



Re-thinking the Traditional Games: Mukna Game of Manipur

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ABSTRACT

Manipur has been known for its rich and diverse cultural heritage since immemorial. The cultural heritage of Manipur includes martial arts, traditional games, dances, music, songs, and a variety of festivals. Traditional games are deeply rooted in the cultural history of Manipur. These games played a remarkable role in establishing the Manipur Kingdom in the southeast Asia. As a fine martial race, the Kings of Manipur vitalized citizens to educate martial arts and traditional games to safeguard their motherland's sovereignty from invasions from neighboring kingdoms like Awas, Khahis, Cacharis, and Tripuris. The major games that helped the martial race Manipuris physically fit were Sagol Kangjei, Hiyang Tanaba, Lamjel, Thang-Ta, Mukna, Mukna Kangjei, and Yubi Lakpi. Mukna is one of the manliest and most advanced forms of traditional wrestling practiced by the Meetei race. According to Meetei mythology, Gods played the Mukna game. The game is associated with several techniques called Lous. Lai Haraoba, an aged-old ritualistic festival of Meeteis, plays a vital role in preserving the Mukna game. Winners of Pana Mukna, the highest form of this competition, called Jatra, were honoured and given special positions in the state administration during the king's days. This paper aims to explore the Mukna game and its socio-cultural significance in Manipur society.

Introduction

Manipur is well known for its illustrious cultural past. The emergence of Manipur as an independent monarchy in Southeast Asia was made possible largely by its rich cultural heritage. Despite being a small and a hilly state, Manipur has gained international recognition for its traditional games. During the monarchical days, learning martial arts and joining the military was obligatory for every Manipuri to protect themselves from invasions from neighbouring nations. Because of their military culture and the vigour, they developed from physical training, the Meeteis were ready to conduct successful conflicts against the then-powerful bordering kingdoms like Awas, Khahis, Cacharis, and Tripuris. The indigenous games of Manipur were closely related to their people's martial heritage and physical culture. Indeed, the history of Manipur is a history of war, battles, and the like (Indramani, 2015, p.189). There may be nothing wrong with saying that this military ideology and energy derived from the enculturation of physical education that, as an active force, geared up the Meiteis to campaign successful wars against the then-neighbouring nations, particularly the formidable Burmese.

Research Methodology:

The present paper is substantially based on a historical perspective. The primary and secondary sources used in the paper are those available in archives, libraries, and other repositories. The primary sources include state chronicles, archaic Meetei manuscripts, secondary sources which include relevant published works like books in both English and Manipuri.

Discussion:

Numerous ancient literary works and other chronicles contain information about the history of indigenous games. These literary sources taught us that Mukna is one of the peculiar indigenous games played for centuries in Manipur. The creation theory of Meeteis is connected to the game. Meitei cosmology holds that Lord *Sidaba*, the supreme deity, created his younger son *Konglouton Louthiba/Lord Pakhangba* after creating the earth. Because of his father's decision, the eldest son, *Ashiba/Sanamahi*, opted to relocate to the heavenly moon. *Ashiba* made the mythical two-winged flying horse out of the agony of ruining the newly constructed land decorated with crops and plants. To control the horse *Samadon Ayangba*, *Pakhangba* employed a special Mukna technique known as the "*Hao Mukna Lengphaichan Mongba Tajin Khurou Yetnaba*" (Singh, 1992:). During this wrestling match, *Samadon Ayangba* assisted his wife, *Chakra Khongchongnubi*, while being caught in a trap called a *Lei-Kapling* (Kokngang, 2018:3). He locked his leg to the horse's legs and grabbed it by the neck to wrestle it. These legendary tales led Meitei to assume that Lord *Pakhangba* was the one who invented the Mukna game. In his book "*Meitrabak Ta Mukna Kangjei Amasung Sagol Kangjei gi Hourakham*",

Thokchom Kamal asserted that one could be overthrown down to the ground with certain techniques, thus became known as Mukna (Kamal Singh, 1985, p. 12). In ancient writings like "*Chainarol*," "*Pudin*," and "*Leithak Leikharol*," battles between powerful kings that employed Mukna tactics were described. When no one emerged victorious in the contests of *Nung Langba* (Discuss Throw), *Shook Langba* (Discuss Throw), and *Thang-Ta* Art, Nongda Lairen Pakhangba and Poireiton ultimately decided to compete in the conventional Mukna style (Sanahal Singh, 1981, p. 167). Many instances of the Mukna game were referenced in the legendary folktales of Khamba-Thoibi of Moirang. Nongban, the rival, was beaten in the field of Mukna by the mythical hero Khamba in his pursuit of possessing Thoibi.

In the past, Manipuris excelled in fighting and combative arts such as *Sarit-Sarat*, *Mukna*, *Thang-Ta*, and other martial arts. Education in military training was considered a crucial component. The most fundamental parts of military education included combat sports, wrestling, *arambai langba* (Throwing of Arambai dart), hunting, *sagol kangjei*, and *lamjel*. There are several accounts of the early Manipuris' military prowess due to their martial heritage. Renown scholar N. Khelchandra described in the text "*Chainarol*" that the Manipuris were once very patriotic and renowned for their bravery and chivalric deeds. Even the royal members received this military training from highly regarded senior instructors proficient in martial arts. Multiple battles between clans mark the history of Manipur and Salais over the dominance of the political system. Ningthouja-Mangang clan, one of the seven Manipuri clans, was skilled in Mukna Kangjei, Khuman clan in the Thang-Ta game, Mukna game, and Moirang in Lamjel. These skills were kept alive since they were crucial for defending oneself from attacks.

Mukna Sanaba, a distinctive kind of wrestling practiced by the Meetei, involves breaking a man's balance by placing his legs on his own (Kirti Singh, 1980, p. 100). The ritual Mukna game, played by the legendary gods *Lainingthou Khoriphaba*, *Lainingthou Loyalakpa*, *Ikon Ningthou*, and *Yangoi Ningthou*, was a main component at the end of Lai Haraoba festival. Mukna was a crucial part of *Kangleithokpa*, also known as *Lai Nupi Thiba* (searching for a wife), and is a part of *Kanglei Haraoba*. Usually, two teams played Mukna at the Lai Haraoba Festival. *Jatras* are the title for winners in Mukna. The team will comprise seven players who participated in the Yendamnaba trial (Meidingu, 2013), chosen based on their performance. Positional names for these players include *Makok*, *Mathang*, *Langjei*, *Langjei Mathang*, *Ngamthang*, *Khomei*, and *Khomdon*. It is usual to assign the Mukna Jatras from the previous year the title of "*Makok*." The '*Lam Mukna*' allowed players from beyond the village where Lai Haraoba was taking place to participate. As a special event, Mukna tournaments between

villages were also arranged. Two teams competed in most of Lai Haraoba's (a ritual festival of Manipuri) matches under various names, such as *Laroi* and *Singloi*, *Lok-Khuba* and *Lokhenba*, *Mangsok* and *Phamen* (Sharatchandra Singh, 1998, p. 27). A spectacular Mukna game would draw the entire community together. Mukna competitions among villages were held as special events. Cheitharol Kumbaba, the Royal chronicle of Manipur, recorded the game Mukna was held in 1865 during the reign of Maharaja Chandrakirti between two villages, namely *Laimanai* and *Ningthounai*, after the Hiyang Tanaba and Sagol Kangjei. (Khelchandra and Iboongohal, 1967:384-385).

Mukna, a contact game in the martial arts tradition, is a contest between opponents who are equal in strength and size. Usually, the game is played by two similar participants in terms of their build, weight, and age. There are many different competitions now, including age-group Mukna and *Takhatnabi* competitions. Mukna, a martial arts heritage contact sport, is for competitions between opponents who are equally powerful and match one another physically. Two players of similar build, weight, and age typically play the game. These rich traditions of Mukna and other unarmed foes of combative art show that the ancient people of this small region had an innate and gifted knowledge of self-defense even when they were unarmed (Singh, 2007).

Ningri-Phijet, *Kaptreng*, and *Maang Kishi Tung Namei* all required a special Mukna attire to play. At the important Lai Haraoba festival and the state level competitions, the contestants wore the "*Ningkham Samjin*". *Ningkham Shamjin*, however, has been widely followed as a custom in Moirang Thangjing Haraoba. Sometimes, Mukna Jatras come to the playing area from different directions, wearing the *Salai Kokyot* with *Tairen* leaf (Red Cedar) (Mongsaba, 2017, p. 146).

The rules and regulations of the Mukna game are determined by periodic revision. It includes core guidelines that all Mukna organizations and the Royals have approved. The Mukna regulations differ slightly from village to village. In the game of Mukna, there is no proper set rule regarding weight category. A senior expert in the Mukna game, who served as a judge, will find and choose the proper competitors by evaluating each competitor's physique, height, and maturity. The public approved of this senior expert, who was sporadically a former Mukna Jatra and possessed much knowledge, experience, and humor. One of the judges will bring the two players to the center of the arena. The players bowed before the king before the game begins. Players will chant "*Nahade Jatrade, Nongmada Pokpa Machana Nini Siba Hounade*" just before the play begins. Mukna players adhere to this tradition to show off their audacity and vigour. The judge will announce the "*Houro*" (start) as soon as the players are holding the phobia/waistbelt, also known as "*Phi Sinnaba*," and they both attempt to use this opportunity to throw their opponents, which is referred to as *Lou chang ba*.

There are about 64 Mukna *Lous* (techniques). These are primarily divided into *Lou Houba*, *Lou Changba*, and *Lou Okpa* (Tuleswari, 2012, p. 58). Every *Lou* has a certain significance. Numerous kinesiology and biomechanics concepts are present in each *Lous*. For each of the specific techniques (*Lous*), there are also counters *Lous* (Lisam, 2011, p. 824). Periodically, many *Lous* was added by *Jatras*, Mukna experts, and others *Jatras*. In this game, a Mukna *Jatra* or senior player can defeat a more youthful and powerful opponent using these *Lous*.

The other player's genitalia or any other uncomfortable body parts cannot be grabbed. Anyone who touches the ground with their hand or knee is considered to have lost the contest. If the competitor touches the ground with his back, the judge will declare him the loser. For Mukna game practice and play, there is no particular playground. It is typically conducted in areas like grazing fields, temple grounds, Kangjeibung, and courtyards. The participants regarded the playing ground as a sacred place. The players meditate and focus on the game while recalling the teacher's advice.

Earlier, the *Pana Loishang*, a royal department, managed and organized the Mukna competitions. Four *Panas*(divisions), *Ahallup*, *Naharup*, *Khabam*, and *Laipham*, are in charge of setting the schedule for the game and the state meet. The King always attends the final, where the winner receives the title of "*Jatra*" (champion) for the year, *Thum Nama* (a full bag of salt), *Ngabong Phi* (cotton clothing), a waiver of all state obligations, and the *Ningkham Samjin* dress (traditional Khamba headgear) and sometimes paddy field. Even the king offered respectable positions in the state administration.

During the king's days, Mukna winners received high honors and were occasionally appointed to high positions in the state administration. The *Jatra* titles gave many people a prestigious status. Due to this practice's high standard and excellence in bestowing the title, many interested individuals left their town searching for better Mukna specialists to get advanced training. The *Mukna Jatras* Kakching Ningthou *Jatra*, Loitongba *Jatra*, Thabi *Jatra*, Mayang Imphal Amu *Jatra*, and Wangjing Khuman *Jatra* were notable during the reign of King Charairongba (Sharma, 2013: *ii*). When Maharaja Chandrakirti visited the Jilla Durbar at the Barak River in Cachar, Leishang *Jatra*, a royal court member, accompanied him. The participants were given various gifts following the game to encourage them, including pans, fresh milk, money, paddy, and clothes.

Unanimous Resolutions were adopted at the meeting of the Nikhil Hindu Manipur Mahasabha, presided over by Maharaja Churachand Singh, on May 30, 1934, in the palace hall, for the promotion of the Manipuri martial arts Thang-ta, Mukna, and Kangjei, including the establishment of clubs in various locations with qualified instructors and the holding of competitions at Brabubahan Jayanti Utsab (Singh & Singh, 1983, p. 53). In Manipur, the Mukna game enjoyed widespread acclaim thanks to royal

support. To advance their activities, the kings established a small division called "*Mukna Kanba*" to manage Mukna concerns (Hodson, 2020, p.70).

A fascinating game called Mukna reveals the Meetei group, which contains numerous philosophical components. Mukna has long been popular among the Meeteis and is typically considered one of the manliest sports. Once more, people of various ages, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds have come to the field to watch the thrilling game of Mukna. Mukna is a traditional game that resembles wrestling internationally despite having peculiar regional peculiarities. Usually, only males take part in this game. The game is primarily a measure of physical strength and techniques.

G.K. Gosh remarked on this game in his book "*Games of Manipur*" as below, "*Mukna is an individual combative sport and manly art, a game of wits, rapid thinking and endurance.*" Arrogance and rudeness among players are taken very seriously and treated as dishonourable acts in this game. Mukna is a game where the true relationship between teachers and players can be seen. Winning the match in *Pana Mukna* competition represents pride and distinction for a particular *Pana* (division). Our ancestors taught the players the value of remaining polite after the game, even if we compete competently.

The native population enjoys martial arts training and traditional sports. Manipur's intangible cultural heritage and rich cultural diversity are reflected in the traditional games played there, such as *Mukna*. Mukna as a game identifies the Meetei race and ridden with philosophies(Singh, 2024, p.38)

Conclusion:

Traditional games of Manipur swayed and ruled over Manipur in the sporting heritage. With the influx of modern western sporting games like football, hockey, cricket, lawn tennis rendered to lead these indigenous games towards the deterioration and extinction. Many traditional games have vanished, and if the present tendency continues many more will soon become extinct. Some elements causing this trend include globalization, migration, demographic shifts, and socio-economic changes and modern education. Playing such traditional games encourages young people to connect with their origins and sense of self. Regrettably, online games have replaced traditional games all across the world.

The focus of youngsters has shifted towards standard academic pursuits, and the *Mukna Shanaba*, *Mukna Tamba* and *Ouraibiba* (learning and practice Mukna) have been forgotten. Manipuri culture is inextricably linked to Mukna game. Numerous historical examples indicate that Mukna had a crucial role in forming Manipur's nation. The health and fitness of our bodies are scientifically maintained through game like Mukna. The traditional game Mukna is an important aspect of the nation's

socio-cultural history. The religious festival Lai Haraoba helps in preserving the Mukna game over the centuries. It is essential to modernize and standardize its original rules and restrictions to make it popularize for future generation. We must pay attention to all sections of life to safeguard such heritage games.

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