



# Pena Performance: Assessing The Ritual Among Meitei Of Manipur

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**Citation:** Soibam Monica Chanu, et al. (2024), Pena Performance: Assessing The Ritual Among Meitei Of Manipur, *Educational Administration: Theory And Practice*, 30(4), 7637- 7643, Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i4.2620

## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

Pena is one of the most splendid musical folk instruments of Manipur. Pena, an instrument in the category Chordophones, a bowed-mono string instrument, Pena has its uses in manifold occasions. It is used in ritualistic offerings or festivals (such as Lai Haraoba), wedding ceremonies, giving royal service to the Meitei King and various other important occasions of the people of Manipur. It is a Manipuri folk instrument which has been in use since ancient days. Besides, *Pena Seishak* has its significance in death rituals as it is also intended to purify the hearts and minds of the family of the deceased and community as whole at such times of grief. This research paper highlights some uses of Pena on multiple occasions in Meitei culture and especially describes in death rituals, how *Pena Seishak* (Pena song or singing with Pena) forms a major part in performing the rituals as a form of offering or prayer to the almighty for a peaceful journey of the deceased to its heavenly abode. Methodology of the research is descriptive and observation through field visit, interviews with musicians performing in rituals and the folks those who attended the rituals. Analysis of ancient text, literature, books and other references are also used to formulate the research paper. Pena is a typical folk instrument that has ritual and religious significance among the Meitei of Manipur and being used as one of the essential music instruments in rituals for the cultural harmony, auspiciousness and mental well-being.

**Keywords:** Pena, Ritual, Meitei, music, culture, social demography

## Introduction:

Pena is a Manipuri folk instrument which has been in use since ancient days. The sound of Pena is charming to hear. The sweet sound of Pena produced when two strings made of ponytail struck against each other can create a feeling of blissfulness, charm and satisfaction in the heart of every listener. Thus, the name 'Pena' is said to be derived from the Manipuri word '*Penba*' meaning being blissful or satisfied. Some scholars pointed out that the instrument of Pena is also linked with the rituals of continuation of our descendants.

From time immemorial, rituals and offerings have always been a part of one's life from birth till death. Till today Pena has been playing an inseparable part in all these events of a Meitei since the olden days of our civilization. The music of Pena is performed by playing the Pena instrument and singing songs simultaneously by the same person. The one who sings the Pena music is known as *Pena Asheiba*. And that person who only plays the instrument without singing cannot be called *Pena Asheiba*. This instrument consists of two parts namely- 1. *Pena Cheijing* and 2. *Pena Maru*. The part which is held by the right hand is called *Pena Cheijing* while the other part which is held by the left hand is the *Pena Maru*.

Among the Manipuri's these are the following groups or clans who used to use the Pena instrument: 1. Meitei 2. Moirang 3. Chakpa 4. Kabui and 5. Tangkhul etc. Amongst the hill people of Manipur are the Tangkhul and Kabui. The Pena instrument used by the Kabui is called "*Laabung*" and that used by the Tangkhul is called "*Ting Teila*". For the Pena instrument used by the Kabui tribe, the *pena Cheijing* does not have *Sharik* (small bells) in it.

The *Kabui* people in the early days used to include Pena song during death and also during times of love and romance. However, they had never sung Pena song before paddy is ripe as this shall hinder the ripening of crops as per their belief. At the time of death of someone, a Pena musician will play the instrument sitting

beside the dead while waiting for the friends and relatives to arrive for the funeral. However, this was not a compulsory tradition.<sup>1</sup>

### Types of Pena:

Based on their size, Pena instruments can be classified into two types. The sound of the instrument differs according to the size.



Fig 1.1 Picture of Pena<sup>2</sup>

#### 1. *Khukhong Pena*.

In *Khukhong Pena* the *Maru* part is comparatively smaller.

#### 2. *Pena Achouba*

In *Pena Achouba* the *Maru* is comparatively larger. In both of these types the *Samei* or the *Cheijing* is of the same size.

### Components of a Pena:

Two objects constitute a Pena. They are 1. *Maru* and 2. *Cheijing*. *Maru* symbolizes mother *Leimaren* and it is said to take the shape of mother Earth. On the other hand *Cheijing* symbolizes the Father, who is the creator. *Maru* of a Pena is made up of 11 components. They are 1. Body of *Maru* 2. *Pungmai* 3. *Uyek* 4. *Utong* 5. *Chumbuli* 6. *Tengkhal* 7. *Khongding samei* (string of ponytail). 8. *Lengoi mari* 9. *Samai* 10. *Kwaklei mri* and 11. *Nura khwangchet*.

The *Cheijing* part of a pena is made up of 9 components. 1. *Cheijing masa* (main body of *Cheijing*) 2. *Cheijing Makhok* (handle) 3. *Cheijing Samei* (string of ponytail) 4. *Konthong* 5. *Mol* 6. *Sen Sarik* 7. *Khuroulang* 8. *Sameilang* 9. *Khubikhang*.<sup>3</sup>

To strike *Cheijing Samei* (*Cheijing* string) and *Khongding Samei* (*khonding* string) against each other requires *Uchan Marek* (pine oil). Without the pine oil, pena cannot make any sound, thus pine oil is also a necessary constituent for pena music.

### Costumes of Pena Performer/Singer:

1. *Kokyot*- Long white cloth makes a *Kokyot*, looks similar to a turban. The cloth wraps around the head in a specific pattern to form *Kokyot* and it is an important ornamental costume of pena singer.
2. *Resham Furit* (Shirt)
3. *Innapphi* (Thin Shawl)
4. *Khwangchet* (waist cloth)
5. *Khamen Chatpa Feijom* (a special Meitei Dhoti which has print of brinjal)

### Ornaments worn by Pena singer:

1. *Khuji* (bangles)
2. *Tan*
3. Garlands<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> (Achoubisana, 1997)

<sup>2</sup> Soibam, Monica, Field visit; Porompat, Imphal East

<sup>3</sup> (Achoubisana, 1997)

<sup>4</sup> (Devi, Pena The Meitei Traditional Folk Fiddle, 2007)

### Uses of Pena in Meitei Society:

In Meitei Culture there are various uses of Pena. Meiteis use Pena in events related to Gods and Goddesses, at the time of service to the King, on various occasions of one's life from birth till death and in various other events of the villages or public. Some of the events related to our Gods in which the uses of Pena were found are listed below :-

1. *Sanamahi Chenghongba* 2. *Pakhangba Chenghongba* 3. *Sanamahi Loukhtpa* 4. *Laigi Chaklon Katpa* 5. *Lai kumjanba* 6. *Lai haraoba* etc.

In olden days there was a tradition of listening to pena *Famshak* among the common people. *Pena Famshak* is a form of pena songs sung by a pena singer surrounded by a group of villagers in the street corners. People also used to gather in and around the premises of the homes of rich and big families in the village to listen to Pena. At times the *Pena Famshak* may be continued till late night. Thus, listening to Pena songs used to be a part and parcel of the life of Meiteis in every locality. Today the very tradition of *Pena Famshak* is no more. In various Folk dramas, there are episodes of pena music. Today various Competitions of Pena music are starting to be held. The relevance of Pena has been increasing that even TV programs start to include Pena.

Pena is relevant from birth till death in the life of a Meitei. Some important occasions in the life of a Meitei in which Pena is used are listed here. They are -1. *Epan Thaba*, a form of celebration accompanied with prayer and offering to the God usually held on the 4th or 5th day after birth of a child 2. *Nahut Nareng Thouram*, celebration of the first day of Perching of the ear of the child to wear the first ear ring 3. *Luhongba* (Wedding) 4. *Sibagi Ahanba Numit ki thouram* (the day of death of a person) 5. *Tangja Lufouba (Asthi)* 6. *Lanna Thouram* (Funeral) 7. *Kumon* (First Death Anniversary).<sup>5</sup> Thus, the relevance of Pena during prayers, various occasions of one's lifetime and as well as entertainment programs have been found increasing day by day.<sup>6</sup>

### Pena in death Ritual:

At the time of death of a person, the bereaved family offers prayer to the Almighty in the name of the dead for peace of the departed soul during death rituals. The family of the death hires performers of Pena music in order to make the rituals a complete one. Starting from the day of death, a series of rituals are being performed which can be divided into four episodes. They are

1. *Potloiba Numit* (day of cremation)
2. *Ashthi Loukhtpa numit/ Tangja Lufouba* (day of Asthi sanchay)
3. *Shradhha/Lana Thouram* (funeral)
4. *Kumon Firoi* (first death anniversary)

In olden days before the arrival of Vaishnav religion, there was a tradition of observing rituals of birth and death using Pena. This way of performing rituals using the Pena instrument had been replaced by Nat Sankirtan from around the time Vaishnav religion came to Manipur. Thus, the very way of performing rituals with Pena music had been almost forgotten for quite a long time. However, the use of pena on many occasions have started to revive as the generation of today is becoming to love the old following of the Meiteis. Some families of the Meiteis who follow the religion of Sanamahi laining these days observe rituals of death by hiring Pena Asheiba (pena singer) and Pena Pala (pena music orchestral). From the day of death to the first death anniversary Pena sings the series of rituals.

On the death of a person, Pena Asheiba play *Nongarol* (indicating journey of heavenly abode to start) while the dead is kept in his/her bed. And again plays '*Singumrol*' accompanied by a song '*Thongaron*' while carrying the body from the courtyard to the place of cremation.

On the day of cremation after the dead body has burnt completely, *Dasha hon* is observed in the courtyard by inviting Meitei pandit and Pena singers. The main audiences of this program are the elders of the locality and the family members. In this program there is also a part of listening to Holi messages about the creator and life to heal the pain and suffering of the members of the bereaved family at the loss of a loved one. *Dasha hon* is observed every day till the day before the *Shradha/Lana Thouram*. Some families observe *Dasha Hon* only on the first day and the day before *Shradha*. Rituals till *shraddha* is a big episode and afterwards there is offered *Thagi gi din* every month in which the family members, friends and relatives and locality members eat a grand feast together. In this program, music and songs are not involved. Instead, a pandit will tell the story of the greatness of our Creator and our life by offering fruits and flowers to the Almighty.

From early days Meitei believed that death is the departure of the undying soul from the body as the worldly task for that person had finished for his lifetime. It is believed that the soul is immortal and it enters a new body in its next life. Since those days it has been followed that when someone dies in a family, *Pena Pala* (a group of Pena performer) is hired for rituals of the death. The death is taken from inside the house to the courtyard while singing the Pena song. Keeping the dead in a small hut in the courtyard, family members and

<sup>5</sup> (Mongsaba, 2022)

<sup>6</sup> (Mongsaba, 2022)

Pena pala will sing and dance after offering things and flowers. The body is then carried to the site of cremation by singing 'Sigumlon' by the Pena Pala. Song sung for the dead by the *Pena Asheiba* is known as *Ashei toran*. When a person is dead, a small hut is prepared at the Sonapung, a small portion in the courtyard of a home which is believed to be a place of the Creator. There are certain rules of making this very hut. There should be exactly eight bamboo pillars and a supporting pillar in the middle. After cremation is done successfully, a mandap or open air hall is made to perform death ritual functions.<sup>7</sup>

#### ***Tangja lufouba/Asthi/Mangani Leihun:***

On the 6th day from the day of cremation a ritual known as *Tangja Lufouba* is observed on which a piece of bone collected from the forehead part of the dead during the burning is dried with the singing of Pena song. On this program Pena performers sing for the departed soul. Fragrant flowers and fruits are offered to the Almighty praying for the peace of the departed soul.<sup>8</sup>

As the *Pena Asheiba* enters Sonnapung (mandap) he bows down before the Mapu Sidaba (the Almighty Father of our Universe) who is believed to sit in the heart of the Sonnapung. Next he bows down before the Gods of four directions of east, west, south and north. Thus he gains permission from the Gods in all four directions and proceeds to start the program by singing his holiness of our Creator.

#### ***Pena Lana Thouram:***



**Fig: 1.2 Pena Lana Thouram<sup>9</sup>**

Birth and death are part of life. Human life goes through the unending cycle of birth and death. Those who left shall come back and those who came shall leave again. In old Manipuri words the above statement was put as "*Mioi mapokti nongkabana nongkumgani. Nongkumlabadi Nongkagani*"<sup>10</sup>.

The ritual of *Lana thouram* (funeral) as per the Meitei belief is performed so that the departed soul would go to the place of heavenly Father and attain peace. Pena singers on that day would start *Singkhai* (raga) and continue to sing before *Tengpanba Mapu Ebungo* (the Creator of our Universe) about the creation of human being, how human figure had been produced, birth of a child, childhood, cares given by parents, growing up of a child to adulthood, marriage and the stage of becoming parents, old age etc. *Lai Oiba Pena* is the evidence that humans have lived a very long time.

Human life goes through the cycle of birth and death. If a life is born, it must end as well. One cannot escape this cycle of birth and death. Thus, we learnt that human life is one that could end easily and it is believed that one's life is granted by the Almighty God. That is why we observe *Lana thouram*. Here is a short extract of a song sung during *Lana Thouram*. This particular song is sung at the time of the death of mother and it is composed upon the sweet memories and love towards her.

#### **In Manipuri Language**

*"Palem Ema Ebema, Nahakna Taibangi yek Salai ashida  
pokpidana chada nouda sandok taibang kumei yairammi.  
Palemgi taibang kumhei yaoramлага, Palem Ema nahakna hedo  
naha chan Touring Fakchana, Napari Namom eikhoine palem gi  
yaibi kanba ngamgadra haiduna, Leipak Maiba, Ningthou Maiba  
kouduna palem panthou anibu laikannarakpada, Palem Ema Ebemma,  
Khoiyum Laiga Taibang miga munnarakpada,  
Khoiyum Laina khajik henkhibana nungi laiwa kaya solle, pal gi laiwa kaya solle,  
Nungi Hidak kaya thare, pal gi hidak kaya thare  
adubu thoudu nungpakthakta laiija eshing chaibagum mannakhre,*

<sup>7</sup> (Singh G. R., 2022)

<sup>8</sup> (Mongsaba, 2022)

<sup>9</sup> Soibam, Monica- Field visit; Patsoi part 1, Imphal West

<sup>10</sup> (Singh G. R., 2022)



*Palem gi thawai kanba ngamkhidre. Palem emana khagi khagi laijana ehourak,  
Kangla yaibung tharamdi, Khambi maram taranithoi na chaklaklabada,  
Taibangpanda ashabana nungda challam, palem gi yaibirel thawai aduna,  
Samu hakchang kainaramdai, pari mamom yenglaga,  
Pari nungshiba emom nungshibi, Nakhoidi taibangpanda leihoukho,  
Emadi chttba yaraktre. Taibang mapugi seiroy sheithek loire,  
emadi taibang cheithek loidana chatpa tare,  
leihouro chatlage. Palemgi yaibirelna,  
Mitlu napom anida tarangi laija era chellaga,  
khounaogi leiyengnadi khatpa yakhida,  
Laikhurembi emana fakhibana,  
wa ngangba yadana mapari mamom chingna yenglaga  
Palemgi yaibirel hikna hikna kaplakle. Palem Ema ebemma,  
Parina chaoraga, Emannaba mirak tinlani haidana,  
pari ama namda po, Emom ama thada pamlaga, pari chaonba yoklakpa,  
nongju nungsha awa kaya khangduna pari chaorakkani,  
emom shanglakkani khangjambado Samu pangal chaorakpa matamda  
Palem gi laman singlamdaida, palem ema ebemma, khamnung sawa tan,  
Amang yaithong kumbana hankhre. Handak mapok langon ashida  
Napari namom eikhoina Ema Ema haiduna maikai mari ollaga  
Palem ema haina kouribashi, Mapok langon ashigi laman shingba oirage Palemwo.  
Palem ema ebemma, napari namom eikhoina emagi lanna thouram,  
Taramathoini suba korou nongja Ashida Sonnapungi Mayaida,  
Mapuna fambal langbada, eratphuna mangda tha,  
Heirang Pungoi thel, leirang pungoi thendana,  
Taojing heirang khradang katchabase  
Palem emana ningba thungde haidana tathi soinapiramgano,  
Palem Ema nakhong khada napari namom eikhoina hanna hanna khurumjari”<sup>11</sup>.*

### English Translation

Mother oh beloved! You were born in this clan of the world  
You gave birth to us and had played your role in this world  
As you had completed all your task on Earth  
And when your body had become weak and ill  
Hoping to save you mom, your sons and daughters had gone to call the King and the priests of the land  
When the Gods and your people were to fight after your soul  
Spells had been charmed to heal your body and soul  
Medicines had been provided  
Yet all our efforts had gone in vain  
As the Gods are the stronger sides  
Mom we failed to keep you with us  
When you were about to leave  
The water of the south are building up  
And the twelve fires are beginning to torch  
When your soul was leaving your body  
Your eyes kept upon us and said  
You continue your stay here in this world  
O My sweet sons and daughters  
Your mom must leave  
As I have sung and praised his holiness to the end  
Your mom is leaving as my days have been completed  
I am leaving o my dear children  
Her soul had turned into tears in her two eyes  
Her tongue had not fluttered as Goddess Laikhurembi caught it tight  
And she just kept looking at her sons and daughters without whispering word  
And your soul o mom had left sweetly  
O mom our beloved  
You dreamt you will be proud amongst friends  
When your sons and daughters grow strong and big  
You carried one son on your back  
And your daughter on your lap  
You brought us up till this day

<sup>11</sup> (Mongsaba, 2022)

You stood the summer heat and heavy rains  
 Thinking your children will grow up one day  
 And your children will bloom as flowers in your heart  
 And now after we all are grown up and strong  
 And when it is almost time to pay you back the love you have given us  
 Mother, your life has ended.  
 When we are saying your sweet name in four directions  
 May this only serve the means to pay you back your immortal love for this lifetime  
 O mother! Our dearest  
 On the eleventh day from today  
 On your funeral  
 In the heart of the Sonnapung  
 In the presence of the Almighty  
 With the pot of water in the front  
 Ornamented with fruits and flowers around it  
 We will present into your o mom  
 The little offering, we had prepared for you  
 Please accept this little offering o dear mom  
 Your children are praying unto your feet again and again.

### ***Kumon Phiroi:***

On various occasions of birth and death as well as offerings and prayers, Pena occupies a big place. According to time and situation, the role of Pena can be varied. When someone has passed away, the first death anniversary is known as "*Kumon*". The day of *Kumon* marks the completion of the sequel of the death ritual. Meitei's believe that a life after death will be born again which will be repeated for birth. Life encompasses three main stages- childhood, youth and old age. And as life comes to its last stage, death is said to happen. Along the journey from birth till death of a life, there are various tasks and duties that one must encounter. *Kumon* is one of the last duties.<sup>12</sup>

On the completion of one year after death the family offers flowers, incense sticks and light, grains, vegetables etc. to the *Tengpanba Mapu* (the Almighty Father). This offering is observed with the singing of songs by performers. This event is for the peaceful union of the soul in God's place and is known as *Kumon Firoi*. *Pena Asheiba* (Pena singer) sings the sweetness and beauty of human life on Earth. He also sings asking the Almighty to give the soul of the deceased another birth so that he /she can live again on Earth and see the beauty of life again.

On *Kumon Thouram*, *Pena Asheiba* expresses, "As the *Tengpanba Mapu* (Almighty Creator) is arrived to sit at the heart of the *Sonnapung*, we are offering these flowers and fruits along with grandeur meal so that thou shall give the deceased of the clan a better life in his/her next birth". He also sings that this *Kumon Phiroi* is the last offered for the son of the clan so that he may attain peace in God's place and get born in a new life.

The songs of *Kumon* teach us that we all are children of the Almighty and human life is the supreme form of life created by him. *Pena Asheiba* also sings that as birth and death are inevitable, may the soul of the deceased bloom as a flower in God's heaven. He also sings hymns to the Lord for his greatness. On that day, all the episodes of the program have been observed successfully in the right sequence, towards the end a light is offered in the name of the Lord thereby praying for a good next life to be granted to the departed soul.<sup>13</sup>

### **Author Contribution:**

The idea of research was initially commenced by the Dr. Kumar Sargam, Corresponding author of the research project with the help of research scholar and first author of the project, Ms. Soibam Monica Chanu. It was quite challenging to accelerate the task and find the accuracy of cultural harmony and the musicality of the music instrument *Pena* among the Meitei. during the field visit scholar tries to find the traditional performance of Pena and it's the role ritual and religious ceremony. Ms. Soibam Monica Chanu took responsibility and take charge to conduct the fieldwork and collected the data required for the research. Drafting of questionnaire, interview and selection of expert was done mutually by supervisor and scholar. Drafting of the research paper, literature review and compilation of the collected data was computed by first author whereas analysis, correction and final copy of the research paper is computed by corresponding author.

### **Acknowledgements**

It gives us immense pleasure to acknowledge the entire Meitei community of Manipur, especially in Imphal East and Imphal West, for allowing us to attend their sacred celebration during the death ceremony. It is obviously a hard time when a family member is dismissed but these people allow us to record their ritual performance during death procession, funerals, Shraddha, that happen during the thirteen days long death

<sup>12</sup> (Ningthouja, 2014)

<sup>13</sup> (Singh G. R., 2022)

rituals activities. The musician who played music, the priest who conducted the rituals and the family who lost their beloved are always thankful for their support during the field study. We are also grateful to the villagers of Patsoi Part 1 and Patsoi Part 2, Phayeng, Khamnamleirak, Samurou, Bashikhong, Heirangoithong etc , the club, and the police personnel, for their support during the fieldwork.

We are grateful to our consultants Shri Leimapokpam Lakpati Singh, Guru Gopiromohon, Dr. Makhonmani Mongshaba, Shamurailakpam Nimai Singh and all other Gurus who supporting us, giving their valuable time to discuss on research topic and providing research materials to complete this project. We are also deeply grateful to the library staff members of Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi and Central Library of Manipur University, Imphal for their cooperation during the research period. We acknowledge all the known unknown personalities who directly-indirectly help and guide to accomplish the research.

**Conflict of Interest:** We would like to declare and certify that we have no conflicts of interest to disclose regarding the research paper.

### Results and Conclusion:

Pena is one of the vital instruments for the Meitei society. The instrument plays a key role for the appreciation and acknowledgement of Manipuri culture. It matters the most inseparable tie with the Meitei community and has rituals significance in the Meitei society from birth till death. The instrument not only occupies its space in the rituals, but has gained appreciation and praise in the form of performing art stages across the country and abroad. Of course, it is a life line of Meitei's and their socio-cultural celebration and a emblem of transferring the legacy of music through melody. *Pena* is a fame to the Manipuri's culture among the tribal communities like Kabui, Tangkhul etc. and its significance can be measure by its widely acceptance in each and very cultural, traditional and ritual celebration. Pena is an instrument that can make a holistic representation of Manipur as a whole.

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