AN ARTIST AND HER CRAFT: THE STORY OF NAMEIRAKPAM IBEMNI AND *KHONGJOM PARBA*

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Published by Zubaan Publishers Pvt. Ltd 2020
In collaboration with the Sasakawa Peace Foundation

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Typeset in Arno Pro 11/13

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ABSTRACT

The *Khongjom Parba,* a ballad that talks of events in the Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891, has become one of the main ways in which people remember the events of 1891 and their aftermath. While I was studying how the *Khongjom Parba* developed, I met the would-be protagonist of my half-formed story, 96-year-old Nameirakpam Ibemni Devi. A Padma Shri and recipient of the Sangeet Kala Akademi Award, she lived through a World War, two different kings, and three different states. Undoubtedly, she was one of the most famous artists of *Khongjom Parba*. Listening attentively, I realised that her story was intertwined with the story of the art form itself, from its genesis after the war of 1891 till the present time when it had undergone various changes and continuities. I hope to be able to tell you about Ibemni Devi and share a little of what I have understood of her craft. Through this trajectory I open up the hegemonic ways of history writing and signpost alternative reading strategies for the past.

BEGINNINGS

At the beginning of the last decade of the 19th century, Manipur was an independent kingdom sandwiched between the British India province of Assam to the west and Burma to the east. The Burmese empire had been taken over by the British following its defeat in the third Anglo-Burmese War in 1885. The Konbaung dynasty's defeat and the fall of the Burmese empire meant that Manipur, which had served as a bulwark for the British against Burmese expansion, no longer served this purpose.

King Chandrakirti who had ruled Manipur since 1850 died in 1886, and a succession crisis ensued amongst his numerous sons. A series of events led to the abdication of Surchandra, who had been crowned king in 1890 after the death of his father, in favour of his younger brother Kulachandra. The crisis among the princes gave the British an enviable opportunity afforded by the petition filed by Surchandra[1] to send in troops, and they eventually occupied Manipur. In March 1891, five British officers including the Chief Commissioner of Assam, James Quinton and the Political Agent in Manipur, Frank Grimwood, were killed inside the court premises in Imphal. Following their deaths, three columns of British troops marched into Manipur in April 1891 from Cachar in Assam, Kohima in the Naga Hills, and Tamu in Burma.

My story is concerned with the last column of troops which marched in from Tamu. Historically, the kingdom of Manipur had always been at war with the Burmese empire (referred to as *Awa-leibak* or Ava Land by the Manipuris). The pendulum of power and influence swung between the two, and stories in both Manipur and Ava are replete with tales of raids, occupying forces, and captives being taken away. Therefore, it would not be wrong to say that the war machinations in Manipur looked towards its eastern border. In that sense, it is perhaps not a coincidence that the Tamu column which marched in from Burma was met with heavy resistance while the Cachar and the Kohima columns marched into Imphal, Manipur's

capital, with little resistance. British military reports talk of abandoned stockades and little or no resistance offered when they marched in from Cachar and Kohima.

The Tamu column encountered a Manipuri camp at a place called Khongjom, 40 km from the capital on the Imphal-Tamu road (present Asian Highway 1). This conflict is referred to as *Khongjom Lan* in Manipuri (*lan* meaning war or battle) and is mainly how Manipuris remember the Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891. Major Paona Brajabashi was one of the commanders of the Manipuri troops stationed at Khongjom along with Major Chongtha Mia. While Chongtha Mia survived the battle and was later captured, tried, and imprisoned, Paona Brajabashi died at Khongjom, and his body was recovered from the battlefield by his family.[2] Every year since 1891, on the 14th day of *Sajibu* (a month in the Meitei lunar calendar corresponding to March-April), Paona Brajabashi's family has made an annual feast offering (*kumon utsav*)[3] for the departed soul at the place where his body was picked up and where his statue is now installed. This annual ritual continued even during the British period when it was outlawed and was hence seen as highly dangerous. It continued after independence too, and the *kumon utsav* in 1956 was offered by Paonam Tonsana, son of Paona Brajabashi along with his three sons, Phulendrajit, Kulabidhu, and Joginder. Following this, on 26 December 1956 (Sunday) a private committee called the Khongjom Battle Memorial Committee was set up and a memorial stone[4] was put at the site where Paona's body was found. The following year (1957) the Paonam family and the Khongjom Battle Memorial Committee decided to hold a memorial function in honour of all those who had laid down their lives on the battlefield of Khongjom on the day of Paona's *kumon utsav*, 23 April.[5] The function was held with religious rites and rituals at the memorial stone erected at the foothills of Kheba Ching and other places and also included a *Sankirtana* performance. This day was known as 'Khongjom Day'. From being just an annually observed *kumon utsav* by the Paonam family, Khongjom Day became a more public event with people from Khongjom and nearby areas

also joining in the memorial service. This family-led ceremony was converted into a state-commemoration when the Government of Manipur announced 23 April as Khongjom Day in 1975 and turned it into a state-led commemoration of the martyrs of the Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891.

Khongjom Parba is a tradition of ballad singing which developed in the peculiar circumstances after *Khongjom Lan*. The most commonly held narrative about the origin of this ballad is associated with a Dhobi Leinou who was attached as a guide to the Tamu column of the British army, which marched in from Burma. The hand to hand fighting at Khongjom and the defeat of Manipuri troops and subsequent loss of Manipur's freedom apparently left a deep impact on the unknown Manipuri guide. Back home and released from his job, Leinou was filled with anguish and remorse. He started wandering through village settlements with a tin piece in his hand and started rendering the events of the lost battle—of the beauty and peace of the kingdom being disturbed by the invasion, the call to arms, the preparation of war in individual families, and the sacrifice of the young sons in the tragic battle. *Khongjom Parba* thus became a refrain of national loss, of hurt pride and dignity of a once proud people, and of the valour and sacrifice of the patriots.

Leinou probably incorporated the *dholak,* a small horizontal drum, for a percussion effect; and a new tradition of ballad singing emerged with many young enthusiasts gathering around the singer. His disciples included Khumanthem Chaoba, Takhellambam Thambalangou, and Leimapokpam Herachandra, who became the first generation of balladeers and whose names became famous during the reign of Maharajah Churachand (1907–41). These three were responsible for adding various other themes/episodes to *Khongjom Parba* and for spreading the genre throughout the land. Tales from the *Jila Durbar* (the meeting of Maharajah Chandrakirti with Viceroy Lord Northbrook in 1874), descriptions of the reigns of former kings, and many other themes from legends, myths, and romantic epics were added to the repertoire of the *Khongjom Parba*.

This emerging art form did not develop in a vacuum but latched onto other musical forms already being practised. It took on more stories and content. Over time, the Leinou style of ballad developed along two distinct lines—a result of individual ingenuity and the creative talent of his successors. One line was led by Takhellambam Thambalangou and Leimapokpam Herachandra. A distinctive idiom of their style was their appropriate choice of suitable archaic words,, driven by the former's penchant for the folk song style to the accompaniment of the *pena*, a traditional multi-stringed fiddle whose distinctive style was later incorporated into the patterns of the *dholak*.

Another line was led by Khumanthem Chaoba and his disciples (most notably Khurai Tombi and Laishram Tonna), who synthesised the newly emerging soft, administrative Manipuri/Meiteilon words with prevailing nuances from *Nata Sankirtana* and traditional folk songs, with a careful choice of the drum's vocabulary from a Hindustani influenced repertoire. It came to embody certain spiritual, devotional moods with chapters from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* taken up and found its most notable advocate in Chaoba's daughter Nameirakpam Ibemni.

IBEMNI: A HISTORIC LIFE STORY

Khumanthem Chaoba passed away when Ibemni was still very young. She was initiated into the world of performing arts at a very young age. She started performing in *leikai* (locality) plays and in singing troupes. Her maternal uncle trained her in *bhajan* and *kirtan* singing. She also started touring with a *shumang lila* troupe and played the role of 'Thoibi', the earliest female to do so in the *Moirang Parba lila.*[6] Predictably, she faced enormous social ridicule for her presence in the *shumang lila*'s world as a woman. She finally stopped playing the role of Thoibi. Ibemni married Nameirakpam Achou Singh at the age of 16. Even though her in-laws encouraged her interest in singing and

performing, her husband had reservations. She recounted waking up early in the morning to finish all her household chores and rushing to her guru's house for lessons. She has eight children, and her eldest ones were raised on her back while she learned from various teachers.

In the meantime, she had become close friends with Maharajah Bodhachandra's second wife, whom she met at Palace Sana Pala. It is said that the queen once told the king to make Ibemni sing the *Khongjom Parba* after she heard her hum a few tunes. Directed by the king to do so, and filled with dread and shyness, Ibemni had to render the *Khongjom Parba* for the king. It is believed that the king recalled Ibemni's late father Khumanthem Chaoba and remarked what a well-known *oja* (teacher/guru/master) he had been and how much his own father, the late King Churachand had revered him. The king directed Ibemni to take up *Khongjom Parba* like her father, and thus an innocent moment amongst friends set Ibemni up to be the first woman balladeer of Manipur—and probably its most famous.

Ibemni started looking for her father's repertoire and over time learnt from her father's pupils including Khurai Tombi and Laishram Tonna of Moirang. She added variations of her own and started a new chapter in her life as a well-known *Khongjom Parba* artist who was much loved by the public. It was during Ibemni's time that the *Khongjom Parba* became a truly popular art form enjoyed by everyone. Her main innovation was in the introduction of stories from the *Mahabharata* in the fold of *Khongjom Parba*. She also composed various other short ballads for All India Radio, Doordarshan, and for special events. Before the start of the Second World War she toured all across Manipur. On 9 May 1942 while she was to Khurai to receive a silver medal from the people there along with *Oja* Tombi, the Japanese started dropping bombs. She fled from Imphal and for four years could not return home. Once back after the war, she got married and started a family, but the invitations to perform did not stop coming. She received royal patronage under Maharajah Bodhachandra and was perhaps responsible to a large extent for the popularity which was enjoyed by the ballad form even after Independence and into the

1970s. The establishment of an All India Radio station at Imphal in 1963 also helped in popularising *Khongjom Parba.* Through the 1950s to the 1970s, *Khongjom Parba* became a truly popular art form which was enjoyed by the masses, becoming a staple at family occasions and ceremonies. Various episodes were added to the *Khongjom Parba* and ballads were sung lamenting the deaths of Hijam Irabot, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Subhas Chandra Bose, and also Indira Gandhi's 20–point programme. Thus, the limits of what could be sung and what could be presented to the public were only limited by the creative abilities of the performer.

Ibemni Devi was about 96-years-old when I first met her in 2017. She was still able to walk and talked clearly, although she was showing signs of forgetfulness, often repeating the stories she had told me a while back. The ravages of time, however, had not taken away her abilities to remember her art.Once she picked up her *dholak,* the words flowed with the beat of the drum. I met her four to five times, and now that I think about it my most memorable times were always when she was singing.

A *Khongjom Parba* recital took place over several days or even continued for weeks. Ibemni stayed in different villages which had called for her. She recollected going to Thanga Karang, an island in the middle of Loktak Lake, about 40 km from Imphal with one of her students, Laishram Mani Devi, where two of the largest boats in the village had been sent to ferry her across the lake. She recalled visiting Khongjom, Kakching, and other places to perform, and how the villagers there told her different stories of the *Khongjom Lan* and how she had to incorporate these into her singing. With the advent of radio, she recollected having to fly in an aeroplane to go to the All India Radio station at Guwahati, Assam just to record a 5–minute sequence. Her deftness at incorporating new episodes into *Khongjom Parba* meant that she remained hugely popular, and a *Khongjom Parba* performance became a regular feature at all family celebrations and other functions. However, the advent of other forms of entertainment, the long years

which it takes to learn the art form, and the dearth of patronage meant that it slowly went into a decline from the 1970s onwards.

Khongjom Parba has been described as a tradition which 'involves a single performer who integrates rhythmic narration, character dialogue, various dramatic techniques, rhythmic musical accompaniment, humour, and exaggeration to bring to life stories and characters in a form of popular entertainment'(Mayanglambam and Sarangthem 2013: 15). Thus, it is a ballad tradition that combines an artistic telling of stories with rhythm. Nameirakpam Tiken, Director of the Progressive Artiste Laboratory (PAL), Imphal, an ethnomusicologist and also the son of Nameirakpam Ibemni, in personal interviews described the form which the *Khongjom Parba* acquired as a 'cultivated folk form' that took freely from other available classical as well as folk musical traditions. *Khongjom Parba* was popular because of its ability to tell stories in ways which the people understood using words and metaphors which people were familiar with. Though *Khongjom Parba* literally means the 'episode of Khongjom', it also incorporated a host of other stories and episodes. The main intent was to tell a story while drawing the audience in with physical gestures and movements by the singer during the performance.

MYTHS AND METAPHORS IN *KHONGJOM PARBA*

A typical *Khongjom Parba* rendition usually starts with an invocation to Lord Gourachandra, prayers to the gurus, and a prayer to the assembled audience, normally older men and women. This invocation to the gods and teachers is always done irrespective of how long the performance is or where it is being held. On the one hand, this invocation is indicative of the huge influence of Vaishnavite Hinduism on the Meiteis and also of the spiritual connection which the performer shares with all those who have come before her and the wisdom and knowledge it is her duty to sing about during the performance. I would like to look at a

couple of episodes of the *Khongjom Parba* as performed by Laishram Mani Devi, a student of Nameirakpam Ibemni and analyse some of the themes, characters, and metaphors used and the general intent of the performance. The episodes which I take up here mainly pertain to the episode of Paona Brajabashi going to war. Although there are other episodes that relate to events which happened before the conflict at Khongjom and also to other characters, the episodes of Paona remain the primary ones for any retelling of the *Khongjom Lan*.

N. Tiken (in personal communications) identifies several key characteristics that mark any musical tradition, which includes its philosophy, literature, iconography, aesthetics, history, and psychology. The basic philosophy of any such tradition is how it came into being and for *Khongjom Parba* this involves patriotic feelings and emotions borne out of defeat at the hands of an enemy. This sense of patriotism which has been ingrained in *Khongjom Parba* since the time of Dhobi Leinou is sought to be propagated among the people who hear it. Hence, literature on *Khongjom Parba,* particularly in the Paona episodes, deals with stories of Paona Brajabashi's bravery and heroism while facing the enemy and of his deep love for the land of his birth. An iconography is thus created around Paona using various imaginative structures, and this visualisation mapped onto Paona's character is used to advance the story. The aesthetics of the tradition are such that the imageries invoked and used are located within the same cultural setting as the audience and are therefore readily understood and absorbed. Further, to break the monotonous nature of simply telling a story, various *taals* are employed and the *dholak* becomes an important part of setting the mood, the scenes, and changes in characters' narratives.

The scene in which Paona Brajabashi sets off for battle sees him praying to Lord Govindajee where he offers 108 lights. The lights burn brightly at first before eventually burning out. On seeing this ominous portent, Major Paona[7] says that he has already offered his head at the feet of his king, and he would gladly lay down his life for his motherland. He prays fervently before setting off with his army

and meeting his commanders, Sanakhya[8] Chinglensana at Nitya Pat Chuthek and Heirangkhongja. This is our first introduction to these characters all of whom have different parts to play as the story develops. The various places the army passes through as it sets out is then described, praying at *Jagatmata Kali Mai,* at *Mahabaliumang,*[9] Laishaba Major wishing him good tidings on the Yaiskul road and so on. The army he leads is described as resembling an ornate floral arrangement, a *nachom,*[10] with Heirangkhongja the small but powerful *chigonglei* of Yaiskul, Chinglensana the *takhellei* of Nitya Pat Chuthek, and Paona himself as the *Ram tulsi* of Mahabali.[11]

The scene then moves to Thoubal where Yengkhoiba *Poilya,* who was already at Khongjom, observes a 'great' army marching down. The *Poilya* thinks that it might be Yubraj Tikendrajit who has come to join the battle but instead sees the words 'Paona General' written on the insignia at which he takes great offence. Paona eventually realises that Yengkhoiba is angry and not willing to discuss battle plans with him or even to march with him. Major Chongtha comes forward and volunteers to march his army along with Paona's. It is sung that Chongtha had 600 soldiers along with him while Paona had 700. Of course, these are not the figures as recorded in the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, the royal court chronicles, but the intent here is mainly to show two large armies marching together to meet the enemy. The initial dispute amongst Paona and Yengkhoiba is a trope for further disputes among the various Manipuri commanders, with no one trusting the others and actively engaging to bring down the others. Amidst all this intrigue and political machinations, Paona emerges as the one with an unshakeable sense of duty and the mind of a brilliant strategist.

Major Paona and Major Chongtha Mia's armies march towards Pallel where the British are. Nearing Khongjom, Paona sees a fortified Manipuri encampment on the side of the road in the open field. He says this makes no strategic sense when other more defensible locations are available and asks for it to be brought down. Major Chongtha replies that it is his encampment, and no one will take it down. Paona then tries to reason with Chongtha Mia, arguing that Khongjom is not the

ideal place to defend from. He draws on imageries and stories from the past to make his point. Khongjom, in ancient times, had apparently been named as the place where Nongda Lairen Pakhangba[12] had placed his foot after taking a large step. According to Brajabashi, it was a place where it was not fortuitous to build anything. Moreover, he recalls the story of Maharaj Garib Niwaj[13] who was fleeing from an uprising by his son. In the middle of the night, Garib Niwaj, who had not had anything to eat for long, asked to be fed. One of his followers at Khongjom, fearing the king's son, said that it could not be done since there was no water in the house. Hence, the king was not given anything to eat. However, the king saw a river running in the distance. On this, Garib Niwaj scolded his follower for lying to him and not admitting that he was actually scared of his son. Garib Niwaj cursed the land of Khongjom saying it would only know misery and ruin, and nothing would grow there. Paona's recourse to this old curse by Garib Niwaj and the mention of the mythical Pakhangba shows the ways in which balladeers often brought in additional details and stories to accentuate the original story. This also retained the attention of the audience while hearing a story about their own past. Major Chongtha does not budge from the encampment and before long Paona sees British troops marching up the Langathel hillside. On this he remarks how the British soldiers look like swarms of ants, and how if he only had a cannon or two he could wreck much havoc on them. He then sends two messengers back to the palace to ask for cannons.

The story moves forward with these two messengers and their attempts at getting the cannons, which are thwarted at one point or the other by various characters including General Thangal who says that the cannons are required for the defence of the palace and are of no use with Paona. Paona is not trusted by a lot of officials at the palace, and they doubt his real intentions. Tikendrajit steps in and allows the cannons to be taken to the battlefield. There, however, is one last betrayal with the messengers being told near Khongjom that the battle is already over and that the cannons should be sent back.

In the meantime, Paona is shown waiting for the arrival of the cannons, and when his messengers come back empty-handed, he accepts this without any complaint. He, however, sends a letter back to the king proclaiming his loyalty to the throne while warning the king of being betrayed by his advisors. The British start shelling the Manipuri camp, and Paona instructs all his troops not to come out and instead hide in the trenches within the fort. Paona stands all alone on the mud ramparts, and his sword 'cuts down' the first 'bomb' fired towards the camp. Paona is joined by Chinglensana, and the second time, the British fire two 'bombs', which are cut down by them. The tempo of the *dholak* noticeably picks up as Paona and Chinglensana cutting down bombs is narrated. At last, Chinglensana is fatally hit, and he breathes his last.

The British throw everything at Paona, but he withstands their shelling for more than an hour. At this the British start firing 'fire bombs' which set the Manipuri camp on fire forcing the soldiers to come out. Furious hand-fighting is then depicted amidst all of which the song sings of Paona fighting bravely even as all his comrades fall one after the other. People of the nearby villages are described as standing on the distant hills or on trees watching the fighting. They are depicted as seeing Paona fighting alone valiantly and asking him to retreat. Finally, hours after fighting and when all his troops have almost been defeated, Paona asks the British to kill him. The martyr blessed by the gods is finally born.

This narrative is a heroic and almost mythical account of a single man who stood up against British cannon fire and never gave an inch to the enemy. Paona's attribute of being blessed by the gods is played up, and his eventual fall is mourned. I observed both Ibemni as well as Laishram Mani with tears in their eyes during this part of the rendering, and I can only conclude that Paona's death meant much more than the deaths of the rest. Paona's fall comes to stand for the fall of Manipur and the loss of her people's freedom. Referred to as *edhou* (grandfather)by Ibemni, Brajabashi personifies the fathers and sons who died fighting the British. This familial loss is mapped onto

the larger loss of Manipur's freedom and the enslavement of a once free people. In that sense, a performance of *Khongjom Parba* becomes a collective lament of society at large. A collective cathartic moment is engineered by a recollection of Manipur's past and its myths, a glory which was lost when Paona laid down his life for his motherland. The valour and courage of the soldiers even in the face of imminent death serves to provide hope to the newer generations. Through its evolution during the long rule of the British, *Khongjom Parba* also became a tool for healing and dealing with trauma. It served to re-instil a sense of oneness by telling the tragic story of Brajabashi and the sacrifices that he and the others made.

The tragedy of Paona and the other martyrs is further highlighted by the characters of the mothers and wives of the soldiers. The wife of the *Yaiskullakpa,* who was sent to safeguard the eastern front, is introduced as one of the first women characters in the ballad leading up to the war. She is described as *Mama Shija,* a mother and also a person of royal blood. The *Yaiskullakpa* asks her to look after their only son, Sangoisana, and their household in his absence. The young lad Sangoisana rushes after his father who was called to the royal court, and there prostrates himself before the king and asks to be sent to war. On seeing that he is determined and will not be dissuaded, his father, the *Yaiskullakpa* and the king give him their blessings. Sangoisana then changes into war garb and departs with his father for war. On seeing her only son dressed for war, *Shija* weeps lamenting that he is still too young for war and looks on as he and his father march into the distance. People line the streets to see off the marching soldiers. Fathers praise the bravery of young Sangoisana while mothers weep on seeing the young man. Both the *Yaiskullakpa* and his son later perish in battle.

Their deaths are sung about, the British officer whom Sangoisana killed to avenge his father is also sung about, but we can only speculate as to what happened to *Mama Shija,* the mother and the wife.

The character of the mother is best exemplified by Heirangkhongja's mother. She is first introduced in the ballad as learning the news of Paona Brajabashi preparing to go to battle. She hears this news in *Sana*

Keithel, the royal market. On reaching home, she tells her son the news and urges him to visit his teacher before he leaves for the battlefield. In the morning, Heirangkhongja dresses for battle and prepares to set out. On seeing this, his mother weeps and beseeches him to stay and not leave his old mother alone. Heirangkhongja replies that as the son of a poor widow he has not been able to do anything for his *oja* Paona Brajabashi. As such he can only follow his *oja* into battle as compensation for his teachings. He then leaves for Paona's house where his mother follows him. On reaching Paona's house, she holds her son's wrist and implores Paona Brajabashi in the name of all the gods to be victorious in battle and to safely return her son to her after the battle. All the assembled people at Paona's house weep at the sight of the old mother and her young son. It is sung that Paona marvelled at this selfless act of the *Meitei Chanu*(*Meitei* woman/lady). He thinks to himself how magnanimous the unfortunate mother is in sending her only son to war. The cry of this poor ill-fated 'mother' carries on to the performances where both Ibemni Devi as well as Laishram Mani shed tears on singing of longing eyes seeing off dear ones.

The theme of motherhood (here read as heterosexual motherhood) runs in the 'enemy' also. It is sung that on hearing of the death of Chief Commissioner Quinton and other British officers at the hands of the Manipuris, *Maharani* Victoria flies into a rage. Her anger is as fierce as a raging fire. She comments that even though 'my' Commissioner Quinton had admitted his mistake, laid down arms and begged to be forgiven several times, he was still killed. This killing of her officers, who were helpless like trapped fish, shall not be forgotten and the Manipuris punished. She then proceeds to inquire about the number of British troops at hand. Of course, this is not how events played out. British military decisions regarding the expedition to Manipur were taken at the Chief Commissioner's office at Shillong through the Viceroy's council, which sat at Shimla and Calcutta. Opinions in London were far from favourable of the decisions taken in British India, and several high-ranking officials, both in the British government and in Parliament, condemned the treatment meted out

to Manipur. The figure of Queen Victoria as a mother protective of her children is our primary concern here which further highlights the theme of motherhood.

The one character which deviates from the norm is presented as a *leishabi,* an unmarried woman. She is sung of as *Koibi* and also referred to as *Mem Persondri* (perhaps a corruption of ma'am sahib). She is described as the *nupi* (wife/woman) of Political Agent Grimwood living in Grimwood's bungalow. She is said to be good friends with Yubraj Tikendrajit, playing badminton with him regularly and also indulging in other activities. On seeing the machinations of the British officers for capturing Tikendrajit, she thinks to herself that in all her time in Manipur she has known Tikendrajit to be an honest man who has no quarrel with anyone, and someone whose company she enjoys. So she thinks that she must warn and save him. On seeing the king and his retinue waiting at the palace gates for the British officers to meet them, she plucks some flowers from the residency grounds and puts them in her handkerchief. Then, she starts throwing them in the direction of the palace signalling to the king that he should head back and not come to the bungalow. On seeing her signal the king goes back inside the palace. This is all that is sung of Ethel Grimwood, wife of Frank Grimwood, the British Political Agent in Manipur. I am not sure why she is sung of as a *leishabi* meaning an unmarried woman. Perhaps it is because she did not have any children and was hence considered a 'maiden,' with all the accompanying problems inherent in such a categorisation. It is perhaps to mark her out as someone who helped and aided an enemy. Or perhaps one should read her characterisation as a *leishabi* against that of the 'mother.'

In reality, she escaped from the fierce fighting at the British residency after the deaths of her husband and other British officers, though she fled not knowing whether her husband was still alive or not. Her experiences were later retold in a memoir which has since served as a valuable first-person account of the events of 1891 (Grimwood [1891] 2008)

THE ORAL AND THE WRITTEN AND A NEW *KHONGJOM PARBA*

British anthropologist Jack Goody wrote, 'oral performance in literate societies is undoubtedly influenced to different degrees by the presence of writing and should not be identified with the products of purely oral cultures' (Goody 2011: 321). What is of concern here is how *Khongjom Parba* as an oral tradition interacts with and reacts to writing and the permanency brought about when something gets written down.

Ibemni Devi spoke with regret about how the younger generations could never fully recall the words of the ballad even when they were written down. What needs to be noted here is of course how the written came to influence something which had been passed on orally. For her, each episode in the ballad holds a separate meaning, and her feelings creep through in every performance. This is perhaps a nod to the memories embodied in the stories and her experiences. Goody (2011: 323) argues that oral memory is simply an experience reworked. Goody also argues that like all cultures, oral ones depend on stored knowledge, but much of it is stored in a way that cannot be recalled precisely, in the manner we usually relate to the psychological operation of memory. So a performance becomes a reworking of earlier experiences. It is in that sense that Goody refers to every performance as a creative act where there is no distinct separation between performer and creator, and no such dichotomy exists (ibid: 324).

This brings me back to my earlier point about the ingenuity of the performer and the addition of various episodes other than that of the conflict at Khongjom into the corpus of *Khongjom Parba.* If every performance is a reworking, it can perhaps be argued that no two performances of the ballad are the same. Hence, *Khongjom Parba's* performance can take on different meanings at different points of time. We have already seen how after visiting different places and hearing various stories about the events at Khongjom and their aftermath, Ibemni had to incorporate new storylines into her performance.

This interaction between the written and the oral takes various forms. I would like to pick up the story in 2006, which was when a book (Chongtham 2006) on the life of Major Chongtha Mia, the other commander of Manipuri troops at Khongjom, was published. The book was written by Chongtham Samarendra Singh, one of the descendants of Major Mia. Singh also served as the Commissioner of Art and Culture in the Government of Manipur. The importance of this book lies in the fact that it sought to change the narrative of the battle that had grown along the lines of Paona Brajabashi's martyrdom and the apparent neglect of Major Chongtha Mia. It claims to tell the real story of Major Chongtha Mia, whom he describes as 'the Commander of the Manipuris at Khongjam'. Armed with this book as a resource, Ibemni was approached to 'correct' the episode of the *Khongjom Parba* that dealt with the battle and highlight Major Mia's actions more. Ibemni rejected this, and the reason she gave for her rejection was that as a tool representing the patriotic sacrifice and the deeds of the martyrs who laid down their lives for the nation, the primacy of Paona Brajabashi and the others who died in the battle more than served her purpose in the ballad. She was, however, uneasy with singing about a character who according to her ran away from the battle.

After this, another balladeer Khumanthem Sundari, who is perhaps the most famous contemporary practitioner of the art form, was approached, and she started singing about Major Mia's action thus adding a new episode to the *Khongjom Parba* stable. Khumanthem Sundari grew up learning from Ibemni Devi among other gurus, and her role in the modern avatar of *Khongjom Parba* is noteworthy. In an interview, Sundari describes her surprise at finding out the 'true' story of the battle of Khongjom in which Major Mia as the commander of the Manipuri troops played an important part. She dismisses the descriptions of the battle in older renditions and performances as inherently illogical and as acts which were not physically possible. Sundari sees her new rendition as correcting and presenting the 'true' history for future generations.[14]

Sundari's insistence on a 'true' history has its genesis in a controversy which has raged in Manipur for the last couple of decades regarding the date of the conflict between the British and the Manipuris at Khongjom and its subsequent commemoration. Despite the government-held Khongjom Day every year on 23 April, sections of the public contest the accepted narrative and instead present another narrative. This contestation arises out of a difference in which the date of the military engagement at Khongjom was recorded by two different sets of sources. Manipuri sources, including entries made in the *Cheitharol Kumbaba,* the Royal Court Chronicles of Manipur, records the date as 23 April 1891. British military reports, on the other hand, record the date as 25 April 1891. This has led to an intense public debate on the nature of the conflict itself and also on the way the memorialisation of the events is being done. A committee constituted by the Government of Manipur in 1981 affirmed the date for Khongjom Day as 23 April, and the commemorations till date have always been held on this date. The martyrs of Khongjom have been acknowledged, but there is a controversy as to who gets to be called a 'martyr', and when the 'martyr' is to be remembered.

The Khongjom Battle Memorial Celebration Committee, Manipur (KBMCCM) is of the view that the commemoration of the Battle of Khongjom should be held on 25 April every year as the real date of the battle is 25 April 1891. Founded in 1994, KBMCCM submitted relevant documents showing the date of the battle as 25 April 1891 to the State Governor's secretariat on 19 September 2012, which provided a fillip to the public debate. The documents were later also submitted to the Chief Minister's secretariat on 8 July 2016 urging the Chief Minister to institute a review committee and 'rectify the date and location of the historic Khongjom War.' Various opinions on the matter are still being formed and talked about in both the vernacular and English press in Manipur.

What is of interest to me is that KBMCCM lists Chongtham Samarendra Singh as one of its co-founders. The publication of his book and the concomitant commemoration held on 25 April every

year as the real Khongjom Day by the Chongtham family and the KBMCCM highlights an ongoing attempt to change the narratives around *Khongjom Lan* and the celebration of Khongjom Day. It is for this development that Ibemni Devi and after her refusal, Khumanthem Sundari, was approached with an appeal to sing about the 'real' events of *Khongjom Lan* in *Khongjom Parba*.

The controversy over the memorialisation of *Khongjom Lan* till now has been hooked on questions of history and its nature. I, however, argue that the nature of history invoked and used has been of an extremely limited nature. The whole enterprise of history has been limited to the question of fixing a date and of showing what actually happened. Even the debates in the government constituted committee of 1981 followed the objective notion that the 'truth of the past' can be known with an almost blind faith in documentary evidence.

In the insistence on written, documentary evidence, the debate on the dates and sites of the events at Khongjom has neglected other sources of the event. Though a few references are made to the existence of *Khongjom Parba*, no satisfactory examination of whether these oral sources can be used for fruitful interrogation of the events has been done. They are referred to only in their capacity as homage and eulogy to the commander of the Manipuri forces, Paona Brajabashi. This is done to show the incompleteness of the British sources which make no mention of the commander. Hence, it is argued that the British had not produced 'factual historical accounts'. The motive behind the omission, it is said, is belittling local heroes. In neglecting oral sources and family rituals, the historiographical debates regarding the conflict at Khongjom have been made poorer and utterly inadequate. This inadequacy is also reflected in the controversy over the memorialisation of Khongjom Day. There have been almost no attempts at dealing with the various intricate debates on memorialisation and the issues which these debates have highlighted. Instead what is now seen in the various comments on the issue is a parochial, shallow attitude uninformed by both notions of historiography and memorialisation.

The argument I make is simple: all the groups concerned seek to derive their legitimacy from 'history' and the historical sources which they marshal. 'History' is seen as the final arbiter.[15] However, this often means a very narrow version of history, one almost exclusively based on written sources, with a preference for official British ones. Hence, there is no question of entertaining other 'sources' which talk about the same events but in often radically different terms, both in content and intent. Secondly, and more importantly, this disdain for non-official, non-written sources betrays an intolerance for listening to and accepting the existence of alternative viewpoints. What this means is that the entire debate around the controversy gets bogged down along hard factional lines with little room for discussion and debate.

Alessandro Portelli (1981, 1991) writes that written and oral sources are not mutually exclusive. They have common characteristics and intersect as much as they have certain autonomous and specific functions of their own and thus require 'different and specific interpretative instruments'. Portelli warns against overvaluing or undervaluing oral sources 'by cancelling out *specific* qualities, turning them either into mere supports for traditional written sources or into an illusory cure of all ills' (Portelli 1981: 97). While not implying that oral history has no factual interest, Portelli argues that oral history tells us less about events as such than about their meaning. Thus, the speaker's subjectivity plays a much larger role than in other sources of history writing.[16] And so he argues that subjectivity is as much the business of history as the more visible 'facts'. He writes, 'what the informant believes is indeed a historical *fact* (that is, the *fact* that he or she believes it) just as much as what 'really' happened' (ibid: 100).

Portelli says that 'oral sources are always the result of a relationship, a common project in which both the informant and the researcher are involved, together' and that 'oral testimony is only a potential resource until the researcher calls it into existence' (ibid: 102). According to Portelli, control over the historical discourse remains firmly in the hands of the historian. Having said this, he argues that oral history changes the historian from his/her 'traditional' role as an

'omniscient narrator' who is impartial and detached and who never appears in the narrative to one who is pulled into the narration and becomes a part of it. According to Portelli, there is an implicit 'deeper political involvement than the traditional development of the external narrator.' But this involvement is not simply a matter of ideology, or of subjective side-taking, or of what kind of sources one uses and instead is 'inherent in the historian's presence in the history told, in the assumption of responsibility which inscribes him or her in the account and reveals historiography as an autonomous *act* of narration' (ibid: 105). Thus, when historians explicitly enter the story, 'they must allow the sources to enter the tale with their autonomous discourse.' As such, oral history has no 'unified subject' and is told from 'a multitude of points of view' (ibid: 106).

Various scholars have commented on the relationship between history and the past. Historians have normally seen the two as related but also enjoying autonomous existence. Carr (2018) makes a distinction between what he calls 'historical facts' and 'facts of the past.' Although both refer to things which happened in the past, the former are distinguishable from the latter by virtue of their being identified and used by a historian in the writing of a history. So, in the case of 'historical facts', the past and history converge to become one, in the sense that history is written with those 'historical facts' as used by the historian. At the same time, the historian also accepts the existence of those 'facts of the past' that lie in the past but have not been used in the writing of history. There is thus a tacit acceptance of a 'past' and a 'history'. However, the existence of this 'past' is predicated on the recognition of the 'facts of the past' as such by the historian. The 'past' exists in so far as it is intelligible to the historian's eye as not being a 'historical fact' but as a 'fact of the past'. This is determined by the historian, and thus the 'past' cannot exist outside 'history'.

The question then becomes of what happens to those 'pasts' which are not recognised as 'history'. In his essay 'History's Forgotten Double', Nandy (1995) argues that history is just one way of constructing the past. He offers a non-modern critique of the hegemony which history

has come to exercise in our construction of the past. Derived from an idea of scientific rationality, the discipline of history has come to see the past only in so far as it can historicise it. This means that Carr's 'facts of the past', which did not become 'historical facts', exist only as the past because the historian acknowledges them. The 'past'-ness of the past does not exist if the historian does not recognise it.

CONCLUSION

When I started work on this paper, I had a vague notion that I wanted to tell a story. When I first wrote to Zubaan I had given titled the paper, '*Khongjom Parba*: The Story of a Ballad through the Ages.' I had been writing and understanding narratives of the Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891, contemporary narratives as found in British records and Manipuri chronicles, narratives as they developed a century later when Manipur became a full-fledged state in the Indian Union, and personal narratives and memories.

There are some possible ways in which a historian can approach and use *Khongjom Parba*as a possible source of writing history or as traces of the past. *Khongjom Parba* as we have already seen, developed with Dhobi Leinou after he returned from the war and started singing of the defeat suffered by the Manipuris, of their heroic last stand, and his own loss of self having served in the British column and seen his own countrymen defeated. Thus, his lamentation in the form of a ballad reflects his attempts to reconcile his actions with his love for his country and the loss he felt once he became the subject of an occupying force. Lt. Grant, a British officer in the Tamu column, records the astonishment and disgust felt by the Manipuris at Pallel when they heard about the defeat at Khongjom (Grimwood [1891] 2008). It can thus be assumed that the feeling of repentance felt and sung by Dhobi Leinou fits into the general sense of loss felt by Manipuris as recorded by Lt. Grant. The 'historical fact' of a sense of lament and

loss sung in the ballads can be established by this corroboration of Lt. Grant's record.

Moreover, the ballad can also be seen in light of the intent behind its narratives, and what the ballad wants to convey. Thus, one can understand the episode in *Khongjom Parba* when Paona Brajabashi is described as cutting down the bombs fired by the British as a heroic attempt by a technologically-lesser, ill-equipped combatant to ward off an enemy equipped with better and more modern weapons. The part where Paona asks for more guns from the palace and elsewhere and the attempts by various officials to thwart his request can be seen in the same light of a valiant, patriotic attempt made to fight against an enemy despite the enormous hardships and political intrigues behind such an attempt. The weaponry of the Manipuris, or rather its lack, becomes a metaphor to show a defiant and valiant character. The entries in *Cheitharol Kumbaba,* the Royal Court Chronicles of Manipur, as they pertain to the deployment of cannons and troops, could perhaps be seen together with this analysis of the narratives in *Khongjom Parba.*

All these different readings and their relevance for writing history is defined by a historian and her craft. But because of the hegemonic nature of history in its relation to the past and the primacy attached to history as the controversy over *Khongjom Lan* has developed, an independent existence of the ballads on their own terms is threatened and sought to be rendered invisible. This is clearly seen in the attempts made by the Chongtham family to rework the narratives of *Khongjom Parba* and in Khumanthem Sundari's comments. The ballads which had served the purpose of instilling a sense of patriotism, of acting as a cathartic moment of release from the pain of defeat, and of a collective lamentation by a defeated society are now tasked with the modern burden of proving their own facticity. The nature of the ballads themselves is changed when questions are asked about whether an event or action which is sung about is realistically possible or not.

While listening to the *Khongjom Parba,* the facts have always been assumed and taken for granted. The question is not about whether one

takes a particular action to be true or false but rather of one's reaction on hearing the ballad. The performers also try to capture and showcase the emotions which are being sung about. Hence, I have observed both Nameirakpam Ibemni and Laishram Mani weep while singing about Paona on the battlefield. The attempt is to make the audience think of the actions and intents of the characters in the ballad, thereby making them imagine what they mean in their own lived experiences. A reading through the lens of history is, however, fixated on proving whether an action or event is real or not, and it always asks whether is happened or not. This development of history, fixated on the written and archival sources also means that the ballads can no longer have an independent autonomous existence. The question of moralising, of providing pointers and morals – which Nandy argues is a common feature of all non-historical modes of constructing the past – is lost in the modern dash towards a scientific verifiable history. Nandy identifies these non-historical constructions as part of a moral venture that reaffirms complex inter-related social realities which do not fall neatly into categories of 'us' and 'them' but instead confirm the varied ways in which people co-exist. A loss of these morals and values in the face of history would uproot a society and make it unintelligible to itself. I argue that the attempts made to jacket the stories of the *Khongjom Lan* behind the rubric of 'right versus wrong' take away from the morals and values constructed, which connect people with their past.

Ibemni Devi passed away at the beginning of this year while this piece was still being written. I would have loved to talk with her one last time. Her *Khongjom Parba* lives on, perhaps not in the way she knew it before but certainly expanded by her additions. A new generation has taken over, and we will remember what it means for us to live within memories we create together, and how we collectively remember pasts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank *Oja* Nameirakpam Tiken for kindly agreeing to talk with me and also for introducing me to *Abok* Ibemni, whose memories I shall treasure. I am thankful to *Eche* Thingnam Anjulika for reviewing this article and providing valuable additions. I am also indebted to Sunny Gurumayum and Dr Usham Rojio for going through earlier drafts of this paper and giving helpful comments.

NOTES

1. Surchandra filed a petition with the Governor of Assam claiming that he had been forcibly removed from his throne and requested the aid of the British to reclaim his position.
2. The condition of the body found, the harsh trek through the hills, and the eventual decision to hold the funeral at Urup Arapti before the body could reach Imphal was narrated in detail in an interview with Professor Paonam Gunindro, great-grandson of Paona Brajabashi on Wednesday, 6 September 2017.
3. As part of the death rituals, a family usually offers a feast for others known as *Kumon Phiroi* on the first death anniversary and organises a *chahi-gi din/ kumon utsav* annually. The Meitei Vaishnavites of Manipur also usually offer *tarpan* during the second half of *Langban* (usually coinciding with September) as an offering to their ancestors.
4. The engraving on the stone slab reads, 'MAJOR GENERAL PAONA BRAJABASHI/AGE 58/THE VALIANT HERO OF MANIPUR/DIED FOR FATHERLAND/ON THURSDAY THE 23rd APRIL 1891/ SUPERHUMAN IN BATTLE/DEVOTED UNTO DEATH' (taken from a photo given in P. Phulendrajit's, *Paona Brajabashi).*
5. The 14th day of *Sajibu* in 1891 corresponds to April 23 in the Gregorian calendar.
6. A *Shumang Lila* is a play (*lila*) performed in an open space, mostly courtyards (*shumangs*), with the audience seated around a square (mostly raised) where the performance takes place. The legend of *Khamba-Thoibi* tells the tragic romantic story of Thoibi, the princess of Moirang (a principality south of

Imphal on the banks of Loktak Lake) who fell in love with Khamba, an orphan. *Moirang Parba* is said to have developed a few years after the Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891 as a satirical theatrical production with dialogues mainly rendered in the *pena-seisak,* a type of singing associated with the stringed instrument, *pena.*

7. Often sung as *Menjor* Paona.
8. Of royal blood. Chinglensana's father Bara Chaoba had once been a pretender to the throne.
9 *Umang* meaning a sacred grove. A temple of Hanuman is located at Mahabali.
10. Normally worn by women as an accessory in the hair besides one of the ears, made of a variety of flowers.
11. A classic *nachom* is usually arranged with a white *takhellei* (ginger lily) as the base, and into the small hole of its petals where the antenna emerge is a small round *chigonglei* flower and a purple floret of the *Ram tulsi*. *Ram tulsi* or a common *tulsi* plant is normally grown in the centre of the courtyard in all Meitei households. The three characters, each with his own persona and character come together as one powerful, beautiful whole like the classic *nachom*. I read the imagery along the lines of a beautiful but ultimately vain attempt, a *nachom* ultimately drying and losing its value no matter how beautiful it once might have been.
12. The first mythical king of the Meiteis who is said to have reigned from 33 AD according to the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*.
13. Garib Niwaj, known as Pamheiba before he converted to Vaishnavism, reigned from 1709–1748 AD.
14. The life story of Khumanthem Sundari mirrors that of Ibemni in that she had to give up singing because of societal pressures. It was only after she returned to her paternal home after her divorce that she took up *Khongjom Parba* again. Now she teaches the art form to young students while also performing regularly. Her relationship with the Chongtham family, the patronage extended to her, and the reason why she agreed to sing about Major Chongtha Mia can perhaps be further examined. She said that we should all learn to keep up pace with an ever-changing world and that it would not do to keep hanging on to old, outdated, and fanciful ideas. In keeping with *Khongjom Parba's* ability to take in all stories, she said that she would be happy to render any story related to any historical figures of Manipur as a ballad if she is provided with their life stories.
15. There are often calls made for historians from Manipur to delve into this issue and render the 'truth' (in Manipuri, *achumba puthokhanningi*).

16. Portelli pushes the argument beyond a single individual's subjectivity and says, 'if the research is broad and articulated enough, a cross-section of the subjectivity of a social group or class. They tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did.' (Portelli 1981: 99–100)

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