



Culture, Identity and Performing Arts with Special Reference to the Performing Arts of Manipur

Author: Dr. S James, MA, MBA, LL.M, PhD

Guest Faculty

Manipur International University

Imphal, Manipur, INDIA

Introduction

The performing arts of Manipur are a vibrant reflection of the region's rich cultural identity. This journal explores the intricate relationship between culture, identity, and performing arts, with a special focus on Manipur's traditional dance forms, music, and rituals. By examining the historical evolution and contemporary practices of Manipuri performing arts, this study highlights how these art forms serve as a medium for cultural expression, social cohesion, and identity preservation.

Manipur, a northeastern state of India, is renowned for its cultural richness and historical significance. The performing arts of Manipur, including dance, music, and rituals, play a crucial role in shaping the cultural identity of its people. This journal delves into the various aspects of Manipuri performing arts, exploring their historical roots, cultural significance, and contemporary relevance.

Historical Context: The performing arts of Manipur have a long and storied history, dating back to ancient times. Traditional dance forms such as Manipuri dance, Nata Sankirtana, and Pung Cholom have been passed down through generations, preserving the region's cultural heritage. These art forms are deeply intertwined with the religious and social practices of Manipur, reflecting the community's values, beliefs, and traditions.

Cultural Identity: The performing arts of Manipur are a powerful expression of the region's cultural identity. Through dance, music, and rituals, Manipuri artists convey the essence of their cultural heritage, fostering a sense of pride and belonging among the community. These art forms also serve as a means of cultural transmission, ensuring that the traditions and values of Manipur are preserved for future generations.

Contemporary Practices: In contemporary times, the performing arts of Manipur continue to thrive, adapting to modern influences while retaining their traditional essence. Artists and cultural practitioners are actively involved in promoting and preserving these art forms, organizing festivals, workshops, and performances to showcase the richness of Manipuri culture. The integration of traditional and modern elements in these art forms highlights the dynamic nature of Manipuri cultural identity.

The performing arts of Manipur are a testament to the region's rich cultural heritage and identity. By exploring the historical evolution and contemporary practices of Manipuri performing arts, this journal underscores the importance of these art forms in preserving and promoting cultural identity. The continued vitality of Manipuri performing arts serves as a reminder of the enduring power of culture in shaping and sustaining communities.

The performing arts of Manipur are a vibrant reflection of the region's rich cultural identity. This journal explores the intricate relationship between culture, identity, and performing arts, with a special focus on Manipur's traditional dance forms, music, and rituals. By examining the historical evolution and contemporary practices of Manipuri performing arts, this study highlights how these art forms serve as a medium for cultural expression, social cohesion, and identity preservation.

Overview of Manipur: Highlight Manipur's geographical location, cultural diversity, and historical significance.

Manipur, often referred to as the "Jewelled Land," is a state located in the northeastern region of India. Known for its rich cultural heritage, scenic landscapes, and unique traditions, Manipur is a vibrant mosaic of history, art, and nature.

Geography and Climate

Location: Bordered by Nagaland to the north, Mizoram to the south, Assam to the west, and Myanmar (Burma) to the east.

Climate: Manipur enjoys a mild and pleasant climate with distinct seasons. Summers are generally warm, while winters are cool. The state receives heavy rainfall during the monsoon season.

Significance of Performing Arts: Discuss the importance of performing arts in Manipur's cultural identity.

Objectives of the Study: Outline the main aims of the research, focusing on the relationship between culture, identity, and performing arts.

Historical Context

Ancient Origins: Trace the origins of Manipuri performing arts, including early influences and developments.

Cultural Heritage:

Diverse Ethnic Groups: Manipur is home to several ethnic groups, each with its own distinct traditions, languages, and customs. The major communities include the Meitei, Naga, Kuki, and Pangal.

Traditional Attire: Vibrant traditional attire like the Meitei women's "Phanek" and "Innaphi" are iconic symbols of Manipur's rich textile heritage.

Festivals: Festivals like Yaoshang (Holi), Ningol Chakouba, and Lai Haraoba are celebrated with great enthusiasm, showcasing the state's cultural diversity.

Performing Arts

Dance Forms: Manipuri dance, known for its graceful and expressive movements, is one of the classical dance forms of India. Other traditional dances include Nata Sankirtana and Pung Cholom.

Music: Traditional music, often accompanied by indigenous instruments like the Pena and the Pung (drum), plays a significant role in cultural rituals and celebrations.

Martial Arts: Thang Ta, a traditional Manipuri martial art, combines combat techniques with rhythmic dance movements, symbolizing the warrior spirit of the people.

Historical Significance: Manipur has a long history of independent kingdom status before its merger with India in 1949. The region has a rich legacy of monarchy and traditional governance.

Political Structure: Manipur is a full-fledged state within the Indian Union, with its own elected government. It is divided into districts, each administered by local authorities.

Natural Beauty

Landscapes: Manipur boasts picturesque landscapes, including rolling hills, lush valleys, and serene lakes. Loktak Lake, the largest freshwater lake in northeastern India, is famous for its phumdis (floating islands).

Flora and Fauna: The state is rich in biodiversity, with several wildlife sanctuaries and national parks such as Keibul Lamjao National Park, home to the endangered Sangai deer.

Manipur, often referred to as the "Jewel of India," is renowned for its captivating natural beauty. The state's diverse landscapes, lush greenery, and serene water bodies make it a haven for nature lovers.

Loktak Lake

Largest Freshwater Lake: Loktak Lake is the largest freshwater lake in northeastern India, famous for its unique phumdis (floating islands).

Keibul Lamjao National Park: Situated on the southern shores of Loktak Lake, this park is home to the endangered Sangai deer, also known as the dancing deer of Manipur. The park is the only floating national park in the world.

Hills and Valleys

Rolling Hills: Manipur is surrounded by nine hills, creating a picturesque landscape with verdant valleys nestled in between. The hills are covered with dense forests, offering breathtaking views and a tranquil environment.

Kangchup Valley: Known for its scenic beauty, Kangchup Valley offers a panoramic view of the surrounding hills and valleys, making it a popular spot for picnics and nature walks.

Waterfalls and Rivers

Sadu Chiru Waterfall: Located near the Sadu Chiru village, this waterfall cascades down in three tiers, creating a mesmerizing sight. The surrounding area is rich in flora and fauna, making it a great spot for nature enthusiasts.

Barak River: Flowing through the state, the Barak River and its tributaries form a network of waterways that enrich the fertile plains of Manipur. The riverbanks are adorned with lush vegetation, providing a serene escape.

Forests and Wildlife

Tharon Cave: Located in Tamenglong district, Tharon Cave is an ancient cave system surrounded by dense forests. Exploring the cave offers a thrilling adventure and a chance to witness the region's natural beauty.

Zoological Gardens: The Manipur Zoological Gardens, located in the Iroisemba area, houses a variety of indigenous and exotic animals. It is an ideal spot to observe wildlife and enjoy the natural surroundings.

Scenic Spots and Gardens

Singda Dam: Located close to the capital city Imphal, Singda Dam is a popular picnic spot. The area offers stunning views of the dam and the surrounding hills, making it a perfect spot for relaxation.

Khonghampat Orchidarium: This botanical garden showcases a wide variety of orchids, with around 120 species in bloom. It is a visual treat for flower enthusiasts and a tranquil place to enjoy nature.

Manipur's natural beauty is a testament to its rich biodiversity and enchanting landscapes. Whether it's the serene Loktak Lake, the lush rolling hills, or the cascading waterfalls, the state offers a myriad of natural wonders to explore and appreciate.

Economy:

Agriculture: Agriculture is the primary occupation, with rice being the staple crop. The state also produces fruits, vegetables, and handloom products.

Handicrafts: Manipur is known for its exquisite handicrafts, including bamboo and cane products, pottery, and traditional jewellery.

Manipur's unique blend of cultural heritage, natural beauty, and historical significance makes it a fascinating destination and an integral part of India's diverse cultural tapestry.

The economy of Manipur is primarily agrarian, with agriculture being the mainstay

. Here's an overview of the key sectors contributing to the state's economy:

Agriculture

Main Crops: Rice is the staple crop, and other important crops include maize, pulses, and vegetables

Horticulture: Manipur has potential for commercial plantation of horticulture crops such as figs, olives, and mandarins

Pisciculture: Fish farming is another significant activity, contributing to both local consumption and export.

Handloom and Handicrafts

Handloom Industry: Manipur is known for its vibrant handloom industry, producing traditional textiles like the "Phanek" and "Innaphi" for women.

Handicrafts: The state produces a variety of handicrafts, including bamboo and cane products, pottery, and traditional jewelry¹

Forestry and Forest Products

Bamboo Production: Manipur is one of India's largest bamboo-producing states, with bamboo forests covering about 8,377 square kilometers⁴

Forest Products: The state's forests provide a range of forest products, including timber and non-timber forest products.

Industries

Weaving and Sericulture: The weaving and sericulture-based industries are well-developed and contribute significantly to the state's income.

Mining: There are opportunities for mining activities, although this sector is still developing.

Tourism

Tourist Attractions: Manipur's scenic beauty, including Loktak Lake, Kangchup Valley, and various waterfalls, makes it a tourist destination.

Cultural Tourism: Festivals like Yaoshang (Holi) and Ningol Chakouba attract tourists, showcasing the state's rich cultural heritage.

Trade and Commerce

Gateway to the East: Manipur acts as India's "Gateway to the East" through Moreh town, facilitating trade between India and Myanmar, as well as other Southeast Asian countries. Overall, Manipur's economy is diverse, with agriculture, handloom, handicrafts, forestry, and tourism playing key roles. The state continues to explore opportunities for growth and development in various sectors.

Colonial Era: Examine the impact of British colonization on Manipur's cultural practices and performing arts.

Post-Independence: Discuss the revival and transformation of Manipuri performing arts in the post-independence period.
Role of Performing Arts: Analyse how performing arts contribute to the cultural identity of Manipuri people.

Cultural Identity of Manipur

Manipur, a state in northeastern India, boasts a rich and diverse cultural identity that is deeply rooted in its history, traditions, and arts. The cultural identity of Manipur is shaped by its unique blend of indigenous customs, ethnic diversity, and vibrant performing arts.

Ethnic Diversity

Diverse Ethnic Groups: Manipur is home to several ethnic groups, including the Meitei, Naga, Kuki, and Pangal communities, each with its own distinct traditions, languages, and customs.

Unity in Diversity: Despite the diversity, there is a strong sense of unity among the people, fostered by shared cultural practices and mutual respect for each other's heritage.

Traditional Practices

Festivals and Rituals: Festivals such as Yaoshang (Holi), Ningol Chakouba, and Lai Haraoba are integral to the cultural identity of Manipur. These festivals are celebrated with great enthusiasm and reflect the rich cultural tapestry of the state.

Cuisine: Manipuri cuisine, known for its simplicity and use of locally sourced ingredients, plays a significant role in the cultural identity of the region. Traditional dishes like Eromba, Chamthong, and Singju are cherished by the locals.

Performing Arts

Dance Forms: Manipuri dance, Nata Sankirtana, and Pung Cholom are some of the traditional dance forms that define the cultural identity of Manipur. These dances are characterized by their graceful movements, intricate hand gestures, and expressive storytelling.

Music: Traditional Manipuri music, often accompanied by indigenous instruments such as the Pena and the Pung (drum), is an essential part of the state's cultural heritage. Music is used in various cultural and religious ceremonies, adding to the region's vibrant cultural identity.

Martial Arts: Thang Ta, a traditional Manipuri martial art, combines combat techniques with rhythmic dance movements, symbolizing the warrior spirit of the people.

Language and Literature

Meitei Language: The Meitei language, also known as Manipuri, is the official language of the state and a significant part of its cultural identity. It is used in daily communication, literature, and performing arts.

Literary Traditions: Manipur has a rich literary heritage, with classical texts and modern literature contributing to the state's cultural identity. The writings reflect the socio-cultural and historical context of the region.

Art and Crafts

Handloom and Textiles: Manipur is known for its vibrant handloom industry, producing traditional textiles like the "Phanek" and "Innaphi" for women. The intricate designs and vibrant colours of Manipuri textiles are a testament to the state's rich artistic heritage.

Handicrafts: The state produces a variety of handicrafts, including bamboo and cane products, pottery, and traditional jewellery. These crafts are not only a source of livelihood but also a reflection of the cultural identity of the people.

Religion and Spirituality

Hinduism and Indigenous Beliefs: The cultural identity of Manipur is influenced by Hinduism and indigenous beliefs. The state is known for its unique blend of religious practices, where traditional animistic beliefs coexist with mainstream Hindu practices.

Temples and Sacred Sites: Manipur is home to several temples and sacred sites that hold cultural and religious significance. These sites are important centres for religious and cultural activities.

In essence, the cultural identity of Manipur is a harmonious blend of its diverse ethnic groups, traditional practices, performing arts, language, literature, art, and spirituality. This rich cultural heritage not only defines the social fabric of the region but also serves as a source of pride and resilience for its people.

Community and Individual Identity: Explore the interplay between community identity and individual expression through performing arts.

Traditional Dance Forms

Manipuri Dance: Provide an in-depth look at Manipuri dance, its history, techniques, and significance.

Nata Sankirtana: Discuss the religious and cultural aspects of Nata Sankirtana, a traditional devotional performance.

Pung Cholom: Highlight the unique features of Pung Cholom, a drum dance that combines martial arts and dance.

Music and Rituals

Traditional Music: Explore the role of traditional music in Manipur's cultural practices and its connection to performing arts.

Rituals and Ceremonies: Discuss the various rituals and ceremonies in Manipur that incorporate performing arts.

Contemporary Practices

Adaptation to Modernity: Analyse how Manipuri performing arts have adapted to modern influences while retaining traditional elements.

Promotion and Preservation: Examine the efforts by artists, cultural organizations, and the government to promote and preserve Manipuri performing arts.

Challenges and Opportunities: Identify the challenges faced by Manipuri artists and the opportunities for growth and innovation.

Case Studies

Ras Lila Performance: Detailed case study of a traditional Ras Lila performance, highlighting its cultural significance and contemporary adaptations.

Thang Ta: Case study of Thang Ta, a traditional Manipuri martial art form, and its role in cultural identity and preservation.

How performing arts promote social cohesion and community bonding in Manipur

Performing arts play a significant role in promoting social cohesion and community bonding in Manipur. Here's how they contribute:

Cultural Festivals and Events

Festivals like Yaoshang (Holi), Ningol Chakouba, and Lai Haraoba are celebrated with enthusiasm and bring communities together. These events involve traditional dances, music, and rituals, fostering a sense of unity and shared cultural heritage.

Community Participation: Everyone, from children to elders, participates in these festivals, reinforcing communal ties and creating a collective identity.

Traditional Dance and Music in Manipur

Manipur, known for its vibrant cultural heritage, boasts a rich tradition of dance and music that reflects the region's deep-rooted history and diversity. These art forms are integral to the social and religious fabric of the state, fostering a sense of identity and community among its people.

Traditional Dance Forms

Manipuri Dance (Ras Leela)

Origins and Significance: Manipuri dance, also known as Ras Leela, is a classical dance form that has its roots in the ancient ritual dances of Manipur. It is deeply linked to the Vaishnavism of the Meitei people, narrating the romantic love tales of Radha and Krishna.

Style and Technique: Known for its gentle and flowing movements, this dance form incorporates graceful hand gestures, intricate footwork, and expressive facial expressions. The dancers often wear colorful traditional costumes, including the vibrant Potloi (skirt) for female dancers.

Nata Sankirtana

Religious Context: Nata Sankirtana is a devotional performance combining singing, dancing, and drumming. It plays a crucial role in the ritualistic life of Manipur, especially during religious and festive occasions.

Performance Elements: This art form is marked by rhythmic drumming, powerful singing, and coordinated dance movements, performed by male artists in traditional attire.

Pung Cholom

Unique Features: Pung Cholom, or the drum dance, is an energetic and acrobatic dance form performed by drummers playing the pung (a traditional Manipuri drum). The performance is a spectacular display of rhythm and agility, where dancers combine drumming with intricate body movements and jumps.

Cultural Significance: Pung Cholom is often performed during Lai Haraoba festivals and other cultural celebrations, showcasing the martial spirit and artistic flair of the Manipuri people.

Maibi Jagoi

Shamanistic Dance: Maibi Jagoi is a ritualistic dance performed by Maibis (priestesses) during the Lai Haraoba festival. This dance is an enactment of the creation myths and the life of the deities, reflecting the ancient animistic traditions of Manipur.

Performance Style: The dance is characterized by slow, deliberate movements and symbolic gestures, often accompanied by traditional chants and music.

Traditional Music

Folk Music

Variety and Themes: Manipuri folk music encompasses a wide range of songs that reflect the daily life, folklore, and traditions of the people. Songs like Khullang Eshei (village songs), Lai Haraoba Eshei (songs of Lai Haraoba), and Pena Eshei (songs accompanied by the pena) are integral to Manipuri culture.

Musical Instruments: Traditional instruments such as the pena (a single-stringed instrument), pung (drum), and flute are commonly used in folk music performances.

Classical Music

Influence of Vaishnavism: Classical music in Manipur is heavily influenced by the Vaishnavite tradition. Bhakti songs dedicated to Lord Krishna and Radha are prominent, often performed during religious ceremonies and festivals.

Styles and Compositions: The compositions are known for their melodic and devotional quality, often accompanied by traditional instruments like the mridanga and harmonium.

Martial Music

Thang Ta Rhythms: In the martial art form of Thang Ta, music plays a vital role in setting the rhythm and pace for the movements. The traditional drums and cymbals used in Thang Ta performances create a powerful and invigorating musical backdrop.

The traditional dance and music of Manipur are a testament to the region's rich cultural heritage and artistic excellence. These art forms not only serve as a medium for cultural expression and preservation but also foster

social cohesion and community bonding. By continuing to celebrate and promote these traditions, Manipur ensures that its unique cultural identity remains vibrant and resilient in the modern era.

Sports Events: Traditional sports and martial arts events are often organized during festivals, encouraging healthy competition and camaraderie among community members.

Cultural Education and Workshops

Workshops and Training: Cultural education programs and workshops on traditional performing arts are organized to teach younger generations about their cultural heritage. These activities help bridge generational gaps and strengthen community bonds.

School Programs: Integrating traditional arts into school curriculums ensures that children learn about their culture from an early age, fostering a sense of pride and belonging.

Community Performances

Local Theatres and Performances: Community theatres and street performances bring people together, providing a platform for local artists to showcase their talents. These events are often free and open to all, encouraging widespread participation.

Collaborative Creations: Creating and performing traditional arts often require collaboration, promoting teamwork and mutual respect among community members.

Preservation of Cultural Identity

Cultural Identity: Performing arts help preserve and promote the unique cultural identity of Manipur. By participating in these arts, individuals connect with their heritage, fostering a strong sense of community.

Intergenerational Transfer: Older generations pass down their knowledge and skills in performing arts to younger members, ensuring the continuity of cultural traditions and community values.

In summary, performing arts in Manipur serve as a powerful tool for fostering social cohesion and community bonding. They provide a shared space for cultural expression, celebration, and education, strengthening the communal fabric and ensuring the preservation of rich cultural heritage.

Economic Implications: Explore the economic impact of performing arts on Manipur, including tourism and local economy.

Cultural Exchange and Global Influence: Analyse the role of Manipuri performing arts in cultural exchange and their influence on global art forms.

Conclusion

The performing arts of Manipur play a crucial role in preserving the region's rich cultural heritage and identity. Through traditional dance forms, music, and martial arts, the people of Manipur express their unique cultural

narratives, foster social cohesion, and strengthen community bonds. These art forms are not only a reflection of the region's historical legacy but also a dynamic medium for cultural expression and innovation.

The traditional practices of Manipuri dance, such as Ras Leela, Nata Sankirtana, and Pung Cholom, showcase the state's artistic excellence and spiritual depth. These performances, deeply rooted in religious and social contexts, contribute to the continuity of cultural traditions and the transmission of values across generations. Similarly, the martial art of Thang Ta symbolizes the warrior spirit and resilience of the Manipuri people.

The integration of traditional and contemporary elements in Manipuri performing arts highlights the adaptive nature of cultural identity. By embracing modern influences while preserving traditional essence, Manipur's performing arts remain relevant and vibrant in the contemporary era. This dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation is a testament to the resilience and creativity of the Manipuri people.

Suggestions

Promotion of Cultural Education: Incorporating traditional performing arts into educational curricula can help instill a sense of cultural pride and awareness among younger generations. Workshops, training programs, and school performances can play a vital role in this endeavour.

Support for Artists and Practitioners: Providing financial support, grants, and recognition to artists and cultural practitioners can encourage the preservation and promotion of Manipuri performing arts. Government and non-governmental organizations should collaborate to create platforms for showcasing and sustaining these art forms.

Cultural Festivals and Events: Organizing cultural festivals, exhibitions, and performances on both national and international stages can enhance the visibility of Manipuri performing arts. These events can attract tourism, generate economic benefits, and foster cross-cultural exchanges.

Digital Documentation and Archiving: Creating digital archives of traditional performances, music, and rituals can help preserve Manipur's cultural heritage for future generations. These archives can serve as valuable resources for researchers, educators, and artists.

Community Engagement: Encouraging community participation in cultural activities can strengthen social bonds and foster a sense of collective identity. Local communities should be actively involved in organizing and participating in cultural events.

Research and Innovation: Supporting research on traditional and contemporary performing arts can lead to new interpretations and innovations. Collaboration between scholars, artists, and cultural organizations can result in creative projects that celebrate and reinterpret Manipur's cultural heritage.

Tourism Development: Promoting cultural tourism in Manipur can generate economic opportunities while showcasing the state's rich artistic traditions. Developing infrastructure and facilities for tourists can enhance the overall experience and attract more visitors to the region.

By implementing these suggestions, Manipur can continue to preserve and promote its unique cultural identity through performing arts, ensuring that its rich heritage remains a source of pride and inspiration for generations to come.

References

1. "Culture of Manipur: Mesmerizing Tradition, Art, Music, Food, and Festivals." Kaleidoscope, 6 Feb. 20234
2. Devi, P. Lilabati, and Rajkumari Jiteshwori. "Manipuri Raas Leela: The Remarkable Manipuri Classical Dance." ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts, vol. 5, no. 6, 2024, doi:10.29121/ShodhKosh.v5.i6.2024.15861
3. Devi, P. Lilabati, and Soibam Priyadarshini Devi. "Tripuri Meiteis in Nationalization of Manipuri Dance: An Appraisal of Their Contributions." ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts, vol. 5, no. 2, 2024, doi:10.29121/ShodhKosh.v5.i2.2024.15152
4. Kshetrimayum, Amita Devi. "The Performing Arts of Manipur." The Cultural Heritage of Manipur, 1st ed., Routledge, 20203
5. "Manipur - Indian Culture." Indian Culture, Indian Culture.

Appendices

Appendix A: Glossary of Terms

1. Ras Leela: A classical Manipuri dance depicting the love story of Radha and Krishna.
2. Nata Sankirtana: A devotional performance involving singing, dancing, and drumming, central to religious rituals in Manipur.
3. Pung Cholom: A traditional drum dance characterized by energetic and acrobatic movements.
4. Thang Ta: A traditional Manipuri martial art that combines combat techniques with rhythmic dance.
5. Phanek: A traditional wrap-around skirt worn by Manipuri women.
6. Innaphi: A traditional shawl worn by Manipuri women.
7. Phumdis: Floating islands found in Loktak Lake.

Appendix B: List of Major Festivals

1. Yaoshang (Holi): A spring festival celebrating the arrival of spring, involving traditional dances, music, and sports.
2. Ningol Chakouba: A festival celebrating the bond between brothers and sisters, where married women visit their parental homes.
3. Lai Haraoba: A festival celebrating the creation myths and the life of deities, involving traditional dances and rituals.