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Performing the Landscape: Orature around Loktak Lake and the Love Story of Khamba Thoibi

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Abstract

The present paper explores the rich system of orature (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 2007) revolving around Loktak Lake and Moirang. Orature indexed orality as a total system of performance linked to a specific idea of space and time. It emphasizes that the nature of orality has a complete system in its own right. The richness of orature revolving around Loktak and Moirang is immense. The available stories of Moirang in Manipur like *Moirang Saiyon* or *Moirang Kangleirol*, including the last episode of Khamba and Thoibi, according to some scholars like E. Mangoljao, A. Khongngang, etc. are believed to have been the incarnations of Panthoibi and Nongpok Ningthou. Today we find the performative traditions or orature revolving around *Moirang Kangleirol* in varied forms, namely Moirang Sai, Moirang Parva, etc. The paper shall explore the relations between landscape and performative traditions, its aesthetic mysticism revolving around Loktak Lake and Moirang.

Keywords: spiritual landscape, Loktak Lake, Moirang, Khamba-Thoibi, Moirang Kangleirol

Moirang was a prosperous ancient kingdom that flourished in Southeast Asia in ancient times. Today, Moirang is a tourist city located 45 km from Imphal. Moirang was considered 'a land of legends'. Among the famous nine incarnation folk stories of Moirang, people in Manipur and surrounding places still prominently remember the romantic story of Khamba-Thoibi till today. It is also famous for the majestic ancient temple of the deity Ibuthou Thangjing. The ancient Moirang contributes to the bulk of Manipuri literature and folklore. Such folklore has intimate relations with its landscape, namely the beautiful freshwater lake 'Loktak', which is rich in flora marine life and is considered one of the prominent locations for bio tourism worldwide.

The present paper explores the rich system of 'orature' (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 2007) revolving around Loktak and Moirang. Orature indexed orality as a total system of performance linked to a specific idea of space and time. It emphasises that the nature of orality has a complete system in its own right. The richness of orature revolving around Loktak and Moirang is immense. The available stories of Moirang like *Moirang Saiyon* or *Moirang Kangleirol*, including the last episode of Khamba and Thoibi, according to some scholars like E. Mangoljao, A. Khongngang, *et al* are believed to have been the incarnations of Panthoibi and Nongpok Ningthou. Today we find the performative traditions or orature revolving around *Moirang Kangleirol* in varied forms, namely Moirang Sai, Moirang Parva, etc. The paper shall explore the relations between landscape and performative traditions, its aesthetic mysticism revolving around Loktak and Moirang.

At an earlier stage of civilization and cultures without the tradition of writing or without the kind of writing familiar to Europeans, such as hieroglyphs, pictographs, or characters, were seen as backward. Similarly, oral narratives were seen as inferior to written literature. Oral narratives are preserved in human memories, passed down from generation to generation. European thinkers saw epics, such as Homer's *Iliad* or the Germanic *Beowulf*, sung before they were written down as precursors to written literature. This distinction produced a binary between orality and literacy—what anthropologists called the "Great Divide," a divide that is sometimes called a "relic of academic colonialism" (Jack Goody qt. in Finnegan, 2006, p. 270). These binary privileges literacy over orality and makes it easy to dismiss the oral-based cultures.

The categorical division between orality and literacy endorsed the idea that oral traditions as suitable only for children, rather than a system for transmitting important philosophical and moral concepts. These traditions taught important social and cultural principles, such as the importance of hospitality and respect. In his influential book, *Orality and Literacy* (1982), Walter J. Ong argues:

Oral cultures indeed produce powerful and beautiful oral performances of high artistic and human worth, which are *no longer even possible* once writing has taken possession of the psyche. (1982 or 2006, p. 14, emphasis added)

Academics are increasingly focused on numerous levels of engagement with cultural expression rather than just literature as they move beyond the dichotomy between orality and literacy. For instance, listening to oral performances has the potential and is now used to inform scholarship. To remedy the bias against orality, scholars use the term 'orature' to refer to speeches, oral tales, and other narratives as an analogous word for literature (Gingell and Roy, 2012, p. 5). Why orature?

Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1998) stresses a subtle distinction of meaning between "orature" and "oral literature." Ngugi notes, "the term 'orature' was coined in the sixties by Pio Zirimu, the late Ugandan linguist" (Ngugi 1998: 103). Ngugi observes that although Zirimu initially used the two terms interchangeably, he later identified "orature" as the more accurate term, indexing orality as a total system of performance linked to a very specific idea of space and time. The term "oral literature," by contrast, incorporates and subordinates orality to the literary and disguises the nature of orality as a complete system in its own right (ibid/1998, pp. 103-127). For this reason, "orature" is the preferred term in this study.

Materiality: Loktak and Moirang

The materiality of Loktak and Moirang in the art and culture of Manipur is vibrant. Loktak Lake is known for its circular floating swamps called *phum* in the local language. Resembling miniature islands, these *phums* are found in numerous forms floating on the lake. With an area of almost 300 square kilometres, Loktak Lake is a lifeline for many people living on the *phums* and around the lake, particularly Moirang. Today, other than being the source of income for many fishermen who largely depend on the lake, the Loktak Lake also serves as a source of hydropower generation, irrigation, and drinking water supply in the region. In the west of Moirang, there is a range of hills known as Thangjing hill. Thangjing Koirel is believed to be the founder and protector of Moirang principality. It is believed that he was a historical king who was later deified and worshipped as

the divine progenitor of the Moirangs. He was supposed to have descended from heavens and made the range of hills to the west of Moirang— the Thangjing hills his abode. Hills surround the kingdom on one side, and the Loktak Lake on the other is his realm where he presides as the deity.

Earlier, Moirang was an independent principality, which had its own kingdom. The Ningthouja clan subjugated Moirang in the 15th century (Arambam 1991:58). Now Moirang has been regarded as the cultural centre of the Meetei (Imokanta, 2005, p. 58). The reference to Moirang as the cultural epicentre of the state is not new; one can assume that it originated during the process of consolidation of the Meetei Kingdom. Hence, symbols of religious and ritualistic importance are quite closely connected to the entire Meetei, in fact so closely connected that it has been chosen as the authentic epicentre of the Meetei culture through its slow, subtle, and successful subjugation.

Moirang's contribution to the culture of Manipur is immense. Apart from its great contribution to art and literature, Moirang's contribution to the repertoire of *anoirol*ⁱⁱ (the language of movements) is significant. Some of the techniques of dance as mentioned in *Anoirol* are as follows:

- a. Dancing by lifting the slightly bent arm is called *liru/lirung jagoi*. This dance form is probably composed by Thingkol Moribicha of Moirang,ⁱⁱⁱ as speculated in *Anoirol (lirung sana noiye)* (Yaima, 1973, p. 32).
- b. Dancing with the alternate four fingers of the two hands touching each other and the two thumbs crossing each other is called *lairu-saba*. This dance form is also probably composed by Thingkol Moribicha of Moirang, speculated in *Anoirol (lairu sana noiye)*.^{iv}
- c. Dancing together in a group led by someone, without much practice in a regular rhythm by observing the leader, is called *leplou saba*. In Moirang *Anoirol*, this is described as *khubak khuna noiye, chako sana noiye, / leplou sana noiye, samu thinna noiye* (Dance by clapping hands/dance the *chako* / dance the *leplou* / dance rhythmically stomping like an elephant) (Yaima, 1973, p. 31).
- d. Dancing together in a circle like a meandering dragon/snake is called *tubu saba*. Again in Moirang *Anoirol*, "*maikei lakna noiye / tubu sana noiye / mathek sana noiye, / lirung sana noiye; / lairu sana noiye / noikhuthekpu noitamye*" (dance at every direction, / dance the *tubu*, / dance the gestures, / dance the *lirung*, / dance the *lairu*, / present the hand-gestures in dance form).

As we see, the nature of dance as developed in the land of dance has a close affinity with its extant landscape and nature. The materiality of landscape envelops both the spatial and the temporal. The following study emphasises the intertwined historicity and spatiality of cultural production and reproduction to theorise the importance of landscape in performative traditions and orature.

Beyond the Ritual Landscape

In the study of Moirang Haraoba, it is important to note the importance of the physical landscapes of Thangjing Hill and Loktak Lake, which are represented as sacred through oral and textual narratives. Soibam Haripriya (2017) has argued that the two sacred sites correspond to the notion of the divine body. While the aspect of the divine body vis-à-vis the physical element is significant

in imagining the idea of the divinity of the King Thangjing Koirel and his body, the physical elements that comprise the landscape—earth, water and so on—are also thought to be elements that comprise the human body and mirror each other (Haripriya, 2017).

It is also important to keep in mind that in Moirang and the adjacent area of Loktak, what constitutes a livelihood and a sustaining worldview depends on continuous negotiations between the communities and the landscape comprising the hill and the lake. By rendering and re-rendering the past and the present, humans and nature together reshape their existence. In this instance, the landscape serves as more of a flowing place where fresh interpretations are conceivable rather than static depictions in religious ceremonies. A spatial centre and a place where a sense of community is being produced and generated are formed when the hill and the lake are coupled as a pair. Apart from these landscapes, today, the newly developed Moirang Keithel (market) in the town of Moirang has also created and generated a new economy and worldview.

It is also critical to note that Loktak Lake and Thangjing hill as specificities cease to represent themselves. Haripriya, in her study, has demonstrated the manifestation of the sacred, the sanctity of which is reinforced by certain oral and textual traditions (Haripriya, 2017, p. 43). One can understand the connection between physical landscapes, sacredness, human and divine bodies within the narratives in which the ritual framework of Loktak Lake is created. While water bodies as sacred have been reflected in various mythologies, they are further localised in the imageries of the specific context of the creation myth, as it exists in Meetei cosmology. For instance, the chronicles of the Moirang kings, *Moirāng Ningthourol Lambubā* has the following invocation:

Prayer to thee O Thāngching, Lord of the
Universe and creator of the Moirāng clan.
Thou art the source of all living beings, the
fount of time, the presiding god of heaven,
the defender of the region standing like
an iron rail, the protector of all animals
both domestic and wild, the vanquisher
of enemies and the omnipresent Lord
both in the sky and on the earth. Thou canst also
make thine abode in the tender care of a
lotus to remain ever fresh and charming and
issue forth from the azure sky most probably
from inside the transparent moon. As a child
Thou wert ever dauntless, grew up healthy as
a luxuriant oak plant ... I pay obeisance

to Thee and Thine consort, Thāngching Koirel
 Leimā, pure as the white cotton and also the
 repository of all souls.

(Manihar 1996, pp. 75-76)

The prayer refers to Lord Thangjing as Thangching, a variation of the name (*ching* meaning hill). Thus the invocation collapses the divine King and the hill, his abode. The invocation also contains an effusion of words that describes the region's landscape. Lord Thangjing, with his abode on the hill, is paired with his consort in the sky, Thāngching Koirel Leimā, with the sky described as 'pure as white cotton'. Loktak Lake reflects the sky and the hill in its waters and is visually and metaphorically seen as the site of the union of the sacred deities. One can imagine that this figuratively enhances the idea of the lake reproducing fertility and reproducing community. The point is not that the supernatural inscribes meanings on the landscape; rather, the landscape itself inscribes the supernatural and the divine.

Another song of Moirang Haraoba is the Yakaiba (*yakaiba* means 'to awake'), as the name suggests, a song sung in the early hours of dawn waking up the deity. Here is the opening line of the song:

The day breaks in the region of Moirang
 When *uthum*, the water cock
 Sweetly sings, 'Tum Tum'
 In the thick bush by the lake.

(Manihar, 1996, p. 18)

This song, performed to pena accompaniment, relates to local tales while expressing an enthralling vision of how the day begins in the region. Simple word choice and a well-balanced rhythmic and tempo arrangement distinguish the tune. The lake's beauty is metaphorically portrayed in the way that it becomes the landscape that connects with life and legends, which has a shared significance for those whose lives are fundamental to the landscape itself. It should be noted how the neighbouring country Burma (known as Senbi to Moirang) is interspersed with the regional legends. While the song metaphorically alludes to the beautiful parrot on the side of Burma that protects her parent's paddy field, it also calls for the same responsibility of the Moirang people to protect their paddy fields for the prosperity of the society.

It is noteworthy to refer to the study of the ritual spaces. Since Arnold Van Gennep (1960 [1909]) studied the connectedness of spatial or geographical movement with the ritual motif of cultural 'passages,' many other scholars have developed the idea of 'ritual space' in numerous ways. Victor Turner (1982, p. 69) precisely discussed the creation of 'ritualised space', focusing on the ritual dynamics of demarcating a 'controlled environment.' Further, he also suggests the role of ritualised space in generating the temporal realities of the ritual calendar itself. In this sense, the above song functions beyond the performing space of Lai Haraoba (*laibung*) but even encompasses the physical landscape of Moirang. A focus on such ritual acts illuminates a critical circularity in the body's interaction with this environment. Such ritual acts generate the physical

space, and it is moulded by it. By virtue of this circularity, society keeps on redefining space and time in a complex 'socially instinctive automatism' (Bell 1992: 99) of the body and the cosmos.

The Moirang Epic Ballad: the Love Story of Khamba-Thoibi

The re-enactment of the Khamba and Thoibi love legend is a significant component of Moirang Haraoba. The Khamba-Thoibi orature is rich in traditional plays like *Moirang Parva* and *Kao Phaba* (an episode of the epic), as well as *Moirang Sai* singing traditions that are primarily performed by females. Many lovers are thought to have originated in the Moirang region, but the divinely predestined love story of Khamba and Thoibi stands out among them. Thoibi is shown as a woman of beauty, and the warrior Khamba as a man of tremendous macho power. The two are finally united after a long journey filled with strange trials, but they are only meant to be together for a short time. The story is still alive because of the resonance of the diction, excellent characterization, depiction of nature, and use of arresting similes, as ballad singers typically render it with the accompanying instrument, *pena*.

The Manipuri poet Hijam Anganghal wrote the epic poem *Khamba Thoibi Seireng*, which has forty-three cantos and over 36,000 lines, in 1986. It tells the narrative of the love between Khamba and Thoibi. He acknowledged that *pena* singers, particularly Chungkham Manik, had influenced him. He said the poem just replicates what they chanted (Anganghal, 1986, pp. iii-iv). But without his creative brilliance, the poem would not have reached such lofty heights. The poet portrayed the principal characters as having tremendous talent. He used metaphors that were appropriate for the characters, many of which were derived from elements of nature.

Although the unending yearning for love and beauty is the song's major theme, the lyrics are performed in vibrant yet melancholic rhymes. It is a narrative telling of the highest calibre that reflects Moirang's long tradition. During the epic era, autonomous kingdoms coexisted side-by-side and engaged in fierce conflict. The Kingdom of Moirang, in and around the lovely Loktak Lake, served as the main setting. As described in the ballad, this lake cradled a distinctive culture of love and beauty – a fertile soil for the growth of this epic ballad. In reality, the oral tradition, finding fulfillment in *Khamba Thoibi Sheireng*, began as the song of Loktak Lake. The entire Manipur, which was created following the union of all the various kingdoms, was embraced by the ballad as it blossomed. The ballad's human issues transcended beyond Moirang's borders. The Khamba-Thoibi ballad may have helped Manipur gain national recognition after the fusion of the Salais.

Moirang and Khuman were neighbouring kingdoms, cradled and nourished by Loktak Lake. Unable to bear family intrigues, a nobleman from Khuman migrated to Moirang. He married a woman of Moirang, and Puremba was born to them. Puremba, in his turn, rose to be a famous courtier of Moirang, peerless in strength and influence. Once, while he was attending the King on a hunting expedition, he saved the King from the attack of seven tigers by catching them all alive. Extremely pleased with his feat, the King gave him in marriage his youngest wife, Ngangkhalima. Before she became one of the wives of the King, Ngangkhalima was the lady love of Puremba. When the King married her to Puremba she was with a child already. Khamnu, the elder sister of

Khamba and one of the central characters of the epic, was thus born. Although born in Puremba's house, she was of royal blood.

Khamba, the protagonist of the epic, was born of Puremba and Ngangkhalima after her. Khamba's parents, unfortunately, died not long after he was born. Thus, Khamba and his elder sister Khamnu were abandoned as orphans. Although their father was once a powerful aristocrat, nobody cared for them after he passed away. Khamba also had good reason to worry about plots against his life because he was the son of a well-known courtier (a member of the Khuman salai). In response to this concern, Khamnu, Puremba's elder sister, brought Puremba's little brother to the protection of Kabui Salang Maiba, a chieftain of the Kabui clan. Khamba and his elder sister went back to their parents' house in Moirang once Khamba had reached adulthood and was able to care for himself.

Then, the lyrical love of Khamba and Thoibi unfolds in the epic song which has been immortalised by the bards of Manipur. Khamba loves Thoibi, the princess of Moirang and daughter of Chingkhuba, younger brother to the King of Moirang. His love is like a fire burning within a snow-capped mountain, subdued but eternal and firm. Thoibi is the embodiment of beauty. The bards used to sing of her peerless beauty, "Beauty herself is no match of Thoibi in beauty." Her love for Khamba is an all-consuming passion that illuminates and gives life to everything coming on its way. Standing in between the two lovers as a counterforce was Nongban, a nobleman of Moirang. His yearning for Thoibi was boundless—an eternal yearning for love and beauty. The epic narrative centres around the three characters, the forces, and the counterforces they represent.

The texture of the ballad is full of subtle and compelling details; the canvas is wide embracing nature and various forms of life in their variegated moods. The epic song celebrates love, beauty, truth, and goodness—expressing a rich way of life, the people, culture, customs, religion, aesthetics, and other finer sensibilities. The intoxication of first love and its coronation in the insistence of eternal fidelity to mutual love is depicted in the episodes of *Shan Shenba* (Tending the Cows), *Kang Sannaba* (the Game of Kang), *Een Chingba* (netting the fish). The physical prowess of the epic hero, Khamba is exhibited in *Kangjei* (the Game of Foot-polo). In *Lei-Langba* (Flower Offering) and *Leirol* (Song of Flowers) cantos of the epic, the celebration of love and beauty as constituting the substance of religion is elegantly visualised. The cantos express the aesthetic mysticism of high order. Khamba's strength and courage are again demonstrated when he overpowers and tames the great bull in the canto on the Kao phaba (taming the bull). However, the penultimate test of the epic hero's love for Thoibi is given in *Shamu Khongyetpa* canto. Chingkhuba wished that Thoibi married Nongban, in stark opposition to her love for Khamba. When she firmly refused, Chingkhuba and Nongban conspired to remove Thoibi's love, Khamba, from the way.

One night, Nongban and his men waylaid Khamba and beat him almost to death. He was brought before Chingkhuba, waiting with the royal elephant at an appointed place of Moirang Khorl Keithel. Hijam Angahal, the poet laureate of Manipur who committed the epic to write for the first time, describes the encounter how Khamba was about to be tied to the elephant and dragged along the rugged road strewn with sharp pebbles till death. Chingkhuba creates this moment with vivid, dramatic intensity:

My daughter, I never promised you.

Your vain words, I will not relish
An obstacle you are in my daughter's way.
Disown now, don't wait for her words.
"This day I forsake – She is yours now."
Say thee, surrender her to Nongban.
Else my sword will do the rest.
Now is time to make amends, Khamba.

(Lokendrajit, 2017, p. 288)

The irony is that Khamba was unmoved. Chinghuba's words did not deter him. Instead, it made him blissfully oblivious of the pains he had suffered. Khamba replied:

Let this body of mine called Khamba
Be transformed into fiery embers
Let my elder sister Khamnu sow
Seeds of Thoiding on my lonely grave.
And when seeds grow into more seeds
Let your noble daughter collect all
To press the oil lending fragrance to her hair
To her alone, I owe my life
What I owe I give up for her only.
Fulfil your wish, ere the dawn breaks.

(Lokendrajit, 2017, p. 288)

In the finest warrior tradition, this momentous decision at the threshold of life and death makes Khamba, who takes destiny in hand, a hero in the mind of the people of Manipur. Poised before life and death, a hero shines like a star beyond the grave, distinguishing the heroic life from the ordinary ones. The ballad portrayed Khamba loving Thoibi the way an epic hero does. The elements that go into making the epic heroes are present in the ballad. The craft that creates the ordinary men with noble elements also fashions the heroes. In their destined suffering and conflict, human destiny is shaped. It seems that man is given a rightful place in the Universe. Hence, our love for the song of epic heroes becomes captivatingly solemn. And the tradition ever grows.

Thus Khamba, the hero, suffered, survived, and proved himself to be an epic hero. Thoibi, in her love for Khamba defied her father and chose exile to Kabaw valley rather than marry Nongban. Towards the closing part, Khamba and Nongban face the ferocious wild tiger in the forest. He who wins will have the glorious honour of Thoibi's love and beauty. Nongban was the first to encounter the tiger. He gave a heroic fight, ending this earthly life. The yearning for Thoibi was so great that

the embodiment of love and beauty continued beyond the grave. The bards used to sing that Nongban's yearning transmigrated into the immortal bird Pithadoi singing "Thadoi, 'Thadoi". Khamba could kill the tiger and thus happens the classic union of the hero and the beauty. Thoibi's dancing in Lai Haraoba is described thus:

The curves of her body as rhythmic
 As the thread that weaves the Universe
 Her waist enfolded in the maidenly girdle
 She needed no other adornments
 To be a perfect embodiment of art.

.....

A dance the Kingdom of Moirang will never see
 Danced before the Lord Thangjing in the temple.
 Thadoi is looking at her dance
 On her way to perfect beauty.

(Anganghal, 1986, pp. 153–54)

This brings the readers the aesthetic mysticism of Thoibi's dance, where art and beauty converge. Thoibi's dance before the deity Thangjing in the Lai Haraoba ritual is described with visual imageries in the epic:

All the gods of the sky have come out of their abode,
 to see Khamba and Thoibi dance.
 The sound of drums and music are making
 heaven and earth tremble.
 Blue hills far and near are bending forward to see nearer.
 Trees, bamboos and creepers are bowing down towards Thangjing.
 The winds from all directions are assembled in a torrent.
 Blowing lustily over the Thangjing temple,
 they sweep over the Loktak Lake,
 breaking her waves into foams.
 The sun, the moon and the stars in unison
 are lighting the ritual palace.
 Love, passion, sorrow, fear, happiness, weakness, strength, creation, dissolution
 – all these emotions have been made ingredients tastes of the dance.

Men and gods are in rapture.

Anan, Namphou, Khorbung, Lamgang, Chiru, Kabui, Kabaw

– all are singing and dancing

– rotating and revolving in the circular motions of dance.

Displaying community dance form and music,

young boys and girls are exchanging queries and responses in songs.

(Anganghal, 1986, pp. 227–235)

Living beings in water, land, and sky celebrate beauty. Landscapes have energy and agency. Catherine Allerton (2009) describes the landscape as “not simply a natural or physical environment, a taken-for-a-granted backdrop of hills, rivers, and valleys” but a “historical process of interaction between people and environment, in which both are shaped” (pp. 235-236). This representation is not seen in the landscape paintings. The landscape has its own agency and potency. It is relevant to mention that 'subdued eloquence, serenity and calmness' in Meetei dance reflect the extant landscape; and if one sees the performance of South India, for example, Kathakali reflects the emotions and feelings of the sea tides and the roaring sea. The celebration resonates with the beauty of its landscape. We also find a unique aesthetic mysticism in this celebration. An aesthetic mysticism that all Manipur communities share is intimately related to the landscape, the cosmogony, and the cosmology that has become part of the cultural consciousness of Manipur.

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Notes

ⁱ *phum* refers to the collection of decomposed heterogeneous masses of vegetation, soils and other organic matters.

ⁱⁱ *Anoirol* (*Anoi*=dance, *rol/lol* = language) literally means "the language of dance", but it is more broadly understood as the "art of body movement." It is a manuscript containing a record of songs, verses and ballads describing the origin of dance, its relation to the Meetei cosmogony and the poetic depiction of dances with cultural metaphors, maxims and ethical codes of the Meetei which shape the aesthetics of the traditional Meetei community life.

ⁱⁱⁱ Moirang is a place in the southwest of Manipur considered rich in tradition.

^{iv} Ibid, both *Lirung* and *Lairung saba* are initially seemed to be dance forms of the Moirang clan.

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