



Anti-Colonial Performance Traditions in Manipur: Perspectives from *Shumang Kumhei* Theatre

R.K. Yaibiren Sana

Tezpur University, Assam, India

• <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3165-1509>

Abstract

Post-colonialism has not brought to an end the perpetuation of colonial power structures and suppression. The ex-colonized countries still suffer from many forms of colonialism. In Manipur, a state located in the northeastern corner of India within the monsoonal tropics, complex political and cultural issues such as insurgencies, militarization and problems of Hinduization interweave through the post-colonial scenario. The rise of insurgencies after Manipur's merger to the Indian Union in 1949, have resulted in armed conflicts within the state and have brought situations of turmoil and suffering to the people. Prior to British colonization, Hinduization had already begun in the 15th century and the 'cultural insurgents' of Manipur to this day consider it a lasting imperialist force which tries to subjugate and suppress the Indigenous culture and religion of the people of Manipur. In these circumstances, theatre, which is the closest medium to the people, evolved as a decolonizing agent by proposing self-determination and peace building. Hence, by taking the account of Manipur and its Indigenous Meitei theatre form of *Shumang Kumhei*, this paper attempts to discuss the power and purpose of theatre in situations where political, religious and cultural suppression still operate and colonial structures still function, now in neocolonial forms.

Keywords: Shumang Leela/Shumang Kumhei, Manipur India, Meitei Indigenous theatre, anti-colonial performance, decolonization, Hinduization

Conspectus of the Manipur Story: An Introduction

S*humang Kumhei*,¹ an Indigenous theatre of the Meiteis,² developed amidst the socio-political turmoil which resulted from several political and religious invasions that took place in Manipur, with the ensuing subjugations of its Indigenous religion, culture and administration. Manipur, which is a small state in the northeastern corner of India, bordering Myanmar, was previously a sovereign kingdom at the India-Southeast Asia frontier:

with its two millennia old political organization, a stable cultural network supported by well developed literary language and several hundreds of scriptures, gold and silver currency which provides a living testimony to its economic organization inside and trade and commerce with the South east Asian countries outside. (Sanajaoba, 1988/2017, p. I)

Its tropical landscape is characterized by mountains and hills, which surround and guard the Imphal valley. The valley is predominantly inhabited by the Meiteis, and in the surrounding hills live not less than “twenty-nine ethnoses: The Naga, Kuki, Lusai, Chin and their sub-ethnoses” (Sanajaoba, 1988/2017, p. iv). The Meiteis who ruled the erstwhile kingdom of Manipur have their own Indigenous religion:

which has its own myths and legends, gods and goddesses, priests and priestesses, rituals and festivals etc. The religion centres around their belief in a supreme Being, *Taibung Mapu Sidaba*, who is a formless divinity having myriad manifestations, and also his two progenies- *Sanamahi* and *Pakhangba*. (Sanajaoba, 1988/2017, pp. 145-146)

However, Hinduism was integrated into the religious and cultural practises of the Meitei when Hindu missionaries started invading Manipur in the 15th century during the reign of King Kayamba, and again in the 18th century, during the reign of King Pamheiba (Singh, 2012, pp. 55, 62). These religious invasions were followed by the takeover of Manipur’s sovereignty after the British conquered Manipur in the war of 1891, and the colonials declared it a princely state with a constitutional monarch under

¹ *Shumang Kumhei* is also referred to as *Shumang leela*. However, the current socio-political forces among the Meiteis demand the replacement of the foreign word *Leela* with the Indigenous word *Kumhei*. To support this move and the arguments presented in the paper, I use *Kumhei* in my usages and retained the word *Leela* for direct quotations.

² The spelling of the Meitei ethnonym varies in various sources and different scholars have given different interpretation to the genesis of its derivation. Here, I am sticking to the most common usage i.e. Meitei. For a comprehensive account of the Meiteis see Hudson (2016).

the rule of the British India Empire. Soon after the British left in 1947, the state was merged to the Union of India in October 1949.

Within the circumstances of these invasions, *Shumang Kumhei* theatre contrived its aesthetics and values – mostly indigenous to the land and the people. It cultivated the ritualistic principles and the dance drama of the *Lai-Haraoba*, the primary and most important ritual observance of the Meiteis (Premchand, 2020, pp. 35,177). Its style is mainly from the *Phagee Lila*, a type of comic skit popularized during the reign of King Chandrakriti from 1851-1886 (Somorendra, 1993, p.154) – and this became a means of expressing the pent-up anguish and anger of the people against the British Rulers (Premchand, 2020, p. 180). *Shumang Kumhei's* vehement relation to humour and comedy ultimately become a part of its aesthetics: “it became emphatic that jokes and fun should be a particular feature of this theatre genre” (Arambam, 2002, p. 5). Further, the choosing of *shumang* or the open courtyards as a performing site indicates this theatre’s resistance against hierarchical spaces, like the Hindu *mandap*³ and the Western proscenium theatre. Therefore, both in its form and content, *Shumang Kumhei* highlights the free spirit of the people and their continuing struggle to live by their Indigenous cultural values.

In this paper, post-colonialism is read with decolonialism. As is well observed, “postcolonialism talks of a specific historical moment but not about an end to the system of power” (Geigner & Young, 2021, p. 2); similarly, decolonialism speaks of the need for a continuing agenda to de-colonize from hegemonic power structures. An attempt is therefore made to take a line of flight from the binary propositions of East/West, oriental/occidental, centre/periphery, insider/outsider, and so on, to indicate that imperialism and colonial tendencies are not merely forces from the temperate West. In the tropical context, as Sun Ge states: “the discussion of Asia involved not only the question of Eurocentrism, but also the question of hegemony within the East” (2007, p. 9). In East African countries, as Joshua Williams informs us: “*Uhuru* (Swahili language for freedom) did not mark a definitive end to colonialism and imperialism in East Africa” (2021, p.16). Therefore, analysing world events solely through a binary lens, such as the dichotomy of East/West compels us to miss the opportunity of noticing (and expressing) diverse hegemonic experiences – which arise from situated contexts – within a continent, a country, or a region itself.

In the context of Manipur, cultural conflicts resulting from the invasion(s) by dominant Hindu ideology and political instability caused by insurgency and militarization after its merger into the Indian Union in 1949, interweave with the post-colonial scenario to create forms of neocolonialism. In this ongoing conflictive state of affairs, theatre has

³ A kind of religious space mostly attached to Brahmin houses. *Mandaps* were constructed in every localities of the Meitei community after the advent of Hinduism.

evolved as a powerful decolonizing weapon for the people. Therefore, this paper, in a decolonialist vein, will reflect on *Shumang Kumhei* as a medium of expressing and restoring Indigenous identity, humanitarian values, and self-determination. I argue that theatre's potentiality as a site for decolonization is particularly powerful because of its intimacy with the common people, which is also evident in the words of Augusto Boal:

The theatre in particular is determined by society much more stringently than the other arts, because of its immediate contact with the public, and its greater power to convince. That determination extends to the exterior presentation of the spectacle as well as the content itself of the ideas of the written text. (Boal, 1979, pp. 53-54)

Shumang Kumhei has closely lived with the people, heard them, and has become their medium of decolonizing thoughts and expression. The adversities the people of Manipur face in the midst of police brutality, armed conflicts, and corruption, and their resentment against cultural repression, have found expression in *Shumang Kumhei*. This theatre emanates stories from the ground, from the people themselves. It is where the creative ideas of the people manifest and become real. In this sense, *Shumang Kumhei* is also an immanent⁴ project. As Alain Badiou notes, "theatre unavoidably takes the form of an event: it takes place, it happens..." (2013/2015, pp.62). In other words, transcendental ideas become immanent in the theatre space, and so he further adds: "It is only in the taking-place that one can really grasp the relation between immanence and transcendence from the point of view of idea. In this sense, theatre is the site of the idea's living appearance" (Badiou, 2013/2015, p. 63).

Manipur and the Colonial Question

There exists an inter-Asian hegemony according to Nongthombam Premchand (2021). In Asia, there exist multiplicities of cultures which face distinct challenges that are unique in themselves. Therefore, "assuming Asia as one single cultural entity and putting it wholly against the West amounts to hiding all the cultural and political contradictions this continent is having within under the carpet" (2021, p.10). What Premchand attempts, is to dilate the understanding of post-colonial, to insist that in the context of Manipur, there are many heterogeneous colonial undercurrents still at play and that 'post' is yet to be achieved. Premchand defers to the theatres of Manipur, to argue that "the idea of post-colonial theatre does not confine to the narrow scope of theatres practised in countries which are free from colonial occupations but it covers areas where there are colonial systems still enforced within countries..." (2021, p. 134). These 'colonial systems' he suggests, may also take the form of thoughts,

⁴ On theatre and immanence see also Lura Cull (2013) *Theatre of Immanence: Deleuze and the Ethics of Performance*

behaviour, knowledge – and therefore the theatres of Manipur have “employed traditional narrative styles and motifs from their cultural context to dismantle the colonial structures of thoughts, feelings and expression” (Premchand, 2021, p. 134). From around the 1970s, the Hindu mythological stories and plays from the West were being replaced by plays based on the history of Manipur and folk stories of *Khamba Thoibi*, *Mainu Pemcha*, *Thambalnu* etc. (Premchand, 2021, p. 168). Theatres of Manipur, have adopted a decolonizing stance to address “the question of missing cultural and political identity of the people and their long forgotten history” (Premchand, 2021, p. 168). In their *Theatre After Empire*, Megan Geigner and Harvey Young (2021) suggest the title’s notion of ‘After’ to imply a follow-on, it indicates that “power does not upend in the blink of an eye...and that colonialism can continue within allegedly postcolonial settings” (2021, p. 2). The book, which brings together a collection of essays on post-colonial theatres of the tropical region (including South Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa, Latin America) and beyond, demonstrates different experiences of colonialism and how they find expression in theatre art. One of the interesting studies is on the theatre of East African countries, in which Joshua Williams (2021) elaborates upon the unceasing colonialism in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania, even after the British left the countries between 1961 and 1963. Williams argues that the post-colonial regime was followed by the colonialism of ‘Morbidity’ in association with the interregnum and power battles among leaders. These obscurities became the themes of theatre plays. And in turn, the plays allowed the audience to imagine the concomitants of colonialism, its different effects, and bitter aftermaths, and “to insist on postcolonialism as a lasting political imperative” (Williams, 2021, p. 26).

In Manipur, it could likewise be argued that a colonialism continues to exist. However, this takes a different form, arising from the complexities of its colonization, Hinduization, and neocolonial experiences, and is expressed through theatre formed by the specifics of its Meitei Indigenous culture. In his analysis of Heisnam Kanheilal’s⁵ play, *Pebet*, Bharucha (1991) criticizes the Indian government’s centralized way of integration, which aims to subsume differences and in the name of development and national integrity endorses colonial norms. Bharucha says of the Indian context, “...we could acknowledge that the Orient has not been thrust on us entirely from the outside. Rather, a certain complicity among the dominant forces in our society has made its consolidation possible” (1991, p. 747). *Pebet* is the story of a mother pebet⁶, who guards her brood from the intended attack of the *Houdong lamboiba* (Saint Cat). Bharucha proposes that “Kanheilal’s Cat is but a Vaishnavite⁷ Cat” (1991, p. 749) who brainwashes Pebet’s chicks to return back and attack their own mother. He further elucidates that “the real fear of Mother Pebet is not that her children will be eaten by

⁵ Heisnam Kanheilal is a popular theatre person of Manipur. His plays have been performed worldwide. He died on 16 October, 2016

⁶ A very small bird (smaller than a sparrow) previously common in Manipur, now probably extinct.

⁷ Vaishnavism is a branch of Hinduism. Vishnu is considered the supreme deity.

the Cat, but rather that they would be converted to ‘Cat culture’” (1991, p. 749). Rather than framing the play *Pebet* as anti-India or anti-Hindu, Bharucha construes that the playwright Kanheilal is questioning “the cultural formations through which concepts of patriotism and loyalty are imposed” (1991, p. 749). Therefore, what Bharucha points out, is the question of the imperialist tendencies to impose the outlandish, ‘One Nation One culture’ thesis in the face of the multiplicities of culture, faith and identity that exist within the country. Here it is necessary to outline and highlight aspects of this history which lives in the present.

Even after the British occupied Manipur after the arduous battles of the Anglo-Manipur war of 1891, the state was not annexed to the Crown. According to the account of Naorem Sanajaoba (1988/2017):

... Her Majesty the Queen, Empress of India, has been pleased to forgo Her right to annex to Her Indian Dominions the territories of the Manipur State; and has graciously assented to the re-establishment of native rule. (Sanajaoba, pp. XVII-XVIII)

Manipur was declared one of the princely states of the British Indian Empire, which offered nominal sovereignty under indirect rule. After the British left, Manipur was governed by a constitutional monarchy under the Manipur Constitution Act, 1947.⁸ However, the ‘sovereignty’ status of Manipur finally came to an end after its merger to the Union of Indian in 1949. The repercussions of this annexation were a rise in insurgency movements, and counter insurgency activities by the Indian military forces, which resulted to extensive militarization. Manipur became a hub of armed insurgency groups, the ultimatum of which was, and is, sovereignty and self-determination. “With over two million inhabitants, belonging to 39 ethnic groups, insurgency and counter insurgency alike continue to traumatize Manipur” (Sezen, 2020). The cause of conflicts and militarization which continues within the whole northeastern part of India is, according to Pradip Phanjoubam, “the unresolved question of nationality among many ethnic populations in the region, which have continually spawned violent separatist insurgencies since the dawn of Indian independence in 1947” (2016, p. 31). India’s response to these insurgent movements is the Armed Forces Specials Power Act of 1958 (commonly referred to as AFSPA), “which gives soldiers, even the rank of a non-commissioned officer, the power to use force to the extent of causing death on mere suspicion” (2016, p. 55). It also gives power to the army to arrest without a warrant and to enter and search any premise to make such arrest (Baruah, 1999, p. 168). However, according to Phanjoubam, even more dangerous is the sweeping legal immunity to soldiers accused of excesses during operations under the Act (2016, p.

⁸ Full document can be retrieved from <https://www.uprinfo.org/sites/default/files/documents/201309/cohrinduprs12008anxannexivmanipurstatecnstituti nact1947.pdf>

55). Under the AFSPA Act, “no prosecution, suit or any other legal proceedings shall be instituted, except with the previous sanction of the (Indian) central government” (Baruah, 1999, p. 168).

In Manipur, several counter insurgency operations under AFSPA have killed numerous people, the numerical estimate of which is difficult to provide since many were forcefully disappeared.⁹ The details of these counter insurgency operations is also difficult to ascertain as “...security forces conducted fake encounters, killed civilians and dressed them up as insurgents and planted hand guns” (Sezen, 2020). A landmark case serves as an example. In 2000, a random act of retaliation, reportedly following a bomb blast at a different site,¹⁰ involved the 8th Assam Rifle paramilitary security force opening up fire at a bus stand in Manipur, killing ten civilians. This incident instigated the Manipuri human rights activist Irom Chanu Sharmila¹¹ to go on an indefinite hunger strike demanding revocation of AFSPA. Her attempt failed even though her strike lasted 16 years during which time she was imprisoned and force fed via a nasal tube. In another case of brutality by the Armed Forces, Thangjam Manorama, a 32-year-old woman, was picked up by the 17th Assam Rifle unit on the night of July 11, 2004 from her home. She was raped and killed. Her bullet ridden body, badly mutated, was recovered from nearby her home the next morning. Following this incident, the government of Manipur constituted an inquiry commission headed by a retired judge. The Assam Rifles refused to send anyone before the inquiry commission for any statements or testimony on grounds that the Manipur government had not taken prior permission from the central government as per section 6 of the Armed Forces Specials Power Act (AFSPA) (Dasarathi, 2017). The ‘Manorama case’ created a landmark in the history of Manipur, instigating unforgettable protests against the inhuman treatment of the people of Manipur by the Indian Army. On the 15th of July 2004, twelve *Imas* (mothers) of Manipur stood naked in front of the Kangla Fort (a historically significant former palace of the Manipur kingdom where a unit of Assam Rifles were stationed) and shouted “Indian Army rape us...we are all Manorama’s mother! Indian Army take our flesh” holding banners that read, “Indian Army rape us! Indian Army take our flesh!” The images of this protest have become a symbol of resistance against Army brutality in Manipur under the Armed Forces Specials Power Act.¹² There are many underlying problems, ongoing debates, and numerous causes and effects of the separatist movements and militarization of Manipur, all of which are interconnected with various forms of hegemony.

⁹ More instances about forced disappearance in Manipur can be found in *INDIA Manipur: The silencing of youth* and can be retrieved from: [amnesty.org/fr/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/asa200051998en.pdf](https://www.amnesty.org/fr/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/asa200051998en.pdf)

¹⁰ Twenty-one years later this report was ruled by the courts as a ‘fake encounter’.

¹¹ Irom Chanu Sharmila is a human rights activist from Manipur. More about her can be read in Deepti Priya Merotra (2022), *Burning Bright: Irom Sharmila and the struggle for peace in Manipur*.

¹² More about the Manorama incident can be found at, <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/indian-army-rape-us/296634>

Another important domain that reflects the question of hegemony and colonialism in Manipur, is the discourse and ongoing movement of cultural and religious revivalism. Importantly, this cannot be understood in isolation from the movements of the insurgent groups, which have constantly intervened when questions of Indigenous culture, language and religion have arisen. In one major instance, in 2000, insurgent groups including the PLA (People's Liberation Army) and RPF (Revolutionary People's Front) imposed an ongoing ban on the screening of any Hindi movies in the state. The *BBC South Asia* reported the purpose of the ban:

The spokesman for the Revolutionary Peoples Front (RPF) group branded Hindi films as obscene and said they portrayed feudal values typical of India's Hindi heartland. He said the screening of these films undermined Manipuri cultural values. The rebel spokesman threatened to bomb any cinema hall screening Hindi movies.... (Bhowmik, 2000)

According to N. Joykumar Singh, separatism and the rise of insurgent groups are themselves effects of Hinduization:

the socio-religious changes which had taken place in Manipur from the time of the advent of Hindu religion and the Sanskritization process which was enforced in the social life of the people was another important contributing factor for the growth of separatist tendencies.... (2005, p. 45)

While the first wave of Hindu missionaries intruded into Manipur in the 15th century, more aggressive was the Hindu invasion in the 18th century during the reign of King Pamheiba, who changed his name to Garibnawaz after accepting Hinduism. Bengali Hindu priests under the leadership of Santidas Godsai and Gopal Das influenced Pamheiba to make Vaishnavism the state religion (Singh, 2012, p. 63). The viciousness of this invasion was the attempt to "demolish completely the distinctive identity of the people of Manipur" (Singh, 2012, p. 65). According to Singh (2012):

Temples and images of Meitei worship such as the *Umanglais* were completely destroyed, they brought in the Hindu caste system, thereby the norm of the untouchable, changed the name of the Meitei clans into Hindu *gotras*;¹³ changed names of Meitei festivals to Hindu names; introduced Hindu religious dances like the *Ras Leela* and thus people were forced to ignore the value of traditional religious principles and practices. (pp. 64-76)

Such events of cultural dilution have continued to cause discontent among the people of Manipur. The reminiscence of *Puya Mei Thaba*, the burning of the Meitei sacred

¹³ Gotras are Hindu system of division based on caste and lineage

book *Puya*, for instance, is still a point of indignation for the Meiteis. It became a theme of the Meitei revivalism movement, inspiring many theatrical performances in Manipur. *Shumang Kumhei* performances such as the *Puran Mei Thaba* (the burning of the Holy book) and *Kanglepak 1709*, became not only popular, but emblematic of cultural revivalism and resistance. These plays are performed and re-enacted in several public events such as the observance of *Puya Mei Thaba* day.¹⁴ The ire of the common people is evident in the popular anecdotes from witnesses of these performances who tell stories of how Angouton, the actor who played the Hindu leader Shantidas Godsai, was attacked by the crowd on several occasions.¹⁵

As Rustom Bharucha (1991) importantly observes, “what tends to be ignored about such assimilations is the process of colonization involved in them” (p. 784). The narratives of homogeneity and forced absence of traditional culture which is forged by the Brahminical scholars of Manipur “want us to view the culture of the State [Manipur] as yet another flowering of Hinduism” (p. 784). The colonization of Manipur therefore involves the displacement of Indigenous religion, beliefs and culture and their replacement with Hinduism. As Bharucha further states: “Meitei culture had been systematically subsumed within the values of an increasingly powerful Hindu hegemony” (p. 784). Against such colonialism, there arose an “intellectually charged cultural insurgency” (Premchand, 2021, p. 54). Such insurgents, in the proscenium theatres of Manipur, articulated themes of cultural hegemony and identity by giving the everyday instances and ordinary stories a symbolic turn using Indigenously developed tactics of performance to disseminate emotions, feelings and ideas. For instance, Shri Biren’s play *Hallakpa* (The Return) is a search for one’s lost identity. Based on the story line of a man’s inability to return to his ancestral home, which has already been invaded by someone else, the play epitomizes the dilemma of a man who discovers his own absence, and, in Premchand’s words, “failed to identify himself to the world” (2021, p. 59).

The Manipur account is, therefore, an experience of despondency, infuriation, and resistance of the common people, amidst ongoing socio-political turmoil. However, it is also in these circumstances, that the creativity of art is exposed, where the forces of the myths and magic are exerted, and all the available aesthetic resources come into power for a common end. Thus, it is only with this background that it is possible to start to understand *Shumang Kumhei* theatre and plays.

***Shumang Kumhei*: Resistance and Prospects**

Shumang Kumhei has been translated literally as courtyard play by many commentators, including Arambam Somorendra, a revolutionary literary and theatre

¹⁴ See <http://e-pao.net/GP.asp?src=16..261114.nov14>

¹⁵The researcher came across this during his interviews and group discussions done in between 2022-2023.

'martyr' of Manipur. However, it appears that the *shumang* is not just any courtyard, rather, it is a democratic space within the architectural style of the Meitei society. It is also a ritualistic space. The Meitei saying, '*Houbasu shumang dani loibasus shumang dani*' indicates that the beginning of a human being and their end will be in the *shumang*. From birth to death, in every ritual performance of the Meiteis, *shumang* is a significant space. A typical Meitei village has no boundaries between the houses and each of the houses has a *shumang*. As such, if the houses were constructed in a parallel line, a stretch of open space is created. In his account of the Meiteis, TC Hudson writes, "an ordinary Manipuri village is a long straggling series of houses...it possesses length without breath. The villages are not surrounded by any rampart or fortification...there are no arbitrary boundaries, though custom recognizes them for the purpose of administration" (1908/2016, p. 26-27). This democratic, egalitarian space, became a performance site for *Shumang Kumhei* when untouchability, alienation and ostracism became a restrictive factor for performing in the Hindu *mandaps* and the King's Court. While *mandaps* were reserved sites for Hindu religious performances like the *Ras Lila*, *Gour Lila*, *Gostha Lila* etc., playing characters of Muslims or hill tribes people were barred from the *mandaps* in the name of maintaining the sanctity of these courtyard temple spaces (Nongthombam Premchand, personal communication, January, 16, 2022). As a consequence of this segregational practice imposed by Hindu conservatism, the *shumang* courtyard was activated as a space of resistance in which *Shumang Kumhei* performances could take place. As Premchand (2020) elaborates:

when sacred spaces like the *mandaps* attached to every Hindu temple were dominated by the Hindu theatre forms, *Shumang Lila* used secular spaces like the courtyard (*shumang*) of any house hold and any space which is performance friendly as its domain. (p. 186)

The *shumang* thus becomes a point of initiation of *Shumang Kumhei* theatre's revolutionary aesthetics, which orients the body of the performer in this space. With respect to space and performance, Gay McAuley (2002) notes that space "is not an empty container but an active agent which shapes what goes within it and which affects the community and itself" (p. 41). In *Shumang Kumhei*, the *shumang* as a performing space, emancipates the performer's body to exercise its liberty in expressing and communicating the desired ideas. By using the space, which has already been intimate with the common people, this theatre has oriented itself to be the people's voice. "*Shumang Leela* lives by the patronage of the common people" says Arambam Somorendro (1997, p. 155), and in the same line of thought, Birjit Ngangomba states that "the real power of *Shumang Leela* lies in its closeness with the people" (1997, p. 157). The closeness of the *Shumang Kumhei* theatrical form to the people is upheld by the performing space, the *shumang*, where there are only limited restrictions on audience-performer interactions. The people go to *Shumang*

Kumhei without care about their dress or how they look: “a mother in between the audience may breast feed her child as she watches the performance. It is a kind of customary socializing” (Ngangomba, 1997, p. 157). During my own visits to performances, I observed¹⁶ that the audience sit anywhere, undefined. Women and girls carry their own mats and items to sit on. Boys and men mostly stand, anywhere from where the performance is visible. There is no strictly definite line which separates performers and audience. This is suggestive of how the performance space is unrestrictive, thus allowing liberty for the audience and the performer to interact. Unlike Western proscenium theatres, which are hierarchical in nature in their relation to the audience, *Shumang Kumhei* is very liberal and anti-hierarchical: a theatre which goes to the people instead of people coming to it (Premchand, 2021). Today, the term *shumang*, connotes any open egalitarian space where a performance of *Shumang Kumhei* can take place.

A typical *Shumang Kumhei* performance requires no stage. With just a few props consisting of a table and two chairs, the performing troupes of around ten to fifteen actors, travel from place to place and perform plays charged with wit, sarcasm, and humour – through which they deprecate the existing social evils. This engagement of *Shumang Kumhei* with humour has a long history. In fact, its comic qualities are said to have derived from early *Phagee Lila* (comic performances). During the British colonial regime, the *Phagee Lila* became a means of expressing unhappiness of the people against king Churachand and his courtiers, who became mere puppets in the hands of the British (Premchand, 2021, p. 180). In contemporary *Shumang Kumhei* performances, humour and comic instincts play dynamic roles in entertaining, ridiculing, resisting and producing new realities. Initially Hindu imperialism and its hierarchical structures became the object of comedy in many *Shumang Kumhei* plays; contemporary *Shumang Kumhei* performances make extensive use of the same comedic strategies to resist broader inhumane practices, totalitarianism and the workings of a despotic political system:

Since its origin in the early years of King Chandrakriti through the reign of King Churachand and post-World War II till today, Manipur *Shumang leela* has been dealing with social criticism, ranging from the religious and mythological themes of the early period till the more secular themes of the modern day. The changing times made the *Shumag Leela* more critical of the social realities, protesting slyly and subtly with their rollicking fun and humour. *Shumang leela* became, as it were, a powerful weapon through which people can register their protest. (Singh, 2002, p. 15)

According to Singh (2002), humour in *Shumang Kumhei* is an expression against oppression and exploitation. One striking satirical play against the oppression of

¹⁶ Field visits to theatre performances in Manipur were undertaken in 2022-23.

Hinduism, is *Mahaprabhu fita onba* (The Measuring of *Mahaprabhu*).¹⁷ In the play, a wooden sculpture of *Mahaprabhu*, the Hindu saint, is halted during a procession by a forest officer on the grounds that the wood from which the *Mahaprabhu* is carved belonged to the state and therefore has to be taxed. The officer then starts measuring the God with his tape. This leads to a brawl for blaspheming the God, arguing that the sanctities of *Mahaprabhu* have been lost. The play is a critical commentary on the preposterousness of *mangba-sengba*,¹⁸ (clean/unclean, pure/impure) which Hinduism in Manipur is so bound by that even the God can be made impure. The *manga-sengba* segregates people on the basis of religion and caste, a system very alien to the people of Manipur. As Singh notes, it was and still is a “deliberate attempt to create dichotomy among different people in the society” (2012, p. 74). The *Manaprabhu fita onba* stimulated several other plays critical of Hindu colonialism in Manipur and which evoked Meitei revivalism (Sashikumar, 2009, p. 73). Around 1993, the *Shumang Kumhei* performance *Keishamthong Thoibi*, written by Chana Lukhoi was a response to the many social problems and upheavals to do with social status which arose in Manipur due to Hindu imperialism. The play, filled with humour and sarcasm, is about a taunting Brahmin, played by Chinglen Thiyam, a popular humourist of *Shumang Kumhei*, who ostracizes his elder son because of being married to a tribal woman, Thoibi, who is very hard working, charming and dutiful. He then goes on to live with his younger son, married to a rich errant Brahmin woman named Gaitri, only to latter accept Thoibi as his ‘true’ daughter-in-law by debunking the *mangba-sengba*. The play illustrates the distortion of integrity and the multifaceted issues in Manipur’s social system caused by the supremacy of Hinduism, which in the play is denoted by the Brahmin character. In a deliberate attempt to demonstrate harmonious relations between the Meitei and other ethnic tribes, Thoibi’s home is set at *Keishamthong*, a tribal village within the heart of Imphal city, the capital of Manipur and the heartland of the Meitei. The play indicates how this unity is put at risk by the nature of the Hindu colonial system in Manipur with its divisionary beliefs such as *mangba-sengba*. Many plays with such motifs became a reoccurring feature of *Shumang Kumhei* performances.

During the late 1990s and from the beginning of the 2000s, when people were grappling with the consequences of armed conflicts in Manipur, *Shumang Kumhei* performances experienced a shift in themes. Plays dealing with the immediate issues of conflict, such as *Lidice gi Gulap* (The Rose of Lidice), *Rastafen*, *Gusmao gi khudol East Timor* (Gift of Gusmao, East Timor), *Uganda gi maraibak* (The fate of Uganda), and *World Trade Centre*, were produced and performed throughout Manipur and beyond. These plays have taken up the global occurrences of fascism, suppression,

¹⁷ Among the Meitei Hindus *Mahaprabhu* is a diminutive name of *Chaitanya Mahaprabhu*, a Hindu saint from 15th century.

¹⁸ In Meitei language *Mangba Sengba* symbolizes more than the literal meaning, clean-unclean. It denotes division and constraints on the basis of pure-impure.

and war, and reinterpreted them within the Manipur context. Scripted by Ranjit Ningthouja, the play *Lidicee gi Gulap* received international acclaim because of the value of its universal message against fascism and war. The story, however, is purposefully crafted to meet the context of Manipur. Based on the history of Nazi Germany's massacre of Czech men in the village of Lidice and the deportation of women and children to concentration camps and later to extermination camps, the story is a depiction of, and a resistance to, the various micro-fascisms that are in operation in Manipur and elsewhere. The play animates thinly veiled critiques of armed conflict in Manipur which is the result of a complicated layering of competing nationalist agendas (Mee, 2005, p. 480). The mesmerizing aspect of the play, however, lies in the use of humour to challenge the brutal realities of fascism. The character of Hitler, played by Tomba, is comically machinated to satirize the fascist tendencies and iron hand rule. "His physicality pays obvious homage to Chaplin and Tomba plays the great dictator as a laughable, childish, stupid figure" (Mee, 2005, p. 481). One of his soldiers is Benalov, played by humourist Sougrakpam Hemanta, who argues and defies his senior officer's orders with his invective and derisive action and speech. In one of the scenes, Benalov, tired by his war duty, is driven to restless schizophrenic behaviour:

Officer: Why are you not alert being a soldier? Do you know the cost of a bullet?

Benalov: I do not know Sir, since I have never bought them.

Officer: Why are you so distracted from your job, soldier?

Benalov: Which worn out body can! As if it is made of an iron. Who can! There is war every single day, everyday bullets are fired. Two-thirds of my life has been lost in war. I want to meet my wife, Sir.

In one of the concluding scenes, plotted in the war field, Benalov meets a soldier from the Red Army, each of them urges the other to drop his weapons:

Red army soldier: Should not it be wise to drop our weapons my dear friend and live in peace.

Benalov: (exhausted) By any chance, do you possess a *Bidi*?¹⁹

Red army soldier: I have a cigarette. And a *meikhet* (a lighter/matchbox)?

Benalov: (showing his *meikhet*) Made in Germany!

Red army soldier: Cigarette! Made in Russia!

¹⁹ A cheap cigarette popular in South Asia. It is symbolically used here by the performer to induce laughter among the audience.

(Both laugh uproariously, the red army soldier lights Benalov's cigarette)

Benalov: *Marup* (dearest friend)! Let us abandon the weapons. Or else nothing can be conversed.

(Both of them share and savour the cigarette with joy, then they take out a bottle of water and drink it with pleasure)

Red army soldier: Neither the thirst, nor the hunger be erased with the weapons.

Benalov: That, which has killed friends, is this gun.

Red army soldier: ...that which has killed and made to suffer women and children. This gun!

Both shout together: Into the river, here go the guns!

Only by the use of humour and comedy could the command of Hitler be defied and argued upon. The humourists, through their performances, present alternative realities by exerting a transformative function on the existing reality. They initiate a reform by means of using satirical and witty dialogues and present a counter narrative which questions the status quo. For the suppressed, humour is the liberator.

In the performance traditions of *Sumang Kumhei*, humour and comedy are often employed to imagine new possibilities; to overturn suppressions for harmonious survival, "to criticize and to reflect the free spirit of the people" (Arambam, 2002, p.6). In this play Hitler was presented to look hilarious; in another play, *Uganda gi Maraibak* (The fate of Uganda), Idi Amin is presented as a racialized and laughable figure by his peculiar makeup and eyes always wide open. Appropriating the British colonial racist stereotypes about Africans, these are reapplied to Idi Amin, the neocolonial dictator, who seized control of the equatorial country in a military coup of 1971. Within the performance, dialogues refer to him as a cannibal and a *mee-sha* (neither man nor animal) to signify and reflect the inhumane nature of his bloodthirsty ruling of Uganda. In one of the scenes, Idi Amin's personal valet, Mandellia, is served a fried human hand:

Mandellia: Idi Ami is so powerful, he has many wives and kills at his will, the power surely must have come from eating these human hands. If I am to rebel against Amin, I shall have to devour this fried hand.

As Badiou contends, "real comedy does not entertain us, it places us in the disquieting joy of having to laugh at the obscenity of the real" (2013/2015, pp. 11, 12). It has the power to turn things upside down and to speak right in the face of the powerful and

their vulgarities. *Shumang Kumhei* as a powerful weapon, serves as the people's medium to negotiate with the various power structures and forces in operation. "It (comedy and humour) came up as an important part of the Manipur's culture of resistance carrying the voice of their plight for cultural and political identity" (Premchand, 2020, p. 186).

Likewise, the rituals of *Shumang Kumhei* also substantiate the above assertion that this style of theatre serves as a people's voice of resistance and their fight to retain cultural identity. Prior to the beginning of every performance, a dedication song '*Lepshak eshei*' is sung praising their motherland Manipur and the ones who have sacrificed their lives for her. The lyrics acknowledge the decades of oppression the land and its people have been subjected to. In the song are sung the words:

Chingmi tammi pumnamak ima gi khongul lirusi lao

Mikha ponbi oiraduna kumja kaya lellaurabi

Ima gi khongul lirusi lao...

(People of the hills and the valley, together let us narrate the story of our Mother, who for so many years has tolerated the pain of repressions and exploitations, let us all narrate her tale...)

Following the *Lepshak eshei* dedication song, one of the performers venerates the audience by delivering a speech in which they seek apology for anything during the performance that may be said, that should not have been said; and for anything that should have been said, but was not said.

After the performance ends the performers come together and sing the *Seiroi Ishei*, the benediction:

Sannaba Kumhei Loire,

Miyamgi thougal fangjaba

Awa ana yaodaba

Nungai yaifaba mapok oirasi

(Here we have come to the end the performance,

our service to the dearest people,
may the sorrow, pain and illness be gone and
joy and prosperity be with us...)

Conclusion: Plague of Shumang Kumhei

It can be said that theatre is where ideas incarnate and become real. Theatre is at once immanent and transcendent. It presents the possibilities of an alternative world by using the body as its resource. According to Badiou ideas are transcendental by means of being powerful. However, ideas become immanent when they incarnate into the body: the body which represents the ideas in the theatre form (2013/2015, pp. 57, 58). *Shumang Kumhei* is a collective effort by the people of Manipur to incarnate their ideas of peace and equality, and where the prospects of harmonious existence are actualized by means of the non-hierarchical interactions that take place between the performer and the audience. The audience completes the aesthetics of *Shumang Kumhei*. When the audience is no more sitting on their mats or in the trees to experience the performance, when they are segregated by their class and are disciplined in the event space, the distinctive aesthetics of *Shumang Kumhei* is lost.

During my field visit,²⁰ I observed a performance by the Times Star Artist Association called, *Sajibu gi Nongma Panba*,²¹ which substantiates this assertion. The scene in the play was of two people in conversation on their way home late at night. Some tipsy men were sitting and taunting in between the dialogues of the performers, to which at one point, one of the performers interposed between his dialogues:

Can you see, can you hear my dear friend? There are drunken men around, let's move faster before we face them, I do not know if they are a boon or a bane to society. (*Sajibu gi Nongma Panba*)

Such incidents kept on occurring during my observations and denoted something more than mere casual happenings, the relaxed nature of the audience and the uninhibited performance of the performers. As Premchand also observes: "oral habits of thought and expression have largely influenced the behaviour of [*Shumang Kumhei*] performance. The text is not sacrosanct or inviolable in the way it is considered by the practitioners of the proscenium theatre" (2020, p. 185). This adds to *Shumang Kumhei's* style and aesthetics of challenging and transforming hierarchical structures and perspectives. According to Lokendra Arambam (2002), the earliest form of

²⁰ The observation was made on the 5th of January, 2023 during a research field visit.

²¹ *Sajibu Nongma Panba* is the new year day of the Meiteis which fall around the month of March and April. *Sanjibu gi Nongma Panba* would mean on the day of *Sajibu Nongma Panba*.

Shumang Kumhei, the *Moirang Prava*, in which sections of the epic, *Khamba Thoibi*²² were performed, became an “artistic rival to the court-supported theatre of *Ras Lila*, *Gostha-Lila* and other religious enactments of the state”(p. 7). Through the initiation of the *Moirang Prava* within *Shumang Kumhei*, “Manipur had started to look back to their past and their traditions for the structural materials of their theatre as against Hindu religious plays...” (Premchand, 2020, p. 181). *Shumang Kumhei* hence became an aesthetic force of decolonization in Manipur.

Yet it is also more. The form and content of *Shumang Kumhei* debunks the conventional understanding of theatre defined by Western standards and the *Natyashastra* Indian aesthetic. In order to understand Indigenous Manipuri theatre, the very hierarchical structures that hold up Western and Indian theatres and their performances must necessarily undergo a decolonial rethinking. Defining Indigenous Manipuri theatre from the Western or Indian standpoint is problematic because of the ignorance and incapacity of scholars brought up in these traditions to even see Indigenous theatre.²³ According to Premchand:

If we go by the concept of theatre as defined in the West...we may not find any theatre indigenous to our context. We may find rituals, dances or festivals but not theatres. And we may come to the conclusion that theatre came from the West to Manipur via Bengali theatre in 1902 during the British rule. (2020, p. 1)

For *Shumang Kumhei*, its form itself is the liberator. The *shumang* (open courtyard), its audience, and its rituals, together, are at work to evoke a sense of self determination. Theatre of course, as Antonin Artraud stated, is like the plague: “it releases conflict, disengages power, liberates possibilities...impelling men to see themselves as they are, it causes the mask to fall, reveals the lie and hypocrisy of our world...” (1958, p. 31). *Shumang Kumhei*, for Manipur and the world, is no less than a plague. The content and form build the aesthetics of a plague.

²² Khamba Thoibi is a 12th century legendary epic of Manipur, a saga of two immortal lovers *Khamba* and *Thoibi*.

²³ A detailed debate can be found in Nonthombam Premchand’s *And then, You fly to Freedom* (2021) and in *Ritual and Performances: Studies in traditional Theatres of Manipur* (2020).

References

- Arambam, L. (2002). Folk Theatre of the Meiteis of Manipur. In L. Damodar, L. Arambam, & N. Premchand (Eds.) *100 Years of Manipuri Proscenium Arch Theatre*, 1, pp. 1-10.
- Artraud, A. (1958). *The Theatre and its Double* (1st ed.). Grove Press.
- Badiou, A. (2015). *In Praise of Theatre*. (A. Bielski, Trans.). Polity Press.
- Baruah, S. (1999). *India against itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*. Oxford University Press.
- Bharucha, R. (1991). *Politics of Indigenous Theatre: Kanhailal in Manipur*. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 26(11/12), 747-754.
- Bhaumik, S. (18th September, 2000). Rebels ban Hindi films. *BBC South Asia*. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/930990.stm
- Boal, A. (1979). *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1st ed.). Theatre Communication Group.
- Dasarathi, A. (2017, March 9). *Remembering Thangjam Manorama*. <https://feminisminindia.com/2017/03/09/thangjam-manorama-essay/>
- Ge, S. (2007). How does Asia mean? In K.-H. C. (Eds.), *The Inter-Asia Cultural Reader* (H. S.-L. Kinchi, Trans.), (pp. 9-64). Routledge.
- Geigner, M. E., & Young, H. (2021). Introduction. In *Theatre After Empire* (pp. 1-14). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429428944>
- Hudson, T. (2016). *The Meitheis*. Akansha Publishing House (original work published in 1908).
- Kabui, G. (2017). Glimpses of Land and People of Ancient Manipur. In N. Sanajaoba (Ed.), *Manipur Past and Present: The Heritage and Ordeals of a Civilization* (Vol. 1, pp. 3-22). Mittal Publications (Original work published 1988).
- Konsam, M. (2017). The Evolution of Meitei State. In N. Sanajoaba (Ed.), *Manipur Past and Present: The Heritage and Ordeals of a Civilization* (Vol. 1, pp. 145-159). Mittal Publications (original work published in 1988).
- McAuley, G. (2002). *Space in Performance*. The University of Michigan Press.
- Mee, E. B. (2005, October). World Trade Centre, and: Lidice-gee Gulab (The Rose of Lidicee) (review). *Project Muse*, 57(3), 480-482. <https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2005.0115>
- Ngangomba, B. (19976, April). *The real power of Sumang leela lies in its audience*. 157-160. (B. Das, Interviewer, & A. Kalyal, Editor) *Seagull Theatre Quarterly*.
- Phanjoubam, P. (2016). *The NorthEast Question: Conflicts and frontiers*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315661414>
- Premchand, N. (2020). *Rituals and Performances: Studies in Traditional Theatres of Manipur*. Reiki Nongtnombam.
- Premchand, N. (2021). *And then You Fly to Freedom: Essays on Postdramatic Theatre, Performance and Culture*. Reiki Nongthombam.
- Premchand, N. (2021, November 7). Artists as Political Actors - on performing arts and politics in Manipur. People's Campaign for Resurgent Manipur. <https://www.facebook.com/PCRM2022/videos/610195706790834>
- Sanajaoba, N. (2017). Introduction. In N. S. (Eds.), *Manipur Past and Present: The Heritage and Ordeals of a Civilization* (Vol. 1, pp. i-xxii). Mittal Publications (original work published in 1988).
- Sashikumar, L. (2009). *Shumang Leela amadi Masigi Khongchat*. Makhonmani Mongsaba.
- Sezen, B. (2020). Manipur: Activism & Resilience in an Unreported Conflict Zone. *Front line defenders*.
- Singh, L. D. (2002). *Shumang Leela*. In L. A. Leimapokpam Damodar (Ed.) *100 Years of Manipuri Proscenium Arch Theatre*, 1, pp. 11-15.
- Singh, N. J. (2005). *Revolutionary Movements in Manipur*. Akansha Publishing House.
- Singh, N. J. (2012). *Religious Revitalisation Movements in Manipur*. Akansha Publishing House.

- Somorendra, A. (1997, June/September). Sumang Leela (Courtyard Play); An introduction. (A. Katyal, Ed.) *Seagull Theatre Quarterly* 14/15, 153-155.
- Williams, J. (2021). DR. SEE-THROUGH AND HIS KIN: East African Theatre in the Interregnum. In M. E. Geigner, & H. Young. (Eds.), *Theatre After Empire* (pp. 15-29). Routledge.
-

Acknowledgements

This work would not have been possible without the ideological force, ideas and courage imbued by my late supervisor, Dr. P. Anbarasan, (Department of MCJ, Tezpur University), who, during the initial and crucial phases of my research work assisted me with great rigour, while also allowing me to think in liberty. He kept assisting my work, providing his suggestions and inputs even during his last days. I shall forever be grateful to him for enduing in me the academic spirit.

R.K. Yaibiren Sana is a fulltime PhD research scholar in the Department of Mass Communication and Journalism at Tezpur University, Assam, India. He is a recipient of the ICCSR (Indian Council for Social Science Research) Doctoral fellowship on the topic 'Aesthetics of traditional theatre of Manipur; Perspectives from *Shumang Kumheí*'. He is closely working with his Meitei community for this research and has presented papers in National and International Seminars on topics ranging across Meitei Folk theatre, Popular Culture, Media and Insurgency. His interest areas include culture and communication, traditional medium and Film studies.