

Origin of Shumang Leela, a traditional media of Manipur

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Abstract

Traditional media plays a vital role in shaping developing nations since it is a more direct and intimate medium for the masses. Moreover, when we discuss a medium, it is best to start from its origin, for it gives a more holistic approach to that particular area. This paper tries to trace the origin of *Shumang Leela*, a traditional media or folk theatre of Manipur. Tracing the history of *Shumang Leela* holds significance since various scholars opine different opinions, and their hypotheses and evidence of origins support each. The paper tries to explore a common binding thread regarding the evolution of this traditional media so that whatever the debate is, there is an agreeing point, although scholars have different theories regarding its origin.

Keywords: Traditional media, *Shumang Leela*, Manipur, history, evolution, folk theatre

Introduction

Shumang Leela is a mobile theatre which travels throughout the length and breadth of Manipur and imparts socio-cultural, political and economic education to the people. Etymologically *ShumangLeela* combines the words ‘Shumang’ (courtyard) and ‘Leela’ (play or performance). So, structurally it may be termed as ‘courtyard theatre’. The play is performed in an area measuring 13X13 sq. ft or 16X16 sq. feet. The space for performance may vary

according to the space available in the centre of any open area, be it the courtyard of a house, a community hall, *mandaps* or local grounds.

Shumang Leela is a structured form of total theatre and has poetry, dance, song, music, mime, and pantomime elements. However, unlike proscenium theatre, the audience can view from all four sides, as it offers a 360-degree viewing gallery. This form of theatre reflects the social, political and moral conditions of the times and the dreams and desires of the people, which approximate protest and intervention for a better dispensation in an artistic manner. *Shumang Leela*, as a traditional media in its presentation, tries to touch the chord on several issues happening in Manipur. The origin is a point of discussion as various scholars' express different views regarding its development.

Origin of *Shumang Leela*

There are multiple opinions by various scholars and experts regarding the origin of *Shumang Leela*. The history of *Shumang Leela* is not presented in a smooth chronological form as intellectuals have diverse views about its origin and provenance. Although there is no formal classification of this traditional media of Manipur, the journey of *Shumang Leela* has been categorized into three phases for the convenience of this study:

- (i) Pre-Maharaja Chandrakirti era (1074-1849 AD)
- (ii) The reign of Maharaja Chandrikirti (1850-1949 A.D.)
- (iii) *Shumang Leela* with written scripts (1950 AD-till date)

(i) Pre-Maharaja Chandrakirti era (1074-1849 AD)

Many experts opine that the performance culture started in Manipur with *Lai Haraoba* (festival of appeasement of the sylvan deities). The festival is a treasure of Meitei history, philosophy and arts; and has survived for ages. It is a festival of fertility in which the people of the *leikai* (locality) or *khul* (village) appease the deity. The depiction of characters and events in *Lai Haraoba* is through songs and rhythmic movements of the parts of the body. There are six forms of *Lai Haraoba* – *ChakpaPhayeng Haraoba*, *Kanglei*, *Andro*, *Moirang Thangjing Haraoba*, *Sekmai Haraoba*, and *KakchingHaraoba*. Scholars believe the custom of performance originated with the *Tangkhul Nurabi* episode on the last day of *Kanglei Haraoba*. It is a mythological narrative, and the performance is an enactment of the banter between Lord Nongpok Ningthou and the goddess Panthoibi. The repartee discusses the philosophy of fertility – both productive and reproductive and there are elements of *Shumang Leela* in this enactment, such as humour, riddles, dialogues from the ritualistic rites, singing, dancing, etc. The *TangkhulNurabi* repertory, as documented in the *LoiyambaShilyel*, was incorporated into the *Lai Haraoba* festival during the reign of King Loiyamba (1074-1112 AD).

In “Folk Theatre of Meiteis”, Lokendra, eminent historian and cultural activist opines on the origin of *Shumang Leela* in the *Lai Haraoba* performances:

Therefore, the origins of the Manipuri folk theatre are to be sought in the ritual dances connected with ancestor worship and propitiation of presiding deities of the clan and community of settlement. The Meiteis of the valley, the predominant ethnic group in Manipur, are Mongoloid in racial character and are practitioners of rice culture. Leisure is one of the fundamental characteristics of rice cultivation and from it originated

the creative use of leisure. Dance, music and the performing arts had developed from that.ⁱ

Apart from *Lai Haraoba*, another form of performance with instances of comedy/satire, somewhat on the lines of humour in *Shumang Leela*, is believed to have existed in the period ahead of King Khagemba (1597-1652 AD). The performance is known as “Chengpak khulou yengdaba huidri padam loudaba tokna makhum hangba.” Loosely translated, it means speaking out one’s mind or whatever he/she wishes to. Later, during Khagemba’s time, it was known as “Mitou Tamba” (mimicry).

(ii) The reign of Maharaja Chandrikirti (1850-1949 A.D.)

A section of the researchers is of the view that *Shumang Leela* originated from the king’s court during the reign of Maharaja Chandrakirti from 1850 to 1886 AD. According to Ningombam Ibobi Singh, a scholar of *Shumang Leela*, this form of performing art originated from *Phagee Leela* (farce plays or comical skits) during the reign of Maharaja Chandrakirti. The *manai achanba* (king’s favourite servant) used to mimic the nobles and members of the royal family, somewhat akin to court jesters. The jesters performed in front of the king during his leisure hours.

In the words of Lokendra, the jesters in the king’s court were enslaved people, but slavery in Manipur was not like the American slavery system as practised in Virginia in the 17th Century. It was a mild form of slavery, with the enslaved people doing odd jobs. Apart from the *manai achanba*, there was the institution of domestic helpers of the nobles, and they were known as *phungana nai*. *Phunga* in Meiteilon means hearth, and *nai* means the enslaved person, so it means domestic enslaved person. They run errands for the family and accompany their masters during social gatherings and functions.

When their masters attend the court, they carry their seats and are not excluded from the activities of the *darbar*. They were exposed to the functioning of the royal court, manners, and behaviours of the courtiers and the royal family. Moreover, to entertain the royal court members, they performed skits without adhering to any written scripts and creating plots. Abujamba comedy, Amuthoi comedy, Yotsubi comedy, Chengba comedy are well-known examples of such performances.

During a court session, Abujamba Saiton and Kharibam Leishaba performed a skit, making fun of a courtier Thokchao, one of the king's favourites. In the performance, they pretended to stumble upon the footprints of an elephant en route to the royal court. Later, they found out that the footprints were of Thokchao and not an elephant. The courtiers and the king enjoyed the performance and laughed their hearts out. So, the jesters were invited to perform during the 10-day Durga Puja celebration. It marked the beginning of the *Phagee Leela*, shifting its venue from the king's court to open ground and making it accessible to the commoners.

There were restrictions on the court jesters' entry into the king's *darbar* after colonization by the British in 1891. Many of the jesters were dismissed from their jobs, and to make both ends meet after the unemployment, they started visiting the villages during the agricultural off-season and performed in the courtyards for an agreed fee. By then, the British had introduced the money economy. The frequency of performance also increased after it moved out from the royal ambience, and the humour started representing the ordinary lives of the general public, and it drifted from the strict hierarchical social structure. The jesters became a lot braver, and in their skits, in some instances, they started attacking the British colonial administration, the maladministration of the ruling class and the elite. Lokendra explains its endeavour in parodying the administration and society of that time:

These clowns did not follow prescribed performance rules or regulations from any theatrical tradition emanating from the royal court. They also departed from the religious plays of the court-supported theatre, starting social plays in the native vernacular, while the religious theatres confined themselves to Brajabuli. Though no long story or dramatic tale was performed, they enacted small categories of nuclear skits highlighting romantic frailties, false ambitions, contradictions of religious spiritualism, the wicked Brahmin, the upstart nobility by-passing collective norms, the over-aged gentlemen with young wives, forced marriages and their foibles, etc. Their short plays followed an anarchic style that disrupted established norms and beliefs. The entire foundation of the religio-feudal society was put to ridicule.ⁱⁱ

Apart from the farce plays during festive occasions, the court jesters continued the tradition of entertaining the king's court, his subjects, and visitors to the king's *darbar*, including the British colonizers. Although there are no documented proofs regarding the script or the type of plays performed in Maharaja Chandrakirti's court, an excerpt from the book by Mrs Ethel Grimwood roughly accounts for the performance of a *Phagee Leela* during that period. She wrote:

Furthermore, to wind up, there was a play. The Maharajah has three jesters, precisely like the old English fashion of having court jesters to amuse royalty. The Manipuri specimen was very funny indeed. Their heads were shaved like the back of a poodle, with little tufts of hair left here and there, and their faces were painted with streaks of different coloured points, and their eyebrows whitened. They wore very few clothes, but they had striped red and green and a variety of shades. They walked up to the tent where we were sitting to watch the sports, all

leaning against each other and carrying on a lively conversation in Manipuri, which seemed to amuse the spectators. On reaching the door of the tent, they all fell at our feet, making terrible grimaces by way of greeting, and they picked each other and retired a few yards off and commenced the performance. One disguised himself as an older woman and another as a native doctor, and the third as a sick man lying on the ground covered with a white sheet. Someone out of the crowd was impressed into the play, and he had to call the doctor to the sick man, who was meanwhile heaving up and down upon the ground in a very extraordinary manner. The doctor came and poked him about, making observations in Manipuri, at which everyone roared with laughter, and then the older woman arrived and dragged the doctor off home. She was supposed to be his wife, and as soon as she appeared, a scuffle ensued, in which the older woman's clothes fell off. We thought best to beat a retreat as the play was beginning to be rowdy and the dialogues vulgar, but I believe that it went on for some hours afterwards, as we heard shouts of laughter proceeding from the direction of polo ground, where the sports were held till late night. And the princess told us the very day that it had been a very good play and the only pity was that we witnessed so little.ⁱⁱⁱ

The British colonial rule started in Manipur in 1891, and slowly and steadily, the colonizers made their presence felt in the social, political and economic spheres. During this period, alongside the *Phagee Leela*, a form of protest theatre started in Manipur by the name of *Kabul Leela* (Kabul play)/*Kabul Jagoi* (Kabul dance)/*Kabul pala* (chorus of Kabul). This form of the theatre started under the aegis of one Sanamacha, a master of Manipuri dance and music, and it was staged as a protest against the Kabuli traders for pricing their goods at exorbitant rates. These traders came along with the British from the Burmese side. The *Kabuli Leela* was followed by *Phadeebi Leela*, or

the play of tattered clothes. This form of play highlighted the miserable conditions of the common mass.

According to another group of scholars, some traits of “Mandap Leela” can be seen in *Shumang Leela*. In the mid-18th Century, the religious theatre forms *Sansenba*, *Goura Leela*, *Ras Leela*, and *Udukhol Leela* were performed during Rajashri Bhagyachandra’s reign at the king’s palace. They were generally known as “Mandap Leela”. The stories of these court-supported theatre forms were based on the life of Lord Krishna. In the words of playwright, cultural activist and Lifetime President of Manipur State Shumang Leela Council Phurailatpam Gunachandra Sharma, the rituals of *Mandap Leela*—*adivas*, *mandala puja*, *Khuwaj*, *beitha*, *sabha vandana* and *nityay padya*—were performed before the start and end of *Shumang Leela*. Also, *Shumang Leela* performers do not use footwear during a performance, similar to Mandap Leela.

Another factor he cited is that during the *nata sankirtan*, the *pala* singers were considered *shokhis* and the drummer as *shokha*; likewise, in *Shumang Leela*, the male actors were considered as *shokhas* and the *Nupi Shabis* (female role enactors) as *shokhis*. In Mandap Leela, the *esheihanba* is called *mayai leppa* (standing in the middle) and the *doha* as *lamba* (opponent) similarly, in *Shumang Leela*, the protagonist is the *mayai leppa*, and the antagonist is the *lamba*.

According to Haorokcham, the *Moirang Parva* (saga of Moirang) performed in 1894/95 at Panjeemayum Lampak in Wahengbam Leikai, Imphal West is the first *Shumang Leela* performance of Manipur. The performance was based on the legendary tales of Khamba and Thoibi from Moirang, a principality of Manipur situated 45-km from the state capital Imphal. The play was banned after 4-5 episodes by the then royal family of Manipur within that year itself, citing that cracks had developed in the premises of the Thangjing Temple in Moirang because of this performance.^{iv}

In an article written by Gunachandra on the “Origin of Shumang Leela”, in a souvenir published for the Shumang Leela Ningtham Kumhei, 2017, the author, on behalf of the Manipur State Shumang Leela Council, confirms that the *Moirang Parva* performed in 1894/95 at Panjeemayum Lampak of Wahengbam Leikai is the first *Shumang Leela* of Manipur. The article also mentions that the elements of theatre like written scripts, dialogues, songs, and dances were not covered by *PhageeLeela* but covered by *Shumang Leela*, almost in toto. ^v

In 1918, another *Shumang Leela* was performed at Tera Keithel in Imphal West district under the patronage of Aribam Amubi Sharma. The play *Harishchandra* was based on the king’s life by the same name in the *Ramayana*. *Harishchandra* was similar to the *Moirang Parva* with lots of songs and dialogues. It was a landmark in the development of *Shumang Leela* because it was a full-length play based on a story and the language was vernacular. It was received with enthusiasm by the people, the royalty as well as the commoners. ^{vi}

By the 1920s, the then king Churachand Maharaj lifted the ban on *Moirang Parva* performance. Soon, two groups of *Moirang Parva* performers started performing it—*Kongpal Moirang Parva* or *Ariba Moirang Parva* (Old Moirang Parva) and *Keishampat Moirang Parva* or *Anouba Moirang Parva* (New Moirang Parva). After the rebirth of *Moirang Parva* in the 1920s, the performances continued till the 1960s and this traditional form of *Shumang Leela*, in its distinctive style, popularized the legendary story of Khamba-Thoibi of Moirang principality. Before the Second World War, other plays that were performed were *Meiraba Charan*, *Chandrajini*, *Chandrahas*, *Satya Charit*, *Bhagyachandra Shamu Phaaba*, *Thok Leela*, *Ekadashi Swayamvar*, *Shubhutta Shuri Huranba* etc.

(iii) Shumang Leela with written scripts (1950 AD-till date)

By the 1950s, scripted *Shumang Leela* plays were performed. The first *Shumang Leela* play with a written script is *Puya Meithaba* (burning of the *Puya*) by N. Angouton.^{vii} By 1952, the first social-message play *B.A. Mapa Lamboiba* was performed, and *Nungshi Leirang* and others followed it. Plays based on the folk tales of Manipur like *Sandrembi Cheishra*, *Ngangbiton*, and *KeibuKeiyoiba* were also performed besides the social-themed plays.

During the first half of the 20th Century, the Bengalis greatly influenced the Manipur society. According to Lokendra, the elites from Manipur who travelled outside the state for their education to Bengal were influenced by the “Jatra” of Bengal and renamed this form of performing arts as “Jatra”, and the performers came to be known as “Jatrawalis”. This change in nomenclature took place in the 1930s.

For many years *Shumang Leela* was known as “Jatra”, and even the festivals conducted by the Theatre Centre Manipur and the Directorate of Publicity were called the All Manipur Jatra Festival. As the politics of name found the name “Jatra” un-indigenous, the name of this theatre was rechristened as *Shumang Leela* by the Manipur State Kala Akademi on January 15, 1976, in an event organized by the Akademi and presided by the then Governor of Manipur.

In the 1970s, another genre of *Shumang Leela* emerged, and it was known as *Epom* (wave) or *Epom Leela*. This form lacked some of the essential elements of a *Shumang Leela* performance, and the sole motive was not to spread social awareness but to entertain the audience. It was a comedy show but with scripted dialogues. By the late 1970s, a new genre of *Shumang Leela* started, and it was known as *Eshei Leela* (Leela with songs). It was also known as *Anouba Shumang Leela* (New Shumang Leela).

Scholars believe that it might be because of the influence of Bollywood and the start of the celluloid film industry of Manipur a few years before it that

the Leela groups started to include songs and dances in their performances. There were two types of *Shumang Leela*—the Dialogue *Leela* and the *Eshei Leela*. In Dialogue *Leelas*, the emphasis was put on stylized dialogues and music was confined only to simple instruments like *dholaks* (drums) and *kartals* (cymbals), while the *Eshei Leelas* had songs and exquisitely choreographed dance sequences. The *Eshei Leela* genre became more popular and completely wiped out the Dialogue *Leela* genre by the late 80s, and this is the only form that is performed nowadays. All the other genres of *Shumang Leela* are now extinct, and the present-day *Shumang Leela* is what started as the *Eshei Leela*.

Conclusion

Although various scholars have multiple opinions regarding the origin of *Shumang Leela*, it can be safely concluded that the multiplicity is simplified by the presence of elements of performance in this traditional media. The elements of the song, dance and dialogues are very much a part of the formative stage since the culture of performance started with *Lai Haraoba*, and to date, it is there. It can be summed up as evolution or work-in-progress, with the principal elements of performing art present in almost all the theories put forward by various scholars regarding the origin of *Shumang Leela*. It can be observed as evolution with the changing face of time and the development cycle, giving its impact as the theatre form progresses. The origin is debatable, as opined by various scholars, but what we can draw from the various schools of thought of its origin is that whether it started in 1074 AD or 1850s or 1894, the characteristics of performance is present from 1074 AD. Only the form and structural changes that have evolved over the centuries culminated in what we witnessed as *Shumang Leela* in the last two centuries.

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