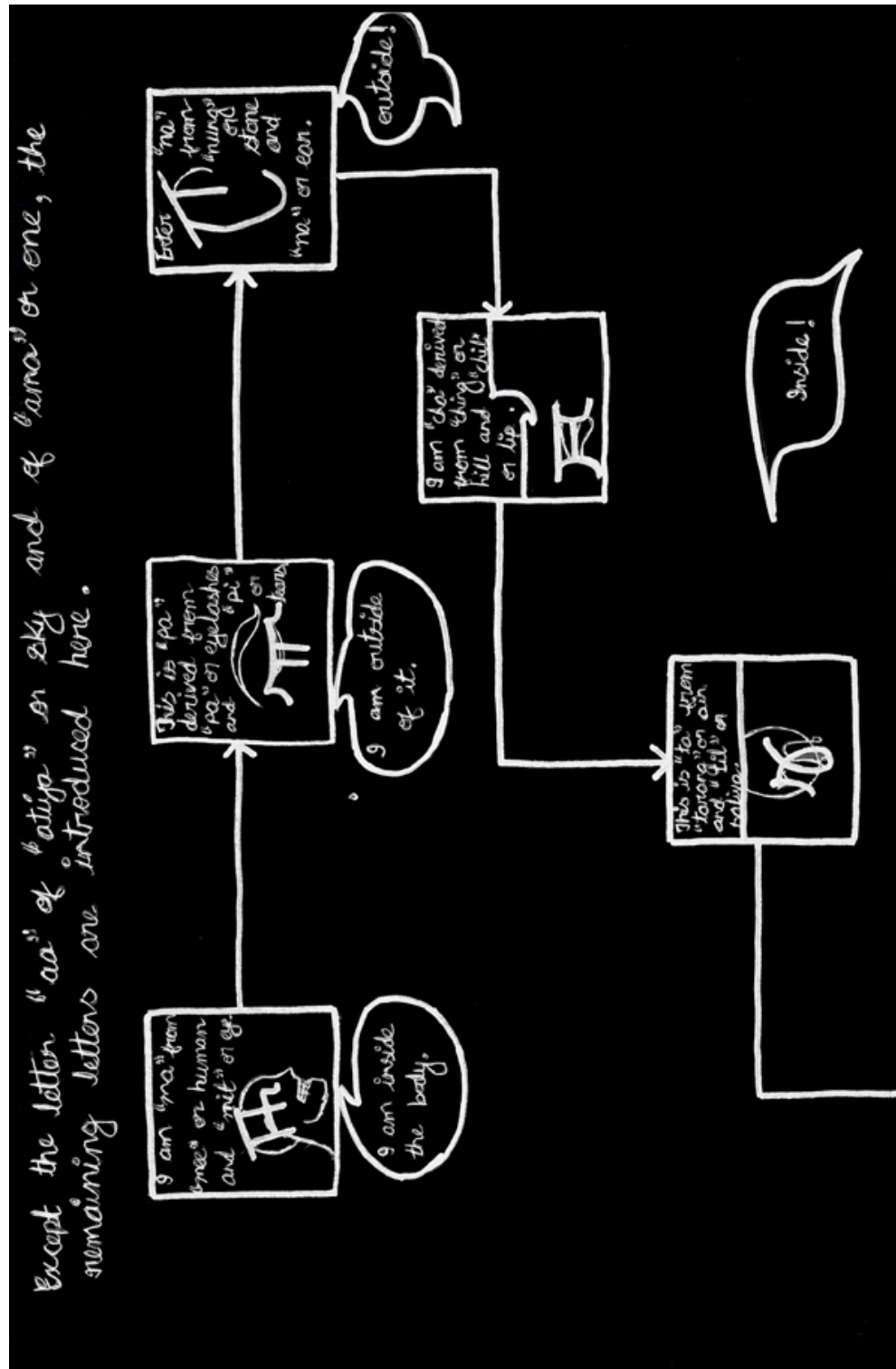


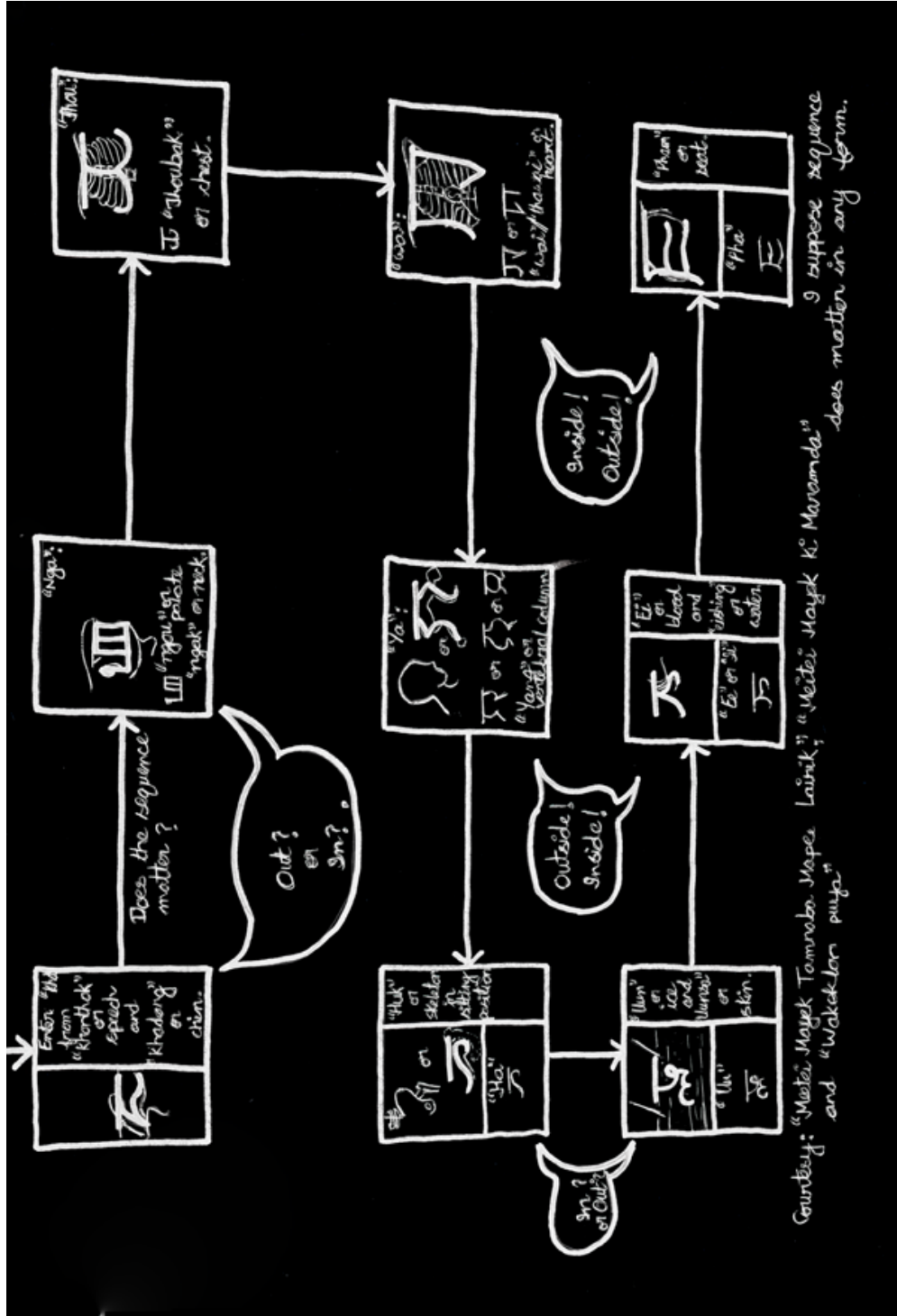
Courtesy: RKCS

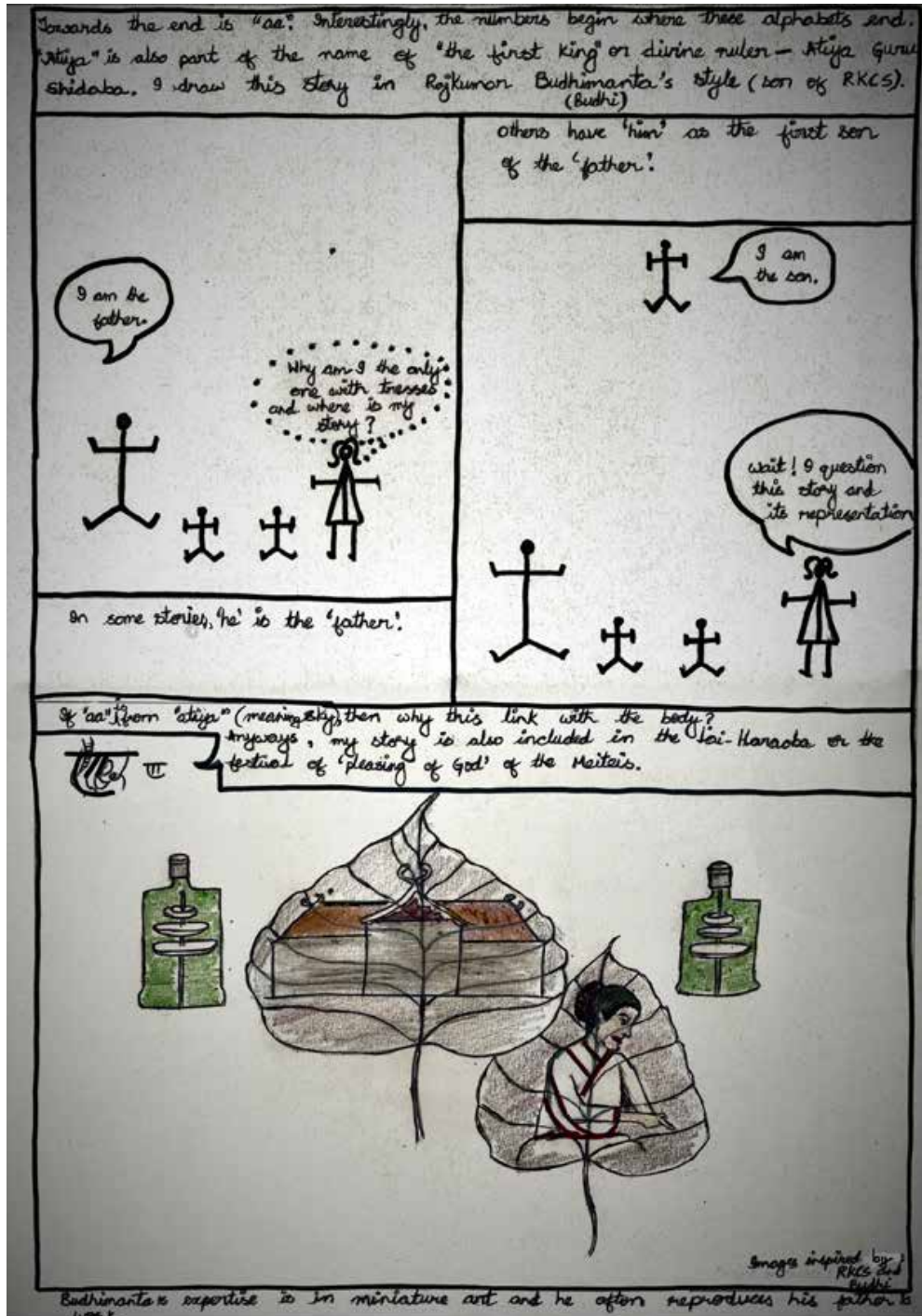
AN IMAGINED GRAPHIC HISTORY OF THE MEITEI GRAPHIC NARRATIVE

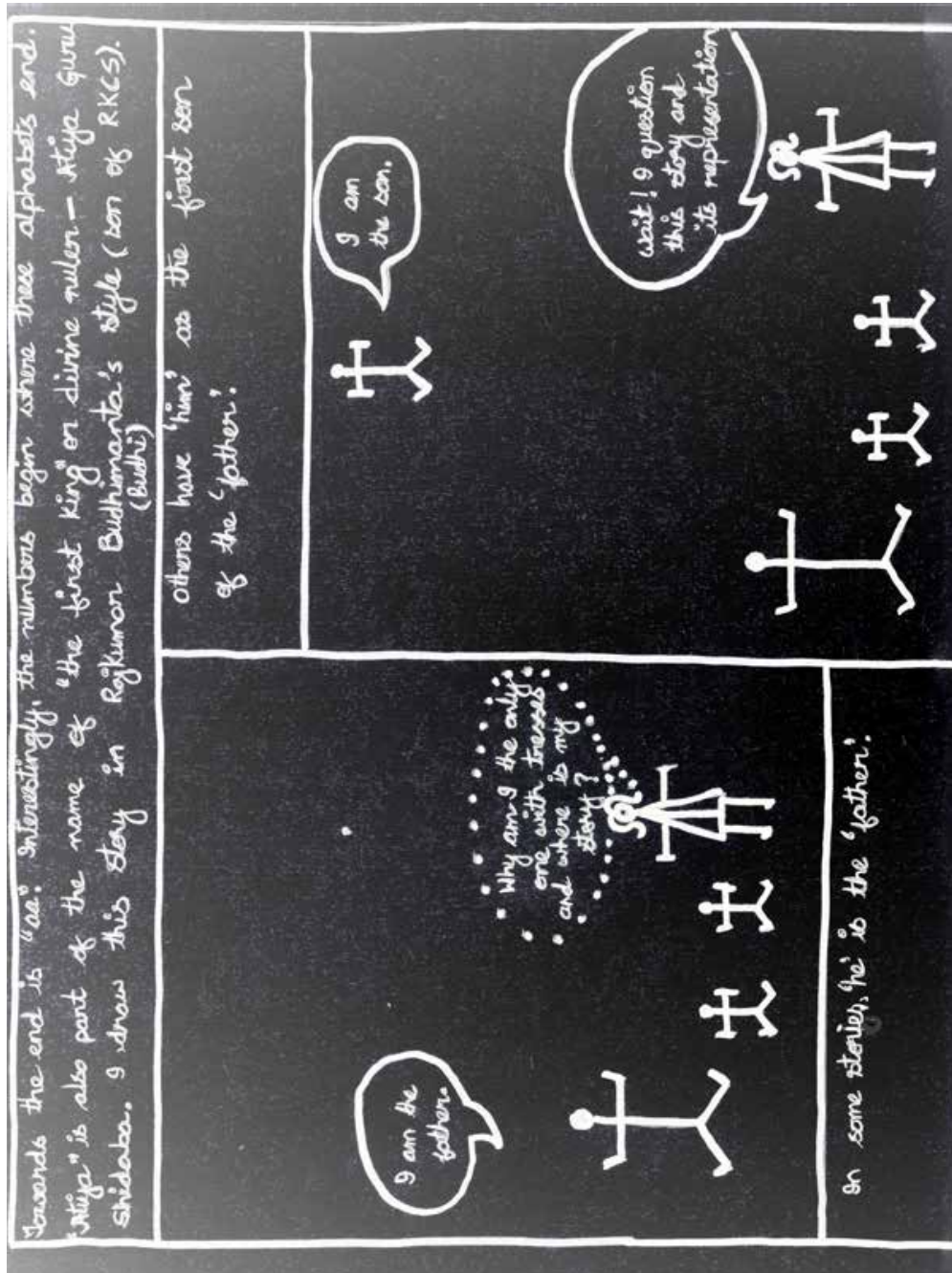
Except the letter "aa" of "atipa" or sky and of "ama" or one, the remaining letters are introduced here.

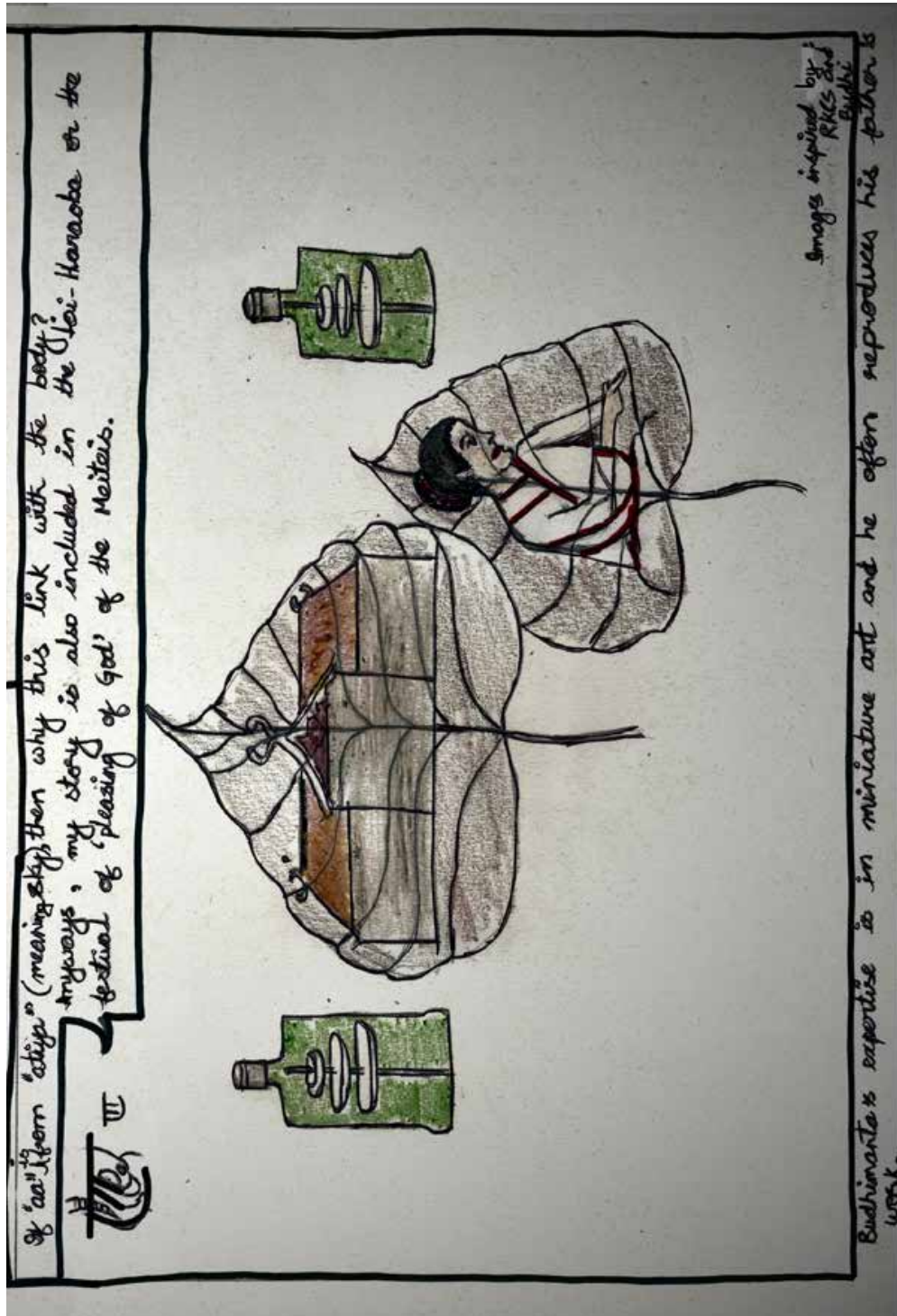




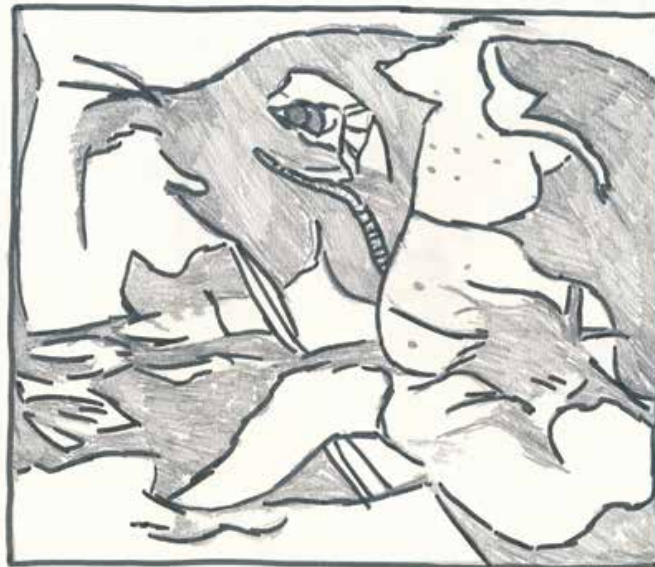




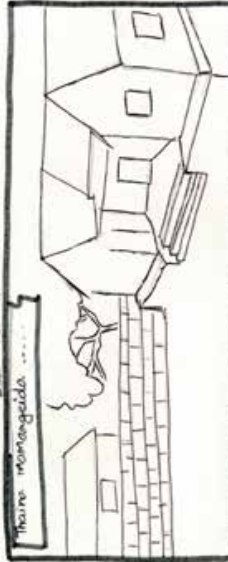




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ଓ
Manipur



Etta- Laidhi
Thane monagida ...



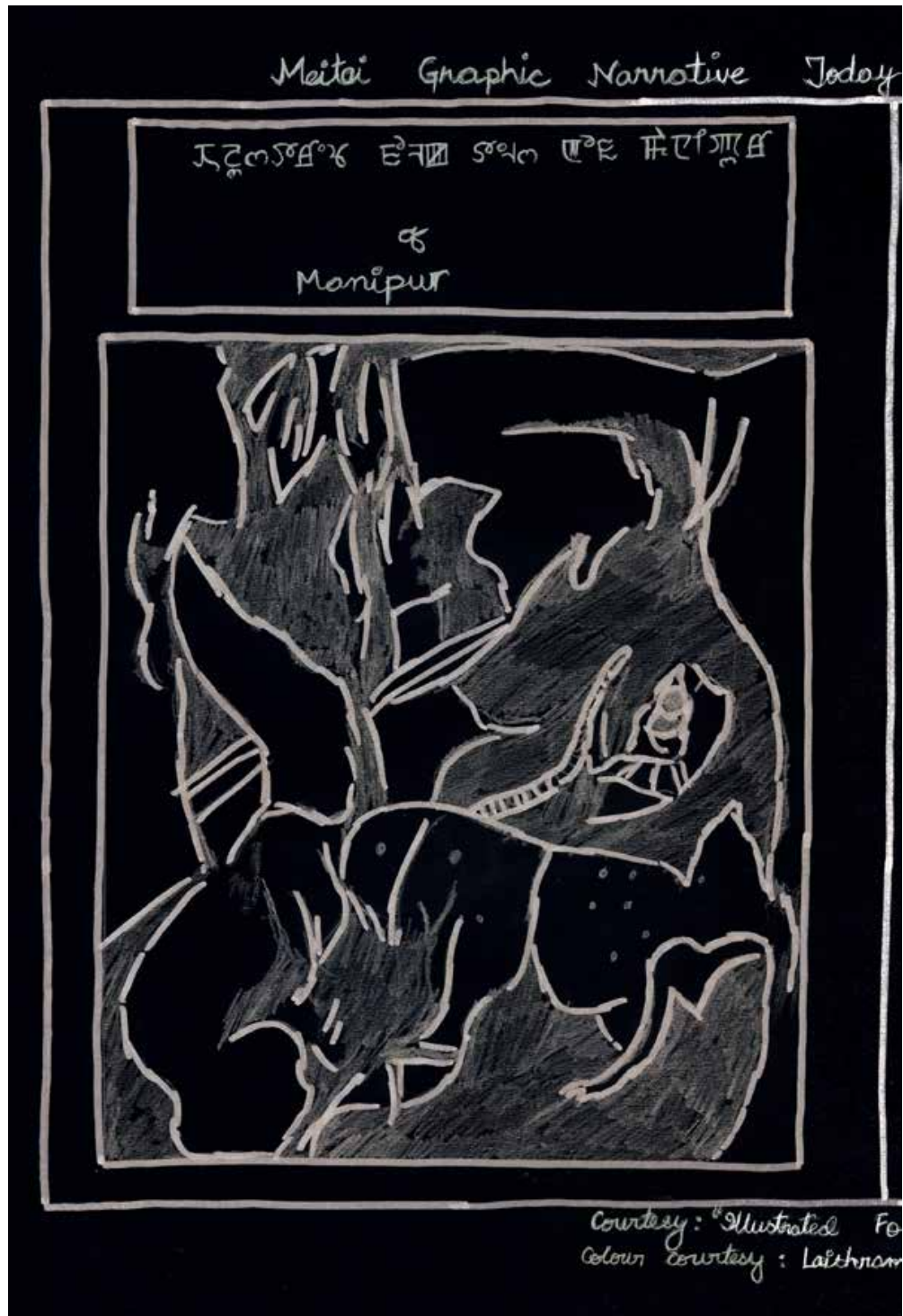
Subudani's book
and many contemporary
Mitei graphic artists
base their texts on
what I have argued
as 'Western' style.



Am a
? Kity
? 5 way

Their styles have no semblance of the painting culture they grew out from.

Courtesy: "Illustrated Folk Tales of Manipur"
Colours Courtesy: Lalsham Meena Devi (at last one woman artist.)





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