

Significance Of The ‘Seitang’ (Great Song) Of Maring Folk Song

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Abstract—This study is mainly focused on the Socio-Cultural life of Maring Tribe based on the folk literature specifically folk songs which help in making a significant meaning of life on earth. There are two types of folk songs in Maring Tribe i.e. *Laa* and *Sei*. *Laa* is specially used in ritualistic purposes, ceremonial occasions and in the performance of folk dance while the *Sei* is based on work song, love song, narrative song and folk origin song etc. The main objective of the present study is interpretation of meaning of life exclusively expressed in the song ‘*Seitang*’ which literally means great song. The *Seitang* is a unique song essentially based on the constitution of meaning towards human being and nature. The origin and ordinal sequence of things are expressively expressed in the responsorial singing of ‘*Seitang*’. So, in the typical folk song ‘*Seitang*’, a reciprocal love and respect of friendship is shown through competitive spirit singing in the form of call and response. Hence, the present research work studies about the folk songs and their interpretation of relationship between human being and nature. The methodology of this study is based on primary data collection from different song masters; and, secondary sources available in the form of souvenir, magazine and published books are also consulted.

Index Terms—Folk song, oral tradition, Seitang, responsorial, call and response, ordinal sequence

I. INTRODUCTION

The Maring Tribe is one of the oldest indigenous tribes of the Manipur state of India. Most of them are settling in the Chandel District and Tengnoupal District of Manipur mainly in the South Eastern part bordering to Myanmar. There are few scattered settlements of Maring people in the districts of Senapati, Kamjong; Imphal East, Kangpokpi; Thoubal and Kakching of

Manipur state. In oral story of tradition about the origin of the Maring Tribe, it is based on mythological view pointing to cave origin. It is firmly believed that the Maring People had been settling underneath the earth in full-fledged and permanent settlement of villages probably in different locations. Thus, they had been living in well-established social life since they were living underneath the earth. Their life beneath the earth was terribly difficult and hardship. So, they decided to come out of the cave. But they could not easily come out of the cave because of its gate was sealed with a large and heavy stone which is called “Thlung-Thoong (Stone Gate). People made several attempts to push out or open the gate by exerting all efforts and means; but, in spite of their repeated attempts, every effort yielded in vain. They sent up domestic animals one after another to push out the gate, but every attempt made by the animals failed to materialize. In final attempt, ultimately a male mithun splendidly pushed the stone out and opened the gate.

“Marings were settling in East land or the world of underneath the earth at the following listed places: Kulwi Shongshong, Washaphai or Wanshangphai, Mongrengphai and Mongsha” (¹Maring Uparap Assembly; The Maring Tribe: A Historical Profile, 2016 p-3). It is written that “According to Myanmar traditions, Marings came from a region in Western China between the sources of the Yangtse-Kiang and Hwang-Ho rivers and reached upper Myanmar through the Ango-Range, they settled around the Irrawady River-Ningthi basin and from there reached Maringphai” (Roland 57). In the book “Statistical Account of the Native state of Manipur and the Hill Territory under its Rule” (Brown R 70), it is

mentioned “Some Murrings say that the place of the origin of a portion of their tribe was part of the Manipur capital at present called “Haubam Maruk” and that another portion took their origin at Leisangkhang.

“The Marings live on the Manipur side of the present Indo-Burma border... after their migration from the Kabaw Valley, they lived for some time in Imphal at Moirangkham (quite near the Manipur Secretariat). From there, they migrated to their present place. Some of the Marings migrated from Ango-Ching near the Kabaw Valleys” (Singh 12).

Social structure is constructed on the following social facts:

1. Material Social facts which include society itself and its major institutions like the state religions, family education etc. and various forms that underlie society like housing patterns, community institutions etc.
2. Non-material social facts which are the social rules and principles of morality, meaning of symbols and the shared consciousness that results from these.

It is evidently clear that the Maring social structure, their social solidarity and integration are built on singular agrarian culture. Relations such as individual relationship in a family, interpersonal relationship in a group and the social relationship amongst the people are the essential component in setting up of a defined structure of the society. In Maring tribe, folk songs play vital role in social build up by serving as a means of communication amongst the people, expressing emotional integrity and fostering social cohesion. It acts as an indispensable tool in strengthening social bonds and stimulating the sense of belongingness in one community.

II. METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a multi-pronged research approach to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the subject. Primary data is gathered through unstructured interviews conducted with various Laa-rung (song masters), who possess the wealth of traditional knowledge and personal experience. Moreover, the researcher personally attended a range of social gatherings and cultural events where these

songs were performed, allowing for direct observation of the performance; audience interaction, and associated cultural practices. Complementing the primary data, the study also draws upon secondary sources which included a variety of printed materials such as souvenirs of different villages, magazines, and published books. These sources provide valuable historical background interpretive insights, and additional perspectives in analyzing the essential meaning and significance of the folk songs within a broader cultural and historical framework.

A. Classification of Maring folk song:

In Maring society, folk songs take an important role as vital tool for cultural preservation; social set-up and community build up. It is deeply embedded in every occasion or event of the society. In fact, folk song is the medium for interpretation of the meaning of life and nature. There are two types of folk songs in Maring Tribe. The two types of folk songs are broadly categorized into ritual-based and social songs, differ primarily on the basis of their different characteristics in performance of occasions and their themes. The main two categories of folk songs are ‘*Sei*’ and ‘*Laa*’. Both the folk songs are embedded in cultural practices. The theme of these songs is interpretation of the tenets of philosophy and theory of socio-cultural set up of human societal structure and community value on building relationship of human being and surrounding nature.

There are more than ten kinds of ‘*Sei*’ and more the thirty kinds of ‘*Laa*’ in Maring folk songs. All kinds of folk songs have their different meanings and themes. Songs of the *Sei* category are mostly emotional-embedded songs while songs of *Laa* category are connected with the ritualistic themes.

B. LAA (Ritualistic folk song):

Within the Maring cultural tradition, there exists a rich variety of ‘*Laa*’ traditional songs that are performed during different functions and festivals. These songs are deeply intertwined with the themes and significance of the events at which they are sung, serving both as a form of artistic expression and as a means of preserving cultural memory. The ‘*Laa*’ repertoire is broad, encompassing songs connected with occasions such as house dedication and agricultural activities like harvesting, private

gatherings; large-scale community festivals, and the observance of seasonal changes and ritual practices. For example, during the culturally significant event of house dedication, specific songs such as *Uiring laa* (song based on house building), *Khonoi laa* (song based on house dedication); *roilhou laa* (song of house dedication), *rakhaang laa* (song of public gathering); *yarekna laa* (night keeping song), and *In-paam laa* (song of dedication) are sung with cultural folk dance. Each of these carries its own nuances of meaning, symbolism and performance style, often invoking blessings, recounting ancestral stories, or marking the social importance of the new dwelling.

In the context of agricultural life, especially during the stages of working in the fields and harvesting crops, songs like *Chaa aatnei laa* (Harvesting song of paddy cutting), *Chaa umnei laa* (harvesting song of paddy thrashing) and *Khong saalna laa* (song of paddy field) are sung. These not only provide a rhythmic accompaniment to collective labour but also embody a sense of camaraderie, gratitude, and respect for the land's bounty.

Seasonal and ritual observances likewise have their own distinctive musical expressions, with song such as *Kum hoina laa* (song of closing year), *Lou wana laa* (song of year commence); *Meikuk laa* (song of off season), *Suwang laa* (song of autumn season); *Lam laina laa* (song of road repairing), *Rimchang laa* (song of dead). These are closely associated with the cycles of nature, the spiritual beliefs of the community, and ceremonial acts that mark important transitions in the agricultural or ritual calendar.

Similarly, private functions and community festivals are enriched by the performance of songs like *Min laa* (song of title celebration), *Paar laa* (song of flower celebration); *Thil laa* (song of stone creation), *Raal laa* (song of victory); *Kho neina laa* (song of village celebration) and *Hong kaap laa* (Song of arrow shooting). These songs often serve to entertain, inspire and unite participants, while also reinforcing social bonds and affirming cultural identity. Thus, the tradition of 'Laa' represents a highly developed and multifaceted art form, deeply embedded in the social, agricultural and ritual life of the community with each song type fulfilling a distinct cultural role within its proper context.

C. SEI (Social folk song):

This category of Maring folk songs is broad and diverse, encompassing a number of fundamental song types, each serving its own cultural purpose and performance context. Among the most notable are *Seitang* (great song), *Seikanyer* or *Seitum* (expressive song); *Seimandi* or *Seilhoulam* (Romantic song); *Nao marnim Sei* (lullabies), *Hilaa sher* (song of lamentation); *Waidon Sei* (Working song), *Wahuina Sei* (Paddy field watching song) and *Chashu Sei* (Rice husking song) etc. While the majority of these songs are performed in social settings often during festivals, gatherings, and communal activities, certain types are reserved for ritual occasions where they take on ceremonial or sacred functions.

Among this wide repertoire, *Seitang* occupies a particularly distinctive position. It is referred to as the "great song" not merely because of its length or grandeur but because it serves as an oral repository of cultural knowledge, imparting essential information about the genesis of humankind and the sequential naming of natural creatures. The *Seitang* is performed as an interactive and competitive event in the form of an antiphonal (call-and-response) structure. Singers are divided into groups –often divided along gender lines into a male group and a female group –alternate between asking and answering questions related to the ordinal names of natural things. These may include references to flora, rivers, water sources, and other elements of the environment that are vital to the community. The performance continues until the correct answers are reached, creating an atmosphere that is both intellectually stimulating and socially engaging.

A key feature of *Seitang* is the custom of inter-village invitations, which serve to expand the event's social dimension. For instance, it is common for a group of men from one village to formally invite a group of women from another village to participate in the singing exchange, and vice versa. This reciprocal practice fosters a spirit of hospitality and mutual respect, strengthening inter-village ties and reinforcing alliances through cultural expression. The gathering becomes more than a musical contest; it transforms into an occasion for friendship-building, social networking and the reaffirmation of communal bonds. In the Maring community, the performance of *Seitang* represents far more than artistic entertainment –it is a crucial cultural practice that embodies the ethos

of the tribe. The event is rooted in a shared understanding of music as a vehicle for collective identity, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and the nurturing of harmonious relationships. Its rhetorical and repetitive structure, with the back-and-forth rhythm of questions and responses, not only sustains the performance's energy but also symbolically enacts the dialogic nature of community life.

Through the *Seitang*, the Maring people reaffirm the indispensable role of folk song in sustaining their cultural heritage.

D. Song on fire

Call for an answer: Angtu reitlainirou kanloi kei ineiyo, karwol mahangeise: koushon kouyailaya reihomaktoune-mollim kul samthumya shonya reihoinarou kouwi neilung khongni shonya kitriyo? Kanloi kei ineini lhoumayenglo; karwol mahangnitou nasho youkhamakno.

Free Translation: On this day, dear arrived brother friends, we are asking you again: no other question, on the existence of many hills, which among the stones is the first born as the stone of fire? Dear arrived friends, kindly give us your answer and please do not be displeased for asking you this question.

Response to the question: Angtu reitlainirou lhoushon kei ineiyo, inei naa mahangso mahang kithrawane karwol mayengeise: mollim kul somthum ya lhoushon reihoinarou kouwi reilungkhongni shonya kitrimakne; 'Meiwi neilungkhongni niyo shon kitrine. Yumrei kaa mayengso karkaowanung lhoushon kei ineiyo inei lhoumakhetlo.

Free Translation: On this day, my dear friend sisters, your question is well placed, and we give you answer to it: among all the fire stones, none other than the *Meiwi* thlungkhong stone of fire is the first born. If our words prove untrue, we beg your pardon for our ignorance.

E. Song on tree

Call for an answer: Angtu reitlainirou kanloi kei ineiyo karwol mahangeise: koushon kouyailaya mahang reihomaktou-mollim kul samthumya somthum lhoushonarou kouwi reithinglimni shonkitriyo? Kanloi kei ineinung karwol mahangleine; inei naa solungrou youkhamakno.

Free Translation: On this day, dear arrived friend and brothers, we do ask you this single question again: among the many trees that grow upon the countless hills, which tree is the first born on earth? We put this query to you, dear friends; please do not be displeased in your hearts.

Response to the question: Angtu reitlainirou, lhoushon kei ineiyo, mahang karkaomakni ngamthang rashilleise: Kouwi reithinglimso thinglim reihomakne, thinglimya shonkitridi thinglim 'Thingkanthouni' ani shonkitrine; khuwei kei warirou atou salnaleine.

Free Translation: On this day, dear awaited friend's sisters, without setting aside your question we give you the proper answer in sequential order: of all the trees upon the earth, none other than the *Thingkanthou* is the first-born among them people of our land speak in this way.

F. Song on flower (orchid)

Call for an answer: Angtu reitlainirou kanloi kei ineiyo, karwol mahangeise: koushon kouyailaya mahang reihomaktou, shangthing reidou wiyei shonrei arei paarri kouwi neireipaarro? Karwol mahangnidou nasho youkhamakno.

Free Translation: On this day, dear arrived sisters, we ask you once again –no other question but this: which blossom upon the tree is the first-born flower? Please do not take offence that we ask anew.

Responding to the question: Angtu reitlainirou lhoushon kei ineiyo, inei nai mahangso mahang kithrawane: shangthing reidouthakkei shonrei arei paarri kouwi neirei-paarra reipaar reihomakne 'Kumtin' nei reipaarni ani shonkitrine.

Free Translation: On this day, dear brothers who have been a waiting us, your question is indeed worthy, Among the flowers which bloom upon the tree is none other than the *Kumtin* flower, that is born first among all blossoms.

G. Song on fruit

Call for an answer: Angtu reitlainirou kanloi kei ineiyo, karwol mahangeise: koushon kouyailaya mahang reihomaktou – theilim chaanshullamri kouwi

reitheilimni theilim chaanshullammo? Karwol mahangnitou nasho youkhamakno.

Free Translation: On this day, dear sisters who have come, we put to you our question once more –no other question but this: which fruit is the first-born among all fruit? Please do not be displeased that we ask again.

Response to the question: Angtu reitlainirou, lhoushon kei ineiyoinei naa mahangso mahang karkaomakne; theilim kul somthummei somthum lhoushonnarou kouwi reitheilimni shonya reihomakne, theilim 'Theinai hei' aani shonkitrine. Khuwi kei warirou atou salnaleine.

Free Translation: On this day, dear brothers who have awaited us, your question is indeed worthy of all the fruits, none other than the *Theinai hei* is the first-born among them. Such is told in the stories of our land.

H. Song on water

Call for an answer: Angtu reitlainirou, kanloi kei ineiyo, karwol mahangeise: koushon kouyailaya mahang reihoinmaktou –mollim kul samthumya lhoushon reihoinarou tuipe chaanshullamri kouwi reituipini shonkitriyo? kanloi kei ineini karwol lhoumayenglo.

Free Translation: On this day, our beloved friend sisters, we ask you this question once again –no question else: among the countless existing mountains, which water source is the first born on earth? Please give us right answer.

Response to the question: Angtu reitlainirou, lhoushon kei ineiyo,inei naa mahangso mahang karkaomakne: tuipe shonkitridi tuipe 'Tuikanleni' tuipe shonkitrine.

Free Translation: On this day, dear brothers, your question is indeed right: among all the water sources, none other source but the 'rain run-off water' is the first born on earth.

III. CONCLUSION

The traditional song '*Seitang*' indicates that everything has its ordinal sequence of existence among all creatures. It uniquely takes the essential role in making constitution of meaning towards life of

human being and things of nature. In Maring folk song mainly in '*Seitang*' the names and meanings of things are expressed by call and response mode of singing between two parties of choir. It is basically based on the ordinal sequence of naming things of nature with significant meaning expressed in the form of antiphonal singing. This rudimentary singing of folk song is focused on the interpretation of meaning towards life of mankind with that of natural creatures. The fact is that the '*Seitang*' inevitably takes the essential role in constituting the core culture of societal structure and community value of Maring Tribe.

In other form of expression, there is another type of conversational song called '*Paokhong-Sei*' which means riddle song. In this song the real name of things is asked in metaphorical form of question. In this way, folk songs act as a vital tool in strengthening social bonds and fostering the sense of cohesive existence. Generally, the primary role of '*Sei*' folk songs is to preserve and transmit the community's cultural heritage and its value of moral messages extended across the generations. The '*Sei*' basically fosters the community bonding, provides social entertainment, and carries moral lessons. It serves as a means of cultural expression reflecting daily life and social activities in bringing people together for common belongingness.

The song '*Seitang*' takes an impactful medium for conveying messages of social bonding. People exchange their sentiments of belongingness in society by means of call and response singing. Thus, the traditional folk song '*Sei*' plays the important role in creating a sense of belonging in human society. It is the cultural bridge which facilitates the social values by fostering a sense of emotional integrity and social relationship.

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