

Floral Semiotic In Ancient Manipur: Deciphering The Language Of Plants In Traditional Communication

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Citation: Dr. Hidam Ajit Meetei, et.al (2024). Floral Semiotic In Ancient Manipur: Deciphering The Language Of Plants In Traditional Communication, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(6) 5367-5371

Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i6.10802

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The Meitei culture is closely aligned with nature. Trees, plants, leaves, flowers, and fruits hold high significance in the Meitei culture. Communication medium reflecting to culture has been a crucial part of life for every society. Throughout history, flowers have been an integral part of traditional communication in many different cultures. Specific flowers and their arrangements have been utilised to communicate emotions, messages, and symbolic meanings in *Floriography*, the language of flowers, which has been employed as a sort of cryptological communication. In addition to being utilised to express feelings and ideas, plants were integral to religious and cultural rituals, demonstrating the close bond between early humans and the natural world. *Meetei* women wore bunches of solitary flowers, known as *Nachom*, behind their ears. The "*Nachom* Tradition" was intriguingly associated with and played an essential role in the cultural lives of *Pakhang-Leishabi*, or young, single men and women, who represent their romantic behaviours. For example, wearing anything particular or different sends a message about accepting or rejecting bids and indicates a woman's marital status. *Nachom* was an essential component of celebrations and rituals. Specific flowers were assigned symbolic meanings, often based on their nature or attributes and used as a medium of communication in early *Meetei* society. Traditional ways of inviting guests using beetle leaves and areca nuts are quintessential parts of invitations. This article aim to explore the language of plants in traditional communication in early Meetei society .

Keywords: Communication, Traditional, Language, Culture.

INTRODUCTION

Humanity's success over other species globally has been characterised by its capacity to create a wide range of sophisticated communication channels. Communication is fundamentally an "out there" or external occurrence. Traditional communication is a mode of communication that has been used for a very long time and is uniquely associated with a particular culture. The goal of a community is to make sharing information and ideas more accessible. The *Meetei* people have coexisted peacefully in the lowlands of Manipur with the highlanders in the hills and valleys from ancient times. Since ancient times, information has been vital to human civilisation. In human development, exchanging knowledge has been essential in constructing who we are today. The capacity of humans to construct a wide variety of highly evolved ways of communication. It will continue to be the defining characteristic of their victory over other species. As a traditional way of information delivery, information is conveyed through vocal, verbal, instrumental, and acoustic techniques. Manipur, in northeast India, bordered by Myanmar to the east and south, Nagaland to the north, Assam to the west, and Mizoram to the southwest, has long been a hub for cultural integration. The result is a variety of customs for sharing information during peace, conflict, and hunting. These unique traditions have led to the existence of numerous communication methods.¹

In the past, the *Meeteis* living in the valley would use wildfires to signal and convey messages about the well-being of the tribals, particularly the Nagas, residing in the hills. In retaliation, the *Meetei* would light lamps atop a massive pole in their courtyard to symbolise the same.

What makes human beings different from the rest of the planet's species? What could happen to us if we did not invent ways to share our knowledge? These questions ponder upon our minds whenever we want to invent new modes of Communication. Throughout human evolution, information sharing has been key to shaping who we are today. The triumph of human over the other species on the planet has been defined by their ability to architect various well-developed modes of Communication.

Without communication, civilisation would not have developed, society and culture would not be organised, and learning would not occur. Having existed since 33 A.D., the *Meetei* community is one of the oldest in India, living in the valley of the northeastern state of Manipur. Continuing such a long tradition was only possible with a well-developed system of information sharing. Information Sharing is conveying one's idea to another person through various means. Since the ancient period of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba, the first coroneted monarch of the Manipur Kingdom in 33 AD, *Meetei* culture has developed various innovative methods for disseminating information for various contexts, maintaining our distinct customs and traditions. The primary modes of information disbursement employed nonverbal messages understood in the early *Meetei* Society.²

Manipur is well-known for its extensive flora, which results from its range of temperatures varying from tropical to sub-alpine and that woods cover 67% of its territory. Interestingly, there are more than 500 species of orchids in the state. With almost 1,200 species documented, the area is also rich in medicinal plants.³ Manipur is also essential for biodiversity protection because of its rich flora, which includes many bamboo species and ancient blooming plants. Trees, plants, leaves, flowers, and fruits are significant in the *Meetei* culture. Communication medium reflecting cultural life. Culture has been a crucial part of life for every society.⁴ The *Meetei* people have a strong relationship with the natural world. Around 400-600 AD, during the reign of King Hongnem Luwang Ningthou Punshiba of the Luwang Dynasty, he gave his artisans and warriors orders to find a giant tree in the forest so they could build a gorgeous royal boat known as *Hiyang Hiren* in the old *Meetei* tale *Hijan Hirao*.⁵ The artisans and warriors found a giant tree known as "*U-Ningthou*" (Phoebe hainesuana) literally, "*Tree King*" or "*Wood King*". The next day, the royal priest perform certain rituals before the felling of the tree. The ritual involves invoking the spirit of the tree and putting an axe on the trunk of the chosen tree overnight, ask the tree for permission to cut it from the Mother Nature goddess *Irok Lai Chanu*, also called "*Mistress of the Gorges*" and "*Queen of the Hill Range*", and the tree spirit could give a hint by moving the axe during the night if it did not want to be cut down. This ritual beliefs and acceptance that trees have spirits, and there is respect for such beings with souls to lead a harmonious existence.⁶ When they had accomplished the rites, they cut it down. When her "*tall and graceful*" tree child died that night, the Mother Nature goddess, *Irok Lai Chanu* wept with sorrow. She lamented that the king's men discovered the tree and paid her to save its life using gold and silver. It conveys Mother Nature's anguish at the loss of the old tree she had before then considered as her child.⁷ It represents *Meetei's* devotion to trees, their view that felling a tree, requires ceremonies and traditions since it's a significant occasion. It shows the ancient *Meetei*, love and care for nature and the preservation and needs of the natural environment in human life and reflects environmental concerns.

The people of Manipur view nature as something that should be approached with gratitude and appreciation rather than as a resource to be exploited. The *Lai Haraoba* or *Umanglai* is a hybrid of animistic and ancestor worship systems, practice extravagant rituals and ceremonies.⁸ The term *Umanglai* is derived from the combination of *Lai* (a god or divinity) and *Umang* (a forest), later translated as *Umanglai* by L. O. Clarke, the British political agent of Manipur.⁹ Also known as *Lai Haraoba*, it is a hybrid of animistic and ancestor worship systems that practice extravagant rituals and ceremonies. During *Lai Haraoba* ladies bring filled with fresh flowers and fruits in *Meetei* dialects, *Heikat-Leikattamba/Heithaba-Leithaba* (offers of fruits and flowers) and *Heiruk-Leiruk* (baskets of flowers and fruits), to offer to the god, hoping to receive blessings. It reflects the environmentally conscious minds and habits as well as behind and between the rituals surrounding and defining them and demonstrates their ecological awareness and regard for the natural world.¹⁰ The concept of a holy grove where deities live signified a greater awareness of man and nature's interaction, allowing Manipuri to enter into an ecological essence both during and after the festival.¹¹

Flowers represent thankfulness and the desire to receive their wishes from the divine. The cultural importance of certain flowers and the ideas that they carry are taken into consideration while selecting them. There are many references to flowers in the folklore and oral literature of the *Meetei* people. The beauty and virtues of flowers are often lauded in early poetry, which frequently includes these blossoms in tales that promote societal ideals and cultural identity.¹²

The *Leiron* manuscript is a significant cultural and botanical text of Ancient Manipur attributed to King Charairongba who ruled from 1697 to 1709. It details over a hundred different flowers, providing descriptions of their characteristics, uses, and associated stories and reflecting the deep connection between the Meitei people and their natural environment. Each flower is linked to local myths, showcasing how flora is woven into the fabric of Meitei culture.¹³

Flowers had a crucial function in conventional communication across many civilisations. *Floriography* is a nonverbal communication method that assigns symbolic meaning to different flowers and their arrangements, enabling individuals to express their emotions privately in societies that value restraint. *Floriography* is also

sometimes referred to as the language of flowers. It is a tradition based on a combination of mythology, literature and folklore.¹⁴ A symbolic meaning is attached to every flower and hue. Red roses are a symbol of love, yellow sunflowers are a symbol of devotion. *Floriography* continues to influence communication in private and professional settings. It has been practised for thousands of years in many Asian, European and African cultures. *Floriography* shaped the Victorian era's social life at its peak.¹⁵

The Lotus Bloom is an essential symbol of communication between all cultures, faiths and holds tremendous spiritual meaning. Through life's challenges, they still do not taint their body, heart, and spirit, as a lotus is a perfect flower to bloom even in dirty water, as it remains pure with its unspoiled petals.

Spiritual illumination

The lotus has always been held in high regard in Buddhism, as it is the flower through which enlightenment is unlocked. The Buddha found *Nirvana* meditating beneath a lotus tree. In addition to solely representing life, the lotus symbolises deeper levels of existence, showing that all creations of nature are bonded together in oneness. The blooming lotus flower signifies growth, rebirth and spiritual enlightenment.¹⁶

The flowering of the lotus is a common theme in Buddhist art. It often represents the promise of enlightenment and the purity of one's spiritual core. While emerging from the blooms and murky waters, everything rising above the surface symbolises the road from ignorance to awareness. A symbol of spiritual purity and the possibility of enlightenment, the lotus blossom appears throughout Buddhist artwork.¹⁷

In Hinduism, the lotus is a symbol of enlightenment, purity, and beauty. There are several images of the gods Brahma and Lakshmi, who are either seated on lotuses or holding them in their hands. The flower symbolises commitment and the road that leads from ignorance to enlightenment, both critical components of puja rituals.¹⁸

In Christianity, Easter is linked to the white lily as a symbol of forgiveness, purity and life. The suffering and sacrifice of Christ can be depicted through passion flowers, his blood, and crimson roses.¹⁹

MAJOR REPRESENTATIONS

Lotus Thrones

The stages of enlightenment and the spiritual journey are metaphorically symbolised by the lotus phases, which are closed bud, half open and fully flowered. Many Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are shown seated on lotus thrones, symbolising their enlightened status.²⁰

Colour Symbolism

Red or maroon roses symbolise commitment, respect, passion, eternal love and beauty; white means a new beginning, peace and growth; and yellow means friendship, joy, youth and warmth. The lotus flower is often a symbol that embraces everything as it is but also represents purity (white), nostalgia and wisdom (blue), passion and pure love (red).²¹

The mythology of the Egyptians

The lotus symbolises the life cycle, which leaves its petals open during the day and shuts them at night. In Egyptian culture, the components of their religious life embody themes of life, death and divine connection. There is a connection between life and the sun deity Ra and rebirth.²²

Manipur has a long tradition of sharing important information with the available sources of the environment. The early *Meetei* society employs a variety of floral communication means, some of which are as follows:

Kwa Na Pao-Chatpa (Invitation through betel leaves along with areca nuts)

It has often been used for life events associated with gatherings or unions. Traditional ways of inviting guests using betel leaves and areca nuts are quint essential part of invitations (*Pao-chatpa*) for key cultural practices regarding important events like *Bor Barton Chatpa* (*Meetei* Traditional way of inviting the groom for wedding); one of the important part of marriage. In *Bor Barton Chatpa*, with a well decorated *Kwamana* and *Kwa* (betel leaves along with areca nuts) as a form of modern invitation card. A younger boy of the bride is sent to invite the groom.²³ *Ningol Chakkouba* festival, a large celebration observed by the *Meetei* people on the second lunar day of the *Hiyangei* month in the Manipuri calendar annually. The festival is where married women are invited to their parents' houses for a feast. The terms *Ningol* and *Chakkouba* translate to "woman" and "invitation for feast," respectively. The invitation, typically sent one week in advance, is sent out by the son(s) of the *Ningols'* paternal family. It develops a more emotionally strengthening bond between them.²⁴

LEINA PAO CHATPNA (flower base Information)

Individuals are formally requested to attend events or gatherings by utilising readily accessible local flowers such as roses, marigolds, and jasmine as a form of invitation. Generally, events related to birth and death like *Epan Thaba* (ritual relating to the birth of a child, held on the fifth day after delivery), *Asibagi Leihun Tamba* (paying homage to the departed soul held on the fifth or sixth day after death).²⁵

NACHOM (a small posy of Indigenous Flower)

Meetei women wore bunches of solitary flowers, known as *Nachom*, behind their ears. *Nachoms* were made up of Indigenous flowers such as *Takhellei*, *Sanarei*, *Nageshor*, *Atal Gulap*, *Khongul Melei*, *Petruk lei Leihao*, *Kusumlei*, *Chigonglei*, *Malika*, *Nageshor*, and *Melei*, among others.²⁶

The "*Nachom* Tradition" was intriguingly associated with and played an essential role in communicating the cultural lives of *Pakhang-Leishabi*, or young, single men and women, who represent their romantic behaviours. Wearing anything particular or different sends a message about accepting or rejecting bids. A woman indicates her acceptance of a man's proposal when she plucks a *Sanarei* (marigold) from her *Nachom*. When other flowers, *Kusumlei* (safflower) are dropped, the recipient is under intense parental supervision and should not be disturbed. *Atal Gulap* (rose) symbolises her total dedication to the men. *Takhellei* (*Hedychium coronarium* or white garland-lily or white ginger lily), the queen flower of *Nachom*, is said to convey her true origins and past to an approaching man before settling matters of romance. *Takhellei* means freshness, activeness, and completeness, among other things. When used by girls on the tip of a single hair, *Leihao* (*Magnolia Champaca*) symbolises independence and singleness, meaning that one should not pursue anything. When widows use *Leihao*, it signifies their unwavering belief and dedication to their deceased husband, as well as their full attention to his family and upbringing of their offspring, and their refusal to allow any male to interfere with their love life. *Nageshor* portrays the lady as unmarried, sustainable, and devoid of desire to engage in extramarital affairs, among other traits. *Petruklei* (*Gomphrena Globosa*) symbolises needs care from the approaching man. When applied on the tip of a single hair by ladies, *Leihao* is believed to symbolise independence and singleness, when widows (*Lukhrabi*) wear it, it signifies their completion. Thus, private emotional expression was communicated effectively in early *Meetei* society. In the indication of a *Meetei* woman's marital status, Unmarried women wear the *Nachom* on the left side of their ear, whereas married women wear it on the right.²⁷

One of three methods to wear *Nachoms* is to put them in hair tips, braid, or earrings. It gives those in the braid away but not the ones maintained in the ears. In mythology, *Nachoms* is said to have originated during the time of Goddess Nongthang Leima, who was an incarnation of Goddess Panthoibi. Fragrant flowers were used to embellish King Nongda Lairen Pakhangba's consort Laisna's coronation costume during his reign (33 A.D.). Originally derived from the dances of the *Lainingdou Mapan* (Nine Male Gods) and the *Lai Nurabi Taret* (Seven Goddesses), *Nachom* was an essential component of celebrations and rituals. Specific flowers were assigned symbolic meanings, often based on their nature or attributes, and were used as a communication medium in early *Meetei* society.²⁸

Kundo (*Jasminum multiflorum*) is used in *Meetei* wedding ceremonies; the *Kundo* flower symbolises innocence, love, and sacrifice. According to Vaishnavite Hinduism, it is revered and fortunate for Lord Vishnu. The non-scented white flower, like a jasmine, is used to create garlands for the bride and groom, which secure their unbreakable bond. Offering one another a *Kundo* represents the couple's unwavering love, selflessness, knowledge, progress, beauty, strength, and prosperity. The goddess Mahalakshmi is said to have initially adorned Lord Vishnu with the *Kundo* garland. The scentlessness of the *Kundo* indicates their readiness to give up their egos and pride for one another. Another symbolic means of joining the couple's souls is when the bride weaves the garland in the *Kundo Pareng* rite, facing the first two flowers together. As a result, at *Meetei* marriages, the *Kundo* is a revered representation of heavenly love, purity, and life preservation.²⁹

MEI HUM MOROK (a bold fire of chilli)

In ancient *Meetei* society, a citizen would carry a smoke chilli tied to the wooden torch and ask the *Meetei* King to intervene in an emergency, such as a wild attack or enemy incursion. *Mei hum Morok* is one of the most efficient means of Communication in *Meetei* society, and the royal court utilises it as emergency information. It signified the gravity of the threat, and the burning of chillies symbolised that the king's decree was as fierce and unyielding as their heat. The tale of Moirang Kangleirol, a girl attacked by a tiger who tells the king about it through *Mei hum Morok*, bears particular relation. The king was informed of that incident through *Mei hum Morok*. In the stories told in the books *Moirang Saion* by Sarangthem Biramani, *Khamba Thoibi Seireng* by Hijam Anganghal, and *Khamba Thoibi Pungsi Wari* by Heisnam Magoljao, an elderly farmer from Fubala (a village of Manipur) bring *Mei hum Morok* to the monarch.³⁰

Conclusion

Meetei society's language of plants and flowers was an elaborate, sophisticated, and environmentally conscious system, interwoven with rituals, status signalling, religious worship, and everyday life. Traditional means of communication, such as simplistic materials and modes abundantly provided by nature, are eco-friendly and easily disposable. It might be an alternative means for the present challenge, like improper waste disposal of plastic litter everywhere, choking our water bodies, and polluting and destroying our precious Natural Environment. It was embedded in cultural symbolism and ecological ethics. These traditional communication practices are relevant for contemporary cultural heritage and ecological awareness discussions. It defines traditional communication in Manipur and offers modern lessons for sustainability and cultural resilience. Their preservation is increasingly relevant amid environmental crises, globalisation, and loss of indigenous knowledge, and actively promoting distinctive traditional *Meetei* modes of information exchange is critical in the context of a rapidly globalising world shaped by significant advances in digital and industrial technologies.

The traditional Meetei communication reveals a profound intertwining of nature, culture and the role of natural symbols in maintaining cultural continuity and ecological harmony in indigenous societies.

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