

TEXT AND TEXTURE OF CLOTHING IN MEETEI COMMUNITY: A CONTEXTUAL STUDY

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Abstract:

This paper is an effort to understand Meetei identity through the text and texture of clothing in ritual context. Meeteis are the majority ethnic group of Manipur, who are Mongoloid in origin. According to the Meetei belief system, they consider themselves as the descendents of Lord *Pakhangba*, the ruling deity of Manipur. Veneration towards *Pakhangba* and various beliefs and practices related with the *Paphal* cult have significantly manifested in the cultural and social spheres of Meetei identity. As part of the material culture, dress plays an important role in manifesting the symbolic representation of their relation with *Pakhangba* in their mundane life. Meetei cloths are deeply embedded with the socio-cultural meaning of the Meeteiness presented in their oral and verbal expressive behaviors. When seven individual groups merged into one community under the political dominance of *Mangang/Ningthouja* clan, traditional costume became an important agent in order to recognise the individual identity and the common Meetei identity. There are some cloths which have intricate design with various motifs, believed to be derived from the mark of *Pakhangba's* body and are used in order to identify the age, sex, social status, and ethnic identity in ritual context. The present paper, therefore, tries to understand how Meetei community identify themselves through using the concept of text, texture and context as a method of analyzing their cultural identity. It is an attempt to understand how they perceived, socialized and constructed their social identities depending upon their uses of cloths on various contexts.

Keywords: Clothing, Identity, Meetei, Pakhangba, Text, Texture, Context.

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Introduction:

Beyond the word-based types, the concept of 'text' has many relationships through folklore because it doesn't exist in isolation. The idea of 'text' can be developed in connection with the material culture which can be considered as a complex text that can take part in, observation and analysis. Material culture refers to the physical object which means cultural products such as clothes, pots, baskets, tools, household materials, folk arts and architectures, food etc. that has tangible and intangible quality to define a culture. A cloth¹ is an item of folklore i.e. a text that has its own structure embodying with certain socio-cultural meaning to identify a group. In cloth, texture could be – rough, smooth, hard, lumpy which are the physical characteristics of cloth that affect the 'text'. The texture would be dealing with how the surface of cloth feels, what colours are used as well as the motifs which are woven. Motifs are patterns which are repeatedly woven to make an item to identify the group. Anything which is connected or related to the physical properties of the clothes that convey meaning is included in texture. The textural figures of the cloth are related to its creation and the weaver who weaved it. Techniques which are employed leads to productions of variant textures for different cloth. The textural features of the cloth are a recognisable tradition to classify the wearer or the significant motifs in various contexts. Such variations in texture of a cloth make the cloth as a 'text' unique. Context refers to anything and everything that surround the text. The text can be understood from the particular narrow context as well as it can also be seen within a larger context, as part of a socio-cultural system. Ben-Amos brings two types of context, 'context of situation'² and 'context of culture'³ which are overlapping each other. The understanding of context is beyond the identification of the text within the particular setting.⁴ Context is important for shaping text and texture of an item of folklore, for the significance of society and individuals. So, cloth as a text of any group has textural feature which is used in certain context and the context shape the text and the texture of the cloth also. A study of clothing of any group requires investigation of the text, the texture and the context.

Generally, clothes are used in various aspects of life be it for providing comfort to our body by protecting it from cold and hot conditions, for covering the skin, mainly the genital areas and the breast which are considered as offensive and transgressing the social norm when exposed publicly. However, the purpose of clothing exceeds beyond such simple understanding. Clothing

is a woven fabric worn by the people which are directly in contact with the human body. There are different types of fabric and wearing patterns of cloth depending on each individual's body type, social, and geographical region. The identity of the wearer is shown through clothing and the influence of the region where the wearer lives is manifested in it. Each individual wear different clothes in different situations to make his/her existence recognized in their group or community. The significance of clothes not only concerns the environmental physiology but it also has socio-cultural meanings that reveal the societal norms and values with respect to their age, sex, gender, social status, sacred and profane activities which appears in various contexts. The concept of clothing as a universal and visual cultural element contains a set of symbols and designs that convey particular messages at different social and psychological level.⁵ Object symbols i.e. clothes are context specific and possess meanings that can be changed depending on the context.

Like some other folks, Meetei community has their subjective symbolic tradition, verbal and non-verbal expressive behaviours which have been practicing from one generation to another which differentiates their identity from other groups. Such subjective symbols are practiced as a cultural collective system through folklore. Clothes as subjective symbol are a cultural product of the people that identify them as an individual or a community. The Meetei community has certain traditional clothes, motifs, cloth-patterns, styles of wearing, (text and texture of clothing) which have been confided since time immemorial from one generation to another to express or to communicate their identity among the group or outside the group. Such traditional clothe, in other words, is known as folk costume⁶ is worn in relation to their community and it is some sort of symbol of identity of that community as well as the identity of the individual in relationship to/within the community. Meetei cloth plays a significant role in their social unification of social groups or tribes settled in various parts of the valley and hill under one belief system which is deeply rooted in God *Pakhangba*. Most of the motifs which are believed to be originated from the body of God *Pakhangba* are projected as pictorial diagrams. Most of these motifs are found in the traditional costumes and they reflect the identity, age, sex, gender, and social status of an individual and the communal life in its different stages.

This paper is an attempt to understand the cultural identity of Meetei community from the text and the texture of clothing in a particular context of Lai-Haraoba, a communal ritual. Their cloth is recognized from their appearances and motifs which are woven as a decorative element. However, the motif or the design woven is not merely a decorative element, but is considered a remarkable art form of the Meetei ethnic identity. Myths, beliefs, nature and environment of the people constitute the Meetei art from which various visual image i.e. Motif germinates. The motif woven into a cloth carries certain meanings in relation to the wearer within the community and it is prescribed with a sense of social and cultural value. Meetei clothes and motifs influence and shape the social identities, including age, sex, social status and occupation. The text and the textural feature are the symbols of belief, but also express the tradition, that expresses their group identity. The main concern of this paper is the relationship between text and textural features of cloth and identity in the eyes of the group (Meetei) in various contexts at the level of both an individual and the group as a whole. Further, this paper tries to emphasize the motifs woven on the cloths in expressing the identity of the community and how the motifs are projected through folklore.

Meetei: An overview

Meetei is one major ethnic group, who resides in the valley of Manipur. According to B. H. Hodgson, the ethnic name (term) Meetei is a combined appellation of Siamese 'Tai' and Kochin Chinese 'Moy' which is *Moy Tai = Moytai = Moitai = Meitei*.⁷ From the Meetei folk narratives, it is known that the name Meetei is derived from the creation of human being from the shadow of Almighty God *Atiya Sidaba* by his son Lord *Sanamahi*.⁸ However, the term Meetei was coined by *Ningthouja*⁹ under a certain belief system to (in order to) integrate all the social groups or tribes settled in various parts of the valley and hill. Most of the ethnic and social groups are politically and socially integrated within the power of *Ningthouja* clan. Though many scholars worked on the ethnic groups of Manipur, the origin of the Meetei ethnic group is not able to trace yet. In spite of many controversies regarding its origin, it can be said that these ethnic groups emerged from the Mongoloid race.

In the *Puya*, an ancient text of the Meetei, it is mentioned that there were four *Hangko* or periods for gods namely *Kahangko*, *Thoihangko*, *Teiyohangko*, and *Poihangko*. After this period, there

are four *Chak* (period) namely- *Hayichak*, *Hayachak*, *Khununglangba chak*, and *Konchak* before the Christian era. The first three *Chaks* were the periods of god and in the last period both god and humans lived together. The *Konchak* period began with God *Ibudhou Konjin Tukhaba*. He married seven *Ibendhou*, also known as *Lai Nura* or *Lairembi Taret* originated from the body of the Almighty God *Atingkok Kuru Sidaba*. Each of the seven *Lai Nura* gave birth to seven sons each and become the progenitors of the seven *Salai*. *Salai* is derived from two words *Sagei* and *Lai*, which literal meaning is the progenitor of their lineage. The seven *Salai* of the Meetei are - *Mangang*, *Luwang*, *Khuman*, *Angom*, *Moirang*, *Khaba-Nganba* and *Sarang-Leishangthem*. It is also believed that they are originated respectively from the seven ancestors- *Nongda Lairen Pakhangba*, *Poreiton*, *Poreiomba*, *Poreiton*, *Nganghunthok*, *Thongaren*, and *Nungou Yumthangba*.

However, other ancient texts like *Poreiton Khunthok*, *Leisemlon*, *Kangbalon*, *Panthoibi Khongul*, and *Leithak Leikharol* reveal that *Angom*, *Moirang*, *Khaba-Nganba* and *Chenglei (Sarang-Leishangthem)* already existed by the 1st century A.D, before the advent of the clans *Mangang/Ningthouja*, *Luwang*, and *Khuman*. Before integrating the groups as Meetei in one kingdom, each social groups or tribes were guided by their own territorial principle. However, when *Mangang/Ningthouja* dynasty was formed in the second century under the political power of *Meidingu Nongda Lairen Pakhangba* after defeating the king of *Khaba* who ruled at *Kangla*, the Meetei as one group was politically developed. From the time of *Nongda Lairen Pakhangba*, the system of clan principality was precipitated as a social and political system even if each clan has their autonomous principality and government in their respective territory under the separate rulers. Formation of the Meetei as a united group did not happen in one period. The matrimonial alliances between the clans made them to form one cultural identical group. In due course of time, all of them were under the sovereignty of Meetei king one after the other. ‘Meetei’ became the common name of all seven *Salai*/clan after subduing *Khaba Nganba Salai*/clan in the second century A. D., and the formation was completed when *Moirang Salai* merged in the fifteenth century A. D.¹⁰

Meetei beliefs and practices are associated with spirits, ancestral worship which are deeply rooted in their behavior and perception. The beliefs and practices of their society exist in a

polytheistic, animistic and naturalistic form. They worship their ancestors who are believed to be the originator of their life. They also worship the power of nature, sun, stars, fire, and believe in the existence of malevolent/benevolent spirits in the surrounding environment, forests, lakes and rivers. They also believe in free and liberated souls like *Timu-Laimu* and *Sharoi-Ngaroi* (evil spirits), *Heloi* (nymph), *Hingchabis* (witch) etc., who has the power to make a person suffer from diseases, unconsciousness and sometimes meet sudden death when a person roam in their vicinity. There are practices which are performed for warding off evil spirits by the concerned spiritual specialists *Maiba*/priest and *Maibi* /priestess. The chronicles and the ancient literary texts reveal that the ancient people of the land worshipped a number of deities. However, there are some Gods which are considered as Universal lord (*Taibang Panba Mapu*) such as - *Atiya Kuru Sidaba/Soralel* (the immortal God of Heaven/ Sky God), *Sanamahi*, and *Pakhangba*.

God *Pakhangba* is considered as one of the supreme gods and is referred to as *Ibudhou Pakhangba*. It is believed that God *Pakhangba* personifies in a mythical serpent, which looks like a dragon. This creature resides in various places like ponds, groves, mountains, rivers, lakes, forests, and caves which are considered as sacred by the community. According to their belief system, Meeteis are the descendants of God *Pakhangba*. A narrative¹¹ reveals about how *Konjin Tingthokpa* was named as *Pakhangba* by his father and became the ruler of Meetei Kingdom. He is perceived as a human as well as a divine form who is meant for governing the social world. He is identified as the first human king and the last king of the 'celestial age'. In some of the narratives, *Nongda Lairen Pakhangba* was the first human king and he was the last son of god. He exists in the form of a serpent during daytime and as a human in the night time. Etymologically, *Nongda Lairen Pakhangba* means *Nongda*=God-sent, *Lairen*= python or serpent or dragon, and *Pakhangba*=one who knows the real father. "Nongda Lairen Pakhangba is the epitome of Meetei kingship. He is the model of kingship in the minds of every Meetei. All the later kings are identified as the descendants of this model king, inheriting both his blood and qualities."¹² There were 74 kings who ruled the kingdom of Manipur. The divinity of *Pakhangba* which is depicted in the form of *Paphal* was used as a heraldic emblem of the kingdom of Manipur in earlier periods and is still used as an emblem of the princely state. The *Paphal* is a symbolical representation of Lord *Pakhangba* which is depicted in the form of a mythical serpent hiding its own tail inside its mouth.

The worshipping of God *Pakhangba* is associated with the *Paphal* cult where it is used as an instrument for bringing social and cultural integration of the Meetei community. There are 364 different forms, and it is illustrated in the ancient manuscript called *Paphal Lambuba*. The mythical serpent is represented in various sizes and shapes, in different colours and positions (encircle posture, long in body, symmetrically coiled in four corners in loops with both tails, the serpent having wings and legs, two bodies intertwined with each other, one with horn and in the form of a boat). These forms are symbolically associated with the divine power of controlling and protecting the community. Most of the *Paphal* are pictorially depicted in the motif of a serpent tail in his mouth, which symbolically represents the world beginning and ending with him. One of the most common gestures/postures is the image of the body coiled on all the four corners representing the respective deities of the four directions. There are different colours in the motif that signify each of the seven clans: reddish yellow stands for *Mangang/Ningthouja*, black for *Khuman*, white or bluish-white for *Luwang*, white for *Angom*, brown for *Moirang*, green for *Chenglei*, and violet for *Khaba-Nganba*. All these colours are used in the representation of *Pakhangba*. The shape and form is also found in the *Meetei* numeral and scripts. In most of the architecture, the gate of a temple has two projected shapes which are called *Chirong* that represents God *Pakhangba*. The motif of *Pakhangba* is used as an icon and in representing various social and political organizations.

The motif of *Paphal* exists not only in the pictorial images, but also in traditional performances. Traditional martial arts follow specific *Paphal* patterns in their body movement by holding spears. In Lai-Haraoba ritual, there is a cultural procession lead by the *Maiba*/priest, *Maibi*/priestess, and *Penakhongba*/music player along with men and women participants where the path follows the body movement of *Paphal*. The representation through visual images and performances gives a cultural symbolic meaning that connects the religious/sacred and the profane world. It directly connects the people in the living world to the supernatural world. These motifs become their folk element which is prevalently found in various art forms that has language to express their socio-cultural values and meaning. There are some other motifs of God *Pakhangba* which are found in the traditional clothes and in their costume. The *Meetei* clothes are woven either plainly or with some sort of motif arranged in systematic patterns. The motif is employed according to the cloth that is to be woven to the cloth. The weaver themselves classify

the function of a cloth and weave accordingly while the motifs in the clothes denote the social identity of the wearer. Traditionally, women of all age, unmarried or married, except for the children were engaged in weaving activities. According to their myth¹³, the art of weaving began since time immemorial and is closely linked to the origin of their community. Women engage in weaving as an occupation and this tradition has generated technical knowledge and skills which are naturally passed down from the older generation to the newer generation exclusively through woman. Such engagement of work in the society by the womenfolk contributed in differentiating the two sexes and their role and identity. It led to the separation of roles and division of labor among the Meeteis. It is said that- ‘Nupa haibasidi sanmi lanmini, Nupi haibasidi phisa lonsa heigadoubani’ meaning men are born as warriors and woman should have the knowledge of weaving. Weaving itself is an identity of the woman folk constructed by the community. The production of cloths depends on the availability of the material and the tools which are found abundantly in this geographical region. The craftsmen use different materials and tools to produce various types of cloths for the community depending upon their utility and the cultural and aesthetic values. They possess weaving looms such as back strap loom, throw the shuttle loom and fly-shuttle loom to produce different types of cloths for both man and woman. Depending on the demand and needs of the individual, they weave varied clothes.

Meetei Identity: Text and Texture of Clothing

From the above discussion, it is evident that the Meitei community is not a homogenous, but a heterogeneous entity having seven *Salai* with each being geographically distributed in different environments. The *Paphal* cult binds them together representing one cultural identity. With the development of political movements in the construction of one group ‘Meetei’ by the *Ningthouja/Mangang* clan, traditional clothing assumed a significant role. The political power of *Ningthouja* clan dominates the Meetei cultural ideals. At present time, the different clans exhibit their affiliation through the clothes they wear though they have their distinctive identities. Alan Dundes says that identity¹⁴ does not mean an absolute or perfect identity. But, even though there are variations or changes in various context and through time, a timeless definite identity persists which cannot be altered. Identity remains constant even if the physical constituents change. Identity is affiliated with certain symbols and the symbols stand for the individual and the group

specifically. A symbol is a selected cultural element which is an essential feature of a collective identity system.¹⁵

As a symbol or the cultural element, Meetei cloth plays a significant role in the social unification under one belief system which is deeply rooted in their God *Pakhangba*. Most of the motifs which are believed to be derived from the body of mythical serpent god *Pakhangba*, they are - *Ningkhram*, *Samjin*, *Mayek Naibi*, *Moirang Phijan* or *Yarong*, *Lamthang Khuthat/Namthang Khuthat*, and *Khamu Chappa/Khamen Chatpa*. The cultural text i.e. cloth woven with certain textural features forms a superstructure that indicates the cultural meaning of the people who belong to that visual art. The texture in the Meetei's clothes is a significant component of the art to express meaning which stand as cultural symbol of identity. The emergence of motif in the Meetei art plays an important role in identifying or discerning their cultural worldview. The myths and ancient legends of the people, the emergence of Meetei as one group, and its impact on the culture and perception of Meetei people constitute the most important underlying principle in their folk arts. Accordingly, these kinds of ideology among weaver of the Meetei are also shown through clothes woven in considerable effects with various motifs. The motifs become an ideological representation of the people's perception which is projected through visual images. "Among its functions, folklore provides a socially sanctioned outlet for the expression of what cannot be articulated in the more usual, direct way."¹⁶ The mythological conception of the world is nothing but a psychological projection towards the outer world. The motifs are visual images that the perception of Meetei community to the outer world. Though the ideology of the *Mangang/Ningthouja* clan interferes in the ideology of the other clans, the sense of a united identity is expressed through the patterns of wearing clothes.

In the Meetei culture, the traditional costumes are alike throughout the valley. Though there are different clans and different sections of people in the Meitei society (e.g. the Lois), they have a shared common traditional costume. In the process of incorporating and enriching one another's culture to form one common culture for all, clothing constitutes as a crucial symbol of national unity. There might be variation in their cultural products due to the varied geo-environmental conditions which gave varied scopes to each *Salai*/clan to construct their identity as a distinct group. But they all were brought under the Meetei nomenclature. Thus, clothing reflects a

common 'metaphor' for the entire group of Meetei who has shared cultural values and social norms. In another word, beliefs and impressions are on the mind and the essence of a culture. Thus, the worldview and the belief system of the communities are intertwined with the texture and design of the cultural product to form a comprehensive text to identify their ethnic group. Alan Dundes define texture is the language of an item 'text' of folklore which has variant feature within a text that reveals variant expressive meaning in various context. Sometime text may be considered independent of its texture and may be translated. However, the result of analysis may contrast between the folkloristic structure and linguistic structure. The text and the texture of an item of folklore are not separated though they may be subjected to structural analysis.¹⁷ The text and the texture of clothing of their community can be clearly visible in their social performance. Folklorists have discussed that 'context' has been narrowed down to 'performances' to observe social and theatrical aspects. Investigation of contexts relevantly requires text to put into some kind of order. By analyzing motifs, types, and their texture, the context for a text will be briefly sketched their relation at various level.¹⁸ Language of a cloth is expressed when a wearer worn in certain context. The texture or motif determines meaning the text which is closely connected to the wearer to determined identity of an individual as well as for the community. The relationship of text and texture is found when both the items are connected to the specific setting and culture of those participating in the act of the communication.

According to the specific setting, Meetei uses various sets of clothes which are distinctive to the individual or the group reflecting their sex, age, social status, and ethnic identity. Such a set of cloth is worn to express the cultural identity of the wearer who represents a social character at a social event. Wearing traditional costumes is an important part of the religious ritual activities. "Folk Costume is the visible, outward badge of folk-group identity, worn consciously to express that identity."¹⁹ The folk costume describes the dress of the traditional ethnic group. It identifies the wearer to the outside world as well as to a particular group or community as a distinct individual who is a part of a particular community. "In every case the costume is distinct and identifiable; it identifies the wearer to the outside world as well as to his own community; it is prescribed by the community and its form is dictated by the community's tradition."²⁰ The Folk costume is worn in relation to their community and it symbolizes the identity of the community as well as the identity of the individual in relationship to and within the community. According

to Alan Dundes, sex and race are unchanging features of identity and age and status are the features of temporary identity.²¹ De Levita brings the idea of ascribed and achieved identity which is synonymously fitted into the idea of permanent and temporary identity. He designated age, sex, origin, nationality and social class as the permanent features of identity. The traditional costumes are shared equally by the people of Meetei even if there are multiple individual identities. It is a symbol of the folk community.

Among the social performances of Meetei, *Umang Lai-Haraoba* is a communal religious ritual and social behavioural event which is believed to be originated from the immemorial time that has been practicing from one generation to another under a certain belief systems within their community. Etymology of *Umang Lai Haraoba* can be understood in two ways, one is 'Pleasing of Forest Deities' which is combination of three words, *Umang* = forest, *Lai* = deity, and *Haraoba* = pleasing. In other terms, it can be referred to 'Pleasing of Lost Ancestors' which is formed by combining four words, *U/uba* = See, *Mang* = vanish/Lost, *Lai* = Ancestors, *Haraoba* = pleasing. Culturally, *Umang Lai* are existed in different forms of identities such as – deities who believed to be existed as human in the past like ancestors such as *Pakhangba*, *Poreiton*, *Nongpok Ningthou* etc. This ritual consist different performance of dances, songs, and chanting incorporating with various material culture according to time and space by ritual experts and participators for pleasing deities. It reflects the cultural behaviour in their social life. It is observed for bringing wealth, healthy, long life, and prosperity in the community. The ritual is performed by the community to bring a relationship among human beings, deities, evils, ancestors, and animals in a well systematic to bring harmony into the society. The folk costume of the community is also shown clearly with differentiating between work day and ritual activities that brings sense of sacred space. The work days or everyday dress is utilitarian and non decorative whereas in the communal ritual dresses are more decorative as well as it give the sense that people dramatizes the wholeness of life in festival mood and ritual activities. In this communal ritual, an individual is not completely free to express their individuality in wearing a cloth rather indicate the age, sex, and status within the unified community. The purpose of the folk costume is to deindividualize the individual identity within the community. Such clothing gives an immense sense of unity of the folk community and individual's identity submerges to community values.

Among the various folk costume worn by the community in this ritual, there is one costume known as *Ningkham-Samjin* or the costume of *Khamba*, a legendary figure of *Khamba-Thoibi* who is believed to be incarnated from god worn by young man. Meetei community believes that the costume was worn by *Khamba*, the legendary hero during the *Lai-Haraoba* of *Moirang*²² before God *Chingu Thangjing*. This costume is believed to be represented as the structural patterns of God *Pakhangba*. It is believed that the motif woven in the clothes are taken from the body of mythical serpent God *Pakhangba*. There is a narrative of Meetei about introduction these motifs. This costume can be divided into five parts according to the texture of clothing as well as the text- *Samjin* represents the head part, *Khadangchet* represents the bread, *Samjin Mapak* represents the crest and dorsal part, *Khamen Chatpa* represents the ventral abdomen part, and *Ningkham* represents the tail part.

1. ***Samjin***: It is a headgear, a symbolical representation of the head portion of the mythical serpent God *Pakhangba*. It is made with a rounded bamboo-frame where one end of a curved wooden piece is attached that rises in the front and bends slightly on the top. A long thin cloth is coiled over the curved wooden stick and the rounded frame. It has two ear-like decorations created on both sides of left and right which are known as *Chiren Langlen*. The long thin white cotton cloth is made from the throw shuttle loom. The two end parts of cloth projected on the two opposite sides of the left and right of the wooden stick signify the pair of ears and the curve that projects upward represents an imaginary horn of *Pakhangba*.

2. ***Samjin Maree***: After the parts are wrapped fully, a lace known as *Samjin Maree* having appliqué work in a design of *Kwakli Mayek* is stitched around the base part of the headgear which crosses in the frontal part and ends up at the top. The *Samjin Maree*, is also known as *Khadangchet*, and is hung down on the frontal side of the headgear which can be fastened at the neck part passing from top of the head to the chin that represents the portion of beard of *Pakhangba*.

3. ***Samjin Mapak***: The *Samjin Mapak* consists of motifs such as *Yenshin Mayek*, *Khoi Mayek*, *Thamba Cheplei*, and *Pheiroi*. *Pheiroi* is attached to a net-like pattern which is formed by interlacing the yellow colour yarns hanging equal in size in bunch. An *Urikshet*/egret plume of feather or a peacock feather is attached on the top of the curved wooden stick. The designs in the *Samjin Mapak* represent the crest and the ventral side of the mythical serpent. There is a hollow

part called *Ukang* at the upper part of the headgear which is believed to be taken from the part of the hollow head of the mythical serpent. Because it is believed that *Pakhangba* was killed by piercing a *Long*, a weapon that has many sharp points.

4. *Khamu Chappa/Khamen Chatpa*: This motif is believed to be taken from the ventral part of the mythical serpent's body of God Pakhangba. The motif is arranged in a repeated pattern to make the whole design of the cloth. The cloth can be produced by both silk and cotton which is woven in fine textural surface. The motif is depicted by employing wooden block printing process on a plain white cloth surface. The motif is imprinted in *Kamu*/deep indigo colour. According to K. Sobita, there are three variant colours- deep purple colour, deep red or chocolate colour which is used to mark the figures. Further, she mentions that there were seven patterns of motif which were used by the family of seven *Salai* with differing colours. However, there are only four different motifs that have been discovered at present.²³ Generally, the motif *Khamu Chappa* is found in *Pheijom* which is known as *Khamu Chappa Pheijom*, a cloth that is worn in the lower part of the male's body. If we observe the pictorial image of the *Khamu Chappa* closely, it can be divided into three sections: i) symmetrically coiled in eight corners which look like a flower motif, ii) eight figures of numerical number of *Meetei* script (the image of *Ama*/one), and iii) a distorted circular figure. The first section is found in the posture of *Paphal* which represents the mythical serpent body of God Pakhangba. In Meetei belief system, there are four directional deities, namely *Koubru*/north-west, *Marjing*/north-east, *Wangbren*/south-east, and *Thangjing*/south-west. There are four main directions also *Awang*/north, *Nongpok*/east, *Kha*/south, and *Nongchup*/west. All of these directions are referred to as *Maikai-Sungdai* which defines the terrain of the territorial boundary of the state. Culturally, Meetei performs offering of some kinds to these deities. The image of the second section which is the eight figures of numerical number one/*Cheishing Iyek Ama* of *Meetei* script is arranged around the first motif. In Meetei philosophy, first numerical number one/*Cheishing Iyek Ama* is considered to be derived from the shape of embryo. The motif of numerical number is visually close to the shape of *Paphal* which can be divided into the portion of the head and tail, a common in motif. The third section which comprised of a distorted circular figure is also visually related to the shape of *Paphal* that represents the Universe. It can be seen at the four corners just outside the second section. It is also believed that life starts from the God Pakhangba and ends with him. Culturally, Meetei practices life cycle rituals i.e. 'life-death-life' because the soul is

believed to be immortal and gets rebirth in a continual cycle. Offering of any kinds are always made in odd numbers; *Chang/life-Shee/death-Chang/life* which is considered auspicious.

5. *Ningkham*: It is a triangular shaped garment which is wrapped on the backside of the body over the *Pheijom* which falls in a v-shape that has appliqué design on its border. The cloth has fine textural feature which is in white colour with a lace having appliqué design in red colour. The white colour cloth is produced from the fly-shuttle loom. The *Ningkham* is a representation of the tail part of the mythical serpent God Pakhangba. The border of the V-shape is stitched with a lace having appliqué intricate design called *Khoi Ningkham* and *Phantup Ningkham*. At the edge of the V-shaped lace, there is a bunch of threads hanging freely in the middle part.

Such costume which is decorated with various forms of textural features embedding with their belief systems makes a wearer to transform into another character. The personified person does not define his individual identity because of the text and texture of clothing that signifies the whole Meetei ethnic group. The text has connection with the texture and both contextualize a sacred space to communicate the whole social group during the ritual events. The context especially the *Lai-Haraoba* ritual of Meetei becomes a space to reveal their communal identity through the text and textural features of clothing. Not only the text and texture stand for the group but it also signifies the sexual identity of the wearer within the community. Culturally, society has been constructed and classified their sexual identity (man and woman) and this costume clearly symbolizes the man identity. So, sex and race are unchanging features of identity.

There are some other text and texture which are found in particular traditional costume of Meetei woman folk to express identity of sex, age, social status and race through this ritual activity. In other words, the text and the texture of clothing in woman have also cultural and social symbolic meanings pertaining to the individuals in relation to her community which can be varied in different contexts. The traditional costumes represent and negotiate a web of issues inherent to the identities of an individual which symbolizes its relationship with other individuals in the group revealing the complex notion of social identity. It stands for multiple layers of meaning inherent within that group. The 'social identity'²⁴ of an individual and his/her sense of

belongingness are limited within the group. Alan Dundes says that age and status are the features of temporary identity. Among the participant of women folk in *Lai-Haraoba*, un-married woman²⁵ wears *Mayek Naibi Phanek*/a wrapper worn around the waist covering the lower body of any colour scheme but married woman²⁶ wears *Thambal Leikhok Mayek Naibi*/a wrapper having specific colour scheme worn from the breast part to cover the lower portion of their body. Generally, *Mayek Naibi Phanek* has textural feature of *Mayek Naibi*, a motif which is considered as an image that is believed to be taken from the body of the mythical serpent God *Pakhangba*. It has two or three pairs of different colour scheme of strips that make a set and are arranged in a repeated pattern horizontally. There are different colours and extra border design made by needle work which is used in various contexts of social life. The various colour schemes represent the particular clan and the relation between one clan to another. In the *Thambal Leikhok Phanek*, there are three sets of colour scheme, namely- pale reddish or pinkish, brown or dark, and white which are horizontally arranged repeatedly throughout the surface leaving the two borders on the top and the bottom part. The red or pink represents *Mangang* clan, the dark colour represents *Khuman* clan, and the white represents *Luwang* clan. This representation is determined by the belief systems of Meetei that there are three periods of time in a day namely *Mangang*, *Luwang*, and *Khuman* who protect the human being throughout day and night from any evil spirits. It is also believed that the morning time is under the control of *Mangang*, day time is under *Luwang*, and night time is under *Khuman*. Here, the colour scheme makes a set of textural patterns to classify a same sex into different age and social status. Even the style of wearing of the cloth classified the social status.

In earlier time, colour of *Phanek Mayek Naibi* identify the sevens *Salai* of Meetei community and it is used to mark their respective identities of each clans. In the book K. Sobita, “Traditionally, the *Mayek Naibi Phanek* of only seven distinct colour schemes were recognized, these corresponding to the seven clans of the Meitei; the *Thambal Machu* scheme belonging to the *Ningthouja* clan, the *Higok* scheme (that is, scheme in which the dominant colour is deep blue) to the *Luwang* clan, the *Kumjingbi* (scheme of dominant black colour alternately intervened by very narrow lines of white colour) to the *Khuman* clan, *Hangam Mapal phanek* (in which yellow of the mustard plant flower is made dominant in a scheme of combination of this colour, maroon and black) to the *Moirang* clan, *Langhou Phanek* (a scheme of black and white in

equal breadth, each measuring about 5mm.) to the *Angom* clan and the Loirang *Phanek* to the *Sarang* Leishangthem clan, characterized by the colour scheme of white and light pink.”²⁷ At present, wearing of such various colour schemes to classify their distinctive identity of clan is not much found even in ritual and profane activities. It is substituted by wearing of *Thambal LeikhoK Phanek* by married woman in the ritual practice that logically represents one ideal group which is culturally constructed by *Mangang/Ningthouja* clan. From the style of wearing and its shape of the position can also related to their *Paphal*. This cloth whether worn by unmarried/married woman is wrapped around the body, one end of the cloth is carried on top of right side of body and other end of the cloth is carried to left side of body overlapping the inner end and is tucked tightly near back side of the body. From the wearing patterns, the horizontal strips which is in the cloth is formed a circular shape which can related to the posture of *Paphal*. Thus, wearing of *Phanek Mayek Naibi* of different types in their social and cultural performance makes the values of morality and specific identity in the society. It also clearly seen that among the same particular sex, the identity can be change according to their relative, and relative to particular social or interactional settings which is recognized by the community. The recognition and determination of one individual identity is acquired through the reflection from another individual. A group is made by combining the individuals who share common interests and belief systems which are socially determined. The subjective belief in their common descent is referred to as the folklore.²⁸ The text and the texture of clothing transformed itself into a social phenomenon that contributes in setting a social relationship where the people live together under an organized social structure. Understanding the cultural identity of the Meetei community deeply depends on the costume which is constructed by the community. The social value of clothes is based on the patterning of the designs or the motifs. Many features of identity are relative to particular social or interactional settings. The sense of identity is tied under a particular context though it represents permanent or temporary identity. Such clothes that have the motif of God *Pakhangba* play an important role during the ritual activities that brings solidarity, common sharing, belief systems and commemoration. Thus, clothes and motifs become their mode of communication within the group and it becomes a language which is used a tool represent their ethnic identity within the community.

Conclusion

With the development of political movements in the construction of one group 'Meetei' by the *Ningthouja/Mangang* clan, traditional clothing plays an important role in the process of incorporating and enriching one another's culture to form one common culture for all. There might be variation in their cultural products due to the varied geo-environmental conditions which gave varied scopes to each *Salai*/clan to construct their identity as a distinct group. But they all were brought under the Meetei nomenclature. Their social unification under one belief system which is deeply rooted to God *Pakhangba* and their social perception and social world view of the group is projected through visual images. The text and the textural features of clothing constitutes as a crucial symbol of national unity. Thus, clothing reflects a common 'metaphor' for the entire group of Meetei who has shared cultural values and social norms. Such mythological conception of the world and psychological projection towards the outer world has been connected through the motifs which are derived from the ideology of Meetei especially *Mangang/Ningthouja* clan which is prominently expressed through the patterns of wearing clothes. This motif found in the traditional costume plays a role to identify age, sex, gender, and social status in their ritual context to identify permanent and temporal identity within the community. From their clothing, individual identity is relative, relative to particular social or interactional settings which mean the sense of identity is tied under a particular context. The recognition and projection of one's identity depend on the motif which he/she wears as the cloth to identify an individual in different identities regarding self and communal identities. So, the motif and clothes of Meetei has close relationship in recognizing an individual in relation to their community. Here, in Meetei costume, the wearing of clothes is a text to represent the essence and culture of their ethnic group which can be found in various contexts. The purpose of the folk costume is to de-individualize the individual identity within the community that gives an immense sense of unity of the folk community and individual's identity submerges to community values.

Besides the simple process of making art, it also inherits an essence that represents the nation. From the study of text and texture of clothing, it can be concluded that geometrical circular and triangular shape is the most prominent structure to make a design for bringing sense of belongingness to their community. Meanwhile, these motifs, in most cases, are directly related to

thoughts, beliefs and in fact myth of Meetei community. The widespread existence of this motif in most clothes can be partly related to the effects of Meetei art and their ideology and philosophy to make a united group. It can be interpreted that the most effect in texture and text relates to their perception and belief systems. Thus, the worldview and belief system of the communities are intertwined with the texture and design of the cultural product. Lastly, traditional costume is one of the most important indicators and symbols of the community to identify the structure of the society in relation to individual and community.

Endnotes

¹ Cloth is a man-made product which is a pliable material made by weaving fibers such as wool or cotton or silk by employing certain techniques and equipment from different looms. It is a woven or knitted fabric which is produced for particular purposes such as dresses, curtains, table covers, bed sheets, body towels etc. used by man.

² The concept of 'context of situation' is the narrowest and direct context which comprises specific time period, place and circumstance in which a traditional cloth is employed.

³ The concept of 'context of culture' is the largest context which embraces all possible contexts in which the entire social and cultural behaviors are occurred.

⁴ Martha C. Sims, and Martine Stephens, *Livng Folklore: An Introduction to the Study of People and Their Traditions*, Logan: Utah State University Press, 2005, pp- 134-138.

⁵ Hilda Kuper, "Costume and Identity", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Cambridge University press, Vo. 15, No. 3 (Jan.), 1973, p. 384.

⁶ The folk costume can be described as "...the visible, outward badge of folk-group identity, worn consciously to express that identity." Richard M. Dorson, (Ed.), *Folklore and folklife: An Introduction*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972, p. 295.

⁷ T.C. Hudson, *The Meitheids*, Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation. (Reprinted), 1975, p. 10.

⁸ Sanamahi is believed as the ruler of every household and all the living creature of the world is made by him.

⁹ One of the clan among the seven clan of Meetei .

¹⁰ Gangmumei Kabui, *History of Manipur*, vol.1, New Delhi: National Publishing House, (Third edition) 2011.

¹¹ *One day, Atiya Kuru Sidaba ask his two sons to travel seven times around the earth, so that the one who would come back first after completing it could be handed over the throne of king. The eldest son went away to perform the assigned but the younger son Konjin Tingthokpa could not went and remain in the palace. However, taking advices from his mother Leimarel, Konjin Tingthokpa travels seven times around his father's throne. Seeing his younger son's politeness, Atiya Kuru Sidaba handed over the throne of king to younger son. After the coronation, Atiya Kuru Sidaba gives a name to Konjin Tingthokpa as Pakhangba. Literally, the word Pakhangba is a combination of two words- Pa=father+Kangba=known, one who knows the real father. When the elder son Sanamahi came back after the completion of his task and he was being found cheated and then Sanamahi started quarreling with his brother Pakhangba. The conflict between the two brothers becomes so dreadful that it rose to the level of destroying the newly created earth. Finally, Atiya Kuru Sidaba intervned and resolved the matter. Pakhangba was crowned as the ruler of the earth and Sanamahi as the ruler of every household. In this way, Pakhangba became the most important public deity while Sanamahi is regarded as a household deity.*

¹² N. Vijyalaxmi Brara, *Politics, Society and Cosmology in India's North East*, Delhi: oxford university press, 1998, p. 59.

¹³ When the time of creation of Universe, Almighty God Atiya Kuru Sidaba send Goddess Leimarel to the living world to perform certain activities for their children (human being). She was in puzzlement about the activities

which she has to contribute for the human being. One day, while she was taking rest after certain activities, she shows a spider and a web made by the spider then she starts imitation of the technique and applied to thread and produce cloth.

¹⁴ “The word “identity” derives from the *latin* word idem meaning “the same”, but it has been painfully obvious in all the discussing of the term that its definition depends as much upon differences as upon similarities.” Alan Dundes, *Folklore Matters*, Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1989, p. 3.

¹⁵ Alan Dundes, *Folklore Matters*, Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1989, p. 8.

¹⁶ Alan Dundes, *Interpreting Folklore*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980, p. 36.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.23.

¹⁸ Heda Jason, “Texture, Text, and Context of the Folklore Text vs. Indexing”, Indiana University press, *Journal of Folklore Research*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (Sep.-Dec.), 1997, pp- 221-225.

¹⁹ Richard M. Dorson, (ed.) *Folklore and Folklife*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972, P. 295.

²⁰ Ibid, P.295.

²¹ Alan Dundes, *Folklore Matters*, Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1989, P. 14.

²² It is a name of place or territory which was ruled by Moirang clan before making Meetei as a one group.

²³ K. Sobita, *Traditional Dress of the Meiteis*, Imphal, 1998, p. 23.

²⁴ “Social identities, broadly defined, refer to those self-categorizations that individuals use to denote their sense of belonging (i. e. identification) with particular human aggregates, or group.” Micheal G. Pratt, and Anat Rafeali, “Organization Dress as a Symbol of Multilayered Social Identities”, *The Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4, (Aug.), 1997, p. 863.

²⁵ Most of the unmarried Meetei woman wears *Phanek* around the waist and the way of wearing pattern is known as *Khoidom Setpa*.

²⁶ The married woman wears *Phanek* above the breasts and the way of wearing pattern is known as *Phidol Chingkhatpa*.

²⁷ K. Sobita Devi, *Traditional Dress of the Meiteis*, Imphal, 1998, p- 43.

²⁸ Alan Dundes, *Folklore Matters*, Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1989, pp- 3-8.

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