

Khullang Eshei in Meitei Folklore: A Study of Ritual and Poetic Expression**Hijam Georgie Philemon**

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Abstract

Meitei khullang eshei is a traditional lyrical genre of Manipuri folklore that expresses the spiritual and emotional consciousness, as well as historical awareness, of the people of Manipur. *Khullang eshei* is performed on various occasions, including rituals, agricultural festivals, and community festivals, where its function goes beyond music, serving as a living archive of cultural tradition. This study takes a qualitative, interpretive approach informed by cultural memory theory and folkloristics and investigates selected *Khullang eshei* lyrical texts translated into English, using a methodology of detailed textual and contextual reading. This paper seeks to interpret how *Khullang eshei* lyrics, through the use of metaphor, symbolism, and performances, preserve ancestral narratives and ethical codes as well as cosmological beliefs. The results of this study demonstrate that through its ritualization of mythological beginnings, articulation of identity through a sacred geography, and use of melodic expressions, *Khullang eshei* preserves communal memory. The findings also reveal that *Khullang eshei* celebrates the changing indigenous worldviews through more subtle forms of resistance to colonial and modern separation through the process of maintaining collective memory through language. By approaching *Khullang eshei* from the perspective of a poetic text rather than merely a collection of oral texts, this study presents *Khullang eshei* as a vibrant manifestation of Meitei consciousness as a fusion of memory, identity and resistance that continues to shape the foundations of Meitei cultural connection and cultural resilience.

Keywords: Meitei khullang Eshei, Manipuri folklore, Cultural memory, Identity, Resistance

Introduction

Khullang Eshei is a form of folk song from Manipur that is shaped by the cultural, spiritual, and everyday lives of Meitei people. It has been passed down through many generations and reflects the emotions, thoughts, experiences, and social practices of the Manipuri community. To situate *Khullang Eshei* within folkloristic discourse, it is important to distinguish how folk songs and folklore are defined as they relate to lived cultural experience. Liberman asserts, “folklore, like any other art, derives from reality” (Liberman 38). In other words, the folklore of each community emerges from its everyday experience. The connection of folklore to everyday life provides a means to view folk songs not just as an artistic representation, but rather as a cultural practice that has been ingrained into society. As stated by Dundes, “folklore includes... folksongs (e.g., lullabies, ballads)” (Dundes 3), highlighting the central role of songs in cultural expression. Folksong lyrics express shared cultural themes, with most songs related to love, nature, joy and sorrow of the society, and human relationships. And they are often accompanied by simple, natural tunes and memorable, easily transmissible lyrics. Folk songs are a fundamental medium for expressing cultural identity and sustaining cultural heritage. A folk song is defined as “a traditional song that is typical of a particular community or nation” (“Folk Song”). *Khullang Eshei* is an ancient folk song from India, a country of Asia, of Meiteis of Manipur, that is an example of Asian folk music, and how they put it into its own genre (Wikipedia). According to Huirem Behari Singh, *Khullang Eshei* in Meitei society can be classified into five major categories: songs of religious and ritualistic association; songs of love and yearning; songs sung in connection with certain ceremonies; work songs; lullabies, rhymes, and children’s game songs (Singh 315–16). As a result, this music has played an essential role in preserving the cultural heritage of Manipur and maintaining a strong emotional and cultural connection to the past. *Khullang Eshei* represents a welding together of oral tradition, prayer and poetry, dance, song and music into a folk ritual of great beauty which epitomises the unique culture of the Meitei people (Arambam and Parratt 189).

Khullang Eshei has received scholarly attention as folklore and ritual performance; however, relatively few studies examine its lyrics as poetic texts that actively produce cultural memory, identity, and resistance. This paper analyses translated lyrics from selected *Khullang Eshei* through the lenses of cultural memory theory and folkloristics. The paper argues that *Khullang Eshei* functions as a mnemonic performance tradition that preserves sacred geography, ethical codes, and cultural resilience within Meitei society.

Methodology

The study utilizes an interpretive and qualitative approach based on the theories of cultural memory and folkloristics. The research data are drawn from the texts of selected *Meitei Khullang Eshei*, as provided in Hanjabam Gourachandra Sharma’s book, *Meitei Khullaka Ishai*, and translated into English by the researcher. Close analytical readings of the texts and their contexts are employed to explore themes of identity, cultural memory, and resistance. As a supplement to the analysis of the *Meitei Khullang Eshei*, secondary sources related to oral tradition, folklore studies, and cultural theory are also utilized.

Cultural Memory

The cultural memory of the Meitei people is not maintained through writing, but rather through forms of ritual performance and oral expression that embody symbolic

systems. The reliance on forms of oral expression to transmit cultural knowledge suggests that Meitei cultural memory is very much part of folklore. Folklorists tend to support this viewpoint and recognize that folklore is clearly one of the most important, perhaps the most important, sources for the articulation and perpetuation of a group's symbols (Dundes 24). Symbolic systems continue to support the collective memory of an entire group of people by allowing for the operation of memory beyond the experience of an individual. By allowing for a collective, rather than an individual, experience with respect to the articulation of symbols, collective memory functions as a social force rather than as an individual possession. Images of the past commonly legitimate a present social order. It is an implicit rule that participants in any social order must presuppose a shared memory (Connerton 3). In the context of the Meitei people, this process can be seen in the context of ritual. The preservation of cultural memory in the Meitei ritual culture is accomplished via ceremonial music rather than stored memory of writing. The cosmology, geography, ethics and social order of the Meitei people are invoked and remembered repeatedly through these ritual compositions, thereby transforming ritual performance into a mnemonic system that serves as a mnemonic device (memory pointers) within the *Lai Haraoba* to maintain a collective sense of identity through the sacred ancestral source (place) and the ethical responsibilities attached to it. As a result, memories are not passively stored but rather are actively recreated each time. Because these memories are transmitted through song and ritual speech, folk lyrics serve not only symbolic but also historical. Beyond their ritual role, poetry and song are excellent sources when they contain historical data and assert events or situations (Vansina 193).

In *Khullang Eshei*, memory is not merely recalled; it is enacted through repeated ritual speech, sacred naming, and performed geography. Beginning with *Laihou Eshei*, cultural memory is established at its cosmological beginning with the invocation of the first creator as an active presence rather than a distant abstraction.

Laihou Eshei:

Nahaaley Eya, Taibang Malangpan

Sanarik Mapaal Saariba

Awaang Koubru Ashuppa

Translated as:

O Ancient One, Creator of the Universe

You who crafted the delicate beads of life

O Supreme Lord of the Northern Koubru

According to tradition, the maker is seen as one who “created the fragile beads of life”—a metaphor for being intentional about how we connect through life. By referencing the Northern Koubru mountain range, these lyrics place universal creation in an exact ancestral location and turn the earth into a place of sacred memory. The people of the Meitei establish their common ancestry and connection between the sky, the land, and themselves, forming the base layer of their cultural memory through the repeated use of the song in their cultural activities.

The formation of collective memory for the Meitei occurs through the *Lai Seithaba*, a holy proclamation that expresses the association between the community and the divine and affirms the belief of immanence in all creation. The invocation proclaims:

Lai Seithaba:

Chingu, Linda O, Taobi Eroinai

Lairen Taoroina, Namu Sidaba

Translated as:

O divine serpent, formless and eternal

The Lord of the serpents, the immortal.

By celebrating the ultimate serpent as representing the formless aspect of divinity, the chant reveals divinity as having existed eternally, yet still being present within all things. The naming of the divine *Lairen*, as Lord of Serpents and as immortal, reinforces the two qualities of continuity and never-ending existence as qualities of sacredness. Therefore, cultural memory is kept alive by ritual language that confirms the divine cannot be separated from the natural world. This reinforces the belief that creation continues to be given life by a continuous divine force. In this context, ritual language functions as more than narration; it actively performs social, ethical, and cosmological meanings. Verbal art may comprehend both myth narration and the speech expected of certain members of society whenever they open their mouths (Bauman 5).

After establishing the presence of the divine through memory, the chant shifts from the divine to the creation of spatial order within *Thangjing Sheithaba*, where the politics of a culture is mapped onto both the sacred geography and the sacred space of Meitei religion.

Thangjing Sheithaba:

Thangjing makhoklang

Thoklang machei khang

Kangla machi khak

Huiyai lamgi Lamchap Phanjei

Thoklang kannachei

Translated as:

The source of the Thangjing hills

The vastness of the heavens

The boundary of the Kangla

Searching for the path in the land of Huiyai

Protecting the heavenly gates.

The song mentions Thangjing Hills/Kangla/Huiyai as a cosmological land. Kangla is presented as a point of interchange between terrestrial authority and cosmic power. The protection of the heavenly gates elevates the protection of the territory to a sacred responsibility. Cultural memory here orders the space such that the three – sovereignty, geography and cosmology are inseparable.

The ordering of the cosmos permeates through *Mikol Thagolba* and cultural memory becomes a philosophy of human existence.

Mikol Thagolba:

Hey thawai mangamak

Miga thana tarukmak

Kuruna hinao sabiro

Khana chaoba Wangbren na

Hey thawai mangamak

Sugnu dgi ashum hollakpana

Lamlen tangjeng thachana

Lamlen hanga khachana

Ashum hongatlakpana

Konba lamdam Sugnu dgi

Translated as:

O Five Souls!

With the six senses

Let the Kuru craft the boat of life

Appeal to thee the great Wangbren (Lord of the Waters)

O Five Souls!

Rowing steadily from Sugnu

Passing through the ancient lands of Tangjeng

Passing through the lands of Hanga

Rowing likewise

From the very land of Sugnu

Let us board the boat and row

The invocation of the five souls and the six senses presents a holistic understanding of the human being. The image of a journey in a boat created by Kuru with navigation by *Wangbren* (Lord of the Waters) tells us that life is cyclically continuous instead of being considered a

straight-line process moving from Sugnu across the Lands. Memories serve to teach ethical lessons to navigate life; specifically, with balance, awareness, and loyalty to their ancestors.

The experience of each person being alive is combined with communal renewal during *Cheithaba*, which is the name of the ritual song performed at the beginning of the New Year. The transition from individual time to communal time begins at this occasion, where personal time ends (and is represented in the lyrics) and becomes a component of cultural memory; thus, both culturally and personally continuing through time. The ritual song is associated with traditional religious kingship and serves to sacralize temporal change by facilitating renewals of both the social and cosmological orders of existence. For this reason, time is seen not only as having a linear or super-imposed sequential nature, but also as a continuous cycle of regeneration, repeating itself over and over through the performance of ritual.

Cheithaba:

Lainingthou ningthourel athoiba

Taibang soraren namu ponghankou

Nyu turi yoinongda Nongda Lairen Pakhangba

Loidam kumba anoubana cheigarakpasida

Phata-haodi kallak-ekla pumnamadi

Tharei lemlei tarasano

Translated as:

O Immortal Lord Supreme King of Kings

Grant prosperity to the humans of this world.

Thee Lord Pakhangba who dwells in the divine water

As the new year breaks like a fresh dawn

Let all evil, illness, and misfortune

Be swept away like this Fish.

By calling Pakhangba “the King of all Gods” and “the Lord who dwells in divine water,” the song relates political power to fertility and prosperity. The New Year is an opportunity to mark new beginnings; the removal of sickness and bad luck represents the idea of purification. The song frames memory as communal and cyclical and uses ritual repetition to create and maintain order among deities, governments, and humans.

Cultural memory serves an ethical and corrective role in The Song of *Sandrembi and Chaisra* where authority is challenged rather than affirmed.

The Song of Sandrembi and Chaisra:

Phigey eyong tatkani

Eigi paobu tamdrabadi

Nakhushu thangol manghangey

Sagol marai tahangey

Langoi khongnet tuhange

Shandrembi na uthakta tong

Cheishrana phambal lang

Ha ningthou tukaoba

Nacha ningthou kaorabara?

Kuku ku ku khangmeitat

Translated as:

The threads of the loom will snap

If you do not deliver my message

I will make you lose your sickle

I will make your horse stumble

I will make your saddle fall

Sandrembi sits atop the tree

While Chaisra sits upon the throne

O King, who has forgotten the spouse

Have you forgotten your own son?

Kuku-ku-ku, Khangmeitat!

When tools that provide for one's daily living (the loom, the sickle, the horse, and the saddle) are threatened, it indicates that society has broken down due to individuals neglecting their communal and social obligations. The fact that *Sandrembi* is in a tree (representing domestic balance) and *Chaisra* sits on the throne (representing political balance) demonstrates the disruption of the domestic and political balances that should exist, while also demonstrating that when a King is directly questioned, his memory is publicly tested and made accountable. This exploration of cultural memory holds power accountable through moral, ethical, and relational obligations as a way of resisting forgetting. The lyrics illustrate the continuity of Meitei cultural memory across cosmology, geography, authority, and ethics, ensuring transmission across generations.

Cultural Identity

The cultural identity of the Meitei people is expressed in their performance traditions through dance songs that convey collectivism, belonging, emotional connection, and continuity with the past. In Meitei performance traditions, identity is not defined by fixed cultural traits alone but is continually negotiated through relational and performative practices. The ethnic boundary defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses (Barth

15). Such relational identity operates within broader social and historical contexts that connect past memory with present communal life. As Rutherford argues, “Identity marks the conjuncture of our past with the social, cultural and economic relations we live within” (Rutherford 19). The performance of these songs affirms collective Meitei identity as a whole, not merely as a set of cultural traits, but through shared participation in myths, ancestral memory, and symbolic devotion. Participation in dance invocations constructs communal identity through ritual gathering and shared devotion to deities and sacred hierarchies.

Dance Invocation:

Ho ho haha ha Herile Herila! He Herila

Se sese sayanasida

Lainingthou Loiyalakpa

Thoicha Nungthel Leima

Nanai eikhoi ayambana

Chingu nangbu puremjei

Translated as:

Ho ho haha ha Herile Herila! He Herila

Let us all gather here

The King of the Deities Loiyalakpa

The Queen Nungthel Leima

All of us, your humble subjects

Bow before thee God.

The exuberant speech acts as a rhythmic invocation to, and as a call to members of, the community, so that individuality is collapsed into collective presence. The song provides a location for Meitei identity as devotee of King and Queen of all the Gods, the references being *Loiyalakpa* and *Nungthel Leima*. The song frames ‘we’ as ‘humble subjects,’ linking collective identity to ritual humility and devotion.

The commonality of belonging to one another is heightened by *Khamba/Thoibi* Dance Song through the expression of joy, beauty and divine grace through the form of identity.

Khamba/Thoibi Dance Song:

Chingu di Thangjingna

Yomkhraba khayomni

Punkhraba leipunni

Sibu thoina haraoba

Sibudi thoina phajaba

Leibara ho leibara

Translated as:

With the grace of Lord Thangjing

Like a bundle of sacred offerings

Like a knot of flowers

Is there anything more joyful than this?

Is there anything more beautiful than this?

Is there? Oh, is there?

The invocation of Lord *Thangjing* serves to create a new musical work which conveys identity as a sacred blend of harmony, where joy within community can be expressed through the presentation of sacred gifts and flower ties. The lyrics pose the rhetorical question, “Is there anything more joyful than this?”, and assert that cultural identity is realised through the act of shared bodily experience. Here, identity is presented as a form of celebration characterised by mythical love and divine favour contrasting with the notions of difference or division.

The process of belonging is further ritualised in the musical work Calling the Goddess; and through participation within the hospitality of deities, identity is established in a participatory manner.

Calling the Goddess:

Sanarembi thoraklo

Lai khubak khubige

Nahum ponjel sabige

Ya ya ya ya

Translated as:

Sanarembi, please come forth

Let's clap our hands for God

Let us craft the divine home

Ya ya ya ya

The people come together as one through cooperative acts of clapping, crafting, or welcoming each other, to call upon the goddess *Sanarembi* to appear to them. The act of gathering as a community demonstrates that they have created a cohesive community and have become a culture of devotion. The people do not view the Gods as someone they would like to be like but instead call upon the divine to join them and therefore define themselves as a people because of their ability to make the divine a part of their community. The culture is manifested through the cooperative work of its members through the use of shared rituals (praying together) or through participation in joint efforts (performing shared rituals).

In The *Ingellei* Flower, cultural identity is also developed on a reflective basis through communal acceptance of departure and transitory being with others.

The Ingellei Flower:

Chingda shatpi ingellei

Chinnadana kenkhiba

Kallake kallake de

Eina kenge kende do

Malangbana humbagi kenbani

Malangba eisu keidoude do

Leirang leikhok loibana

Ho kenbani kenbani de

Translated as:

The Ingellei flower on the hill

Has withered without being plucked

How tragic, how tragic!

Did I cause it to wither? No, I did not

It withered because the wind blew

The wind is not to blame either

It withered because the flower reached its end

The *Ingellei* flower that dies symbolizes the natural cycle of existence, and rather than blaming or regretting, accepts. In this context, identity is philosophical and recognizes that nothing lasts forever. The song expresses a mature cultural attitude toward life's events by accepting all endings as part of being, embodying honest emotional restraint and wisdom.

Heirangkhoïnida expresses the emotional connection to identity through landscape in terms of the relationship between love and separation.

Heirangkhoïnida:

Heirangkhoïnida chanaba heinida

Sibu thoina haoba heidi chindamba heinida

Chekla paikharabana pombi hanjillakpana

Cheklagi kaidongpham khangdabana pombi kangaonaredo

Shabi enemacha pamubi

Lamshonbigi lamyaida

Monuna ware pothaba

Apamba lamdam yengkhibadi

Pamuba lamdam tamhourey

Shabi enemacha pamubi

Chinglunggi sana loktudagi

Paibiraklone nungsibi

Translated as:

The Heirang-khoi fruit is for eating

But the most delicious fruit is the one from the heart

The bird has flown away, and the mate has returned

Not knowing where the bird perishes, the mate is driven mad

O my beloved, the one I desire

In the middle of the wasteland

My heart is weary and tired

Looking at the land of my longing

My beloved's land remains far away

O beloved, from the golden cave of the hills

Fly towards me, my love

The desire of the heart, as portrayed in literature and art, creates the frame for identity as a combination of emotional and relational facets. The natural world reflects our longings, and as such, will be an important part of how we define our love. Cultural identity is often a function of emotion, established through the responder's ability to endure, to wait, and to be devoted beyond their physical proximity. For ethnicity is a matter of myths, memories, values and symbols, and not of material possessions or political power (Smith 28).

Wakollo embodies multiple dimensions concerning both displacement and conflict, wherein the concept of identity is placed within an area that does not wholly comport with the broader definition of identity itself. The lyrics convey that speaking later has greater effectiveness for winning arguments; therefore, utilizing delays and/or restrictions is an effective response to uncertainty and conflict.

Wakollo:

Wakollo wakollo

Chingda taaba wakonna

Tamda tage mahaido

Tamda taba wakonna

An International Refereed/Peer-reviewed English e-Journal
Impact Factor: 7.825

Chingda taage mahaido
Wakonna kaapa, likappa
Wakon phaoreng leng

Translated as:

Wakollo, Wakollo
 The crane dwelling on the hills
 It wants to land in the valley but finds no place
 The crane dwelling in the valley
 Wants to land on the hills but finds no place
 The bending bamboo, archer, Impaled the crane

The lyrics dramatise a fractured sense of belonging: the crane of the hills desires the valley, while the crane of the valley desires the hills. This mutual dissatisfaction produces liminality, where neither space becomes home, and identity emerges through displacement and exclusion.

In *Ipu Mantri Pukangba*, there is an attempt to raise political awareness regarding identity by looking at how past enmity has impacted people's identity.

Ipu mantri pukangba:
Ipu mantri pukangba
Ipuna kangla karuba
Meiteina joy oibra?
Moirangna joy oibra?

Translated as:

Grandfather minister big-belly
 Grandfather has entered the Kangla
 Is it the victory of the Meitei?
 Is it the victory of Moirang?

The song challenges any one version of history by asking which victory it commends. Identity is challenged, rather than solidified, asking for reflection upon the concepts of power, conquest and shared history. Cultural identity is emphasized here; it confronts unquestioned victories.

Shembi Mukaklei illustrates that identity results from resilience and inconsistency.

Shembi mukaklei:
Leirang lonjinnaba

Heirang lonjannaba

Heirang mami tamthare

Taojing mahei yaanthe

Shembi mukaklei

Houroidra hairaga hourey

Liklai maru hougara hunbana houdarey

Translated as:

Flowers adorned each in secret

Fruits feeding each in secret

No sign of blooming

Nor sign of fruitfulness

The wildflower Mukaklei

Told it would not bloom, bloomed

But the garland flower seeds, though sown, refused to grow

The blossoming of a wildflower that was not anticipated is juxtaposed with failure of cultivated flowers in that it makes visible a different basis for valuing things outside of the measuring ‘stick’ of control used for evaluating the success or failure of the cultivation of flowers. In this instance, identity is relational to endurance, uncertainty and opposition; valuing natural resilience as opposed to imposed order. The lyrics present Meitei cultural identity as both collective and emotional: devotional yet critically reflective, rooted in the land yet conscious of displacement. Across dance, song, memory, and questioning, identity remains dynamic, enabling continuity, resilience, and renewal.

Resistance in Manipuri Folk Songs

Resistance in Manipuri folk songs exists not only through overtly anti-political action but also through emotion, community support, celebrating and asserting identity. The songs reflect shared pain by documenting the tragedies of the past, honouring those who survived, and bringing about a sense of political consciousness. Resistance here is not limited to military action, but takes the form of the communities involved remembering what happened, being vigilant for another invasion, and reasserting themselves as Indigenous Peoples. The articulation of resistance through folk songs becomes particularly visible when attention is paid to how meaning is carried across language, performance, and cultural context. One translation might attempt to render literal meaning, another might strive to mimic poetic form, another to elucidate hidden meanings, another the cultural ambience (Apter and Herman 157). This multiplicity of meaning allows resistance to emerge not as a single narrative but as layered expression embedded in emotion, memory, and performance. The song *Awa Laan* exemplifies the community’s form of collective resistance to the immediate anxiety and urgency of the Burmese invasion.

Awa Laan:

Hidakphu macha tumbak tumbak

Karal tongjei lamding lamding

Itakhoi koinoukhoi

Kumsi Awa laklaga

Kadom kadom chensiba

Khangabokta chengdaisi

Laitharoi chakhangsi

Enam sagolsenbi hengo hengo

Waikhom baji gi moibung achouba

Sagollai utti phut phutoko

Translated as:

The hookah is small and oval-shaped

And the journey to the crossroad is long

My dear mates and friends

If the Burmese (Awa) come this year

Where shall we run?

Let's sell rice to Khangabok

Let's feed Laitharoi

O Horse-keeper, steady, steady

The great conch of Waikhom Baji is blowing!

So, prepare Black lentil porridge

The imagery of a “small hookah” in opposition to a “long journey” captures the juxtaposition between an extraordinary vulnerable position confronting an extraordinary intimidating force. The arrival of the *Awa* (Burmese) creates a situation that is the basis of an ordinary human life-giving way to one of crisis. In this crisis, resistance is evident in the collective decision-making connected with where to escape, how to survive, and whom to provide sustenance for. The blowing of the conch as the conch encourages alarm and mobilization, while preparing food for an unexpected event as an expression of communal solidarity during foreign invasion. Resistance in this context is spontaneous, collective, and rooted in the idea of surviving as opposed to being simply heroic.

Beyond immediate survival, resistance also appears as commemoration, where memory of leadership becomes a political resource. There are also examples of resistance that celebrate the ideology of resistance, such as *Athougi Eshei*, where the memory of a leader and the act of nation-building are forms through which resistance to the *Awa* (Burmese) becomes articulated.

Athougi Eshei:

Chandramani lanthouba

Lundi khudei yeiheiba

Sanagi yakhin khilheiba

Sheiroubu sheilou shemheiba

Nongdambi maru touheiba

Paringna yangkhei shalheiba

Leibakki chengphu khilheiba

Sallai chaning phaheiba

Translated as:

Chandramani, the great warrior

Master of donning the *Lundi Khudai* (traditional wrap)

Who knows how to fix the golden *Yakhin* (headgear)

Who turned the wild wilderness into a settled home

Who took the lead in the heavens' decree

Who built fifty rows of settlements

Who secured the rice-pots (prosperity) of the nation

And brought order to the clans (*Salai*).

Commemoration of *Chandramani* as a warrior, organizer and lawgiver presents the idea of resistance as order being created from chaos and transitioning from wilderness to settled area, and creating a means of surviving from land that cannot exist without sustaining cultural or social structures. In doing so, resistance symbolizes the continuity of a civilization and self-government, despite disruption. This memory of conflict is captured concisely through The Song of *Keirangba*, a song that utilizes violence to illustrate resistance.

The Song of Keirangba:

Leimapokpa keirangba

Shamu kondrumba

Awanglomda laanthaba

Marpal kaokhairey

Translated as:

Leimpokpa Keirangba

The one who manages the great elephants

When he went to war in the North

The enemy's gates were shattered.

The march of *Keirangba* to the northern front and the breaking down of enemy gates represent an action-based resistance that was performed in a decisive manner by way of a very rapid way. The shortness of the song also mirrors the quickness of victory, and adds to the strength, movement and tactical ability of the resistance movement. For the people who resisted, they will remember the resistance as a form of victory and assertiveness that has created pride within the group.

However, there was not only external or military resistance in the area; also, there was an emotional and domestic resistance in *Khaina Meichak* that focused on feelings of loss, separation and desire during times of conflict.

Khaina meichak:

Khaina meichak

Ipam meihourey

Langjing meichakley

Echaningthou yaoribara

Khambi meikallo

Translated as:

The burning fire of separation

My home is on fire with grief

My heart is burning with longing

Is my little Prince still there?

Let the great fire cease

The burning imagery associated with home and heart is a reminder of the internal costs of war, while the questioning of an absent prince indicates vulnerability and uncertainty. A plea to stop the fire signifies a desire for peace. The concept of resistance as endurance is expressed through the refusal to allow the grief of loss to extinguish hope; therefore, those who continue to resist emotionally in the face of loss endure and remain hopeful.

Culturally, resistance in *The Pena Player* is profoundly expressed through the use of music and performance as acts of defiance, as well as means of maintaining continuity.

The Pena Player:

Pena khongba tadakhoi

Penabu khongba tadakhoi

Nachanna jaggoi sajabba

Ho khongbiyu ho khongbiyu de

Translated as:

O Pena player, Elder Brother
 The player of the Pena, Elder Brother
 Your younger sister is dancing
 Oh, play it well! Oh, play it loud!

The call to the Pena player to play louder and better during dance asserts the persistence of indigenous art forms even in unstable times. Music here becomes resistance against erasure, sustaining identity through sound, movement, and collective joy. By centering performance, the song affirms that cultural survival itself is an act of resistance. These performances also show that resistance is not only expressed through armed action or political leadership but also through emotional endurance and cultural continuity. The songs do not support a single heroic account of resistance, but rather allow for a multifaceted understanding of resistance. Cultural survival, memory, and identity are all being defended against the invasion, loss, and/or lack of recognition.

Conclusion

This study has shown that Meitei *Khullang Eshei* functions as a living cultural archive through which memory, identity, and resistance are continuously produced and transmitted. Far from being mere folk expressions, these songs operate as performative texts that preserve cosmological beliefs, sacred geography, emotional histories, and ethical values within communal practice. Through ritual invocation, narrative symbolism, and embodied performance, *Khullang Eshei* ensures that collective memory remains active and socially meaningful. The analysis demonstrates that cultural memory in Meitei folk songs is layered and dynamic, moving from mythic origins and divine presence to spatial order, ethical living, and moral accountability. Cultural identity emerges as performative rather than fixed, shaped through devotion, love, longing, displacement, and historical questioning. Resistance, meanwhile, is articulated not only through martial narratives but also through emotional endurance, communal vigilance, and the preservation of indigenous art forms. Taken together, these dimensions reveal *Khullang Eshei* as a powerful medium through which the Meitei community negotiates continuity and change. By sustaining ancestral knowledge through song, *Khullang Eshei* affirms cultural resilience and asserts the enduring relevance of indigenous expressive traditions in the face of historical disruption and modern transformation.

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