



E-ISSN: 2706-9117
P-ISSN: 2706-9109
www.historyjournal.net
IJH 2024; 6(2): 17-20
Received: 18-05-2024
Accepted: 25-06-2024

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A historical appraisal on the selected traditional children's games of Manipur

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Abstract

Manipur, known for its rich cultural heritage, has a long history and unique cultural identity distinct from others. The traditional games of Manipur are deeply intertwined with its cultural legacy. Closely linked to the region's history, culture, and civilization, these traditional games are a crucial part of the cultural life of the Manipuris. Traditional games play an essential role in children's mental and interpersonal skill development. However, many traditional children's games are not adequately recorded despite their significance, raising concerns about their preservation. The present study aims to explore and document selected traditional children's games of Manipur such as Se Se Seboti, Tongdrumbi, Kei Yen Sanaba, Phibul Habi Sanaba, Uraobi, Laphu Phukpi Nom Nom Sagaitong, Uchi Chi Chi Khangmeitat.

Keywords: Manipur, traditional games, children, culture, society, values

Introduction

Though a small, hilly state, Manipur has earned wide fame for its traditional games. Involvement in games and recreational activities has remained a part of the human culture of the Meeteis. All civilizations developed along with their social and cultural realms, and traditional games occupied the center stage. Manipur has had several traditional games since the early days. These games are closely linked to the people's history, culture, and civilization.

Traditional games did not originate suddenly and evolved through different historical backgrounds in this land's historical and cultural values. The traditional games have shown their interconnections in their origin and gradual evolution. The traditional games are classified as outdoor and indoor games, individual and team games. Traditional games have their philosophies. They are bearers of moral values, lessons of life, and ethical and cultural values. In addition, games played a vital role in overall mental growth, behaviours, and interpersonal skill development. Traditional games reflecting the cultural life of the Meeteis saw a major transformation in the nineteenth century. These games flourished for centuries and had to be given away to modern games. Along with introducing numerous modern games, diminishing patronage and lack of promotion from different stakeholders paved the way for the gradual eclipse of the traditional games.

Manipur, too, has several traditional children's games. Knowledge of the games has been transmitted through traditional practices. Philosophically, these were related to the grooming of children as responsible subjects of the country. Despite several popular traditional children's games, it is of concern that accounts of the games are not properly recorded.

Research Methodology

This article is based on a historical perspective drawing from primary and secondary sources available in archives, libraries, and other repositories. The primary sources include chronicles, archaic Meetei manuscripts, while secondary sources include relevant published works like books in both English and Manipuri, articles, and journals. Interviews have also contributed valuable information to this article.

Discussion & Results

The origin of the traditional children's games testified to the cultural value of the Meetei race. All these games possessed their philosophical ideas and purposes. The games were more than just entertainment, pleasure, and pastime. The games were intended for physical

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fitness and mental soundness as a resourceful asset of a bright future. Forefathers taught children about the games and, importantly, the values of life in the games. All these games were important components of the traditional system of education. Traditional children's games were Se Se Seboti, Tongdrumbi, Kei Yen Sanaba, Phibul Habi Sanaba, Uraobi, Laphu Phukpi Nom Nom Sagaitong, Uchi Chi Chi Khangmeitat.

1. Se se seboti

During the time of the king Garibniwaza @ Pamheiba (1690-1751 A.D.), there was a contest between Ramandi preacher Santidas Gosain and the Meetei scholar Chingu Maichou Khonganghaba over the superiority of religion. This Manipuri proverbial line, "Se Se Seboti, Laishram Macha Bhubhoti, Nanga Eiga Kaonasi," was supposed to be composed during this historical event. Grown-up girls usually played this traditional game as a recreational activity. The game gave much physical activity to the girls. The sanarol (playing lines of the game) runs:

*'Se Se Seboti, Laishram Macha Bhubhoti
Nanga Eiga Kaonasi, Kanaga Ngamge Yengnasi
Kouna Phuktum Phuktokke, Thambou Thekkum Thektokke
Leisabi Phidup Singnasi, Pakhang Khudei Singnasi, Swaa'.*^[1]

The game is usually played in an open space like Shumang (Courtyard) or Shanggoi (Front yard). Two players sit on heels and low waist, facing each other, and put their hands on the waist by spreading one leg. Players shouted Swaa (start) and started the game. Players jumped by uttering the sanarol (playing lines) one by one, kicking sideways alternately. The player jumping and kicking sideways without touching the ground was declared the winner. Sometimes, the players engage in a leg-to-leg fight to make the opponent fall or disturb the balance^[2]. The game's essential aspect was keeping the growing girl physically and mentally healthy. Again, playing this game kept girls' hips and thighs strong^[3]. This helped them in normal childbirth when they became mothers. The game helped girls with the efficiency of body and mind coordination, concentration, and foot movement skills. The game tested the skills of foot movement^[6]. This game exhibited girls the prowess and vitality to groom physically and mentally fit for a bright future^[5].

2. Tong tong tongdrumbi

Children play this game along with a mother or senior. Children will sit in a circle around the mother and her. The children placed their hands on the floor. The playing mother gave a mild punch by reciting the lines:

*"Tong Tong Tongdrumbi, Chakrik Nakrik Chawaibi
Lai Marol Mashing Thi, Thadoi Koina
Temu Temu Maton Sana, Chi Chou"*

The hand which fell the last word *Chou* is out, and the game continued till the last. Philosophically, the *sanarol* (playing line of the game) showed the mother's love and protection of the children^[6]. The dedication and selflessness of the mother are shown in a proverbial manner in this game.

3. Shon Shaba

The game was a children's game mostly played with their

father or grandfather. While resting, sleeping on the back of the bed, or sometimes in the mangol (verandah), cuddling their legs, played this game with children climbing on their father or grandfather's foot. The sanarol(playing lines) of this game runs: "Epa, Epu Shon Sha Shon Shon Shon."

At the end, the child would be upside down and said shon shon. While playing the game, grandfather or father taught their children the lesson of three generations of the family. This game gave the message that maintaining the prestige of the forefathers by the present generation is the main priority of this game.

4. Hao macha tunanboi

The Hao Macha Tunanboi Thumbon Nammaga Sinase was the phrase used by the parents in this game for kids. Hao Macha are literally the hill tribes. Children sitting on the parent's lap played it by swinging and singing the playing lines. The game is philosophical and has a life lesson. The game showed oneness with mutual co-operation. This showed the culture of living together for years among the indigenous communities. Because of its geographic location, salt used to be and was treated as a highly valuable item. Salt brines used to be found in valley region. People living in Manipur's highlands depended on people living in the valley for salt. People living in the upland exchanged their goods for salt, an essential daily item needed by those living in the valley. This game delineated the composite culture^[7].

5. Kwak kwak

The game was played by children of around 5-10 years of ages portraying themselves kwak (crow) and mapi (mother). This game was played by skillful boys and girls in athletics in the open field or large courtyard. One of the seniormost boys or girls acted as mapi by holding one another's waist. The mapi would be at the front of the chain and defend the children from the players who acted as kwak by running sideways without breaking the chain. The kwak demanded the mapito give the rearrest child, termed as khomdon (means the youngest), and tried to touch him/her. If the Kwak touched the Khomdon, the player was declared out and would shout by saying, "Nang Chare, Nang Chare (you are out)." The game continued until all the children were out. This game was played with the conversation of the following lines (free translation),

*"Kwak Kwak, Kari paono?
Mayang paone, Chak chakhom amata chage
Chaphade, Eshing khuya ama thakke, Thakphade.
Tungda Leiriba asi kanano? Echa Khomdon ni.
Nacha Khomdon piyu, Piphade
Eidi Louna Louphade, Nakan Chage, Lai lei.
Nthak lan-ge, Korou lei
Nakrang Litke, Malem lei, Swaa".`*

This game was an age-old game. The game's message was centered around the concern about the influx of migrants in the Indigenous people's area. Thus, game showed the confrontation between the migrants and the natives of this land.

6. Kei yen sanaba

The origin of this game was related to the cosmogony of the Meeteis. The game depicted the aggression of Ashiba (Lord

Sanamahi) to kill his younger brother Konjin Tuthokpa (Lord Pakhangba) who took his father's throne when the former returned home after completing Nongkhong Koiba (Sailing the universe seven times) ^[8]. Seeing the younger son Konjin Tuthokpa's unable to sail around the universe, mother Leimarel Sidabi out of pity advised his younger son to pray his father and went round the father Sidaba's seat of throne. Mother Leimarel Sidabi made his younger son Pakhangba aware that father and his seat were the universe's origin. Konjin Tuthokpa runs to avoid his furious elder brother attack. Realizing the future detrimental outcomes, LainurasTaret (seven female deities) rounded the younger son and sang a song to lower his temper.

*“Kre Ke Kre Mo Mo, Yangel Shamba Shyao Shyao
Tokpa ga Kamba ga Keiga Yen ga, Yenkhong Phatte
Chasillo
Laigi Yen ni Chaphade!”*

In this proverbial song, *Kei* (Tiger) depicted Lord Sanamahi and *Yen* (hen) as Lord Pakhangba. The game taught the significance of mind over emotion. The song was also sung in the *Ougri Hangel Chongba*, a ritualistic dance in the Lai Haraoba festival ^[9].

7. Phibul habi shanaba

Both boys and girls played the game in villages since early times ^[10]. The game was played by throwing a ball made of cloth. The ball was known as phibul. Players stood around a circle, maintaining equal distance among them. One team of seven players acted as Sagol (horse), and another played as Sagol Tongba (horse rider). The rider's team played by throwing and catching. If one of the players let down the ball, it was termed as mangba (means out). A player from the horse team picked up the ball and hit the riders. If the ball hit the player, then the player was declared out. The game also formed a feature of the Lai Haraoba festival in which two Maibis (female priests) played around the Chong Khong (name of a pole) ^[11]. The game depicted how Lord Lainingthou (Supreme God) and Lairembi (Supreme Goddess) played the game for the propagation of progeny ^[12].

8. Uraobi

The traditional game was played by boys and girls. The game's name, 'Uraobi,' was an aberration from U-laobi (uttering 'u'). Nowadays, it is mostly played by the girls. The game represents the internecine war among the different clans and principalities before the emergence of the Manipur state formation. It was a war like game with two teams: raiders and defenders. The defenders act as prisoners of war and stand inside a circle, while the raiders try to touch them without taking a breadth. Distance between the two circles is fixed according to the agreement of the two teams. One player of the raider team, i.e., the attacking side, uttered the word 'u' without taking a breath and tried to touch the defending team player. If the player touched the defender player, she would be out.

Moreover, if the raider player made a pause in breathing while uttering the word 'u', the rival players could touch the raider player. The raider player tried to reach her original place before he or she was declared as out. The next team followed the same procedure after declaring all the players out. Players used many lines other than uttering 'u'. The

main uraorol (playing line of Uraobi) was 'u laona bandi mapham lengage'. Above this, players used other lines associated with their daily life. Another common uraorol (playing lines of uraobi) was

*‘Udei chaoba khongnangni, mana pung ba heinou ni,
keishampat ki tenawa, heinouna mulaga
tenawana haraoe, te te tenawa...’*

Uraobi had different forms. The game depicted the independent principalities which engaged in frequent war for political and military power over others. The game depicted the essentiality and role of every member of the Meetei society in defence of their motherland from the enemies. The game described the capturing of the war captives to strengthen the kingdom. Another aspect of the game was the breathing techniques used as a medical therapy ^[13]. The breathing practice used in the game kept the internal organs related to breathing intake. Naorem Ibobi points out the importance of breathing therapy used as an essential technique by experienced persons in lifelong activities ^[14].

Regarding position style, the game was similar to the Indian game Kabaddi. Instead of using a marked playing area, it is played in an open space or within the premises of the villa or house.

9. Nom nom sagai tong

The game was usually played by children singing the lines by sitting on the branches of bamboo and trees. The game was associated with many philosophical aspects. The playing lines Nom Nom Sagai Tong Chanaba Leite Takhel hangis are proverbial. Numerous philosophical proverbs are woven into the playing lines. Children, both boys and girls, played this game by swinging the tree branches with the recital of the lines Nom Nom Sagai Tong Chanaba Leite Takhel Thang. Children mostly chose small heights for their safety. The literal meaning of the lines is to play and make merry while there is plenty, but when there is nothing to pick up one's swords. This game teaches the lesson to preserve food and wealth for future generations and not to depend on others.

10. Uchi chi chi khangmeitat

The game is played by singing the proverbial lines Uchi Chi Chi Khangmeitat, Kharung Mapan Khousaba Sendrang Laka Phrang. This proverb was related to a historical event when Vaishn vite faith was preached in Manipur for the first time. This proverb is highly philosophical, in which the Meetei ancestors and philosophers predicted the value and importance of primal religion. Apart from the games mentioned above, children played some other games like Chenjong, Manjong, and Keku Lotpi ^[15].

Conclusion

The traditional games of children have crucial roles in fostering various aspects of personal growth, behaviour, and social learning. The growing urbanization and modernization process have hugely impacted traditional games. Traditional games are now seen to be confined in the interior places with a lease of life. Many are seen on the verge of edge. The cultural significance and moral values embedded in traditional children's games is lost due to influence by different cultures, societal norms, technological

advancements, changing preferences for entertainments and recreation. Preserving and fostering such traditional children's games culture systematically and effectively poses a significant challenge.

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