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YU (TRADITIONAL FERMENTED DRINK) OF THE MEITEIS AS AN INSEPARABLE PART OF CULTURE IN THE PAST.

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ABSTRACT

Yu is a traditional fermented drink of the Meiteis distilled from fermented rice. Its production and use among the Meiteis precede the advent of Vaishnavism in the region and forms an integral part in their ritual offerings, social gatherings and community feasting reflecting their way of life, beliefs and traditions. The Cheitharol Kumbaba (the royal chronicle of Manipur) record instances where yu was present in certain ceremonies, feasts and communal gatherings highlighting that yu functioned as a symbol of abundance, prosperity and social cohesion. It is commonly prepared in households using fermented rice and the knowledge of distilling is transmitted across generations, particularly through women. The sharing of yu during marriages, social gatherings and festivals strengthened kinship ties and communal solidarity. In this sense, yu operated as a social lubricant that reinforced collective identity. The paper is a humble attempt to examine the traditional practice of distilling and drinking of yu among the Meiteis.

KEYWORDS: Culture, rituals, tradition, Yu.

INTRODUCTION

Human has been using some kind of spirituous drink since the Palaeolithic times.¹ Fermented drinks are interminably associated with the existence and culture of various ethnic community of the world since the

beginning of civilization.ⁱⁱ It is considered as a significant cultural item used in various rites and rituals and its form and meaning of uses is culturally determined.ⁱⁱⁱ Textual references to *soma* and *surain* in the Rigveda provided the earliest evidence for the use of intoxicating drinks and the presence of a customary brewing tradition in the Indus and Vedic cultures of the Indian subcontinent.^{iv} The people residing in the Northeastern states of India also consumed a kind of intoxicating drinks prepared from rice from a very long time back.^v It also plays an important role in the socio-cultural life of the people as it is found to be associated with many occasions like merry making, rituals ceremonies, festivals, marriages and even death ceremonies.^{vi}

The history of Manipur extends to the prehistoric era, although the recorded history of Manipur is generally traced to the reign of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba, who is believed to have ascended the throne in the early first century of Christian era.^{vii} Scholarly debates concerning the origin of the Meitei people remain diverse and contested, often shaped by differing religious interpretations and political perspectives.^{viii} Despite these controversies, it is widely acknowledged that Manipur's geographical position along important routes linking South Asia, Southeast Asia and Central Asia facilitated the migration of various ethnic groups from prehistoric times onward. Communities identified with Mongoloid, Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryan, and Tai (Shan) backgrounds are understood to have entered the region over successive periods.^{ix} These movements contributed to the processes of cultural interaction and physical assimilation^x, resulting in the composite ethnic formation observed in present day Manipur.^{xi} According to Saroj Nalini Parratt, in her book, *The Religion of Manipur*, it is clear that irrespective of the debates surrounding their origins, the Manipuris have developed a distinctive cultural identity of their own. This evolved culture, she observes, shows minimal resemblance to the traditions of the various groups from whom they are believed to have descended.^{xii}

Yu, a traditional fermented drinks, often play an important role in ceremonies, celebrations and everyday social interactions, contributing to the cultural fabric of the Meiteis society. The preparation and consumption of *yum* may be intertwined with communal activities, fostering a sense of identity and shared heritage among the Meiteis people. However, the adoption of Vaishnavism in the 18th century reshaped the cultural life of the Meiteis. With this historical background, the paper is a humble attempt to examine the traditional practice of distilling and drinking of *yu* among the Meiteis.

METHODOLOGY

A multi-disciplinary approach has been adopted as a methodology for the present article. Various sources like the *Puyas*, *Cheitharol Kumpapa* (The Royal Chronicle) and secondary sources written by different scholars who work on the history of Manipur along with other directly or indirectly related works of various scholars belonging to other discipline with the theme has been adopted. Relevant literature on the traditional method of distilling alcohol has been used along with research tools like interview with knowledgeable person, participation, observation, field work is being conducted to collect the related information. The collected data has been examined both qualitatively and quantitatively wherever necessary.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Food and drink of a community constituted a significant cultural expressions that extend far beyond their biological function as sources of sustenance. The Meiteis of Manipur must have adapted their diets and food gathering techniques by relying on plants, roots, tubers, hunted animals and other available resources provided by

the environmental conditions for their food sustenance. Ancient texts like the *Ningthou Kangparol Ponglen Puya* mentions a period of settled life, agriculture and domestication of animals.^{xiii} The region has favourable wet rice cultivation and the food habits of the Meiteis consisted of rice, vegetables, meat of both hunted and domesticated animals along with *yu*.^{xiv} In the various rites and rituals, *yu* forms an important part serving as a symbolic and cultural role. Traditional festival such as *Lai Haraoba* is considered the most authentic Meiteis festival which maintain the Meiteis belief and preserves the traditional social practices that existed before external religion came and influenced it.^{xv} It further helps us to understand the tradition, beliefs and history of the Meiteis^{xvi} and is like a living mirror of the traditional Manipuri society.^{xvii} *Yu* form an integral part of *Lai Haraoba* and is offered to the deities in the preliminary rites carried out by the *maibi* (traditional female priestess of the Meiteis who plays an important role in some of their rites and ritual)^{xviii} showing its close connection with the Meiteis social and religious life.

Beyond its ritual association with *Lai Haraoba*, *yu* also occupies a wider socio-cultural sphere in the various rites, festivals and community gatherings within the Meiteis society. Before the adoption of Hinduism by the Meiteis, the birth rituals of a new born baby performed on fifth and sixth day after birth for a baby girl and baby boy respectively, was known as '*Ipanthanba*' or '*Yupanthaba*' which means giving a few drops of *yu* to the mouth of the baby.^{xix} Before a day or two after fixing the date of the marriage ceremony, a ceremony called *heiching kharaipuba*, which owed its origin from the words *haijapot* (a formal presentation of items for request) was performed. The items for presentation consisted of a basket of rice, fish, salts, fruits, along with two pots of *yu* and different items of fruits by the groom's father as gifts to the bride's family.^{xx} Traditionally, *yu* is also used in the form of medicine. In the text *Panthoibi Khonggun*, it is mentioned that Panthoibi cure certain ailments by offering *yu*.^{xxi}

According to the text, *Moirang Ningthourol Lambuba*, in the grand feast organised by the King for his subjects, *yu* is normally served along with meat and rice.^{xxii} There are also references of Panthoibi offering *yu* in a public feast organised on her wedding day in the text *Panthoibi Khonggun*.^{xxiii} In the same text, it is mentioned that she requested Nongpok Ningthou for his help in harvesting by serving *yu* emphasizing that *yu* also form an important part of social interaction and communality among the Manipuris.^{xxiv} The *Cheitharol Kumpaba*, the Royal Court Chronicle of Manipur also mentions the use of *yu* in various rituals and socio-cultural life of the Meiteis during the pre-Vaisnavite period of Manipur. During the time of King Mungyampa (1562-1597), the *maibas* (here it refers to male religious officials, it is also sometimes referred for traditional physician/healers), drank *yu* and feasted on the meat of animals.^{xxv} Gangmumei Kamei observed that in the second half of the sixteenth century, community feasting and drinking is a popular social occasion for different social groups, clans and priest in which the King participated personally.^{xxvi} He regards Khagemba as one of the most illustrious ruler of medieval Manipur noting that his reign was marked by the co-existence of both traditional Meiteis gods and Hindu Gods. The royal chronicle *Cheitharol Kumpaba* also recorded that, "Layingthou Khagempa also drank a toast of *yu* and others joined him" and further recorded that "The sovereign king got the ladies to dress up and decorate themselves with pheasant feather at the archery contest and they drank a toast of *yu*"^{xxvii} These entries shows that *yu* occupied an accepted place in certain ceremonies and communal festivities, reflecting its presence in the socio-political and ritual life of the period.

METHODS OF YU PREPARATION

There are three varieties of *yu*: *pukyu*, *waiyu* and *laiyu*.^{xxviii} The *pukyu* and *waiyu* kinds are exclusively made for special occasions like *lai haraoba*, *laiyu* which is generally known as *yu* is made both for commercial and general use. Traditionall, preparation of *yu* is mainly done by the women known locally as *yu-thongbi* (*yumeaning* alcohol and *thongbi* referring to the women who is brewing alcohol and the whole process involve in the distillation of *yu* is known as *yu-thongba*). The process of making *yu* involved a series of processes. The distillation process begins by placing the *cheng* in a specially designed *chaphu* (earthenware) with a hole in the bottom known as *ngankok* (*ngan* -steam and *kok*- top/head), which is placed on top of another earthen pot filled with water known as *ngankha* (an earthenware pot used for boiling water to produce steam)in order that the steam generated from the *ngankha* cooks the rice in a process termed *chakthongba*, producing *chakngan* (cooked rice). The cooked rice is then transferred into a perforated bamboo basket (*thummok* or *chaksangbai*) for cooling and draining.^{xxix}

The next stage involves the mixing of properly washed and dried *chakngan* with *hamei* (it is a locally prepared starter for fermentation made from a mixture of rice powder and bark of *yangli* (*Albizia mycrophylla*) plant). Before mixing, the *hamei* is finely crushed to ensure uniform blending with the rice. The addition of *hamei* facilitates fermentation and enhance the intoxicating quality of the final product. The proportion of *hamei* added to *chakngan* is determined through traditional knowledge transmitted across generations. Approximately 30 grams of powdered *hamei* are mixed with 10 kilograms of *chakngan* prepared from an equivalent quantity of *cheng*.^{xxx} The basket containing the mixture is then carefully covered with warm cloth or sacks to maintain adequate warmth, thereby facilitating effective fermentation.

The prepared mixture is transferred into a basket carefully lined with leaves of the *khangra* tree (commonly known as Flame of the Forest, *Butea monosperma*), or *Hong-oo* (*Alocasia indica*), or *Sangoi Hidakangouba mana* (*Datura metel*). Presently, these leaves are often replaced with polythene sheets, due to the increasing scarcity of the leaves, as well as the convenience, ease of cleaning and ready availability of polythene in local markets.^{xxxi} The lined basket is then positioned above a tub and this stage of the procedure is locally referred to as *luthup chanba*. The subsequent stage involves fermentation, which typically requires three to five days to reach completion which depended on climatic conditions with the duration being shorter during the summer and longer in winter. As fermentation progresses, liquid begins to drip gradually from the mixture and is collected in a tub known as *khari*. The fermenting mixture is referred to as *khajee*. During the early stage of fermentation, it is known as *khajee houdaba*, whereas once the process is completed it is locally known as *khajee houbu*.^{xxxii}

The next process involves the transferring of both the *khajee* and the collected *khari* into a large earthenware pot, where they are combined with water in an approximate 1:1 ratio. This procedure is locally known as *khajee khunba*.^{xxxiii} The mixture is then left undisturbed for a further period of two to three days to allow additional fermentation. The final phase consists of distillation. The fermented mixture is poured into a *yuphu* (earthenware vessel for keeping the wash *yu*) and covered with a perforated aluminium plate known as *yumai*. A thin cloth is placed over the *yumai* to prevent solid particles from passing through. Above this, the *yukok* (inverted earthenware pot that is used to function as lid for providing steam), an apparatus with a hollow base, is positioned. Inside the *yukok*, a slightly curved tin sheet is installed to guide the condensed liquid outward. The apparatus also features a circular opening at the top, upon which a vessel filled with cold water is placed to facilitate condensation.

The tin sheet extends outward as a hollow tube connected to an aluminium or plastic pipe, at the end of which a collecting vessel (*yu-ya poon*) is placed. Heat is applied beneath the *yuphu*, initially at a high intensity until the mixture reaches boiling point, after which it is carefully regulated. The steam rises into the *yukok*, cools upon contact with the cold surface, condenses, and gradually drips into the collecting vessel as distilled *yu*.^{xxxiv}

CHANGES AND CONTINUITY

Historically, Manipur is characterised by recurrent warfare with her Burmese neighbour and internecine conflicts and in this regard, Mackenzie observes that the early history of Manipur was marked by constant raids across the frontier by Burmese and also by internal wars of savaged brutality, often involving violent struggles within ruling lineages.^{xxxv} Amidst these turbulent conditions, significant transformations unfolded in the eighteenth century with the introduction of Vaishnavism.^{xxxvi} Initiated during the reign of Charairongba and consolidated under Pamheiba (Garib Niwaz) and Bhagyachandra, Vaishnavism became institutionalized as the dominant religious tradition. Its adoption brought about profound cultural changes in Meitei society and the *Cheitharol Kumpaba* recorded that under Pamheiba (Garib Niwaz), the consumption of beef and the keeping of pigs and fowl within residential areas were prohibited and punished.^{xxxvii} Punishment included deportation to peripheral areas known as *loi* villages. These kind of regulating food and drink, in accordance with the Vaishnavite notion of devotion, ritual purity, vegetarianism and abstinence from intoxicants changed how the production and use of *yu* were perceived and treated keeping it outside the acceptable devotional conduct of Vaishnavism.

However, *yu* has continued to persist within specific and cultural contexts of the Meiteis society. The *Cheitharol Kumpaba* recorded that during the reign of Pamheiba (Garib Niwaz) all the royal ladies ceremonially drank a toast of *yu* at the marriages of princesses.^{xxxviii} It is still continued to be used in the traditional festival of *Lai Haraoba*, where it forms part of ritual offerings to local deities. It is still a customary practice for the people of Andro and Sekmai, to serve *yu* to every person irrespective of age in their marriage ceremony. *Machin* a variety of *yu* is still used for quick healing of the stitching wounds after child delivery by the Meiteis women. The tradition of serving *yu* as a symbol of sharing happiness to guests, relatives, friends on the wedding night and in the feast of celebration are continued even today. Thus, the ceremonial use of *yu* during marriage festivities and in traditional festivals like *Lai Haraoba* reflects a notable dimension that *yu* was not entirely eliminated from cultural life of the Meiteis but persisted in specific ritual contexts

CONCLUSION

Yu in the pre-Vaishnavite Manipur is not just a fermented drink but a sacred and integral item in the cultural life of the Meiteis functioning as a ritual offering, social interaction and commensality amongst the Meiteis. Its references in the royal chronicle like the *Cheitharol Kumpaba*, highlighted its importance within the cultural and political framework of the time. However, the advent of Vaishnavism in the eighteenth century undergoes a significant transformation in the cultural life of Manipur, marking a transformative phase in the cultural history of the Meiteis. However, *yu* continues to be used even today in the indigenous festival of *Lai Haraoba* where it forms part of ritual offerings to local deities, in certain rites, ritual and ceremonies of the Meiteis demonstrating that cultural practices adapt rather than disappear.

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