https://doi.org/10.65734/tgi.ssei.avp.ijcsss.ti.26.29.3

Yumsharol: Belief And Cultural Identity In Meetei Indigenous Architecture

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between traditional belief systems and indigenous architecture among the Meetei community of Manipur through the study of Yumsharol, the traditional practice of house construction. For the Meeteis, a house has never been understood merely as a physical shelter. It is closely tied to religion, memory, social ethics, and everyday ritual life. Drawing upon Puyas, oral traditions, and earlier studies, the paper examines how different sections of the Meetei house are associated with deities, sacred directions, and ritual obligations. The household itself functions almost like a living temple where Sanamahi, Leimarel Sidabi, Emoinu Ahongbi, and ancestral spirits continue to shape domestic space and conduct.

The study also considers the historical transformations that followed the spread of Vaishnavism during the reigns of Charairongba, Garibniwaz, and Bhagyachandra. Although processes such as Sanskritization and the burning of the Puyas altered many public aspects of Meetei culture, indigenous beliefs continued to survive within the domestic sphere. In many ways, the inner space of the house remained one of the last enduring spaces where older traditions were quietly preserved. Rather than treating architecture simply as material structure, this paper approaches Yumsharol as a living cultural system through which knowledge, values, and identity are transmitted from one generation to another. Even today, traditional Meetei houses continue to carry traces of an older worldview where architecture, spirituality, ecology, and social life remain deeply interconnected.

Keywords: Manipur, Meetei architecture, Meetei philosophy, Puya tradition, Sanamahi worship, Yumsharol

Introduction

Traditional Meetei architecture reveals much more than methods of construction or aesthetic preference. It reflects a way of life shaped by memory, ritual practice, cosmology, and social order. Among the Meeteis, the yumjao or traditional house has long been regarded as an extension of cultural identity itself. Wangam and Apanthoi describe it as a symbolic representation of Meetei "identity, habits and lifestyle" (Wangam & Apanthoi, 2018). In this understanding, building a house is not treated as an ordinary practical activity. The selection of land, orientation of the structure, placement of pillars, and arrangement of rooms are all shaped by ritual considerations and inherited knowledge systems.

Meetei architectural traditions are deeply tied to indigenous belief. The process of construction itself is understood as sacred activity (Chandam, 2026). A house is therefore never neutral space. It is structured around divine presence, ancestral memory, and ritual obligation. Domestic life unfolds through these relationships. Worship of Sanamahi, Leimarel Sidabi, Emoinu Ahongbi, and other deities continues within the household through daily observances tied to the hearth, courtyard, and sacred corners of the home.

This paper revisits Yumsharol not merely as vernacular architecture but as a cultural system that preserves indigenous philosophy and collective memory. It also draws from recent scholarship on indigenous knowledge systems to understand how oral tradition, ritual practice, and ecological awareness continue to shape Meetei architectural thought (Florian, 2024); Wu et al., 2025). At the same time, the study considers how these traditions adapted under changing religious and historical conditions without entirely losing their foundational worldview.

Mythic Origins and Ritual Foundations

The origins of the Meetei house are closely tied to mythology and ritual performance. During Lai Haraoba, ritual specialists reenact stories connected with creation, settlement, and the emergence of social life. Certain ritual performances, especially Yumsharol and Phisarol dances, symbolize the transition from wandering existence to settled habitation. Chandam (2026)

observes that these performances preserve memories of how early communities struggled toward collective social life and permanent settlement.

One well-known narrative recalls how *King Yoimongba* and his younger brother *Taothingmang* built a nine-room Yumjao at Kangla. While planning the structure during a heavy storm, they observed the tops of two bamboo poles bending and crossing together in the wind, inspiring a criss-cross roof framework. Looking up, they saw a rainbow, whose graceful arc inspired them to adopt a characteristic curvilinear, slanting roof structure that became the hallmark of traditional Meetei houses. Stories such as these reveal how Meetei architectural forms emerged not simply from technical necessity, but from a profound symbolic interpretation of natural phenomena and cosmic elements.

The house itself gradually came to be understood as a sacred body. Kabui (1991) notes that the entrance of the Yumjao symbolically represents the human body, so that entering the house also carries ritual meaning. Inside the household, the sacred furnace or *funga lairu* represents divine presence and continuity. It is associated with clan deities such as Mangang, Luwang, and Khuman, while Emoinu Ahongbi is believed to protect the welfare of the household (Kaoba, 1985).

Other sacred spaces are arranged according to strict cosmological principles. Shrines dedicated to the Ancestral Clan Deity (*Sagei Apokpa*) are traditionally positioned in the northeastern quadrant (*Chingkhei*) of the courtyard, while the sacred chamber of Lainingthou Sanamahi occupies the vital southwestern corner inside the house. Furthermore, Sarangthem (2011) highlights that the entire family enclosure (*Hingkhol*) is laid out to mirror a great coiled serpent (*Paphal*), intrinsically linked to the primordial ancestral manifestation of Lord Pakhangba. Through these deeply embedded spatial beliefs, the *Yumjao* transcends its role as a mere physical residence, transforming instead into a structured miniature cosmos inhabited by ancestral and divine forces.

Structural Symbolism and the House as Body

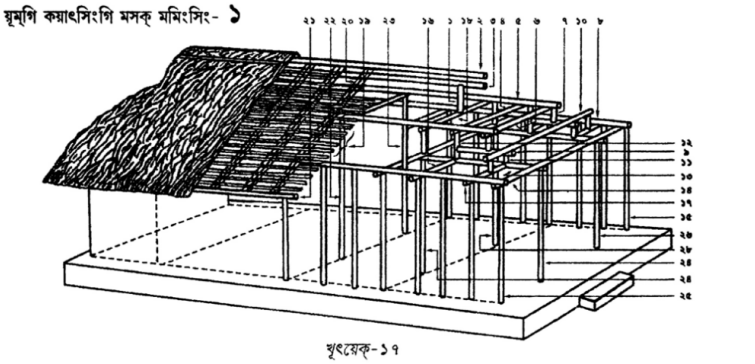
Traditional Meetei architecture is filled with symbolic associations, many of which relate directly to the human body. The structure of the Yumjao is often interpreted in anthropomorphic terms. Singh (1982) notes that pillars are positioned symmetrically to maintain balance between male and female forces within the household. The roof beam or khangba is understood as the spinal cord of the house, while rafters are compared to ribs (Singh, 1975). Because

of this symbolic significance, stepping across the main beam is traditionally prohibited (Singh, 1985).

Spatial organization also reflects cosmological ideas. Houses are generally constructed facing east so that sunlight enters through the front porch or mangol. Eastward orientation is associated with prosperity and well-being, whereas westward alignment is considered inauspicious (Singh & Singh, 1967). Chanu (2022) similarly notes the belief that directly aligned front and rear doors may allow wealth to "drain away" from the household.

Natural materials used in construction carry symbolic meaning as well. Bamboo, grass thatching, and earthen plaster are valued not only for practical reasons but because they maintain continuity with the surrounding environment. Bheigya (2025) observes that traditional thatching materials naturally regulate seasonal temperature while simultaneously reflecting ecological intimacy between household and landscape.

The symbolic dimensions of Yumsharol therefore operate on several levels at once. The house mirrors the human body, reflects cosmic order, and encodes social values within spatial form. Wangam and Apanthoi (2018) rightly describe the Yumjao as a cultural symbol through which worldview and identity become materially visible.



(১) সনা য়ূম্বী (২) য়াহুনম্ (৩) য়াহুবী (৪) থবাক্খাঙ্ অতেন্ব (৫) খাঙ্ঙবু (৬) থবাক্খাঙ্ অতেন্ব (৭) সনায়ূম্বী খোঙ্ঙতেন্ব (৮) লোয়খাঙ্ (৯) সুকুতু অতেন্ব (১০) থবাক্খাঙ্ অসাংব (১১) সনায়ূম্বী খোঙ্ঙতেন্ব (১২) সনায়ূম্বী খোঙ্সাংব (১৩) সুকুতু (১৪) মায়গৈ (১৫) চীংখৈগি সূম্ (১৬) অখুব (১৭) অখুন (১৮) খাংতেন্ (১৯) ঊবা (২০) শুমদাং (২১) লোয়খোম্ (২২) যাত্রা উরেপ্ (২৩) যাত্রা পাব (২৪) ফম্লেন্গি উখোক্তেন্ (২৫) মৈবমগি সূম্ (২৬) মাঙসোক্কি উখোক্তেন্ (২৭) ফম্লেন্গি ফক্তোম্ য়ূম্বী (২৮) মাঙ্সোক্কি ফক্তোম্ য়ূম্বী।

Figure: Traditional Meetei (Yumjao) house-frame with labeled components (Indramani Naoroibam 1995)

Ritual Practices in Construction and Domestic Life

Construction of a traditional Meetei house begins long before the first pillar is raised. Ritual specialists perform *Paring Hunba* and *Paring Tingba* to determine whether the land and timing are auspicious (Singh, 1972). In some cases, even the owner's birth date becomes part of the calculation used to judge the suitability of the site.

The erection of the foundation pillar, known as *Jatra Hunba*, is considered especially sacred. Those participating in the ceremony are expected to observe ritual purity and avoid conditions considered ritually inappropriate (Chandam, 2026). Any mistake during this stage is believed capable of bringing misfortune upon the household. Such practices reveal how morality, ritual discipline, and architecture become closely intertwined.

Inside the completed house, daily activities continue to carry ritual meaning. The hearth or *Phunga Meipham* occupies a central place not only physically but socially and spiritually as well (Hodson, 1908). Beyond cooking, it functions as a place for gathering, storytelling, and transmitting memory across generations. The fire itself is often maintained continuously as a sign of continuity and protection (Indramani, 2020).

Morning cleansing rituals such as Wai Teiba are still associated with household well-being (Kabui, 1991). Floors, hearths, and courtyards are cleaned according to customary practice, while annual repainting and purification before Cheiraoba symbolically renew the domestic space. Everyday acts such as handling rice pots or entering the kitchen are also regulated by ideas of ritual purity, especially in relation to Emoinu worship.

What is striking here is that ritual is not confined to festivals or ceremonial occasions. It becomes woven into ordinary domestic life. Through repeated practice, ethical values such as discipline, respect, cleanliness, and restraint become embedded within the architecture itself.

Sacred Space, Ancestors, and Social Order

The arrangement of space within the Yumjao reflects both cosmology and social structure. Different sections of the house are assigned according to gender, age, and ritual function. For instance, unmarried daughters occupy the Ningol Ka, while unmarried sons occupy the *Piba Ka* (Nalini, 1980). These divisions reflect broader symbolic associations of femininity and masculinity within Meetei thought.

Sacred spaces dedicated to deities are positioned carefully within the household. Leimarel Sidabi's chamber, the hearth dedicated to Emoinu, and the southern niche associated with Sanamahi each occupy ritually significant positions (Florian, 2024; Sarangthem, 2011). Surrounding structures such as Laishang and Sanggoi are similarly arranged according to cosmological directionality (Singh, 1977).

Ancestor worship remains deeply connected with domestic architecture. Clan deities and ancestral spirits are believed to inhabit specific corners of the house, and oral narratives concerning lineage origins continue to be retold within these spaces. Wangam and Apanthoi (2018) argue that the Yumjao serves as a central reference point for sacred placement and cultural orientation. The house therefore acts not simply as shelter but as a repository of kinship memory and inherited identity.

Indigenous Knowledge and Continuity

Seen through the lens of indigenous knowledge, Yumsharol represents a living and adaptive cultural system rather than static heritage. Traditional architectural knowledge is transmitted largely through oral practice, observation, and apprenticeship rather than written manuals. Elders, ritual specialists, and builders continue to play an important role in preserving this knowledge.

Florian (2024) notes that indigenous architectural traditions often emerge from deep familiarity with ecology, climate, and social life. The Meetei case reflects this clearly. The continued use of bamboo, earthen materials, and spatial orientation demonstrates how architecture remains tied to environmental understanding as well as ritual philosophy.

At the same time, these traditions are not entirely frozen in the past. Contemporary houses may use tin roofs or concrete walls while still preserving ritual layouts, sacred corners, and symbolic principles. In many cases, adaptation occurs without completely abandoning older cosmological meanings.

Oral storytelling around the hearth remains especially important in this process. Through stories connected with clan origins, Lai Haraoba, and ancestral deities, younger generations continue to learn about ethics, kinship, and community memory. The house therefore functions not only as physical

structure but also as a pedagogical space where identity is quietly reproduced through everyday life.

Conclusion

The tradition of Yumsharol demonstrates how architecture can become deeply intertwined with belief, memory, ritual practice, and social identity. For the Meetei community, the house has long functioned as more than shelter. It is a sacred and symbolic environment through which relationships between humans, ancestors, deities, and nature are maintained.

The study also shows that Meetei architecture preserves a worldview in which material space and spiritual life remain inseparable. Rituals surrounding construction, hearth practices, sacred orientation, and ancestor worship all contribute to transforming the household into a living cultural institution. Although processes of modernization and religious change have altered aspects of traditional life, many foundational principles of Yumsharol continue to survive. The persistence of these practices suggests that indigenous knowledge systems possess a remarkable ability to adapt while retaining cultural continuity.

Preserving traditional Meetei architecture therefore requires more than conservation of physical structures alone. Equally important are the oral traditions, ritual practices, and collective memories that continue to give meaning to those spaces. Without them, the house may remain standing, but much of the world it once carried would slowly disappear.

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