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CONTINUITY THROUGH CHANGES: CULTURAL RESILIENCE IN THE YAOSHANG FESTIVAL OF MANIPUR

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ABSTRACT

The Yaoshang festival of the Meitei community in Manipur represents a unique convergence of indigenous ritual and Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition, shaped by centuries of religious and socio-cultural transformation. Drawing on Victor Turner's frameworks of liminality and communitas, this paper examines how the festival's core practices-the ritual burning of straw huts (Shang Mei Thaba) and the moonlight dance (Thabal Chongba)-create a liminal space in which ordinary social hierarchies dissolve and collective identity is renewed. The festival thus functions simultaneously as a living archive of cultural memory and a periodic mechanism of social cohesion, sustaining Meitei identity through colonial disruption and modern change.

KEYWORDS: *Yaoshang, Thabal Chongba, Meitei festivals, cultural resilience, ritual theory*

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INTRODUCTION

The Yaoshang Festival is celebrated during the full moon of *Lamta* (February-March), marking the major cultural and religious ceremonies of the Meitei Community. For the five days, there is a social immersion in which the regular activities like education, professional works, and jobs are suspended, allowing for a smooth communal celebration defining the community's spiritual and traditional calendrical aspects. The history of the Yaoshang

Festivals shows the ability of the Meitei community to deal with the complex interrelations between indigenous culture, tradition and contemporary significance.

According to Singha (1963), the 18th Century brought about a major transformation in the Meitei Community due to the introduction of Gaudiya Vaishnavism (p.66). While the introduction of this new faith resulted in various indigenous traditions being incorporated into the Gaudiya tradition, it did not eliminate them. The result was a harmonious synthesis of the two faiths where the indigenous Meitei traditions integrating into Hindu style of worship. The most prominent example of this blending is *Yaoshang*. It is both the traditional Meitei practice of burning straw-huts in ritual purification and festival in celebration of the pan –Indian Festival of Holi. The *Yaoshang* festival represents a symbol of Meitei-Vaishnavism, or the ways that the Meitei people of Manipur incorporating the beliefs and practices of Gaudiya Vaishnavism into the distinctively Meitei traditions. The study attempts to identify *Yaoshang* festival not only as a celebration but also the festival as a site for social interactions. Using the Turnerian approaches of Liminality and Communita, this paper highlights the role of the festival in creating a transformative environment of rejuvenating social ties with one another.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Victor Turner provides the necessary criteria in understanding the ritual logic behind the *Yaoshang* festival. Turner (cited in Premchandra, 2014, p.12) describes “liminality” as being “at the threshold,” or between social positions assigned by custom or law. When the participants are in the state of liminality, they are in a “liminal phase” where they are no longer recognised as having an identity or rank in society and the customary rules of the society no longer apply.

Festival such as the *Yaoshang* in the Manipur region offers a structured medium for those experiencing a feeling of being at the edge of two worlds. As noted by Murugavel (2023), the ritual priests known as the *Maibas* and the *Maibis* are the mediator between the divine and the human realm. The community as a whole is involved in this bridging process during the *Yaoshang*. The start of the festival initiated by the *Yaoshang Mei Thaba* (burning of the straw hut) creates the transition into this unique and a sacred time for the entire community. Within this liminal space “spontaneous communitas” emerges. Victor Turner defined “Communitas” as being able to relate to others as “total human beings” (i.e., people without the consideration of their social /cultural roles that define their identity) in a socially egalitarian manner. This type of state exists at its highest point within the *Thabal Chongba*, dancing under the moonlight, where the clan (*Salais*) and the lineage restrictions are removed, allowing for a unified, intense communal spirit to occur. This event is considered a demonstration of Turner’s “Communitas of the street” (i.e., a spontaneous, non-hierarchical assembly of the community to reaffirm the community’s spirit).

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION

The present-day festival called “Yaoshang” can be traced back to the pre days of Gaudiya tradition of Vaishnavism. The festival is centered on the ritual known as “Yaoshang Mei Thaba,” where the word “Shang” means “small hut made of straws and bamboos” and the the act of signifies “psychologically impacting the burning of a small straw structure” to drive away the evil spirits and support the prosperity of the land. The ritual was performed prior to the yearly fertility planting of crops in association with the worship of the deity “*Lainingthou Pakhangba*”. According to Paratt (1974), the Meitei were “integrated into the agricultural cycle,” and the full moon of the Lamta (the moon of the beginning of the year) was the time to cleanse themselves before the beginning of a new year (p.89).

The indigenous rite underwent a transformation starting on 17th or early 18th Century. According to the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, court chronicles of the Meiteis, the transference to Vaishnavism started by gradual movement of the Royal Court. King Charairongba (1698-1709) was the first monarch that became formally recognised and practicing Vaishnavism as a result of Brahmin scholars coming from Bengal (Devi, 2013, p.56). The most transformation occurred during the reign (1709-1748) of Maharaja Garibniwaz (Pamheiba), declaring Gaudiya Vaishnavism as the state religion and implementing the abolishment of the indigenous traditions and replacing them with those of the Hindu traditions.

With the involvement of royalty; a one of a one-of-a-kind fusion was created. The traditional lunar festival created by the Meiteis became linked with the Hindu festival called Holi (the festival celebrating the destruction of the demon Holika through the burning of the straw hut)- even though the Meiteis still continued to use the name *Yaoshang* for their traditional practice of burning straw huts. According to Manna (2020), this ethnic identity created “Manipuri Vaishnavism,” allowing the people of this region to maintain a sense of cultural continuity from their pre-Hindu days while still adopting many of the elements associated with the belief system (p.11). Another medium through which synthesis was demonstrated was through the Nat Sankirtana – the way people performed devotional songs and dances during the festival celebrations (with songs sung to Bengali devotional lyrics that were performed using Meitei style and traditional dance movements).

In the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, there is a significant incident recorded as “the burning of the Puyas” (*Puya Mei Thaba*) during the reign of Maharaja Garibniwaj. The sacred manuscripts of the Meiteis (Puya) documents- includes history, genealogy, and ritual. Khan (2024) states the chronicles provides evidence of a “hard-line opposition” from the people against this decree and therefore indicates the cultural resistance occurring at the time that state sponsored changes in the religion were being made. It is still considered to be one of the most

significant examples of cultural loss in Meitei culture and has inspired modern *Shumang Kumhei* (courtyard theatre) performances, such as *Puran Mei Thaba* expressing the need for cultural renewal. (Singha et al., 2022)

The *Cheitharol Kumbaba* records the inclusion of the Brahmin migrants into the Meitei society. As Devi (2013), points out that these migrants were given *Yumnaks* (family names), by the king, thus they were included in the social structures of Meiteis (p.56). This process of social inclusion allowed for the local development of the new “Manipuri Vaishnavism” and established a Brahmin class that would assist in mediating between the new religion and the already established traditions.

In addition, the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* contains information regarding Vaishnavite festivals. One example is the Brahmin ascetics performing Raas Leela in the royal court (Paratt, 2009). These events illustrate the use of the chronicle by the Meitei kings, providing legitimacy to their religion based policies as well as to demonstrate the successful establishment of Hindu rites as part of the ceremonial life of the state. Accordingly, the chronicle not only documents history but serves as a means of creating identity and demonstrates how the Meitei state was able to transition through periods of dramatic historical change.

LIMINAL PHASE OF THE YAOSHANG FESTIVAL

The *Yaoshang Mei Thaba* serves as the essential threshold marker of all aspects of the *Yaoshang* festival. On the full moon, homes and villages build small huts of straw and bamboo (*Yaoshang Yum*) symbolizing great significance to the Meitei traditions, representing the home of the spirits of the old year. For the followers of Vaishnavism, it is linked to the legends of the burning of the demon Holika.

Burning the hut (made of straw and bamboo) collectively constitutes a performance of cleansing through fire. As noted by Devi (2024), fire is viewed as a “transformative force” that removes all the impurities of the past years (p.312). As ritual participants enter into the heightened emotional and sensory awareness, they feel the intense heat of the fire, the smell of the straw burning, and the chanting of all the participants together converts their experience from secular to sacred (liminal period of the festival). The ritual also embodies a high level of social reversibility. Children lead the way in gathering donations (*Nakatheng*) for building the hut and for continuing the festivities. Children being able to exert a level of ritual authority over adults are an example of Turnerian liminality. By participating in the *Mei Thaba*, the community is making a symbolic reset of the social order, preparing the community for *communitas* to emerge.

THABAL CHONGBA AND ITS SOCIO-CULTURAL ASPECTS

Thabal Chongba (dancing in the moonlight) embodies *communitas* more than anything else during the *Yaoshang* (first three days) and is performed over the five days. The dance is done in the open areas of villages or

communal spaces. The role that *Thabal Chongba* plays historically as school of interactions has made this event important to the Manipuri community as it provided the only sectioned, opportunity for young men and women from different clans (Salais) to meet each other.

The dance form is relatively straightforward in appearance: with individuals standing in a circle, they intertwine their hands and move around their coming centre to the same rhythm as the drum plays (dhol). On the much socio-cultural level, however, there is much at stake symbolically in this dance structure. Victor Turner positioned that the concept of a “circle” represents the purest form of the idea of “communitas”, i.e., that the traditional hierarchical structure characteristic of societal order gives way to a more direct, immediate, and non-rational connection between persons (Turner cited in Murugavel, 2023). In the *Thabal Chongba* circle, there are no distinctions based on the ranks or lineage; everyone who participates is equally part of the collective movement.

According to Manna (2020), the *Thabal Chongba* has evolved in some ways but it still acts as a bonding agent. Dance structure creates new social connections, especially within the youth population, while also reinforcing existing relationships (p.11). The *Thabal Chongba* gives a community that has traditionally had very rigid social standards and has held clan endogamy in high regards an opportunity to temporarily bypass those standards so that the community can continue to be viable and cohesive.

The *Yaoshang* festival shows various practical values for communities as they strive to sustain their cultural identity under external pressures. Adaptive layering, as exemplified by the Meitei, is a highly successful strategy since it allows for the integration of new cultural experiences while remaining true to the core of the indigenous traditions. According to Singha et al., (2022), the integration of the Gaudiya Vaishnavism into the Meitei community was not an outright replacement but rather an example of “cultural integration” (p.4). As such, Meiteis incorporated many elements from the Gaudiya traditions (e.g., Nata Sankirtana and Yaoshang Holi) into the existing cultural framework, creating a unique Manipuri form preserving a sense of identity for the community even as religious landscapes transformed.

Festivals serve as a social form of “cultural insurance” by providing people within a given community an opportunity to engage collectively through the creation of a state of communitas, creating a sense of unity amongst them through the social cohesiveness and trust in one another. The collective work involved in the organisational of the *Thabal Chongba*. The sports events are now considered to be central to the contemporary Yaoshang celebration, as well as in organising communal feasting, contributes to social capital. In this way, the social capital created through these types of festivals continued to be the force that helped sustaining the Meitei people through hardships associated with the colonial era and their subsequent incorporation into the Indian

nation. Festivals also serves as “living archives” of cultural memory; therefore, as our societies change through time, the core cultural values, beliefs, and historically significant events associated with the events will continue to be periodically replicated so that they can be transmitted to future generations.

CONCLUSION

The *Yaoshang* festival of the Meiteis is an intricate expression of the culture that demonstrates Victor Turner’s concept of “*Communitas and Liminality*”. The ritualized burning of the straw huts through fire and the shared ritual in celebrating Thabal Chongba allow this periodically performed festival to provide for the Meitei community a platform to reconstruct their social milieu, creating an environment fostering unity amongst the people without regard to historical or religious differences, thereby creating a new reality for the community. Evidence from the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* and the Puyas show the intentional role of the Meitei ruling class and the determined response of ordinary Manipur dwellers in producing the unique syncretism nature of this festival. By establishing a setting that allows for historical recollection and spontaneous social cohesion, the *Yaoshang* festival provides for the ongoing sustenance of the Meitei spirit and identity. This festival does not merely celebrate the past, it remains a living and meaningful ritual helping to develop and reaffirm the identity and resilience of the Manipuri people in this continuously changing society.

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