

Continuity and Change in the Construction of *Cultural Meanings of Space in Meitei tradition*

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ABSTRACT:

The concept of 'space' has always been an area that continues to capture Sociological imagination since the very inception of the subject. Starting from Durkheim, whose detailed analysis of society's notion of space as part of his overall schema of sacred/profane distinction (in religion in particular), 'meanings' of 'space' and how the same are constructed 'collectively' by a community has constituted an important area of research for many scholars. This paper looks at how a particular community- the *Meiteis*, constructs 'meaningful spaces' collectively through their participation in the socio-cultural processes of interactions with one another, the mythological memories expressed and reaffirmed through community rites and rituals, and the traditional belief system as well as their adaptation to a changing socio-cultural environment.

Key words: space; social construction of meanings; sacred/
profane; camouflagization

INTRODUCTION

Scholars believe that the *Meiteis* of Manipur have inherited a belief system of *Sanamahism*, a form of animism combined with nature worship and elements of ancestor worship before the adoption of *Vaishnavite Hinduism*.¹² In the *Meitei* belief system, the concepts of 'space' and 'time' are constructed on the basis of characteristics of geographical location, directions, the mythological events associated with the area in particular, and the relative

12 *Vaishnavism* came to Manipur in the late 17th century from Bengal in the reign of king Charairongba (1698-1709) according to R.K Jhalajit Singh (1987:3)

location of the area as to be identified as either 'inside' or 'outside'. For Durkheim and Mauss, 'space' was nothing else than "...the site of the tribe, only indefinitely extended beyond its real limits."¹³ It is thus difficult to clearly put a geographical boundary and limits to socio-cultural imagination and construction of 'space' for a particular community. According to Rob Shields, 'space' is conceived as the 'Dreamtime' in which "...landscape can become not just sedimented traces but an historiography, read through embodied presence, peregrination and pilgrimage...This heterogeneous social space must be produced and reproduced as a cultural artifact and performance."¹⁴ Durkheim divided religious concept of 'space' into two- the sacred and the profane. The 'sacred spaces' like any other sacred things, according to Durkheim are protected and isolated from 'profanisation' by the intervention of moral interdictions or *taboos* of the society.¹⁵ According to a scholar, while the moral sanctity of the 'sacred space' derives its characteristics from the objects present or events which have occurred in that particular area, this 'space' also can change its character through the intervention of human agency. A term "camouflaging" has been introduced to describe this changing character of space.

...space like any other objects has the potentiality to alter its characteristics depending on the importance, be it sacred or profane, bestowed on it by the people who own it through a set of normative actions..... there is possibility for a particular space to move in and out of sacredness. Camouflaging tendency is not endogenous but exogenous in that the space by itself is not an active agent but its characters are defined by the human agency manifested through such acts as ritual, so that the space becomes sacred at least for a specified time period.¹⁶

The scholar explains it in terms of 'transportation' and not 'transformation' as used by Schechner.¹⁷ This paper argues that although 'space' can

13 Durkheim & Mauss (1963:12)

14 Rob Shields (1991:148)

15 Durkheim (1976:56)

16 Kshetrimayum Imokanta Singh, 2007- *The Social Dynamism of Shumang Lila of Manipur: A Sociological analysis of its Contemporary Manifestations*. Unpublished thesis submitted to the Centre for the study of Social Systems, SSS, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India.

17 Schechner (1983:154)

temporarily transport its own characteristics to another form through the intervention of human agencies, there are certain 'spaces' (at least in the *Meitei* case) which can not change or take another form- not even temporarily. 'Spaces' among the *Meiteis* are not just physical spaces as is also the case in many other traditional communities. 'Space' again is not just a physical expanse but a sacred as well as a dynamic realm where spirits, ancestors, and the forces of nature interact. This paper tries to highlight an aspect of certain 'spaces' that can not be changed even for a moment and even after the intervention of human agencies expressed through axiomatic ways. Spaces in *Meitei* belief system are divided into 'public' and 'private' for the purpose of analysis so that the 'outside' and 'inside' of space could be clearly understood as is the case among the *Meiteis*. With the limitation of having looked at 'space' from an 'insider's' perception (and also from a believer's point of view, this paper nevertheless aims at clarifying certain elements of 'space' that can not be separated from the traditional belief system and practices of a particular community of which he/she is a member.

"PUBLIC SPACES" ASSOCIATED WITH HISTORY

As mentioned earlier, creation myths 'create' certain 'spaces' in collective mind which can not be associated with any other events or characteristics unrelated to that myth. Such spaces in the public are again strongly attached to the sentiments of the members of the community who share that memory and history. We can take the example of the *Kangla* fort and the former palace of the *Meitei* king, Maharaj Gambhir Singh at Langthabal, Canchipur. Collective response to the infiltration of these historical sites was intensely emotional and the Indian state has been highly criticized for its act of permitting security personals to 'occupy' the *Kangla* fort as well as the Langthabal palace. For members of the community of *Meiteis* who believe in the sanctity of *Kangla* or Langthabal palace, *secularisation* of these spaces were taken as an act of directly attacking the sentiments of the

people and were strongly opposed and resisted by the people of Manipur.¹⁸ Neither can these sites be *transported* into other forms of sacred spaces.

“VILLAGE SPACES”

Public, yet lower in the sacred hierarchy than the above mentioned categories of sacred space, the village space is again divided into different smaller spaces where different spirits exercise their power within a boundary. There is a village God, who protects and looks after the welfare of the whole village. This God is to be pleased every year through the ritual of *lai haraoba*¹⁹ in which his sacredness is reaffirmed and reproduced continuously through the collective performance of rites and rituals. Each village have a different Guardian God and the performances also differs depending on that. Once established as the abode of such guardian gods, the same can not be changed. However, spaces in and around the ‘temple’ can be secularised and sacrilized as per needs of the community members. Examples can be seen in the *lai harouba* ceremony during which the space in front of the ‘temple’ can take different forms depending on the demands of the event. Sometimes, the front area can even become a stage for the children and the teenagers who dance and act with film music at the background! But once the same space has been sacrilized with necessary rituals by the ritual experts, it again assumed its sacred character for the performance of religious rites and rituals related to the *haraoba* ceremony. In ‘normal’ everyday times, the same can be used by anyone in and around for different purposes- as playground, meeting place, etc.

“INSIDE” HOMESTEAD LAND

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- 18 The ‘nude’ protest of 12 elderly women at the western gate of Kangla against the atrocities of the Indian Army shocked the world and exposed the ugly stories of sexual abuses in the name of fighting underground revolutionaries. A detailed analysis of the incident and its impacts can be found in many writings, such as Panchali Ray’s “Political motherhood and Spectacular resistance: (Re) examining the Kangla Fort protest, Manipur”, in *South Asian History and Culture*, vol. 9, 2018, Issue 4 pp. 435-448 (published online: 18 October, 2018)
- 19 ‘Pleasing of Gods’ in which the mythical stories of creation of human society, culture, and human beings and other creatures is re-created and re- enacted with the whole villagers as audience and sometimes as participants in the acts of performance alongside the religious experts, the priests and priestesses called ‘maibas’ and ‘maibis’.

Generally, each community member is an owner of a homestead land (*ingkhoh*) within which his house is constructed. The entrance gate is called *kondhong*, and is considered as a *dangerous area* since it is the boundary that demarcates the *inside* from the *outside*. After entering through the *kondhong*, the *inside* of the *ingkhoh* has an *ingkhoh koiba lai* (the spirit that looks after the homestead land), in the form of a 'snake'. An area in the Northeastern side of the *ingkhoh* is designated as the 'home' of this *lai* and is worshiped daily seeking his protection for the whole family members.

Sometimes, the ancestor of a *sagei* or clan is also kept in such temples if the head of the family is also the *pibarel* or male head of the *sagei*. Every year *chaklen* or community feast is offered with befitting rituals performed with the help of *amaibas* and *amaibis*– the ritual experts.²⁰

Next, 'inside' the homestead land but 'outside' the house, and in the middle of the *shumang* or courtyard, basil plant is kept to which prayers are offered– twice daily for believers. This is called *tulsibong*, and nowadays, after revivalism, we can find *langthrei*²¹, *laphu*²², *sana khongnang*²³ kept here, alongside the *tulsi* plant in some cases, and without the *tulsi* in some.

A very important 'space' inside homestead land, and yet just outside the house and located at the borderline between the house and the *shumang* (courtyard) is *churi tafam*– a dangerous spirit is supposed to guard there and if any human come in 'contact' with that spirit, it is believed that person will find it difficult to stay alive for long (as we can make out the meaning of this belief from the saying–*churi tafamda lai oknaradi hingde*). coming inside the house and just at the entrance of the house is *thongjil* or the threshold. In every belief system the threshold holds a very important place and this area constitutes a highly meaningful space for the members of a community. Among the Meiteis, *Thongak lairembi*, a female deity is

20 Traditional ritual experts are 'chosen' ones who are being trained by the senior experts to make them ready to perform their roles in rites and rituals. Meitei culture has an institutionalized system of priesthood– both males and females or other genders with a formal office in the erstwhile palace or *konung*.

21 Botanical name is *Eupatorium birmanicum* DC, also known as Burma Agrimony or Hemp Agrimony

22 Banana tree

23 Banyan tree

supposed to be guarding at the threshold protecting the house from evil spirits of the outside world.

This place is where offerings are made everyday in Meitei households for the protection of the household members. Another important place at the backside of the house is *sanathong* (again a place where evil and dangerous spirits are believed to have been always looking for a chance to cause harm to the household members).

“INSIDE” THE HOUSE

A house of a Meitei is always constructed by keeping in mind the places of the spirits and always leaving some spaces for these spirits while constructing the same. It is believed that everything has a designated place outside as well as inside the homestead land as well as inside and outside the house. If proper designated places are wrongly occupied by somebody else or something else, bad things and misfortunes are believed to have been waiting for the members of the household.

While constructing a house, it is taken great care that six portions or rooms are constructed- *thawai manga miga tharaga taruk*, symbolically representing the five souls and the shadow (which is considered as the sixth soul). Starting from the place where the foundation stone is laid, *jatra*²⁴, every thing has to be properly placed, otherwise misfortune might befall to the inhabitants.

Inside, each corner and each room has a meaning- each member has a properly designated place in it. The division is mainly based on age and gender along with the marital status of the members.²⁵

Meitei believes that a house was conceived by drawing similarity to the structure of a human body and thus each part, as in a human body, is integral and plays an indispensable role in the organic functioning of the house as whole. So, it is mandatory for a house to construct incorporating the philosophical dimensions as laid in the Meitei believe system and thus

24 Naoroibam Indramani wrote about the important place the *jatra* occupies in Meitei Architecture in great detail in his book *Meitei Yumsharol*(1995:93). See also Pandit Wang's *Tabumungi Yumsharol*(2022:pp.7-11).

25 Details of the same can be found explicitly analysed in Soibam Nepola's *Philosophy and embodiment in a house among the Meiteis*, in E. Bijoykumar Singh (ed.) *Traditional Knowledge System: Agriculture, Arts and Architecture* (2024).

having each of the functional parts of a body. A Meitei house, specifically in the Yumjao Laikhan Taba, running its anterior to posterior ends in the direction following east to west, is also believed to have followed the structure of a man kneeling with elbows on ground just as an Ox resting on its knees. Representing the human body, the Ridge beam (horizontal beam connecting the Rafter from one end to another) in a house is considered to be the spinal cord with the Rafters being symbolized as the rib bones. Besides, the two opposing wall of a Manggol (the top anterior part of a house, usually with an open end towards the front veranda) is considered to be the legs with the main entrance door being the mouth of a human. Accordingly, the backdoor of a Meitei house represents the end opening of the anal canal and the commonly accompanying structure of two windows on either side of the main door symbolized the pair of eyes in a human body. The hearth inside a house derives and draws its similarity, anatomically, to the navel of human body. Thus, a house structurally represents the human body; and knowing the composing parts of a house is synonymous to knowing the parts of the body...²⁶

Just like the different parts of the body, different spaces inside the house occupy their own places. Human head can not be placed at the end, neither is the stomach possible to occupy the place of the head. Similarly *Meitei* believes in the proper placing of different parts of the house so that the balance is maintained not just in the house but also in the individual residents' health, wealth, mind and body states.

CONCLUSION: CHANGE AND CONTINUITY

Modern houses have changed not just in their construction materials or structures, but also in the allocation of spaces for deities inside the house. *Phunga* is no longer seen in *Meitei* household, and along with it, *Phunglairembi* (the goddess guarding it) has disappeared as well. *Emoinu*, the goddess of wealth (at par in status with Goddess Lakshmi in Hindu Mythology) on the other hand, hasn't stopped occupying the important place that she used to occupy in the earlier times. *Emoinu ema* or mother *Emoinu* is supposed to be performing her duty as ordered by the three Gods- *Mangang*, *Luwang*, and *Khuman*- representing the three times- morning, afternoon and the

26 Soibam Nepola (Ibid)

night.²⁷ This can be compared to the the three Gods- Brahma, Bishnu, and Maheshwor (the creator, preserver and the destroyer in Hindu Mythology.

Direction gods and goddesses have not changed as well. It is still believed that since creation times, different Gods have been entrusted with responsibilities to guard the different directions of the universe, and a change in the area of jurisdiction of these deities is unimaginable for a believer in *Meitei* tradition. Worshipping of God *Sanamahi* at the southwestern corner of the house has never changed. This makes a Meitei family 'unique' in many senses of the term. The sacredness of such places can not be converted into another at convenience.

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