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Embodied Affect, Living Archives: Posthuman Aesthetics in Manipuri Ritual and Performance

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Abstract

This paper examines how traditional Manipuri performance practices function as dynamic sites where affect, memory, and relational knowledge extend beyond human-centred frameworks. Drawing on posthumanism and affect theory, it analyses **Ras Lila, Nata Sankirtana, Pung Cholom, and Pena music** as embodied practices that connect human, spiritual, ecological, and material worlds. These performances generate affective intensities through sound, movement, and devotion, while simultaneously operating as living archives that preserve and transmit indigenous knowledge and cultural memory. By situating these forms within posthuman aesthetics, the study argues that Manipuri traditions challenge anthropocentric notions of art and history, foregrounding more-than-human relationality between bodies, instruments, landscapes, and sacred forces. Engaging performance studies and cultural memory, the paper highlights how these practices reconfigure aesthetic canons and offer alternative ways of imagining community, belonging, and posthuman futures within the framework of Indian Knowledge Systems.

Keywords: Ras Lila, Nata Sankirtana, Pung Cholom, Pena, Posthuman aesthetics, Cultural memory

Introduction

Recent developments in humanities scholarship have increasingly challenged the centrality of the human subject in shaping understandings of culture, art, and history. The emergence of posthumanist thought, particularly in response to ecological crises and the realities of the Anthropocene, has

prompted a critical re-evaluation of how human existence is entangled with nonhuman agencies, material environments, and multispecies relations. Within this evolving intellectual landscape, concepts such as affect, aesthetics, and memory have gained renewed significance, enabling scholars to rethink cultural practices that extend beyond anthropocentric frameworks.

This paper engages with these theoretical shifts by examining ritual and performance traditions in Manipur, particularly Ras Lila, Nata Sankirtana, Pung Cholom, and Pena music, as embodied practices that generate aesthetic and affective experiences transcending the boundaries of the human. These traditions are not merely artistic expressions or cultural artefacts; rather, they function as **living archives** that sustain and transmit indigenous knowledge systems through embodied memory, sonic expression, and ritual enactment. In doing so, they create dynamic relational networks that connect human performers with instruments, sacred forces, audiences, and ecological landscapes.

Affect is central to this inquiry as it foregrounds the **embodied, relational, and pre-conscious intensities** that circulate through sound, movement, devotion, and spatial environments. These affective flows operate beyond individual subjectivity, producing shared experiences that bind participants within a collective aesthetic field. Such intensities reveal how performance traditions generate forms of belonging that exceed human-centred definitions, aligning with posthumanist notions of **more-than-human assemblages** in which agency is distributed across bodies, objects, and environments.

Simultaneously, the concept of memory is reconfigured within these traditions. Rather than adhering to linear, text-based historiography, Manipuri performances foreground **embodied and ecological modes of remembering**, sustained through oral transmission, repetition, and ritual practice. These living archives challenge dominant archival paradigms by preserving cultural knowledge in performative and experiential forms, where past and present coexist within the immediacy of performance.

By situating Manipuri ritual practices within the intersecting frameworks of affect theory, posthumanism, and performance studies, this paper argues that these traditions offer critical insights into posthuman aesthetics rooted in indigenous epistemologies. They demonstrate how performance can function simultaneously as aesthetic expression, cultural memory, and ethical

engagement, ultimately reconfiguring our understanding of art, community, and relational existence in a more-than-human world.

Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework of this paper is grounded in an interdisciplinary engagement with **affect theory, posthumanism, performance studies, and Indian aesthetic philosophy**, particularly the theory of *Rasa*. These frameworks together enable a nuanced understanding of Manipuri ritual performance as a site where embodiment, memory, and relationality intersect.

Affect theory, as articulated by Brian Massumi (2002), emphasizes **pre-conscious intensities** that move between bodies and exceed linguistic articulation. Affect is not confined to individual emotional experience; rather, it operates as a **relational force**, circulating through gestures, rhythms, and environments. Sara Ahmed (2004) further elaborates that affect "sticks" to bodies, objects, and spaces, creating networks of meaning and belonging. In the context of Manipuri performance, affect becomes visible in the way **sound, movement, and devotion generates shared experiential intensities**.

Posthumanism extends this relational understanding by decentering the human subject. Rosi Braidotti (2019) conceptualizes the posthuman as a condition in which subjectivity is distributed across **human, nonhuman, and technological assemblages**, while Donna Haraway (2008) foregrounds the idea of "becoming-with," emphasizing interspecies and inter-material coexistence. These perspectives resonate strongly with Manipuri cosmology, where humans, deities, nature, and ritual objects coexist in **mutually constitutive relationships**.

Performance studies scholars such as Richard Schechner (2006) and Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008) highlight the **transformative and processual nature of performance**, where meaning emerges through enactment rather than representation. Diana Taylor's (2003) distinction between the *archive* and the *repertoire* is particularly significant here: while archives rely on textual preservation, repertoires transmit knowledge through **embodied practice, memory, and repetition**.

In addition, Indian aesthetic theory, especially *Rasa* as elaborated in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (Vatsyayan, 2003), provides a crucial framework for understanding affect in performance. Rasa refers to the **aesthetic experience or emotional essence** evoked in the spectator, achieved through the interplay of

performance elements. As Rekha Navneet (2020) notes, aesthetic experience in Indian tradition is not merely emotional but **a form of communion**, linking performer and audience in a shared experiential field.

Taken together, these frameworks enable us to conceptualize Manipuri performances as **living archives of affect**, where aesthetic experience, embodied memory, and posthuman relationality converge.

Discussion

Manipuri Ritual and Performance Traditions as Cultural Knowledge Systems

Manipur possesses a rich and layered cultural heritage in which ritual and performance occupy a central position within community life. Dance, music, and devotional practices are not isolated aesthetic forms but are deeply embedded within the **social, spiritual, and ecological fabric** of the region. These traditions have evolved through a complex historical process shaped by the interaction between indigenous Meitei belief systems and Vaishnavite devotional influences, resulting in a unique cultural synthesis that continues to inform contemporary practices (Parratt, 1980; Yumlembam, 2019). Within this context, performance becomes a vital medium through which knowledge, identity, and collective memory are articulated and sustained.

Among the most prominent performance forms are **Ras Lila, Nata Sankirtana, Pung Cholom, and Pena music**, each embodying distinct yet interconnected modes of aesthetic expression and cultural transmission. Ras Lila, widely recognized as a classical dance tradition, enacts the divine love between Krishna and Radha through highly stylized gestures, intricate costumes, and rhythmic choreography. Beyond its visual elegance, the performance generates a **devotional aesthetic space** in which dancers embody sacred narratives, transforming the stage into a site of spiritual experience (Devi & Jiteshwori, 2024).

Nata Sankirtana, inscribed by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage, represents a collective form of ritual performance that integrates singing, drumming, and dance within communal religious practices. Its emphasis on synchronized movement and rhythmic chanting produces an immersive environment where performers and audiences participate in a shared **affective and spiritual communion** (Singh, 2022). Closely associated with this tradition is Pung Cholom, in which performers execute

acrobatic movements while playing the pung drum. This form exemplifies the integration of **bodily discipline, sonic rhythm, and devotional energy**, demonstrating how the body itself becomes a medium of musical and spiritual expression (Singh, 2021).

The Pena, an ancient string instrument, holds a distinctive place within Manipuri cultural history. Traditionally used in storytelling and ritual contexts, it functions as a conduit for transmitting myths, genealogies, and historical narratives. Its sonic qualities evoke deep emotional resonance, linking performers and listeners to **ancestral memory and cosmological knowledge** (Sagolsem Singh, 2021).

Collectively, these performance traditions operate as **repositories of indigenous knowledge systems**, where aesthetic practice, spiritual belief, and social values converge. They illustrate how cultural knowledge in Manipur is not confined to written texts but is sustained through **embodied practice, oral transmission, and ritual repetition**. In this sense, Manipuri performances function as dynamic systems of communication that integrate aesthetic, social, and ethical dimensions, offering a holistic model of knowledge production rooted in lived experience.

Ras Lila and Devotional Affect

Ras Lila represents one of the most refined expressions of devotional performance in Manipur, embodying a rich convergence of **Rasa aesthetics, affective intensity, and posthuman relationality**. Emerging in the eighteenth century under the patronage of Manipuri kings influenced by Vaishnavism, the form dramatizes episodes from the life of Krishna, particularly his divine relationship with Radha and the gopis. However, beyond its narrative structure, Ras Lila operates as a **transformative aesthetic practice**, where performance becomes a medium for spiritual experience, embodied devotion, and relational engagement (Devi & Jiteshwori, 2024).

The aesthetic power of Ras Lila lies in its capacity to generate a **sacred affective atmosphere**. Through delicate hand gestures (*abhinaya*), circular movements, and rhythmic musical accompaniment, performers evoke emotional states of love, longing, and transcendence. Drawing on the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, such emotional evocation can be understood through the concept of *śṛṅgāra rasa*, which in the Manipuri devotional context transforms into **bhakti rasa**, or the aesthetic experience of devotion (Vatsyayan, 2003).

As Navneet (2020) argues, rasa is not merely an individual emotional response but a **shared experiential communion**, where performer and spectator are bound within a collective aesthetic field. The performance space thus becomes a site of spiritual transformation, where affective intensities circulate and produce a sense of sacred presence.

From a posthuman perspective, Ras Lila unsettles rigid distinctions between human and divine agency. The dancers do not simply represent mythological figures; they are understood to **embody sacred energies**, creating a liminal space where human, divine, and material dimensions converge. This process resonates with Donna Haraway's (2008) notion of "becoming-with," wherein identities are not fixed but emerge through relational interactions. In Ras Lila, the performer, costume, music, and narrative together constitute an **affective assemblage** in which agency is distributed across bodies, objects, and spiritual forces.

The visual and material aesthetics of Ras Lila further intensify this relational experience. Elaborate costumes, shimmering fabrics, and symbolic ornaments transform performers into figures that appear almost ethereal, blurring the boundaries between the human and the otherworldly. These material elements are not merely decorative; they actively participate in the production of affect, shaping how the performance is perceived and experienced. Jacques Rancière's (2004) notion of the "distribution of the sensible" is relevant here, as Ras Lila reorganizes perception by creating a sensory environment where devotion, beauty, and spirituality are inseparable.

Affect operates dynamically within this environment. The slow, rhythmic movements, melodic music, and immersive atmosphere allow affective intensities to circulate between performers, audience members, and the sacred space itself. Sara Ahmed's (2004) concept of affective circulation helps explain how emotions such as devotion and longing are not contained within individual bodies but move across a network of relations, producing a **collective experience of transcendence**.

In this sense, Ras Lila can be understood as a **posthuman aesthetic practice**, where the human body becomes a conduit for divine, material, and affective forces. It demonstrates how ritual performance can generate forms of relationality that extend beyond anthropocentric frameworks, offering a

model of aesthetic experience rooted in interdependence, embodiment, and spiritual connectivity.

Sonic Bodies and Collective Affect: Nata Sankirtana and Pung Cholom

While Ras Lila foregrounds visual grace and devotional narrative, **Nata Sankirtana and Pung Cholom** emphasize the **sonic, rhythmic, and kinetic dimensions of ritual performance**, revealing how sound and movement function as powerful mediators of affect and relational experience. These traditions exemplify how embodied performance generates collective intensities that exceed individual subjectivity, creating immersive environments where participants are drawn into shared spiritual and aesthetic engagement.

Nata Sankirtana, as documented by M. T. Singh (2022), is a highly structured ritual practice performed during religious festivals, temple ceremonies, and life-cycle events. It integrates **devotional chanting, drumming, and choreographed movement** within a Vaishnavite framework. Central to its performance is the use of rhythmic cycles (*tala*), vocal modulation, and synchronized bodily gestures, which together produce a deeply immersive sonic environment. The repetitive cadence of hymns and the resonance of drums generate what Brian Massumi (2002) describes as **affective intensity**, a pre-conscious, embodied force that envelops participants and shapes their experience beyond cognitive interpretation.

The collective nature of Nata Sankirtana is fundamental to its affective power. Unlike performance forms that foreground individual virtuosity, this tradition emphasizes **group coordination and rhythmic unity**, where performers move and vocalize in synchrony. This produces what Sara Ahmed (2004) conceptualizes as the **circulation of affect**, wherein emotions are not contained within individual bodies but move across a network of relations, binding performers, audiences, and the sacred environment into a shared experiential field. The performance space thus becomes a **sonic ecology**, in which voices, drums, gestures, and spatial arrangements interact dynamically to produce a sense of communal belonging and spiritual communion.

Pung Cholom extends and intensifies these dynamics through its emphasis on **kinetic energy and corporeal discipline.** In this form, performers execute complex acrobatic movements, including spins, leaps, and intricate footwork, while simultaneously playing the pung, a traditional Manipuri drum (Singh,

2021). This dual engagement of body and instrument transforms the performer into what may be described as a **"sonic body,"** where movement and sound are inseparable. The rhythmic beats of the drum are not external to the performer but are generated through embodied action, collapsing the distinction between musician and instrument.

From a posthuman perspective, this interaction between body and instrument can be understood as a **relational assemblage**, in which agency is distributed across human and material elements. The pung is not merely a passive tool but an active participant that shapes the rhythm, tempo, and expressive possibilities of the performance. This aligns with posthumanist arguments advanced by theorists such as Braidotti (2019) and Haraway (2008), who emphasize the interdependence of human and nonhuman actors in the production of meaning and experience. In Pung Cholom, the drum, the performer's body, and the surrounding sonic environment co-constitute one another, producing a dynamic field of interaction.

Erika Fischer-Lichte's (2008) concept of the **transformative power of performance** is particularly relevant here in this context. She argues that performance generates meaning through the **autopoietic feedback loop** between performers and spectators, where each influences the other in real time. In Nata Sankirtana and Pung Cholom, this feedback loop is intensified by the rhythmic and sonic elements of the performance, which actively engage the sensory and affective capacities of the audiences. The vibrations of the drum, the resonance of collective chanting, and the visual energy of movement combine to produce a multisensory experience that transcends representational meaning.

These performances demonstrate how affect operates through **vibration, rhythm, and embodied energy**, creating shared emotional and spiritual intensities that circulate across bodies and space. They reveal the potential of ritual practices to generate forms of **collective belonging and relational identity** that extend beyond individual subjectivity and human-centred frameworks. In doing so, Nata Sankirtana and Pung Cholom exemplify posthuman aesthetics, where sound, movement, and materiality converge to produce dynamic, interconnected worlds of experience.

Pena Music and the Transmission of Cultural Memory

The **Pena** occupies a distinctive and foundational place in the cultural history of Manipur as one of the oldest indigenous musical instruments of the region. Traditionally performed by hereditary musicians known as *pena khongba*, the instrument has long been associated with **ritual performance, storytelling, and historical narration**, functioning as a vital conduit for the transmission of cultural knowledge (Sagolsem Ramkumar Singh, 2021). Its role extends far beyond musical accompaniment; it is deeply embedded within the **cosmological, social, and spiritual life** of the community.

Unlike many modern musical instruments that operate within formalized or commercialized frameworks, the Pena remains closely tied to **oral traditions and embodied practices**. Performers accompany mythological narratives, local legends, and genealogical histories with its distinctive melodic patterns, creating a performative space where storytelling, music, and memory intersect. From the perspective of performance studies, Pena music exemplifies what Diana Taylor (2003) terms the **repertoire**, a system of knowledge transmission sustained through embodied enactment rather than written documentation. In this sense, the Pena becomes integral to what may be understood as a **living archive**, preserving and transmitting cultural memory across generations through performance.

The affective dimension of Pena music is particularly significant. Its tonal quality, often described as plaintive or melancholic, evokes deep emotional responses such as **nostalgia, reverence, and spiritual introspection**. These affective resonances enable the performance to bridge temporal divides, bringing past narratives into the immediacy of the present. This aligns with Brian Massumi's (2002) conceptualization of affect as a **temporal and relational force**, capable of linking different moments in time through sensory and embodied experience. Through its sound, the Pena not only recalls memory but actively **reanimates it**, transforming history into a lived, affective encounter.

From a posthuman perspective, the relationship between the performer and the Pena illustrates a profound **interdependence of human and material agencies**. The instrument is not merely a passive object but an active participant in the creation of sound and meaning. Its structure, resonance, and tonal possibilities shape the rhythm, pace, and expressive capacity of the performer, while the performer's embodied skill brings the instrument to life. This interaction can be understood as a **co-creative assemblage**,

where human and nonhuman elements collaboratively produce affective and aesthetic experience.

Furthermore, as Parratt (1980) observes, Manipuri religious and cultural practices emphasize the interconnectedness of the spiritual and material worlds. Pena performances often invoke **ancestral and divine presences**, situating the act of remembering within a broader cosmological framework. Memory, in this context, is not merely historical but **relational and sacred**, linking individuals to their community, their environment, and their spiritual heritage.

Thus, Pena music functions as a **living archive of cultural memory**, where sound, narrative, and embodiment converge to sustain identity and continuity. It demonstrates how indigenous performance traditions can preserve knowledge while simultaneously generating affective experiences that reinforce communal belonging and relational existence within a more-than-human world.

Ritual Performance as Living Archives in the Age of Transformation

In contemporary contexts, Manipuri ritual performances are undergoing significant transformations shaped by processes of **globalization, digital mediation, and socio-ecological change**. Traditions such as Ras Lila, Nata Sankirtana, Pung Cholom, and Pena music, once primarily rooted in localized ritual contexts, are now circulating across wider national and global platforms. Digital technologies, particularly online streaming, social media, and archival recordings, have expanded the reach of these performances, enabling new forms of visibility, documentation, and cultural exchange. While such developments contribute to the preservation and dissemination of cultural heritage, they also raise critical concerns regarding **commodification, decontextualization, and the shifting meanings of authenticity**.

Within this evolving landscape, the concept of **living archives** becomes particularly significant. Unlike static archival systems that fix knowledge in textual or material forms, Manipuri performance traditions continue to rely on **embodied transmission, oral continuity, and collective participation**. Diana Taylor's (2003) notion of the *repertoire* is especially relevant here, as it foregrounds how knowledge is sustained through repetition, enactment, and communal memory. These performances are not merely preserved;

they are **continually re-enacted and reinterpreted**, allowing them to adapt dynamically to changing historical and cultural conditions.

At the same time, environmental and social transformations within Manipur, including ecological degradation, shifting community structures, and changing patterns of cultural engagement have also influences how these traditions are practiced and sustained. Ritual performances, which are often closely tied to specific landscapes and ecological rhythms, are increasingly compelled to negotiate new contexts. Yet, this adaptability reflects not decline but **resilience**, as communities continue to reinterpret their traditions while maintaining their core aesthetic and ethical values.

From the perspective of the **Indian Knowledge System** (**IKS**), these practices exemplify an integrated mode of knowing that brings together art, spirituality, ecology, and social life. They challenge dominant Western paradigms of knowledge that privilege textuality and abstraction, instead foregrounding **embodied, affective, and relational forms of understanding**. As Braidotti (2019) suggests, posthuman futures are not solely defined by technological advancement but by reimagining relationships between humans, culture, and the environment. In this sense, Manipuri ritual performances offer alternative frameworks for thinking about sustainability, continuity, and belonging.

Ultimately, the persistence of these traditions demonstrates that living archives are not remnants of the past but **active, evolving systems of cultural knowledge**. They continue to mediate between memory and modernity, preserving identity while engaging with transformation, and thereby reaffirm their relevance in both local and global contexts.

Conclusion

This study has examined how Manipuri ritual and performance traditions embody complex configurations of **affect, memory, and aesthetics** that extend beyond anthropocentric frameworks. Through the analysis of Ras Lila, Nata Sankirtana, Pung Cholom, and Pena music, the paper has demonstrated that these practices function as **living archives**, preserving indigenous knowledge while continually generating new meanings within evolving cultural contexts. These traditions are not static inheritances but dynamic processes through which cultural memory is enacted, negotiated, and sustained.

By foregrounding **embodied affect and relational aesthetics**, the study reveals how human creativity in these performances is inseparable from interactions with **material objects, sonic environments, spiritual forces, and ecological systems**. Such practices challenge dominant assumptions about art, authorship, and historical representation by emphasizing the **interdependence of human and nonhuman agencies**. In doing so, they align with posthumanist perspectives that reconceptualize subjectivity as distributed and relational rather than autonomous and human-centred.

Integrating insights from affect theory, posthumanism, performance studies, and Indian aesthetic philosophy, this paper argues that Manipuri ritual performances constitute **dynamic systems of knowledge production**. They demonstrate how aesthetic experience operates as a form of ethical engagement, fostering modes of belonging that extend across communities, environments, and cosmological dimensions.

In an era marked by ecological crisis and rapid technological transformation, the study of such indigenous performance traditions offers critical insights into **alternative ways of imagining cultural and environmental relationships**. Manipuri ritual practices remind us that aesthetics is not merely representational but **relational and ethical**, capable of sustaining connections between past and present, human and nonhuman. Ultimately, these traditions contribute to broader discussions of posthuman futures by illustrating how **embodied performance and cultural memory can reconfigure relationships between humans, communities, and the more-than-human world, offering sustainable and ethically grounded visions of posthuman futures**.

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