



Phunga Wari: A Cultural Memory of Manipur in the Modern Digital World

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Abstract

The Manipuri tradition of *Phunga Wari*, which means stories around the hearth is more than an act of storytelling; it is a cultural institution that educates the historical, moral and philosophical consciousness of the Meitei people. Rooted in the sacred hearth (*phunga*), where fire symbolises both domestic harmony and divine presence, this practice functions as an oral archive, preserving the history of ancestors, cultures, rituals and ecological wisdom, long before the introduction of writing. Elderly people narrated tales such as *Pebet*, *Lai Khutshangbi*, and *Keibu Keioiba* to younger generations which share the values of courage, discipline, wisdom, communal living and respect for the nature. This paper aims to serve the idea of recollecting traditions which reveal the politics of knowledge transmission and also how story telling disciplined the children into conformity with cultural norms through fear, awe and symbolic storytelling. Stories like *Hingchabaga Miwoibaga Loushing Tanaba*, where human triumphs over a demon with wit and symbolic objects such as a *pung* (drum like musical instrument), rope and tortoise, highlight the creative interplay between imagination, survival and moral guidance. *Phunga Wari* is not merely a passive cultural treasure but an active site of negotiation between sacred and mundane, fear and creativity, authority and imagination, continuity and change. By analysing its symbolic structures, pedagogical ideas, and modern aspects, the study demonstrates that *Phunga Wari* continues to function as a living repository of Manipuri identity while simultaneously negotiating the advancement of globalization and digital modernity.

Keywords: *Phunga Wari*, Oral tradition, Cultural continuity, Ecological wisdom, Digital modernity.

Introduction

In Manipuri tradition, *Phunga Wari* literally means *the story telling by our elders around the clayed hearth*. It is the practice where myths, folktales, legends, and moral stories are narrated to the younger generation while sitting together by the fireplace in the household. This leads to the enlightenment of the younger generations in study the cultures and beliefs of the ancestors. As *Phunga Wari* is an overexcitement gesture it leads the children to make them assure to join in the form of entertainment. More than a form of entertainment, *Phunga Wari* functions as an **oral archive of collective wisdom and knowledge**. It also carries forward the identity, cultural values, history, indigenous philosophy and ethical codes. It preserves ancestral backgrounds, truth, rituals and ecological wisdom. Also sitting with the elders and listening to them serve as a tool of socialization, respect, courage, discipline, community living and gender roles. In this sense, *Phunga Wari* is not merely storytelling but a **living repository of Manipuri identity**. All these ensure that *Phunga Wari* explores knowledge and survive wisdom beyond written texts through memory, performance and communal participation.

For generations, the people of Manipur worshipped several natural phenomena like the sun, moon, sky, water, air, trees, python (which we called *Epathou Pakhangba*) etc. on the basis of the cultural and historical ideas. The religious beliefs and practices of early Meiteis were classified into many characteristics and activities. Every house of the Meiteis had the sacred area of deities in the house. Among them, '*Phunga Lairu*' at the centre where there is a hearth at the western side of the house, which is associated with fire and believed to be the abode of the goddess of wealth and prosperity. It is also believed that around two thousand years ago, a 'sacred fire' had brought to the land of Manipur by a legend named *Poireiton*. Since that time, the 'sacred fire' has been preserved in the Andro region of the state. Apart from the sacred

fire of Andro, every Meitei household make it customary to have this clayed hearth in the south-west corner of the house and keep the fire burning all day and night, and such sacred fire does not blow out till today. This type of hearth made of clay is called '*Phunga*' in Manipuri. Around this hearth, the grandparents narrated several stories to the children in order to make them awaken before the dinner in the evening or at night. The stories were not only the stories of fantasies; it includes several knowledge-giving and thought-provoking narratives to the children. The stories were in oral form connecting from one generation to another. No one can predict when, where, and how this form of narrating stories had started but it gives a profound impact throughout the generations. The children were urging for more and more interesting stories everyday as a tradition.

Although before the introduction of manuscript and the writing system, it was the idea of the spoken word that governed the human societies in different parts of the world. Transferring of information or any other stories in early societies are only through spoken words. Stories were disseminated from one generation to the other when elders tell or narrate them, thus creating a storehouse of spoken words. Their spoken words also included songs, chants, oratory, hymns, proverbs, riddles and many other forms of spoken words. There were several storylines where the words were delivered in the form of song for example, *Khongjom Parbha* where the elderly '*Esei hanjaba*' (the native singer of Meitei) narrates the whole evidences of *Khongjom War* in the form of song. The stories were there in the form of chants in Hijam Anganghal's "*Khamba Thoibi Seireng*" when Thoibi sent her messages to Khamba by chanting the words while working so that the enemies could not catch them. Hence, the origin of oral literature was introduced since it was predicted. Now the oral histories take a greater role in research methodology and continues to be effectively integrated in academics.

From these oral traditions, children of the house are exposed and captured to the tradition of the *Phunga Wari*. The common stories which are passed on from generations to generations are *Uchek Langmeidong, Yongna Tan Yenba, Hanuba Hanubi Paan Thaba, Pebet Amasung Houdong Lamboiba, Lai Khutshangbi, Keibu Keoiba, Ita Thaomei, Tapta, Lamhui Loushing, Khamba Thoibietc*. These are some classic examples of folk tales that every Meitei children could relate to (Singha, Birmangal 2012). These tales became popular as the *Phunga Wari* in the backgrounds of Manipur. It may also be regarded that these stories were told and passed on in a light-hearted and jolly mood for the purpose of entertainment as well as lesson. Narrating such joyful stories also introduce fear in the minds of the children which make them obey and follow the right path of the societal norms. Apart from the entertainment, these stories provide knowledge and wisdom in a proper manner.

The understanding of *Phunga Wari* becomes more engaging and easier to grasp when illustrated through a short story or as an example. For instance, the tale of *Hingchabaga Miwoibaga Loushing Tanaba* by Konsam Jiten Meitei in his book "*Lairen Pakhang Amasung Hingchabaga Taibang Miga Loushing Tanaba*" helps in providing a clearer understanding of the discussion. In the tale *Hingchabaga Miwoibaga Loushing Tanaba*, the protagonist Thouba, while travelling through a dense forest, encounters three apparently ordinary objects: a *pung* (drum like musical instrument in Manipur), a big tortoise, and a long rope. These three objects, however, turns out to be a symbolic significance in the narrative which later enable his survival against a powerful demon. Thouba was drawn into a cave by a mysterious light where he discovers the demon within. But his presence of mind guided him to overcome the fear which is termed as '*Loushingna Samu Phabani*' (wisdom bounds elephant). He beats the *pung* and proclaims himself the king of demons. Here, man versus demon, weakness versus strength, and fear versus courage are resolved through

the manipulation of wisdoms rather than the violent act.

Oral Tradition as Cultural Archive

Before the introduction of manuscript or written text, the knowledge survived through the oral traditions only. Making the hearth as a site of historical continuity through generations, the elders transferred the moral lessons, knowledge, myths, folktales and legends throughout the generations in the oral form. *Phunga Wari* functions as a living oral archive that preserve the cultural identity of the Meitei people. Through knowledge, myths, folktales, legends and moral narratives, the generations have preserved the indigenous identity, culture and traditions of the society, making a profound lesson to the generations regarding the roots and beliefs of the community. Several histories and folkloristics are not far beyond the oral narratives. Important mythologies and mysticisms are found by the stories of elderly experienced people. Several scholars and academicians who undertake research on the oral traditions take help from those people only as there was no written form. Hence, *Phunga Wari* is not simply a storytelling or an oral-narratives but a living performance through generations. The elders used rhythm, repetition, actions and performance to engage the children in the story and transforming the stories into an entertainment. This makes the children to earn the knowledges by transforming the stories into memorable events. The performative nature of *Phunga Wari*, thus, turned oral narratives into cultural texts, embedding ecological wisdom, spiritual lessons and moral guidance within symbolic and memorable frameworks.

Sacred Hearth and Spiritual Symbolism

The *Phunga* (clayed hearth) cannot be placed at any place of the Manipuri house. There are several places of each deity to be placed in the house for their purpose and beliefs. The *Phunga* is specified to put at the Centre or South-West corner of Meitei households. This was not only utilitarian and the decorations, but deeply

symbolic in nature. *Phunga Lairu* of Eben Imoinu (Goddess of Wealth) was associated with fire worship and wealth, embodying both spiritual and domestic harmony in the house. It is also believed that around two thousand years ago, a 'sacred fire' had brought to the land of Manipur by a legend named *Poireiton*. Since that time, the 'sacred fire' has been preserved in the Andro region of the state. Apart from the sacred fire of Andro, every Meitei household made it customary to have this clayed hearth in the South-West corner of the house and keep the fire burning all day and night, and such sacred fire does not blow out till today. The bringing the sacred fire to Manipur further elevates the hearth's status as a cosmological symbol. Storytelling around the hearth was, thus, a ritual act, blending the sacred with the mundane. The hearth united the family both physically and spiritually, creating a sanctified space where wisdom and cultural values were transmitted across generations.

Pedagogical Role and Socialization of Children

The principal functions of *Phunga Wari* were pedagogical. The tales were didactic which aimed at shaping the moral imagination of children. Not only the entertainment, the *Phunga Wari* instilled discipline and social values. For example, the story of *Thouba in Hingchabaga Miwoibaga Loushing Tanaba* illustrates the power of intelligence and presence of mind over brute force. It also teaches children courage and wit. Similarly, other stories insisted the children in obedience, respecting the elders, importance of gender roles and developing community responsibility. On the other hand, *Phunga Wari* helps the children in increasing their imaginative power, enthusiastic, nostalgia, patience and especially listening to elders. Adding to this, the *Phunga Wari* also function as tools of socialization, ensuring conformity to cultural norms while raising children with practical wisdom. In early days, the children get to know the historical proverbs, mythologies, legends along with the

moral studies from listening to *Phunga Wari*. Each narrative was similar in every place and had an ideal example of knowledge sharing among children. This transformation is occurred in sharing every story from one generation to others. The children will also follow the tract throughout the next generations. All such ideas and knowledge of the stories are one of the major factors to make the children to encourage and help them in socializing.

Transformation in the Modern World

In the modern world, *Phunga Wari* has changed into a significant transformation. Once the symbolic and at the centre of the Meitei household has moved into the virtual spaces of digital media. The tradition which was once shared in the family and neighbours around the *Phunga* is now archived, broadcasted and consumed on social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and even in academic publications. The *Phunga Wari* is now performed in movie adaptation or in an anime for betterment and understanding in the electronic era. This transformation demonstrates both continuity and disruption of the symbolic status of *Phunga Wari* in the community. "Contrasts between electronic media and print have sensitized us to the earlier contrast between writing and orality. The electronic age is also an age of 'secondary orality', the orality of telephones, radio, and television, which depends on writing and print for its existence." (Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 1982).

At the same time, the digital documentation safeguards *Phunga Wari* against the threats of forgetting and generational disruption. It allows folktales, ecological wisdom, and moral teachings to reach younger audiences who may no longer experience around the physical hearth as a living cultural site. In this sense, technology becomes a new hearth which extends the accessing and preserving cultural memory beyond certain geographical boundaries. The children in the

modern digital period get the practice of advancement in the society and retelling the stories and imitating the actions which are shown in the media. They get to know every idea of the myths, legends and moral values through the sense of entertainment and fantasy. All these changes the real ideas and meanings of the story as it was shown in the form of movie with music and rhythms. This transition inevitably alters the nature of the practice. The performative intimacy of elders' voices, the warmth of the fire, and the collective act of listening are difficult to replace in digital spaces. What was once a practical and dialogic tradition are now transformed in a virtual and individual experience easily through digital platforms. This arises critical questions about originality, community development and the future of oral traditions in this modern globalized world.

Most importantly, the transformation also has an ecological resonance. The physical clayed hearth which was traditionally burned by wood or charcoal connected listeners to a rounded circles of firewood collection, forest ecology, and seasonal sounds. But it is revered in favour of modernisation and digital screens which represents not just a cultural shift but also a shift in human-environment relationships. *Phunga Wari* in its modern concept has become a site of negotiation between tradition and technology, locality and globalization, human performance and digital screening.

Analysis and Discussion

In the narrative of *Hingchabaga Miwoibaga Loushing Tanaba*, the mysterious act of the protagonist, Thouba, is the act of wisdom and knowledge throughout the story. His '*Pairakki loushing*' (presence of mind) saved his life from the demon. As he disguised himself as the king of demons by using the three extreme powerful instruments, it makes him alive against the barbarous demon. Using these three powerful instruments, Thouba claimed himself the king of the demons and make it believed. This episode analyses a performative idea through Claude

Lévi-Strauss's structuralist framework, which argues that myths are constructed on systems of binary oppositions (Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, 1963). He also brings the idea of platitude and sophism on discussing about the idea of myth. Such strengths and courage between man and demon are manipulated through signs rather than the brutal force.

Further, the symbolic contests between Thouba and the demon were illustrated. When the demon tosses a strand of his long hair as a proof of power, Thouba responds with the long rope. The demon misrecognizes it as it is even greater than a strand of hair. Later, when the demon presents a leech, Thouba shows with the tortoise, which appears larger and more threatening. Each instrument weakens the demon's superiority, showing what Jacques Lacan describes as misrecognition, where identity and perception are shaped through symbolic displacement (Lacan, *Écrits*, 1966). Following the exploration of the misrecognition, Lacan introduces the notion of the 'the Real' and the 'the Symbolic'. He continues that the unconscious is a product of the interplay between these two concepts and it is through the analysis of linguistic and symbolic patterns that understand human behaviour. The demon fears by the misconception which is not by the physical appearance but only by Thouba's symbolic substitutions. And all these gestures exemplified Freud's idea that the ego manages anxiety by redirecting serious fears through imagination (Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 1923).

The tale also teaches the ecological wisdom surrounded in oral traditions. The tortoise, the rope, and the '*pung*' are not only the powerful instruments but also elements derived from the environment, reflecting the mutual relationship between human survival and environment. The idea is also in Manipuri proverbs where there is any form of elements discovered in an unexpected way in a journey it should be kept properly as a good omen. The same idea applied in the bringing of '*Iben Imoinu*' in the house. And any materials where

snakes snatch is a *yai* (gem) and it should be kept as a respect. From the perspective of Cheryl Glotfelty's ecocriticism, literature must be seen as a cultural text deeply related with ecological realities where the environment is not a passive idea but an active presence (Glotfelty, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, 1996). Here, natural objects play as an epistemological substitution demonstrating how human needs is inseparable from environmental knowledge.

Thouba's impersonation of the "king of demons" can be read through Homi K. Bhabha's concept of mimicry, which reveals how imitation becomes a subtle yet powerful mode of resistance. According to Bhabha, mimicry occurs when the marginalized subject imitates the authority of the dominant power but never fully becomes it, instead the imitation is partial, exaggerated and ambivalent which described "almost the same, but not quite" (Homi K. Bhabha, *Of Mimicry and Man*, 1984). This incomplete resemblance destabilizes power rather than reinforcing it. In Thouba's case, his performance of the demon king is not an attempt to genuinely assume that identity but to reproduce its signs that is its language, logic of dominance and demand for proof.

The resolution of the contest, where Thouba commanding the demon to shut his eyes and run without looking back, announces his victory. It is not the overflowing show of physical strength but wit, adaptability, clever and symbolic mastery that save his life. And the concept of **Joseph Campbell's Monomyth or Hero's Journey**, Thouba's logic with the demon shows the stage of "tests, allies, and enemies," where the hero is challenged to prove his strength through cunning rather than might (Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 1949). His survival signifies not only the intelligence over power but also the affirmation of the community's trust in adaptability as a cultural virtue. Thus, the *Phunga Wari* operates not merely as entertainment but as what Walter J. Ong terms an "oral archive" a storehouse of cultural values and memory that ensures the

transmission of wisdom across generations (Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 1982). It functions as an archive of collective wisdom, developing ecological awareness and the philosophical ideas into human condition.

Moreover, the trickster-like qualities of Thouba can be examined through Paul Radin's study of trickster figures in his book *The Trickster: A Study in Native American Mythology*, 1956. As a cultural archetype, the trickster expands by several rules, turning weakness into strength, and surviving through subversion. Thouba's deceit and symbolic manipulations situated him as a peripheral figure who resonates danger through improvisation. "Trickster acts the part of the autonomous psyche, in that he displays no knowledge of good and evil, yet all values come into being through his actions" (Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in Native American Mythology*, 1956). His trick of disguising himself as the king of demons demonstrate the power of oral presentation as well. Then the symbols of pung, rope and tortoise made the demon follow the tricks of Thouba.

From the postcolonial ecocritical angle, the narrative reflects how marginalized communities assert their survival through immense relation with land, animals, and material culture. As Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin argue, postcolonial ecocriticism highlights how ecological wisdom is bound to resistance against domination (Huggan & Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, 2010). Thouba's dependence on natural elements is not a mere supplement but it is a necessary substitution to belong throughout the journey for his safety. This carries the local knowledge systems that symbolises the keys to resilience and power. This shows the corelation between human and nature, predicted through the ecocritical lens.

Finally, the story may also be read through ecofeminist symbolism. The act of survival through non-violence, symbolic

transformation, and ecological elements aligns ecofeminist values that privilege interdependence and creativity over domination and destruction (Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*, 1988). The idea of dense forest and the cave in the narrative where Thouba experienced is interpreted as the general relations with the nature. Thus, the narrative admits that wisdom and balance with nature protect life more effectively than aggression and violence.

The analysis and discussion of *Phunga Wari* shows that it is far more than the way of storytelling. It is like a cultural institution that studies historical backgrounds, ecological knowledge, moral values, and symbolic imagination. The paper uses several theories through structuralist oppositions, psychoanalytic projections, trickster archetypes, mimicry, ecocriticism and ecofeminism where the stories elaborate themselves as a simple text which relates with several ideas in identity formation.

Conclusion

The research on *Phunga Wari* gives exquisite knowledge and wisdom which demonstrates that oral storytelling in Manipuri tradition is not only a simple cultural practice but an important value of identity formation, ecological ideas and moral education. Originated in the sacred clayed hearth (*Phunga*), this oral tradition functions simultaneously as entertainment, pedagogy, and archive. By gathering families around the fire and listening to the elders were the only gems that every younger generation would grab for. The words of the elders transmitted not only myths and legends but also the deeper meanings of life, survival, love, peace, wit and harmony with everyone. In this sense, *Phunga Wari* acts as a bridge or a medium between the sacred and the profane, connecting ancestral memory and historical beliefs with everyday life.

From the analysis of one of the stories of Konsam Jiten Meitei's *Hingchabaga Miwoibaga*

Loushing Tanaba. it exemplifies how these narratives demonstrate as symbolic systems. And several infinite numbers of stories were in the roots of Manipuri society. Such stories were passed on from generations to generations giving vivid ideas and knowledge to the youngsters. Through Thouba, the protagonist of the story of *Hingchabaga Miwoibaga Loushing Tanaba*, it teaches a great lesson on wit, adaptability, and presence of mind and the privilege of knowledge and imagination rather than brutal force. Such incredible knowledge and lessons are found in every *Phunga Wari* from the elders and it is a must for everyone and every generation to follow. In doing so, the following generation can learn several life-lessons such as courage, presence of mind, ecological values and respect for the relationships between human and non-human worlds. The several theories like structuralism, psychoanalysis, postcolonialism, ecocriticism and ecofeminist readings enrich our understanding of how such stories provides strategies of resistance and resilience in yet knowledgeable and profound ways.

Importantly, *Phunga Wari* shows how ancestral memories are preserved and passed on without depending on manuscript or written texts. These stories are sustained through memory, performance and shared participation that highlights the dynamic relationship between orality and identity. "Speech is inseparable from our consciousness and it has fascinated human beings, elicited serious reflection about itself, from the very early stages of consciousness, long before writing came into existence" (Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 1982). These ideas disciplined the children into adaptability with cultural values while simultaneously allowing creativity and uprising through the trickster-like figures who challenge authority and power in the said oral stories. Thus, *Phunga Wari* is not only a constant folklore but a living, adaptive archive and dynamics that negotiate the difference between fear and

courage, authority and mimicry, tradition and change.

In the context of globalization and digital modernity, the importance of *Phunga Wari* becomes even more valued. As written and digital media increasingly dominate cultural communication, oral traditions seem like sinking in a deep root ocean which risk the ignorance and marginalization. The development and the enrichment of modern digital world change the visual representation of real *Phunga Wari*, sitting around the hearth. Such changes are not a good sign in the preservation of our cultural identity. Yet, the survival and adaptation of *Phunga Wari* through literature, education, and digital storytelling demonstrates its enduring significance as a resilient mode of cultural transmission. This cultural transmission develops in the form of digitalization which in turn submerged the indigenous form of cultural value on the other side.

Ultimately, *Phunga Wari* must be understood not only as a cultural treasure of the Meitei people, but as a living philosophy that continues to guide human imagination and survival strategies. It embodies the power of oral tradition to sustain identity, resist domination, and transmit ecological and ethical wisdom across generations. Just as the sacred fire at the *Phunga* continues to burn in Meitei households, these stories continue to illuminate paths of resilience, adaptability and harmony in the modern world. By recognizing and valuing *Phunga Wari*, it affirms the relevance of indigenous oral traditions in shaping collective futures where wisdom, creativity and ecological balance remain central to human life.

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