

KHOGJOM PARBA: A TRADITIONAL BALLAD TRADITION OF MANIPURI

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ABSTRACT

Khongjom Parba is a significant traditional ballad form of Manipur that preserves the historical memory and cultural identity of the Manipuri people. The ballad mainly narrates the heroic events of the Battle of Khongjom, where Manipuri warriors courageously fought against British colonial forces. Through a blend of music, narration and dramatic performance, Khongjom Parba has developed as a distinctive oral tradition that commemorates the bravery, sacrifice and patriotism of the Manipuri heroes. This paper examines Khongjom Parba as an important component of Manipuri oral literature and performance tradition. It explores its historical background, narrative structure and stylistic characteristics, highlighting how performers convey historical events through melodic narration and rhythmic recitation. The study also emphasizes the role of the performer, who functions as both a singer and a preserver of collective historical memory. Furthermore, the paper discusses the cultural and social significance of Khongjom Parba in shaping historical consciousness and cultural identity in Manipur. As a living oral tradition, it continues to transmit historical narratives and cultural values from one generation to another. The study underscores the importance of documenting and preserving Khongjom Parba as a valuable element of the intangible cultural heritage of Manipur.

Keywords: Anglo-Manipuri War; Ballad tradition; Khongjom Parba; Manipur; Manipuri folk music; Oral narrative.

Introduction

Khongjom Parba is one of the most remarkable forms of narrative ballad traditions in Manipur as well as inhabitant areas of Manipuris in north east India and occupies an important position in the cultural and literary heritage of the Manipuri people. Rooted in the rich tradition of oral literature, Khongjom Parba combines music, narration and historical storytelling to preserve and communicate the collective memory of a significant historical event in the history of Manipur. The ballad primarily commemorates the heroic struggle of the Manipuri warriors during the Battle of Khongjom, one of the most decisive battles fought between the Manipuri forces and the British colonial army. In traditional societies, oral ballads have long served as powerful mediums for preserving history, culture and social values. Although Khongjom Parba originated in the context of the Anglo-Manipuri War, over time it has evolved into a broader narrative tradition that not only recounts the history of Manipur but also incorporates various folk tales and legendary stories. Khongjom Parba represents such a tradition in Manipuri culture, where history is narrated not merely as factual information but as a living narrative expressed through musical performance. The ballads vividly portray the bravery, patriotism and sacrifice of the Manipuri heroes who fought to defend their land and sovereignty. Through its emotive narration and melodic recitation, the tradition has played an essential role in keeping alive the historical consciousness and collective identity of the people of Manipur. The performance of Khongjom Parba usually involves a solo performer who narrates historical episodes in a rhythmic and expressive style, often accompanied by a traditional percussion instrument. The performer acts as both a singer and a storyteller, skillfully blending poetic narration with dramatic expression. This performance tradition not only entertains audiences but also educates them about their historical past and cultural values. Over time, Khongjom Parba has evolved into a significant cultural expression that continues to be performed during commemorative events, particularly in remembrance of the Battle of Khongjom. The tradition thus functions as an important medium through which historical memory is preserved and transmitted across generations. In this context, the study of Khongjom Parba becomes crucial for understanding the relationship between oral tradition, historical narration and cultural identity in Manipuri society.

Objectives

The present study on Khongjom Parba aims to explore the historical, literary and cultural significance of this traditional ballad form. The main objectives of the study are as follows:

- To examine the origin and historical background of Khongjom Parba in relation to the Battle of Khongjom.
- To study the performance style and musical characteristics of Khongjom Parba within the broader framework of Manipuri performing arts.

- To explore the role of Khongjom Parba in preserving historical memory and cultural identity among the people of Manipur.
- To highlight the cultural and literary significance of Khongjom Parba as an important component of Manipuri oral literature and intangible cultural heritage.

Methodology

The present study on Khongjom Parba adopts a qualitative and descriptive research methodology to examine its historical, literary and cultural significance. The study primarily relies on both primary and secondary sources to obtain relevant information. Primary data are collected through the observation of performances of Khongjom Parba and, where possible, through interactions with performers and practitioners who are actively engaged in preserving this traditional ballad form. Secondary data are gathered from various scholarly sources such as books, research articles, journals, and historical documents related to Manipuri literature, folklore, and culture.

Historical Background

Khongjom Parba, a traditional Manipuri ballad musical art form that honors the heroes of the 1891 Anglo-Manipuri war. Introduced by Dhobi Leinou also called Samjetsabam Leinou, an eyewitness to the conflict. This war marked a turning point in the political history of Manipur, bringing an end to the independent kingdom and ushering in British colonial administration. The events of the war left a deep impact on the social and cultural consciousness of the Manipuri people and these memories were gradually preserved through oral narratives and ballads. The Anglo-Manipur War of 1891 arose from a complex political situation involving internal royal succession disputes within the Manipur kingdom and increasing interference by the British colonial authorities. The conflict eventually escalated into armed confrontation between the Manipuri forces and the British military. One of the most significant battles of this war took place at Khongjom on 23rd April 1891, where the Manipuri soldiers made a determined stand against the British troops. During the battle, the Manipuri warriors fought with great courage and determination despite facing a well-equipped colonial army. Commanders and soldiers such as Paona Brajabashi and many others displayed extraordinary bravery and sacrifice while defending their homeland. Although the Manipuri forces were eventually defeated due to the superior weaponry and numerical strength of the British army, their resistance became a symbol of patriotism and heroism in the history of Manipur. After the war, the memory of these heroic struggles continued to live in the hearts of the people. In order to commemorate the bravery and sacrifices of the warriors, Dhobi Leinou began singing about the war by wandering from village to village, narrating the heroic deeds of Manipuri soldiers during the Anglo-Manipuri War. These narrative songs gradually evolved into the tradition known as Khongjom Parba. Gradually, the singing of Dhobi Leinou gained popularity and the people of Manipur came to remember and internalize the heroic episodes of the Anglo-Manipuri War through his songs. Through his musical narration, rhythmic recitation and emotional storytelling, Leinou vividly recount the events of the battle and the valor of the Manipuri heroes. Over time, Khongjom Parba became an important medium for preserving historical memory and transmitting it across generations. The ballads not only recount the historical events of the Anglo-Manipur War but also express the collective sentiments of the people, including patriotism, loyalty and devotion to the motherland. As a result, Khongjom Parba occupies a significant place in Manipuri oral literature and serves as a cultural bridge between history and artistic performance. Thus, the historical background of Khongjom Parba is deeply intertwined with the political and military history of Manipur in the late nineteenth century. The tradition stands as a living testimony to the courage and sacrifice of the Manipuri warriors and continues to play an important role in shaping the historical consciousness and cultural identity of the people of Manipur.

Musical Instruments used in Khongjom Parba

Khongjom Parba is primarily a narrative musical performance in which the singer narrates historical events with rhythmic accompaniment. Although the performance mainly focuses on vocal narration, certain traditional musical instruments play an important role in supporting the rhythm and emotional intensity of the ballad.

1. Dholak

The dholak is the most important instrument used in Khongjom Parba performances. It is a double-headed hand drum that produces different tones on each side. The performer usually plays the dholak while singing the narrative. The rhythmic beats of the instrument provide a strong musical foundation for the performance and help maintain the tempo of the narration. Changes in rhythm often correspond to different moods in the story, such as moments of tension, sorrow or heroic action.



Fig. 1 Manipuri Dholak

Role of Instruments in Performance

The instruments in Khongjom Parba are not meant to dominate the performance but rather to support the narrative voice of the performer. The rhythmic accompaniment helps the singer maintain the flow of the ballad while also heightening the dramatic effect of the storytelling. Through the harmonious combination of vocal narration and instrumental rhythm, the performance becomes both musically engaging and emotionally powerful. In the performance of Khongjom Parba, musical instruments play a supportive yet essential role in enhancing the narrative expression of the ballad. Unlike many other musical traditions where instruments dominate the performance, in Khongjom Parba the central focus remains on the voice of the performer who narrates the historical events associated with the Battle of Khongjom. The instruments function primarily as rhythmic and emotional accompaniments that strengthen the dramatic effect of the storytelling.

Narrative and Performance Style

Khongjom Parba represents a distinctive form of narrative performance in Manipuri oral tradition, combining elements of storytelling, music and dramatic expression. Unlike many other musical traditions that involve multiple performers, Khongjom Parba is generally performed by a single artist or sometimes in chorus who narrates the historical episodes through a highly expressive style of melodic recitation. The performer delivers the narrative in a rhythmic and emotionally charged manner that enables the audience to visualize the historical events being described. The performance is typically accompanied by a traditional percussion instrument known as the dholak, which provides rhythmic support and enhances the dramatic effect of the narration. The rhythmic patterns of the instrument help to structure the performance and create an engaging atmosphere for the listeners. The tempo and intensity of the rhythm often change according to the mood of the narrative becoming slower during moments of sorrow and faster during scenes of battle and heroism.



Fig. 2 Manipuri artiste performing Khongjom Parba with Dholak (Source: e-pao.net)

A central feature of Khongjom Parba is its narrative structure, which combines descriptive narration, dialogue and lyrical passages. The performer recounts episodes related to the Battle of Khongjom, vividly portraying the bravery, sacrifice and loyalty of the Manipuri warriors who fought against the British colonial forces. Through dramatic voice modulation, expressive gestures and emotional intensity, the performer brings the historical narrative to life for the audience. The storytelling technique often includes dramatic dialogues between characters, poetic descriptions of the battlefield and emotional expressions reflecting the suffering and courage of the warriors. This mixture of narrative elements transforms the historical account into a powerful artistic performance that deeply moves the listeners. Another important aspect of the performance tradition is the role of the performer as a custodian of historical memory. The artist must possess not only musical talent but also a thorough knowledge of historical events, cultural values and narrative traditions. Mastery of language, rhythm and emotional expression is essential for effectively conveying the spirit of the ballads. In addition, the performer often adapts the narration according to the audience and the context of the performance. While maintaining the core historical narrative, performers may introduce variations in style, tone and emphasis, thereby keeping the tradition dynamic and relevant. Through such performances, Khongjom Parba continues to function as an important medium for preserving historical memory and cultural identity in Manipuri society.

Cultural Significance

Khongjom Parba occupies a vital place in the cultural life of Manipur and represents an important medium through which the collective historical memory of the people is preserved and transmitted. As a narrative ballad tradition rooted in the memory of the Battle of Khongjom, it commemorates the courage, sacrifice and patriotism of the Manipuri warriors who fought to defend their homeland. Through emotionally powerful narration and musical expression, Khongjom Parba keeps alive the stories of heroism and resistance that continue to inspire the people of Manipur. One of the most important cultural roles of Khongjom Parba lies in its ability to preserve historical consciousness. In societies where oral traditions play a significant role, ballads often function as living archives of historical experiences. Khongjom Parba serves this purpose by transforming historical

events into poetic narratives that are easily remembered and transmitted through performance. By narrating the heroic deeds of warriors such as Paona Brajabashi, the ballads reinforce a sense of pride and historical awareness among the listeners.

The tradition is also closely associated with public commemorations and cultural gatherings in Manipur. Performances of Khongjom Parba are often organized during events that honour the memory of the heroes of the Battle of Khongjom. These performances not only pay tribute to the fallen warriors but also serve as occasions for the community to collectively remember their shared history and cultural heritage. In this sense, Khongjom Parba functions as a cultural institution that connects the past with the present. Furthermore, Khongjom Parba contributes significantly to the preservation of Manipuri oral literature and performing arts. The tradition demonstrates the creative ability of the Manipuri people to transform historical events into artistic expression through music, narration and dramatic storytelling. The performers, through their mastery of language, rhythm and emotional expression, play an important role in maintaining the vitality of this tradition. Another important aspect of the cultural significance of Khongjom Parba is its role in transmitting moral and social values. The narratives emphasize themes such as bravery, loyalty, sacrifice, and devotion to the motherland. By presenting these values through compelling stories and emotional performances, the tradition helps shape the ethical and cultural outlook of the community. In the modern context, Khongjom Parba also serves as a symbol of cultural identity and heritage for the people of Manipur. As globalization and social change influence traditional cultural practices, the preservation and promotion of such traditions become increasingly important. Efforts by cultural organizations, scholars, and performers to document and promote Khongjom Parba contribute to safeguarding this unique tradition as a valuable part of the intangible cultural heritage of Manipur. Thus, Khongjom Parba is not merely a form of entertainment or artistic performance; it is a powerful cultural medium that preserves history, reinforces identity, and connects generations through the shared memory of the past.

Major Themes in Khongjom Parba Songs

1. Heroism and Duty

Khongjom Parba vividly portrays the unwavering sense of duty displayed by Manipuri warriors during the Battle of Khongjom. Figures such as Paona Brajabashi are immortalized as embodiments of courage and loyalty. The songs emphasize that for these warriors, defending the motherland was not merely an obligation but a sacred responsibility. Even in the face of certain death, they upheld honor and dignity, inspiring future generations to value bravery and selfless service.

2. Tragedy and Loss

Alongside heroism, Khongjom Parba deeply expresses the sorrow and devastation brought by war. The fall of Manipur is depicted not only as a political defeat but also as a profound emotional and cultural loss. The songs often describe the grief of mothers, wives, and children who lost their loved ones in battle. This theme humanizes the historical event, transforming it from a distant memory into a shared emotional experience. The lamentation within the songs creates a powerful atmosphere of mourning and remembrance.

3. Patriotism

A central theme of Khongjom Parba is intense love for the motherland. The performers convey a deep emotional attachment to Manipur, presenting it as a sacred entity worth dying for. Patriotism in these songs is not abstract; it is expressed through action, sacrifice, and unwavering loyalty. The narratives encourage listeners to cherish their land, culture, and identity, reinforcing a strong sense of belonging and collective pride among the Manipuri people.

4. Colonial Resistance

Khongjom Parba also serves as a narrative of resistance against British colonial forces during the Anglo-Manipuri War. The songs highlight the injustice, aggression, and imbalance of power faced by the Manipuri soldiers. Despite limited resources and overwhelming opposition, the warriors resisted bravely. This theme underscores the spirit of defiance and the refusal to submit easily to foreign domination, making Khongjom Parba an important voice of anti-colonial expression.

Together, these themes make Khongjom Parba a rich and multidimensional art form. The core themes focus on the Khongjom War's heroism, but now-a-days it extended to include Manipuri epics like Khamba-Thoibi, Ramaya, Mahabharata and Moirang legends. Variations include Ningthorol (warrior tales) and Kangleirol (myths from Moirang) It is not only a chronicle of war but also a moral and emotional guide that teaches values such as bravery, sacrifice, love for one's land and resilience in adversity.

Legacy and Contemporary Relevance

The legacy of Khongjom Parba has extended far beyond its origins as a post-war narrative tradition. Over time, it has evolved into a significant cultural institution that continues to shape the historical consciousness and artistic identity of the people of Manipur. In contemporary society, Khongjom Parba is regularly performed during state functions, cultural festivals, and

particularly on Khongjom Day, which commemorates the heroes of the Battle of Khongjom. These performances are not merely ceremonial; they act as powerful reenactments of history, allowing audiences to emotionally reconnect with the sacrifices of their ancestors. Schools, colleges and universities also incorporate Khongjom Parba into cultural programs, helping younger generations understand their heritage in a vivid and engaging manner. A number of cultural organizations, scholars, and artists have taken active roles in preserving and promoting this tradition. Institutions such as the Jawaharlal Nehru Manipur Dance Academy and the Manipur State Kala Akademi and various Gurus individually support training, documentation and research related to traditional performing arts, including Khongjom Parba. Through workshops and formal instruction, young performers are trained in the intricate techniques of narration, voice modulation, and expressive delivery that define the genre.

Modern technology has also contributed significantly to its preservation. Audio and video recordings, digital archiving and online platforms have made Khongjom Parba accessible to a global audience. Performances that were once confined to village courtyards and local gatherings can now be studied and appreciated worldwide. This has opened new avenues for research and cross-cultural exchange. At the same time, artists are experimenting with innovative adaptations. While maintaining the core narrative and emotional depth, some performers incorporate stage lighting, theatrical elements, and even fusion music to appeal to contemporary audiences. These adaptations help keep the tradition dynamic without diluting its historical essence. Importantly, Khongjom Parba continues to function as a medium of moral and cultural education. In an era of rapid globalization, it reinforces values such as courage, sacrifice, integrity, and love for one's land. It serves as a reminder of the resilience of the Manipuri people and their struggle against colonial domination during the Anglo-Manipuri War. In conclusion, the enduring relevance of Khongjom Parba lies in its ability to adapt while preserving its core identity. It bridges the past and present, ensuring that the stories of valor and sacrifice remain alive in collective memory. As both an artistic tradition and a historical narrative, it continues to inspire, educate, and unite people across generations.

Conclusion

Khongjom Parba stands as one of the most profound expressions of Manipuri cultural heritage, blending history, music, and moral philosophy into a single powerful tradition. Rooted in the memories of the Anglo-Manipuri War and especially the Battle of Khongjom, it preserves the stories of valor, sacrifice, and unwavering patriotism of Manipuri heroes such as Paona Brajabashi. Through its evocative narrative style and emotional depth, it transforms historical events into living experiences that continue to resonate across generations. Beyond its artistic value, Khongjom Parba serves as a cultural bridge between the past and the present. It educates, inspires, and reinforces a strong sense of identity and belonging among the people of Manipur. Even in the face of modernization, the tradition remains vibrant, adapting to new contexts while retaining its core essence. Ultimately, Khongjom Parba is not merely a song tradition but a living testament to the resilience and spirit of a people. It ensures that the legacy of courage, honor, and sacrifice is never forgotten, continuing to inspire pride and unity in Manipuri society.

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