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Adaptation of Manipuri *Phunga Wari* in the Digital Age: A Study of *Keibu Keioiba*, an Animated Feature Film Based on Meitei Folklore.

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Abstract:

Manipuri folktales, also known as *Phunga Wari*, are considered one of the most significant forms of oral narratives of the Meitei community. These tales play an important role in transmitting moral and traditional ethos to the young children since time immemorial.

Traditionally narrated by elderly people, these tales have served as the foundation for imparting cultural and educational values to the younger generation. Folktales, as a dynamic tradition, have evolved over time highlighting advancement in technology and social patterns. With the advent of digital technology, the narrative medium of *Phunga Wari* has expanded to different formats, helping in wider dissemination. In the digital medium, *Phunga Wari*, once preserved and transmitted orally, are now adapted into print, broadcast and digital media. These platforms have expanded the reach of these tales beyond geographical territories while enhancing accessibility and preservation of this age-old oral Meitei storytelling practice. In the digital world, these tales are no longer narrated around the kitchen fire. This article explores the evolution of *Phunga Wari* from oral to digital. By analyzing the adaptation of one of the famous Meitei folktales, "Keibu Keioba" this study examines how digital media serves as an archive for the preservation and transmission of Meitei culture, presenting it to today's generation in a more accessible and appealing way. This paper also argues that digital adaptation

is not merely a survival strategy but a necessary evolution for preserving and disseminating Meitei cultural heritage in a fast-changing world.

Keywords: *Phunga Wari*, Digital storytelling, Dissemination, Digital adaptation, Cultural preservation.

Introduction:

According to Simpson & Steve Roud, Folktales apply to all prose narrative, following traditional storylines, which are told orally, or were told in previous generations covering fairytales, legends, fables, etc. (132) Since folktales are part of oral tradition, these tales are handed down verbally from one generation to another.

Meitei folktales, known as "*Phunga Wari*" to the Meitei, are traditional stories passed down orally from one generation to another. In a traditional Meitei house (*Yumjao*), there is a sacred clayed hearth known as *Phunga*. At night the grand parents would sit around this sacred fireplace with the children who would listen attentively to the folktales being narrated. Before the introduction of formal education in Manipur, these tale played an importent role in moulding the characters of the children. Generally, these tales were developed out of the imaginative and creative power of the old folks. Krotoski argues that stories are "memory aids, instruction manuals and moral compasses." Before the invention of electronic media, oral storytelling served as a means of entertainment and informal education, imparting wisdom and moral values to the next generations. The creativity of the elderly people and the continous practice storytelling serve as a connecting link for transmitting past culture to the present. Through this oral tradition, the younger generations learn about the Meitei culture, tradition, social practices, and social mores. The values imparted to the young children through this practice foster the intergenerational transmission of rich cultural norms and codes on traditional conduct of Meitei community.

Manipuri Folktales have evolved from age-old oral traditions to contemporary digital narratives. The gathering of children and grandparents around the *phunga* at night to listen to the tales narrated by grandparents was a daily practice in every family. It was not only a matter of storytelling but a moment of bonding, informal education and the passing on the culture. The change in lifestyle and advancement in architecture have brought changes

to the structural design of the traditional Meitei house. In today's society, modern architecture has altered the structure of a Meitei house, making the new architectural designs similar to western design to a large extent. This has resulted in the loss of the traditional fireplace, the *Phunga*. The changing dynamics brought by modernization have reshaped societal structure and ancestral practices of the Meitei people, leading to a gradual decline in the traditional house design known as "*Meitei Yumjao*" and *Phunga*. These factors are the main reasons for the decline of *Phunga Wari* in the 21st century.

The invention of digital press and the subsequent integration of digital technology with mass media in the 20th and 21st centuries brought tremendous changes in the narrative techniques of Manipuri folktales. Before the rise of technology, oral storytelling was one of the significant means of disseminating Meitei folktales but in recent times digital media has taken over from oral storytelling. In modern society, digital media serves as a significant medium for the dissemination of folktales. Influenced by the rise of digital media, the rising generation, especially Gen Alpha and Gen Z, are engrossed in television, mobile phones, cartoon shows and social media. This has ultimately led to the decline of the beautiful art of oral storytelling. At such a critical juncture, digital media has emerged as an important tool in preserving the rich Meitei oral tradition, though customized into different forms. A gradual revival is underway to counter balance the negative impact of modernization on the traditional practices. With the dedication and hard work of passionate cultural enthusiasts, scholars and intellectuals, *Phunga Wari*, a part of Manipuri oral tradition has adapted into different forms: text, audio and audio-visual animation operated through digital platforms like TV channels and social media platforms. Many authors and publishing houses have documented folktales by textualizing them into collected volumes. Even the English translated and illustrated texts of Manipuri folktales are made available to the public. Preserving tradition amidst the changing societal dynamics is one of the positive achievements of scholarship. The advancement in technology and innovation have also led to the rise of new forms and modes of expression that preserve the core elements of folklore notwithstanding transformations in form, medium, and context. This is commonly termed as "hybrid folklore" (Kjupeva 124). In this context Selberg urges folklorists and students to look for the adaptations and changes that folk culture undergoes transformation in industrialized societies, rather than perceiving media and

technology as destroyers of folklore (239). The documentation of folktales and their adaptation to different digital formats help in preserving the oral tradition and provide a doorway to disseminate Meitei culture to the masses who are engaged in the digital world. In fact, the presence of folktales on digital platforms helps in the continuation of the Manipuri oral tradition and in passing it on to the generations that follow.

The Objective of the study:

1. To examine the change in the digital adaptation of folktales to captivate the attention of the viewers.
2. To study how digital media helps in the dissemination of folktales and the preservation of Meitei cultural heritage.
3. To analyze how digitally adapted folktale impart knowledge of traditions and customary practices.

Research Questions:

1. How does the textual version of the *Phunga Wari* differ from its digital adaptation on YouTube?
2. What are the main factors that lead to the adaptations?
3. How does digital media serve as an archive for the preservation and dissemination of Meitei cultural heritage?

Theoretical Framework:

The digital adaptation of Meitei Folktales (*Phunga Wari*) *Keibu Keioiba* reflects the dynamism of folklore in contemporary society. Alan Dundes argues that folklore does not vanish or is rooted out from the society with modernization, instead technology itself has become the subject of folklore in present society. He further asserts that technology speed up the transmission of folklore (17). It changes its form by adapting with the changing social and technological contexts. Similarly, Meitei folktales are being tailored to fit with the global changes and for wider audience engagement. In addition to this, the adaptation of *Phunga Wari* from oral storytelling to digital narratives also highlights the continuity of Meitei folktales. The adaptation of *Phunga Wari* into new media reflects global change in the communication technologies and act as a means of safeguarding oral culture amidst modernization. The availability of *Keibu Keioiba* on YouTube Channel is a significant example of the new media adaptation of Manipuri folklore. The adaptation of folklore, legends etc. into

different forms of media is studied and analyzed in Linda Hutcheon's Theory of Adaptation. Adaptation is not a new phenomenon in modern society. Even in Shakespeare's era adaptation existed where stories based on the then society are adapted from sheets of paper to theatrical for new audience (Hutcheon 2). Similarly, the adaptation of Meitei folklore has taken place together with the changes brought by modernization. Andras Vajda urges that traditional folk culture of every society is shifted from oral culture to digital platforms with the rise of internet. He further asserts that Internet is turning out to be an effective medium and space of traditional culture (8). Andras view on the shifting paradigm of oral culture draws closely parallel to Manipuri folktales as digital platforms emerge as new storytelling space.

Research Methodology

Research Design: This study employs a qualitative approach and descriptive analysis on multimodal features. In this study, qualitative approach is used to interpret cultural significance, meaning, social and cultural representation, change in narrative technique, preservation and dissemination of traditional practices. The content of "Keibu Keioiba is analysed from different critical lenses to understand the themes and cultural representation rooted in oral and digital storytelling. It also helps in examining the embedded meaning both in the text and the animation. Further, the multimodal analysis of this animation provides significant insights into the animated characters, audio-visual elements, musical instruments and background soundtrack. It further helps in studying and examining the Meitei cultural practices, aesthetic beauty of the music produced by the traditional Manipuri musical instruments.

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis method is used while analysing the data. Consistent with the development model of culture, each theme requires interpretation by the a qualitative research (Guest etal 10).

Oral to Digital Narratives: The evolution of *Phunga Wari*

Phunga Wari (Meitei Folktale), an integral part of Meitei tradition and culture, is an ancestral practice which serves as a cultural repository and a way of passing down cultural values. It also plays an important role in strengthening family bonding, preserving oral traditions and imparting moral lessons.

Civilization brings changes to the social structure and lifestyle of people. The evolution and adaptation of *Phunga Wari* are clear examples of the changing dynamics brought by civilization. These tales, which have been narrated orally since time immemorial, have been adapted into texts, theatrical plays and digital platforms over time. One of the main reasons for this successful adaptation of Manipur folktales (*Phunga Wari*) from oral tradition is the advancement of science and technology. In the context of Chinese folklore, Duan urges that the Chinese folktale disseminate from oral to written form and to other different forms. He further asserts that the new technology will expand the scope of global dissemination by increasing the pace of the changes and the process of dissemination (64). Similarly, in the contemporary Meitei society, internet plays an important role in the preserving the Meitei oral traditions. The adaptation of folktales into digital formats saves the oral traditional storytelling practice rooted in Meitei society from disappearing in the modern society. The decline of the joint family, lesser time of interaction between grandparents and children and the increasing engagement of children with the internet, social media are some of the factors that lead to the decline of traditional storytelling of the Meitei community. However, retelling of myths, legends, folktales through new media facilitates the preservation and transmission these traditional practices in the modern digital age. At the same time the transition from oral to new media has transformed the traditional concept of *Phunga Wari*. The traditional meaning of it has changed with the modern architectural design of houses. The tradition of maintaining the traditional fire place or a clay hearth known as *Phunga* has been replaced by modern layout . Ultimately, *Phunga Wari* loss its relevancy and meaning without *Phunga*. This oral storytelling is no longer a commonly practiced tradition in most Meitei families except for the few. In today's digital world, folktales are adapted to digital platforms without altering their themes. Despite the changes in medium, narrative techniques and social setting, the core elements remain unchanged.

The arrival of western based formal education and the advancement of science and technology are some important factors that influenced the life of folk. These factors lead to change in certain aspects of society and the interest of the folk on oral narratives. The decline of oral tradition from Manipuri society is one fine example. However, with the efforts of intellectuals, cultural enthusiasts, cultural preservationists and scholars, documentation of

oral folktale has started and appeared in text format in late 90s. With the rapid rise of digital media in 21st century, there was a shift from text to media. In contemporary society, the oral storytelling has started shifting from *Phunga* to digital platforms. The change in lifestyle and the advent of modern electronic gadgets have posed questions about the preservation of oral tradition, cultural continuity and sustenance over time. The rapid use of e-gadgets and the rapid growth of social media have given the idea of integrating oral folktales with technology to the folklorists and scholars. The increasing use of internet also sparks the idea of scholars, cultural enthusiasts and intellectual to foster adaption of folktales for easier accessibility across the globe. Thus, facilitating cultural dissemination by transcending the limitation of orality. Adaptation in digital platforms enables global accessibility than any other forms. The adaptation of *Phunga Wari* can be considered as a way of keeping traditional Meitei culture alive in the contemporary society.

Many Meitei folktales that were once narrated orally are uploaded on different digital platforms like YouTube, blogs and websites, for instance, "Keibu Keioiba", "Pebet". "Keibu Keioiba" (Tiger Head) and "Tapta" are now available in digital format such as audio and audio-visual formats. Animated characters are used in the visual format to describe the setting vividly. Traditional musical instruments of the Meitei community like '*Pena*', '*Moibung*', and '*Pung*' are now used to enhance the audio effect and to attract the attention of the listeners. The use of such traditional instruments helps in imparting and transmitting Meitei culture to future pillars who are heavily influenced by the popular culture circulating on various digital platforms. This integration of traditional instruments while narrating these tales play a key role in saving Meitei culture from loss by bringing it back to its roots.

Pupu Folk Tv and Wari TV are some YouTube channels that present Meitei Folktales on digital platforms by using animation technology. Manipur Story Channel, Naoshum, Kangleipak Khutsem and Young Minds are channels podcasting *Phuga* Wari in audio. On Spotify, "NEZINE's Podcast" has podcasted three well-known *Phunga Wari*: (1) Sandrembi and Chaishra (2) Kabui Kei Oiba (3) Yairipok Thambalnu in a three-part podcast series, each featuring a *Phunga Wari* narrated by an elder in Manipuri to capture the beauty of oral storytelling of Meitei culture. Further, each narration is immediately followed by an English translation. Such mediated audio versions of storytelling also play a vital role in preserving Manipuri folktales in modern

society. These platforms also help in extending the reach of Phunga Wari to a diverse audience, including children and the elderly, ensuring their continuity across generations.

Analysis of Digital Adaptation: Animated film Keibu Keioiba broadcast on YouTube.



Bhumenjoy Konsam, Keibu Keioiba, 2009, Makok Production Studio

YouTube, one of the largest and fastest online video-sharing platforms, has affected the lives of contemporary people to a great extent. Social media sites like Instagram, Facebook, etc. also help in disseminating the uploaded content across the globe with easy accessibility. social networking sites(Blank and Peck). Manipuri folktales are now available on YouTube, social media, and other digital platforms and it helps in reaching the far and wide corner of the globe.

"Keibu Keioiba", one of the famous Meitei folktales (*Phunga Wari*) was later adapted into a digital format in the form of animation and released in 2009 by Makok Production Studio. It is the first Manipuri animated feature film based on the Meitei folklore. This animated feature film has given a golden opportunity to the young children who are less familiar with Meitei traditional beliefs, customs and practices of Manipur. This animated film is enhanced with rich background sound effects and soundtrack produced using indigenous musical instruments like *Pena*, *Moibung and Pung*. Such effort act as abridge, facilitating the innocent children acquire knowledge about the historical and cultural importance of indigenous musical instruments in Meitei society. Moreover, the English subtitle makes it easier to understand the story and its moral implication. After the release of this film, it was broadcast on one of the YouTube channels of Manipur called 'Wari TV' in 2017. It was

uploaded on 30 November, 2017 in two parts. As of May 21, 2026, the first part of the film reached 4,965,986 views and the second part 3,173,722.

The YouTube adaptation follows the story of the creature Keibu Keioiba and the tragic incidents that follow after the abduction of Thabaton. This 2D animation created by using Vector format is more child friendly and child centric. It emphasizes more on imparting moral values and family bonding. In the story of the textual version, Thabaton gave birth to a son after she lived with Keibu Keioiba but there was no son in the digital adaptation of this tale telecasted on the YouTube channel 'Wari TV'. The difference in the content of the animated version and the text is primarily based on the targeted audience or viewers. The exclusion of Thabaton's giving birth to a son after she had lived with Keibu Keioiba in the animation makes the narrative more focused on children. Since the main purpose of a folktale is imparting moral values and wisdom, the modern adaptations are focusing more on a child friendly narrative.

The animation streamed on YouTube channels imparts knowledge of Manipur folk music and its cultural significance beyond geographical territories. The global dissemination of the cultural heritage is also facilitated by different digital platforms. The adaptation of *Phunga Wari* on new media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Spotify etc. provide an authentic and reliable repository of the Meitei oral tradition, customary practices and cultural values. It also enables easy access to these tales to the world, particularly to the children of the Meitei diaspora which ultimately helps in preserving the Meitei folk culture. For example, the animation film "Keibu Keioiba" imparts the basic knowledge of Manipuri musical instruments like *Moibung, Pena* and *Meitei Pung* to the young children who are heavily influenced by the Western culture. Young children can easily understand more about the Manipuri musical instruments upon watching this animation. This digital adaptation embellished the aesthetic charm of traditional musical instruments to kids, teenagers who are influenced heavily by K-pop and Western music. The knowledge acquired from such work can at least help in preserving the beauty of Manipuri traditional music.

The animated version has rich audio-visual effects and thereby easily grabs the attention of the Screen Generation. The audio-visual effects of the animation help in catching the attention of viewers, such attention-grabbing elements are not found in the text. These factors make the textual adaptation

and digital adaptation different in various aspects. One key aspect that sparks the analysis of the animated "Keibu Keioiba" is the fusion of Manipuri folk instruments and Western musical instruments. This fusion of the musical instruments in the animation makes the audio-visual effect eye catching and such musical backgrounds induce thrilling and goosebump experiences for the audiences. According to Sorri Senjam, the music director, the Western musical instruments like electronic drum, bass guitar and electric guitar are used along with the Manipuri folk instruments like '*Meitei Pung*' and '*Pena*' to give a thrilling background music and he also adds that the fusion of the Manipuri folk musical instruments and Western musical instruments in the animation aims to give a new experience of the Manipuri folktale to the viewers. He further explains that this fusion makes the tech-savvy generation feel the need to know more about Manipur folk culture and folk instruments. He confidently looks forward to the future and is hopeful that such initiatives can become a significant means of preserving Manipuri folk instruments in today's modern world.

In Meitei culture religious rituals, practices and beliefs have significant symbolic meaning. In the animation, Kabui Salang Maiba is portrayed as a traditional religious practitioner and later a person who suffers the ill consequences of his hunger to exercise the power of his magical black art. The character of Kabui Salang Maiba portrayed in the animated version depicts the ancestral folk practice of Manipur and their role in the society. In Meitei society, *Maiba* plays a significant role in cultural and religious rituals. The representation of the character of the *Maiba* in the animated film *Keibu Keioiba* gives knowledge of ancient Manipuri traditions and customary practices to the future pillars of the society and also to the Meitei diaspora. In modern society, migration is a common phenomenon wherein the phenomenon does not necessarily mean that people abandon their traditions and practices. The adaptation of folktale is one fine example supporting that folklore is still changing and finding new ways to exist (Dorson 41). Children who are heavily influenced by modern values and lifestyle lack the knowledge of such ancestral practices. Children who had listened to *Phu*nga Wari from elderly parents possessed a strong cultural background and identity with deep understanding of Meitei customs and values. Hence, the digital adaptation of folktale preserving disseminating knowledge customary practices and rituals of Manipuri culture.

Looking from an ecocritical lens, the animated version of "*Keibu Keioiba*" highlights the relation between human beings and nature. In the 21st century, the rapid development of science and technology has brought human civilization to its peak. On the other hand, this development has posed an adverse effect on nature and its cycle about which human beings are less concerned. The lamentation of Mother Earth over the selfishness of human being is portrayed with the outcry of a goddess before the tree was cut down by Thabaton's brothers. The cutting down of trees by village folk for their needs is shown in the animation. Such practices of cutting down of trees are very harmful to the ecological balance of nature. The cry of the goddess as shown in the animation is a kind of environmental awareness to the masses. Literally, the cry of the goddess represents the intolerable negative impacts of human actions on nature. Such representation makes the young children aware of human-nature relation and the importance of natural elements in the existence of human beings on Earth.

The way of portraying the themes of a folktale like wit, wisdom and trickery is very different when the tales are adapted into animation. The line, "*Sana O, Naril O... Chenga Pellona... Ebung gi Ebema Ebung lak ae thong hanglo*" spoken to Thabaton by her elder brother Pellona is presented as an advice to Thabaton by her eldest brother. This advice is a unique code and means of communication between Thabaton and her brothers, ensuring her safety inside the hut. She will not open the door until and unless those words are prompted from the recognizable voice of her brothers. Young children can understand the significance of elderly advice after watching this adapted tale. This particular trickery element used in the animation is not employed in the various published text and folktale collection. Unlike textual versions, the animation portrays the ill consequences of misusing magical and sacred power. Kabui Salang Maiba, a priest with a magical power, could not transform back into human form and is destined to live a tragic life. After being transformed into a half human and half tiger creature, Kabui Salang Maiba lives an alienated life away from his family and human society. The misuse of sacred power and traditional knowledge result in the creation of hybrid creature with tiger head and human body. This creature symbolizes the negative and ruinous effect of human curiosity of power. The animation also clearly shows to the viewers that misuse of spiritual knowledge is not good and should not be attempted in the human society. The tragic life and

death of Keibu keioiba in the film imparts moral lesson to the young minds living in Manipur. The moral lesson conveyed in the film parallels to the fate of Dr. Faustus in Christopher Marlowe's tragic play *Doctor Faustus* illustrating how moral violation, uncontrolled desire and power hunger lead to one's total ruin and death.

Moreover, the animation disseminates to the viewers that emotional restraint and self-introspection are necessary for peaceful existence in every human society regardless of the civilization and technological advancement. Although there are always variations in the adaptation, the purpose or motif of folktale remains unchanged. There is no significant change in the theme, moral lesson of the folktale despite the inclusion of audio-visual effect and 2D characters.

In Meitei society religious rituals, myths, folk culture are not arbitrary, but have significant symbolic meaning for Meitei culture. Understanding the symbolic meaning of these traditional practices is key to understanding Meitei culture. The natural and supernatural are important elements of *Phunga Wari*. The rituals and religious practices of Manipur are closely related with these elements. One such practice portrayed in this animated film is the practice of offering a prayer to the goddess of Nature a day before the cutting of a tree. This ritual involves incense sticks, fruits, flowers put on a banana leaf. It shows the continuity of cultural and religious beliefs and practices of the Manipuri people handed over the generations. In Manipuri rituals and religious practices, flowers and fruits have been associated with the culture of Manipur since time immemorial. As Alan Dundes remarks, "Folklore as a mirror of culture frequently reveals the areas of special concern." (The Meaning of Folklore, 55). Nowadays, children acquire knowledge of traditional practices, customary beliefs, rituals and Manipuri gods and goddesses from digitalized tales and social media instead of acquiring from traditional oral practice. In contemporary society, oral storytelling is continuously shifting to new media platforms, thereby transforming the process of acquiring and imparting traditional and cultural knowledge. Such changes accentuate the need of digital media in preserving our culture. Digital adaptation of folktales play an importtant role in the cultural reawakening and dissemination of social and religious practices far and wide with maximum reach. According to Gopinath, the dissemination of folktale on digital platform makes the cultural

elements easily accessible to viewers across the globe unlike traditional oral storytelling (291).

Conclusion

Alan Dundes argues that technology is not destroying folklore, instead, it plays an important role in spreading it and acts as a vital source for the generation of new forms of folklore (Interpreting Folklore 17). New media has provided a space for the preservation and dissemination of folktales. The advancement of science and technology is rapidly changing the world. As a result of such rapid changes, oral tradition has evolved through different phases of adaptation to protect the cultural heritage of Manipur. YouTube, social media, podcasts and websites are the digital platforms that help in the dissemination of *Phunga Wari* across the globe. The adaptation of *Phunga Wari* on e-platforms has transcended the geographical boundaries, thereby becoming an effective means for preserving and safeguarding Meitei cultural heritage. The availability of these tales in different digital formats also serves as a connecting link between generations. For the technology-savvy generation, these adaptations of *Phunga Wari* provide a strong base for understanding the customary practices, rituals and beliefs of Manipuri society. Presently in Manipur, there are many content creators operating different media channels telecasting different animated videos of *Phunga Wari*. The animated characters play an instrumental role in grabbing and capturing the mind of young children and through this adaptation Meitei culture is disseminated to the far ends of the world. In the contemporary world, the digital platform and crucial rile in the evolution Phunga Wari. This evolution shows that folklore is a dynamic tradition which evolves with the flow of time. New media spaces, in the contemporary world, serve as a connecting link of the past with present and future by facilating preservation and dissemination of intangible while educating present and future genertation about their cultural legacy.

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