

Visual Arts forms and Expectation in Traditional Meetei/Meitei Religion

¹Dr. M. Irikhomba Meetei, ²Dr. S. Priyokumar Meitei

¹Assistant Professor, Dept. of Fine Arts, Manipur University, Canchipur

²Guest Faculty, Dept. of Anthropology, Manipur University, Canchipur

Email – ¹irikmeetei@gmail.com , ²kumarpriyo@yahoo.com

Abstract: Visual Arts is a medium of communication. It is practiced since from the early period of time. Visual arts documented the past history of human civilization and it also takes the major role for making the complete society. It was also used as a tool for dispersing religious movement within the society. Here, we can remind different religious phases of Meetei's/Meitei's. First the pre-Hindu or pre-Vaishnavite religion, second the Hindu or Vaishnavite religion movement and third phase revivalist movement of traditional Meetei/Meitei religion. In these three phases visual art has used for moving ahead different aesthetic meaning of their different religious activities. Archives and excavation reveal the importance of art forms in the socio-religious lives of a group of people. Academically Visual Arts we mainly referred to Painting, Sculpture, Print making and Applied Art. Beyond these, other medium such as installation is also implicated in the present visual arts trend. This type of art form i.e. installation is still practicing since from the time immemorial. Visual art occupies a significant role in the religious cultural ways of life either in the form of movable or immovable artifacts. The emergence of Hindu religion and infusion of Bengal's culture in the Meetei's/Meitei's lives is a significant historical episode of development in the state of Manipur. It brought changes to the traditional culture and religious beliefs overwhelming the people by using visual elements. Lack of making God and Goddesses forms (it may be either sculpting or painting), temple architecture and lack of understanding proper art forms were the main reason of disappearing Meitei religion. The present paper attempts to understand the significant roles and implications of visual art elements encrypted in traditional Meitei religion.

Key words: Visual Arts, Religion, Installation, Artefacts.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Visual art forms are entities to make people think deeper inside and liberalize to self interpretation. Visual art occupies a vital implication in reviving the traditional religion and to sustain the indigenous culture, with technological aid. It is essential to upgrade the beauty of the identity culture of Meitei society over time. Universally, social changes through external or internal forces are inescapable. Similarly, in the state of Manipur also, the change has occurred through the agency of Bengoli Saints exercising considerable influences by means of visualized art forms on traditional beliefs of the Meetei/Meiteis. It was due to several factors of cultural change. Major problems of the traditional Meitei religion are lack of architectural and visual art forms which are in a position to entice the majority sections of the Meitei society as compared to its Hinduism counterparts. As a result, visual art forms were transformed from traditional to Vaishnavite ideology. In due course of time, traditional Meitei culture amalgamated with new Hindu cults and form a unique one. In the later period, there was a rise of the revivalism of indigenous religion which may be called contra-acculturation from the anthropological perspective. The revivalism being undertaken in this paper devotes to highlight a major transforming transition from Vaishnavism to Sanamahism which has had advanced almost in a halfway swing. Revivalism began as because of many reformists in the light of strengthening language, culture, original scripts, and future of the new generation. Since, the movement is on its halfway course, not freed from multiple difficulties of communal disharmony, groupism and segmentism. It leads to binary division in theoretical and practical teachings on some selected Meitei festivals, rituals related ceremony. For example: Under the same ideology and principle, *Cheiraoba* (Meetei New Year) is celebrated on two different days, different narratives and religious spells are used in birth, marriage and death ceremonies. In this present day of 21st century, the Meitei people outlay between these two major religious traditions. No doubt the art forms in Meitei Sanamahism are lagging behind comparatively in many ways. The art forms say, the patterns of dragon headed serpent god of 'Pakhangba' are hardly installed in the households and people are reluctant to see the images or pictures on day-to-day living. Since the structure is a form of serpent with dragon head, it possesses a frightened icon to the viewer rather than the cultural values. Hence, it is tendered usually by the traditional religious practitioner. There is a need to devise creative and attractive architectural icons, visual forms to endorse indigenous aspects of traditional religion to admire this tradition.

This paper attempts to understand three important things. First is to identify some important visual arts elements in traditional Meitei religion. The second purpose is to understand the various forms and motifs in those visual arts artefacts'. This paper also has the purpose to bring into light on the importance and significance vis-à-vis the aesthetics values of visual art in the traditional Meitei religion.

2. EMERGENCE OF HINDUISM: AN OVERVIEW:

Though most of Manipuri was at least nominally Hindu after the 15th century, in earlier time, the major religion among the Meitei people were Sanamahism in all the areas. King Pamheiba treated a Bramhin Hindu Pujari as his *Guru* who was from Silhet of Bangladesh. He came through western mountain of Manipur. The king followed whatever advice suggested by the Shanta Das Goshai, the Bengali Brahman, who had a very strong attitude to exploit the tradition, culture, script and religion of Manipur by convincing the king Pamheiba. After Shanta Das Goshai's suggestion only, King Pamheiba forced every people of Meitei/ Meitei to follow Hindu as their religion. King Pamheiba (Garibaniwaza) was formally initiated into Ramandi or Rama cult in 1730. On before this phase, people of Manipur were originally nature worshippers and traditional Gods for example Iputhou Sanamahi and Iputhou Pakhangba were regarded as biggest Gods with highest beliefs. After 1717, king outlawed the consumption of pork, poultry and beef. (1) He also converted many Sanamahi Laishang shrines followers into Hindu temples and fought with the traditional clergy for religious power. Examples are the creation of Hindu Mahasabha, Brahmasabha, Govindajee Temple Board, Mondum Mahadev, Lord Krishna Temple of Kaina. Apart from it, worshipping of Surja Dev (Sun God), Tulsi (Holy Basil plant in courtyard) was also a significant impact. In Manipur, interestingly, even after the adoption of Hinduism, Meitei did not give up worshipping of Sanamahi by allotting a space inside the house, on south east corner of every household. Meanwhile, the people of Manipur still have great belief on their traditional religion, worshipping Ibudhou Sanamahi. As the people of Manipur were forced to follow the Hinduism by the King, they maintained this as the external face religion just to show the respect for their king. Shanta Das Goshai was killed afterwards by the people paying off his disrespect and rude behavior towards the original religion of the Meiteis. After the death of monarchy people started independently following their original religion 'Sanamahism' worshipping 'Ibudhou Sanamahi', and the influence of Hinduism started degrading. And now in the present era the Meitei's are retaining the 'Sanamahism' cult through influences of many leaders.

3. THE PROBLEMS :

Every subject has a goal of its applicability to the society. Fine arts, especially, visual art subject plays an important role to the society or a country. The essence of art begins from the society or community that we are living today. Without art we couldn't still recognized the oldest civilization like Egyptian, Chinese and Indus valley civilization. According to Pran Nath Mago 'the word art has come to be applied in discriminately to so many form of human activity'. (2) This is true that visual environment of a country is an important part of its existence and what we see impacts on us deeply in many different ways. Visual art acts as a mirror of the society indicating own cultural ideology, skills, knowledge, beliefs, habits and life ways. (3) If we talk about history of Manipur, it is very complex and still in vague of controversy. This might be the factor of burning of *Puya* (books on Meitei beliefs) or lack of rich artefact such as making Stone sculpture, metal casting, wood curving, architectural design or other related art works. But excavation of visual art elements such as tools, pieces of pottery and other materials believed that history of Manipur begins dated back from the Palaeolithic period. (4) Development level of religious culture with the visual art forms in those times is evidently observed and can be reconstructed. Paintings, carvings and sculpture signify the various life ways of the people economic, political and traditional belief systems. This sort of reconstruction will be very helpful in advancing the knowledge through mutual sharing of ideas and missing gaps in the earlier cultural civilization, undoubtedly the progress of religious traditions. Other art forms such as performing arts, traditional folk music, songs are preserved since form the early period of time but the art practice of making paintings, mural work, wood curving, stone curving, architectural forms were very limited. Most of artwork related with the visual arts were mostly done and developed after the arrival of Hinduism in Manipur. At first, the traditional practice of idol worship was not done. Animism, ancestral worship, snake worship were the main religion of Meitei people. Dr. Indrani mentioned that with the adoption of Hinduism as state religion; the worship of idol has been started among the people living in the plane areas. The Hindu followers used to capture the traditional cult by using fascinating visual elements. Idols of god and goddesses made of metals were become more popular among the Meitei religion. The import of bronze idols into Manipur was started since the time of Meitei King Kiyamba (1467-1508 A.D.). (5) Here, some of the sculptural forms of Hindu God and Goddess are showing below.



Fig1: Matsya Avatar (Fish incarnation of Vishnu)
 19th Century A.D.
 (Photo Courtesy Manipur State Museum)

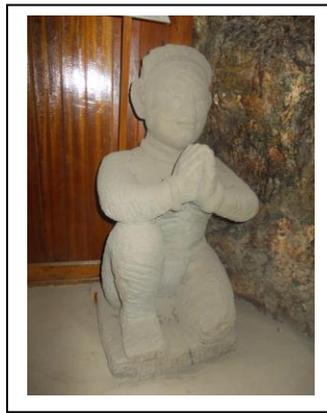


Fig2: Seated Hanuman
 18th Century A.D.
 (Photo Courtesy Manipur State Museum)

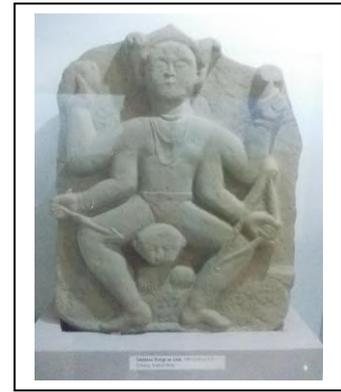


Fig3: Goddess Durga on Lion
 19th Century A.D.
 (Photo Courtesy Manipur State Museum)



Fig4: Standing Ram and Sita
 18th Century A.D.
 (Photo Courtesy Manipur State Museum)



Fig5: Seated Kartikeya
 19th Century A.D.
 (Photo Courtesy Manipur State Museum)



Fig6: Goddess Saraswati seated on lotus
 19th Century A.D.
 (Photo Courtesy Manipur State Museum)

According to G.P. Singh, it is mentioned that with the introduction of Hinduism in Manipur the Hindu missionaries provided an impetus to the construction of temples. A new Hindu style of architecture was greatly influenced by the contemporary schools of architecture and adopted. (6) During the period, the temples of Rama, Hanuman, Radha-Krishna, Govindaji, Kali and other Hindu gods and goddesses were constructed by following the different Hindu style of architecture. Hindu followers unintentional change the name of the original deities of Meitei into Hindu god and goddesses by using those visual elements. Some of the unwanted changes or having potentials of being changed are Mongba Hanba Umanglen (Mahabali), Nongpok Ningthou at Nongmaijing Hill (Mahadev), Hiyangthang Lairembi (Kamakhya) etc. (7) This is how Manipuri tradition transforms into new cultural identity in the social history and cultural adaptation over space and time. The revivalist protests that the Meitei culture and indigenous people are in the verge of extinction due to extreme level acculturation since 1709, starting from the time of king Pamheiba till the last king of pre-merger Manipur. No doubt, most of the Meitei people adopted the Hindu religion, but no one wish to discontinue worshipping of traditional gods, Emoinu, Sanamahi, and Forest Deities. On the other side, a key amount of population is embracing the traditional art and culture at the expense of the Hindu based traditions as a part of the revivalist movement. The present development in the visual art forms thus can't ignore the indigenous and traditional art forms apart from the infusion of the Hindu culture and Bengal's art in the recent days of 21st century.

There is lack of absolute literature to exemplify the origin of traditional Meitei religion probably due to destabilization of cultural resources and specialists when the Hinduism was on its underway to engulf the beliefs of the historical kings and people of Manipur. The indigenous art therefore assimilated adopting the popular identity of

Hindu philosophy. However, the revivalism movement (being considered to be established during the time of Naoria Phullo) had embraced the traditional elements endorsed with traditional culture and attempt has been made to reconstruct the origin by accumulating the cultural traits of traditional religion. “Emoinu”, a goddess, even though worshipped by the Meiteis since time immemorial, the patterns of celebration of Emoinu Day, is changing over time. It is worshipped on a celebration on the 12th day of the 10th month of lunar calendar. The celebration is becoming to attain in a larger scale in the recent trends and largely held up by the revivalists.

4. VISUAL ART FORMS AND EXPECTATION IN TRADITIONAL MEITEI RELIGION:

Visual Art forms in traditional Meitei religion are very limited and need to be reproduced on making different artworks base on Meitei god and goddesses. Paintings, carvings, metal casting, totem installations are important aspects of documenting Meitei religion. The literature is immensely valuable in reconstructing the art and culture of the Meitei’s for making an anthropological reinterpretation of religious practices with special reference to the importance of visual art. Some of the visual art forms which are base on Meitei religion are showing below.

Drawing, paintings and sculptural forms of Paphal.

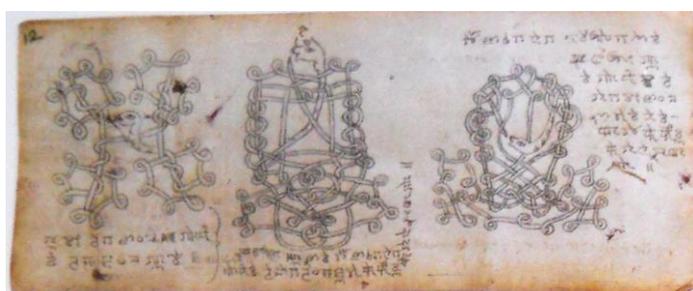


Fig7. Manuscript Drawing of Paphals. 18th-19th A.D.
 Photo courtesy: Illustrated Miniscript of Manipur, Mutua Bahadur

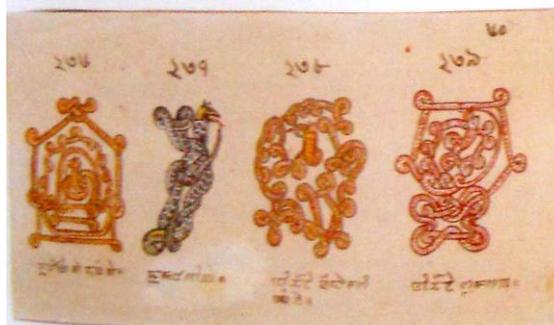


Fig9. Sculptural form of Paphal
 Photo courtesy: Personal collection

Fig8. Manuscript paintings of Paphals. 18th-19th A.D.
 Photo courtesy: Illustrated Miniscript of Manipur, Mutua Bahadur

Painting, Installation and Sculptural forms of Goddess Emoinu Chak-hong Nga-hongbi



Fig10. Painting of Goddess Emoinu.



Fig11. Sculptural form of Goddess Emoinu.



Fig12. Installation form of Goddess Emoinu.

Special architectural designed hut for god, giant size boat headed with dragon head, frontal walls of houses designed with the shape and pattern of *Pakhangba* are still observed as identity artefact of Meitei society. There is hardly convincing records and data to validate the direct association of visual art and religious life of Meiteis' due to a comprehensive change in life ways with the advent of Hindu culture in the mainstream society. For example, the image or patterns of *Pakhangba*, (dragon or serpent headed god) patterns are manifold and it has both malevolent and benevolent characteristics. Therefore, it is worshipped under a strict instruction of a quack or specialist. Some of the noteworthy features of visual art in association with traditional religion are observed in:

- Paintings of god: *Emoinu*, *Pakhangba*- a dragon headed serpent god.
- Carvings in wooden furniture or figurine sculpture or sculptured in economic utilitarian.
- Different forms of installation practice in *Lai Haraoba* (pleasing of god) ceremony.
- Pottery Making (pottery is a necessary elements used in different religious purposes of Meitei society).

The contemporary visual art of Manipur is a substantially synthesized product of traditional and Hinduisation art forms largely influenced by Bengal's art. The architectural visual art of traditional Meitei religion is taken care of by a very few specialists and there is lack of standardized technological approach and exposure. For example, the different forms and patterns of serpent headed god "Pakhangba" are not well installed and worshipped by the mass followers. However, another god "Sanamahi" regarded as the king of god is worshipped by all the Meitei community irrespective of either Hindu or Traditional religion followers.

5. CONCLUSION:

From the aforesaid discussion, the role of visual art in religious movement is quite noteworthy. The cultural progress is therefore stipulated by the development of visual art with specific to religious customs and practices. When we turn back to see the past, the Hinduisation in Manipur was a dramatic change, in a sense, not only in the religious field but also a series of cultural fusion with foreign tradition through the application of visual art. They used to make powerful visual elements in the form of costume, dresses, fashionable items, fine arts, luxurious items etc. It is true that visual perception is sharper than verbal or audio aids from somebody. For example, advertising on the billboard or a traffic signal in a crowded city is more penetrating than mere instruction through audible devices. So, visual art plays an important role to make Hindunisation in Manipur. Making of sculptures like *Garuda*, *Krishna-Radha* sculpture paintings, temples etc. allured Manipuri people to float in an Indian ocean. This religious movement has not built on a single day or a single month or a single year rather it has been entrenched through ages. Considering on the part of contra-acculturation, revivalism of traditional Meitei religion indispensably requires taking up the application of visual art in a similar fashion prevailed during Hindu revivalism. Incorporation of cultural values with aesthetic values is very much important. Now, the time has brought some changes that several distinct forms of visual art are progressing in parallel to one another on the same platform. For example, celebrating the image of mother goddess *Panthoi* is now popular than celebration of Hindu goddess *Druga*. In addition, the celebration of *Emoinu Eratpa* at *Yumnam Leikai*, *Imphal* is also one important example indicating the spirit of reviving Meitei traditional culture, displaying several visual art forms of cultural items such as giant size pottery, basket, images of goddess, installations, some sculptures like woman while grinding rice using traditional method etc. This is an auspicious symbol of artistic development through exchange of ideas and development. It is a high time to undertake a symbiosis approach incorporating the two dimensional aspects by parking aside the notion of superimposition. Keeping in mind that present turbulent situation is the experiment of the future and by-product of the past, it is apparent that visual art forms can largely determine the beauty of the culture not limiting to attract a major chunk of the population.

REFERENCES:

1. Roy, J.1973. *History of Manipur*. Calcutta eastlight book house.
2. Mago, Pran Nath. 2001. *Contemporary Art in India*, New Delhi, National Book trust, pg.7.
3. Mukerjee, R.k.1998. *Social Function of Art*. Publisher-Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan. Pg-1
4. Burkitt, M.,C. 1963. *The old stone age*. Cambridge University press, pg.1.
5. Devi, Indrani,K. *The Bronzes of Manipur*. Tribal Museum and Research Centre, Imphal, pg.1,2,9,18.
6. Singh, G.P.2012. *Hinduism of Manipur*. Gyan Publishing House, pg.84.
7. Singh. Bijoykumar. Kh. H. Sudher. *Social History of Manipur. Craft of Hinduism and state formation in Pre-Modern Manipur*. Sumarg publishers and Distributors, New Delhi. pg.67
8. Chingtamlen, W.2007. *Ashort history of Kangleipak Part II*.
9. Irabot. N. *Manipur Lameatlon Pafanlon Puya*.
10. Joshi, S.C. 2002. *Manipur the Jewell of India*. Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi.
11. Singh. Kumar,O.1997. *Stone age Archaeology of Manipur*. Iboyaima Printers, Imphal.

Web References:

- http://epao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=manipur.Manipur_and_Religion.Meitei_Culture_Religion
- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanamahism>
- http://epao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=manipur.Manipur_and_Religion.The_Revivalism_of_Sanama_hism
- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pamheiba>
- <http://www.academia.edu/Download>
- <http://manipur.itgo.com> (Photo image Fig.9) access on 24th May,2019.
- <http://ar-ar.facebook.com> (Photo image Fig.11) access on 24th May,2019.
- <https://kangleipakima.blogspot.com/2013/01/?view=magazine>