

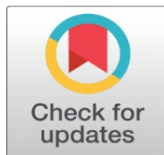


## SUBIKA ART: AN EARLY VISUAL ART FORM OF MANIPUR

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### ABSTRACT

There are six surviving manuscripts under the category of Subika namely *Subika*, *Subika Achouba*, *Subika Laishaba*, *Subika Choudit*, *Subika Cheithil*, and *Thengrakhel Subika*. For this paper the manuscript “Subika Laishaba” has been discussed. Illustration of Subika Laishaba is the manuscript painting among the earliest surviving visual arts forms of Manipur. Though the advent of *Subika Laishaba* paintings has lately acquired from various individual collections, the painting possesses an interesting area of studying its visual elements and cultural values of Meitei community. The painting of *Subika Laishaba* is a composition of cultural motifs made by pre-existing features and other influences stimulated from their cultural worldviews. Such cultural ethics of scribe makes them to create a unique style seen as indication of establishing a thought of school in which cultural and regional features are highlighted. *Subika Laishaba* manuscripts represent the direct and authentic continuation of the tradition of Meitei cultural life projected through visual images. Though there is no particular founder mentioned in the royal chronicle/history known as *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, there may be a possibility that the art form may have existed when the writing tradition was introduced in the state. This paper is an attempt to study its purposes and visual language portrayed in the *Subika Laishaba* manuscripts to understand its school in the realm of visual art. This study of visual language may be able to work without judgment and self-criticism.

**Keywords:** Visual Art, Worldview, Motifs, Visual language

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Manuscripts are the oldest form of art in Asia where Indian, Tibetan, Chinese, Persian manuscripts etc. are included. In Asian culture, manuscript painting is considered as a corpus of cultural knowledge that represents cosmology, civilization, skills employed in depiction of the legends, history, moral values, prediction of fortune, and ideals. Like others, in India also, tradition of manuscript painting with different styles evolved and reflected the cultural milieu of that community and region. These traditional manuscript paintings technically develop with their own styles depending upon their history, beliefs, social structure, and worldview. Most of the time, these paintings are heavily influenced by their local cultures. However, commonality with other far cultures manuscript painting may also be noticed with the styles, techniques of a particular style of art. “They all have

certain qualities in common, though on thoughtful examination it will be seen that each group has characteristics as essentially its own as the religion and costume of the countries from which they come. Their similarity consists in great smoothness and delicacy of finish, an immense regard for detail and an underlying seriousness of purpose that is felt in them all” (W. 1924, 108-112). Still there are certain points and aspects in traditional art form that makes them aesthetically unique from others. Although, it is the cultural value, moral, belief and worldview of that community that helps to develop a particular art form, it is also the environment where that community is surviving. It is their collective consciousness that helps to develop particular art form. As India is culturally, geographically, and historically diverse, we can also see various styles of painting that are categorized in different schools in present time. All schools follow a different style and technique of paintings as well as material. However, majority of Indian manuscripts are drawn on paper and strips of palm leaf which were exclusively in use before the introduction of the new material, perhaps in the eleventh century. These are considered the oldest known Indian paintings on paper.

In Manipur, since Meitei established their own script/alphabet, numbers of scholars or *Pandits* scribe *Puya*<sup>1</sup> or archaic Meitei manuscripts which deal with various subjects such as cosmology, astrology, mythology, legends, history, folk belief system etc. These literary records show the intention and culture of writing in this group of people is vibrant in nature. Among the *Puyas*, *Subika Laishaba*, a long sheet folded into thirty-six folds, is an astrological text which has illustrations. As a tradition, Meitei people consider their destiny is on the hand of hidden powers and forces given by spirits, deities, evil eyes, and celestial bodies. In addition, an astrologer explains every aspect of an individual’s personality and predicts fortune based on the position of the sun, moon, and other celestial objects. Their prediction is considered as divine information that leads to a luminous path for expanding knowledge of consciousness and realization of the totality of life through observing a ritual. Astrologers were assigned for duties of telling fortune and prediction of good or bad of the kings.

From the secondary sources, it is found that *Subika* is derived from Sanskrit word ‘Siva-ajna’ (pronounced *Shiv-agya*), a corrupted term of *Saubhagya* which means good luck or prosperity Phukan (1990). “It is to be noted that the Buddhist traits were incorporated in the *Suvika* (*Sivajna* – the Manipuri work for *Suvika* is *Suvika*)” (Singh and Kriti 2005, 102). The term *Subika Laishaba* is also used as *Suvika* (the Manipuri word for *Sivajna* or the sayings of *Siva*) (Proceeding and Transactions of the All-India Oriental Conference, 1982: 424, Astrological Magazine, Volume 71, Issues 1-6, 2007. P. 71).<sup>2</sup> The National Mission for Manuscripts of India has documented the illustrated manuscripts of Manipur such as *Subika Laishaba*, *Subika*, etc. in the year of 2006. Government of India, Indian Culture (discovery, Learn, Immerse, Connect) has collected and digitized huge, illustrated manuscript written on *Agarbark* (strip or pieces of wooden board) and on local handmade paper with archaic script received from National Mission on Monuments and Antiquities. There are numerous numbers of *Subika* text namely- *Subika*, *Subika Achouba*, *Subika Laishaba*, *Subika Choudit*, *Subika Cheithil*, and *Thengrakhel Subika*. These texts deal on *Yum-Kei Saba* (construction of house), *Luhong-khongdongba* (marriage making), *Yuharaba* (earthquake), *Mi Pokpa* (giving to birth), *Thabak Inghkhang Thou*

<sup>1</sup> Thoidingjam Tombi mentioned that there are various manuscripts dealing on a wide range of subjects, including day-to-day human activities, animals, birds, environment, astrology, life and death, genealogy of clans and each other. In *The other Manipur*, H. Dwijasekhar Sharma. (ed.) (2013). New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House. 6 (12). pp. 1671.

<sup>2</sup>[https://www.google.co.in/books/edition/Astrological\\_Magazine/xNQ5AAAAIAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&bsq=Subika+laishaba&dq=Subika+laishaba&printsec=frontcover](https://www.google.co.in/books/edition/Astrological_Magazine/xNQ5AAAAIAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&bsq=Subika+laishaba&dq=Subika+laishaba&printsec=frontcover), Date of Access: 01/06/2022

*Chatpanachingbagi Apha Phatta* (result for a work, service or job), *Karigumba Thabak Amagi Apha-Phatta Phal* (result of a particular activity), *Hakchangi Apha Phatta Khudam Changdam* (sign given by the part of body's condition), *Thaban-gi Apha Phattagi Wapham* (auspicious day according to the lunar position), *Nong Chuba* (raining), *Thabiyum Saba* (Appearing of Halo of the Sun), *Touruba Thabaksingi Apha Phatta Warol* (result of my service), and *Khudam Toubagi Apha Phattagi Waramsing* (details of message or notice for particular sign) (Indramani 2008, 3-9). Apart from these subjective differences between the *Puyas*, Mutua (Bahadur 2005, 7-8) gave several manuscripts which are found in loose, unbound single page, folded, and bounded leaf. (Sharma 1999, 10-66) pointed out that the writing culture was started in Shan script and followed by Brahmi script at 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century in Manipur. Since the production of writing sheet i.e., paper was originated from China was spread to Arab and to the world, the author assumed that the production of paper may be encroached by Chinese merchant who had visited Manipur for trading purpose. Further, he mentioned that technique and technology of Meitei paper making has similarities with Myanmar since both falls on the same category of oriental paper making technique. So, he elucidated that the typology and technology of Meitei might flow from adjoining lands such as the Shans, the Burmese, the Kachin, the Karan etc. with little local variations. He also added the making ink may be influenced by the oriental style of Tai-Burmese and the western fashion of Bengal ink-solving tradition. The manuscript study of (Sanajaoba 1991, 54) provides insight into Meitei society and culture. Periodically, Th. Tombi (2020: 415-416) divided visual art into four phases in which manuscripts illustrated paintings are grouped in the earliest phase. Further, he mentioned that the undated manuscripts are considered as sacred scriptures. These *puyas* have been preserved as a visual art legacy that provides spiritual and intellectual insight into an unsophisticated or primitive people. Here and there the manuscripts of Manipur are explicitly mentioned, but the study on the visual images and its elements is less. However, Th. Tombi Singh (2013: 1672-1673) attempt to analyse *Subika Laishaba* that depicts human, animal and birds either in simplified frontal or profile forms and flattened designs varying tonal values with line, textures and solid blacks or colours. He found that the illustration has no foreshortening and overlapping portrayal of shape, without any sense of perspective and background. Gender in human and animal are clearly distinguished which are arranged in symmetrical and central composition. So far, the studies conducted on illustrated manuscripts of Manipur are less in number and visual analysis has never been used in any genuine academic research. The scribe's cultural motif, inherited and embedded in his psyche, was not expressed to the Meitei society.

The present paper will focus on the illustrations of *Subika Laishaba* published in facsimile by Mutua Bahadur<sup>3</sup> in his book "Illustrated Manuscripts of Manipur". The illustrations of *Subika Laishaba* have visual language from the elements such as lines, shapes, forms, colours, and patterns. These visual images become Meitei's cultural motif, structure to create visual effects as well as express cultural significance meaning and values. The visual language examines a vocabulary of visual images from which Meitei scribes or artists build several images. This paper tries to study the formal elements that are the visual experience to express artisan's intent in an artwork. Furthermore, the primary goal of this paper is to understand visual aspects and cultural values in order to establish *Subika* art as an Indian art school. The study compels us to look more carefully at the art to understand the subject matter and the notion of style encompasses both the personal style of the

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<sup>3</sup> Mutua Bahadur is a cultural activist and the director of Mutua Museum, Imphal.

artist and the period style. Moreover, it also has unique structure and fundamental features that define the particular style that reflect the identity of the community. Visual analysis method is incorporated enable to describe the images vividly that gives information of the scribe and interesting facts about the image. So, the study is based on the data which is collected from primary (personal memories, and visual arts) and secondary sources. For the primary sources, personal and telephonic interview method has been applied to gather data about *Subika* art form. For that, painters, pandits, personal collectors, regarding their age and gender has been interviewed during particular time period i.e., from May 2018 to June 2021.

## 2. PUYA: ARCHAIC MEITEI MANUSCRIPT

The exact time period of the introduction of the Meitei writing tradition is still debatable. However, according to the royal chronicle *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, King Khagemba (r.1597-1652) introduced the Meitei script in 1616 CE (Ibungohal and Khelchandra 1967, 24). At present, it is understood that *Puya* is written by a Pandit/scholar who is assigned by the ruling king under the *Pandit Loishang* (institution) which was established during the reign of King Garibniwaz (1709-1748). Such information highlights the tradition of writing in the Meitei community that might have started before the establishment of *Pandit Loishang*. With reference to the surviving *Puya*, two types can be mentioned– *Puya* without authorship and *Puya* with authorship.

In *Puya* without authorship, the name of the scribe or the artisan is not mentioned and it is anonymous. Whereas, in *Puya* with authorship, the specific name of the author is mentioned. From historical record, it is also found that the books on tantric contains were burnt by the order of King Garibniwaz (1709-1748) to abolish the practice of *potsem* or tantric practice (Ibungohal and Khelchandra 1967, 24). It is also believed that some of the texts were kept secretly, and some were rewritten from the memory of scholars. According to (Memchoubi 2006, 10-20), tantric art was found in Manipur before the advent of Vaishnavism. There is no record of authorship in most of the surviving tantric texts found in Manipur. The *Subika Leisaba* is one of such books with no record of authorship.

In Meitei language, the activity of painting and drawing is commonly known as *Lai-Yekpa*, a combination of two words *Lai* means God and *Yekpa* means to sketch or to draw. The painter is known as *Laiyekpa Mi* means the person who draws or sketches the image of God. Since the profession of drawing and painting is prohibited to the common people, the scribes or the artists might be someone who can deal with the spiritual world or the one who trained under an expert. It is also believed that if a person does not draw or sketch properly then his life may not go smoothly. So, they might be someone who taught the journey of life, liberation from the apprehension, prediction for the future etc. More interestingly, the *Subhika Laishaba*, visual images found to be depicted along with the text as an illustration. There are visual elements depicting the cultural meaning which is associated behind the text. Moreover, the Meitei people follow certain methods and techniques for illustration.

## 3. METHOD AND TECHNIQUES

The visual images found in the *Subika Laisaba* manuscript are painted on handmade paper. It is also found that materials of manuscript are prepared indigenously either handmade paper or barks of tree. (Sharma 1999,12-13) mentioned that there were four types of Manuscript classified from their main

writing materials used by the scribes, they are- *Agarbak* (strip or pieces of wooden board), *Kona-mana* (Palm leave: Species of *Palmae* family), *Tenou mana* (Leave of *Euphorbiaceae*), and *Meitei Che* (Meitei/Manipuri paper i.e., Handmade paper). The size of the *agarbak* manuscripts were found in two ways - 10x24 cm. and 5x10cm. There were two standard sizes of hand-made paper - one was about 13x32cm, and another was about 6x39cm. Further, it is also found that some old paintings along with the text were painted on a single folded sheet of 96x78 cm. size (Bahadur 2005, 6). According to G. H. Damant<sup>4</sup> (1877: 37), the manuscripts found in Manipur in the nineteenth century were all written on a coarse, but very durable kind of paper, with pen made of bamboo and the papers which were blackened with charcoal on which they wrote with a soapstone pencil.

Traditionally, production of local ink was done by Meitei women<sup>5</sup> for weaving purposes. However, scholars mentioned that the technique and knowledge of making ink for writing may be influenced of the oriental style of Tai-Burmese and the western fashion of Bengal ink-solving tradition (Sharma 1999, 26). Th. Tombi (Sharma (2013, 1674) writes, “And for a lustrous look of the dyes, green tea leaf, khuchum pere, sodium liquid, lupa hidak (silver) are mixed with water and powder of burnt rice (starch) are added to the ink. In particular *Nungshil* (copper sulphate), *Phijigree* (alum) are dissolved in the compound liquid ink apparently to prevent it from petrification or worm-infestation etc.” It is also found that ink was made from lacquer liquid extracted from the cocoon of an insect feeding only *Arhar* plant, which is dissolved only in warm *alkane* made from the ash of burnt banana leaves. On the other hand, the mixture is mixed with an oily juice of the *Yangou* tree (*Dipterocarpus tuberculatus*) to find lacquer-like substance. In *Subika Laishaba*, colors of red, yellow, black, and brown are found to be painted in illustrations.<sup>6</sup> For writing purposes, they used stalks of bird feather or small bamboo twig (prepared from tenwa or moubi bamboo species). So, their use of the colour on handmade paper with stalks of bird feather or small bamboo plays a vital role to express the visual language of the *Subika Laishaba*.

#### 4. VISUAL LANGUAGE AND ITS PROPERTY

The illustration of *Subika Laishaba* has visual language from the elements such as lines, shapes, forms, colours, and patterns. These visual images become their cultural motifs which are arranged to create visual effects as well as to communicate cultural meaning and values. The visual language examines a vocabulary of visual images from which Meitei scribes or artists build several images. For this, some of the illustrations of *Subika Laishaba* published in the book, “*Illustrated Manuscripts of Manipur*” Bahadur (2005), have been used to study the visual language and its property. Foremost, particularly in the *Subika Laishaba*, illustrations are enclosed within a frame which is made up of two parallel Indian-red colour lines and the central area is filled up with an irregular or a curved line either in black or in brown colour Figure 1. Visually, rigidity and stiffness of the two parallel lines are enlivened by the curve or irregular line Figure 12. Whenever there is intersection, a floral motif

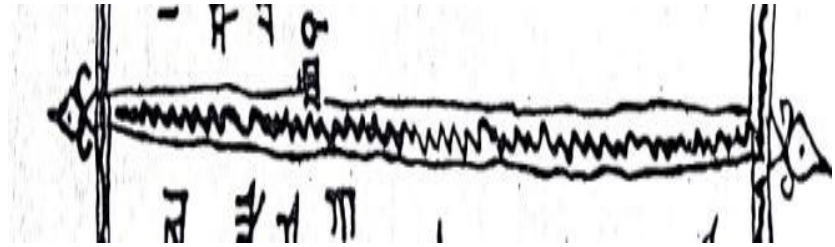
<sup>4</sup> G. H. Damant was the first pioneer in studying the scripts of Manipur

<sup>5</sup> It is found that the local woman is involved in preparation of dyes prepared from herbs, flowers, roots of trees etc. The water-based ink was made from the local ingredients such as - charcoal, yachubi fruit, Kuhi, pomegranate, kumna, yongchak skin, heikru Kaphoi, heikru, Yongchak, Shayi (*brindela retusa*, fem, *Apocynaceae*), Kuhi (*Holarrhena antidysenterica* Fem. *Apocynaceae*) etc. to extract dark or black pigment. The ink is known as Muk means black or dark. The Kumshang Loishang was existed since the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century. There was wider usage of Kumjingbi and Kumlang Phaneke dyeing from Kum. The weavers of Meitei women produce blank ink from the Kum plant (*Strobilanthes flacoidifolius*) and Khe-U (Sumach).

<sup>6</sup> Red dye is obtained by soaking Kuhi bark in water, while yellow is obtained from the boiled juice of U-Napu mixed with turmeric juice. Blueblack dyes would be prepared from boiled Kumna juice, while brown dyes by mixing and boiling Bokul tree bark and outer crust of pomegranate.” In Thoidingjam Tombi Singh, *The Visual Art Heritage of Manipur*, in H. Dwijasekhar Sharma. (Ed.) (2013). *The other Manipur*. New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House. 6 (12). pp.1674-75.

(organic shape) is drawn [Figure 2](#). The floral motif is outlined with Indian-red colour filling the space with yellow-ochre with a black colour dot at middle part.

**Figure 1**



**Figure 1** Frame Made Up of Two Parallel Lines with An Irregular Line

Source [Bahadur \(2005\)](#)

**Figure 2**



**Figure 2** An Organic Shape (Floral motifs)

Source [Bahadur \(2005\)](#)

Further, the representational figures found in these manuscript paintings can be studied from the recognizable and unrecognizable figures. The text does not reveal any particular story of a particular character. The text is a maxim consisting of a fundamental moral principle or rule which is a conscious expression of the community. It carries Meitei philosophy behind a given pedagogical actions. So, the text is a cultural idea and knowledge given to someone for a safe life. Pictorially, there are recognizable figures such as human, headgear, animal, bird, tree, serpent, cultic object, and palanquin/coffin are found to be illustrated for a particular text. A brief detail of each figure is discussed below:

- 1) Human figure:** A distinct anatomical feature of male and female is not identified in representation of human figure. Moreover, details of each of the body parts are not specified. Most of the figures are outlined with Indian-red colour executed in frontal view. However, the legs are in a semi profile view slightly bending in position. There is a thick line hanging in between two legs which is unrecognizable. Again, the figure can be divided into two types. First, the figure has a rounded face with a vertical line that represents nose, two dots of eyes, two implied lines indicate two ears, and two uniform curve lines represent cheek [Figure 3a](#). The main body part is filled with yellow colour classifying chest and navel part with dots of brown colour. The two dots of eyes are brown. Second, the outline of the figure is in Indian-red colour having a rounded face with two curved lines meeting and intersecting at the horizontal line. These two curve lines represent eyebrows, the horizontal line represents lips, and two dots below the curve lines represent eyes. There are two u-shapes that represent ears [Figure 3b](#).

Moreover, there are two types of body, one is a yellow body with dots, and another is an Indian-red body [Figure 3 a and b](#). The value of light and shade identifies the body and makes a distinction from one figure to another. The yellow and Indian-red colour gives us light and shade intensity. Further, human figures are found in different positions and gestures associating with recognizable and unrecognizable objects that indicate activities to create a scene in relation to the text. So, the figures can be categorized into three different groups:

- **Figure carrying with palanquin or coffin:** The upper abdomen is projected in frontal view whereas the two legs are in semi profile bending slightly indicating walking position. The bar of palanquin or coffin is supported on the shoulder with holding by right hand and left-hand rest on the waist. The gesture and position of hands and legs clearly indicate the action of carrying palanquin or coffin.

Figure 3



Figure 3 Figure Carrying with Palanquin or Coffin  
Source [Bahadur \(2005\)](#)

- **Standing figure:** Here, figures are not different from the above types, but the hand gesture and position associated with recognizable and unrecognizable objects makes them differentiate from one to another figures. Moreover, the association of objects like swords, cultic objects and other unidentified objects depict the activities and functional values of the object in relation to the figures. Again, standing figures can be seen in two ways – figure standing on a bar or platform and figure standing without representation of foreground.

Figure 4

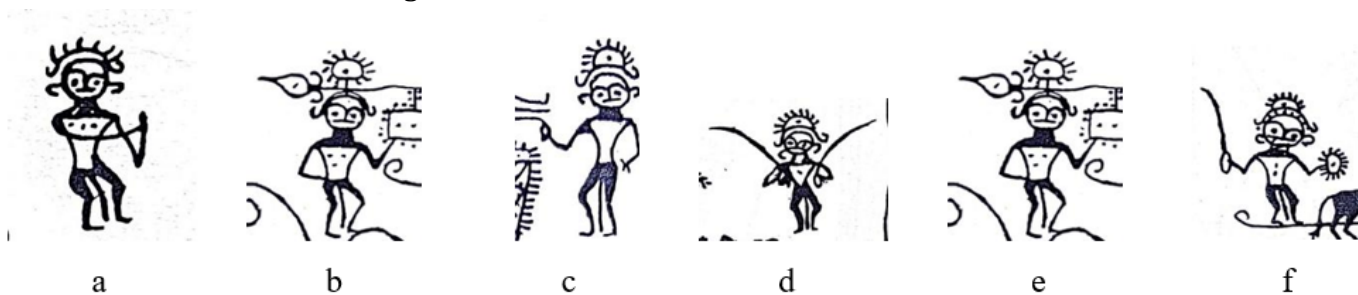


Figure 4 Standing Figure  
Source [Bahadur \(2005\)](#)

- Sitting figures:** Similarly, there are some figures which are depicted in sitting position. According to their sitting position, it can be classified into two types: - sitting with showing legs and sitting without showing legs. In [Figure 5a](#), the two legs are represented in profile position, but the face and upper abdomen remain the same. In [Figure 5 a, b, c, d, e, and f](#), there is no representational line that indicates legs. However, the figures rest on a platform holding swords or cultic objects. Some of the figures holds two objects on their right and left hand whereas some figures hold only one object.

Figure 5

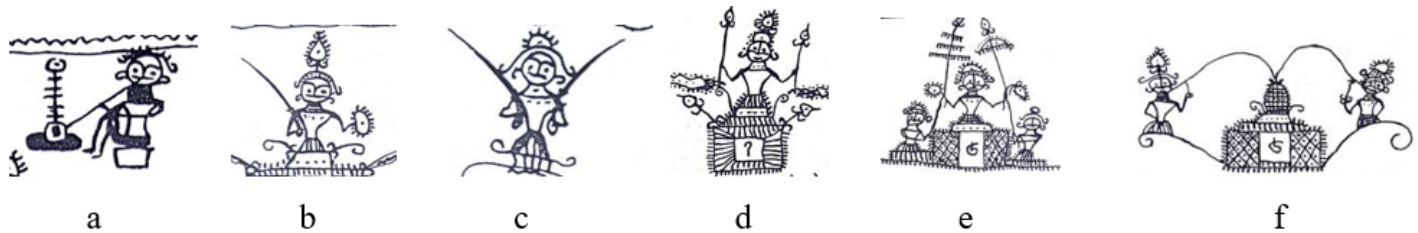


Figure 5 Sitting Figures  
Source Bahadur (2005)

- Headgear:** Different headgears are drawn to distinguish and to differentiate each of the human figures that breaks monotony representation of figures. It also enriches the values of figures. Conical shape headgear is found in [Figure 6 a and b](#), however, both are different because of the values of line and colour. In [Figure 6 a](#), the outline is in Indian-red colour, and it is filled with the same colour as well. In [Figure 6 b](#), the outline is in Indian-red colour, and it is filled with yellow. There are headgears of umbrellas in shape having either dome or organic (floral design) shape protruding with lines which are projected on top of the head [Figure 6 c, d, e, and f](#). The outline is in Indian-red colour and yellow is filled in the dome and organic shape. The dot and protruding lines are in brown colour. Visually, the dots and protruding lines give not only decorative essence but also give a motion unless to keep rigidity.

Figure 6

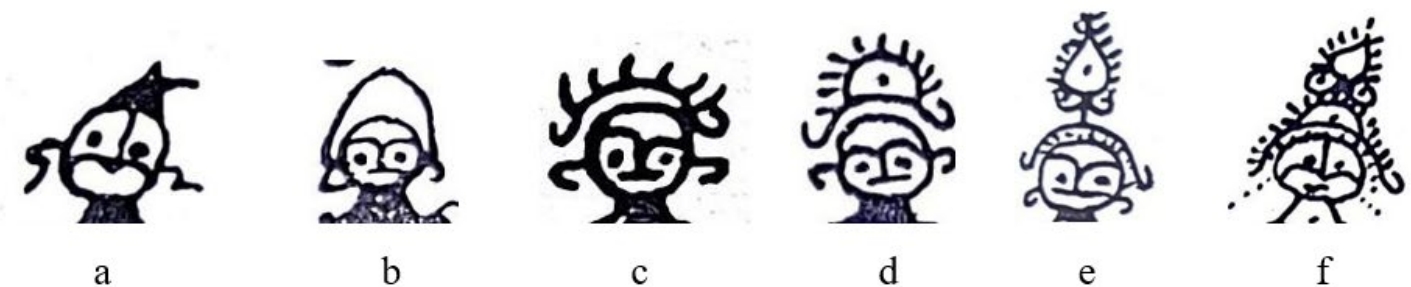


Figure 6 Headgear  
Source Bahadur (2005)



3) **Animal and bird:** Animals and birds are depicted in profile view with minimal unique features that signify the characteristic of the herd. Although the detail is less but minimum outline, lines, and texture signify the features of animal and bird. A flat tone Indian-red colour is used to fill the whole figure except their eye part seen in Figure 7a, b, c, d, and e. The first three figures seen in Figure 7a, b, and c have bending thick lines of legs that give motion whereas the legs seen in Figure 7d and Figure 7e are stiff and rigid. In Figure 7f, the body part is filled with yellow and the outline and irregular dash, and dots indicate texture of skin of tiger.

Figure 7

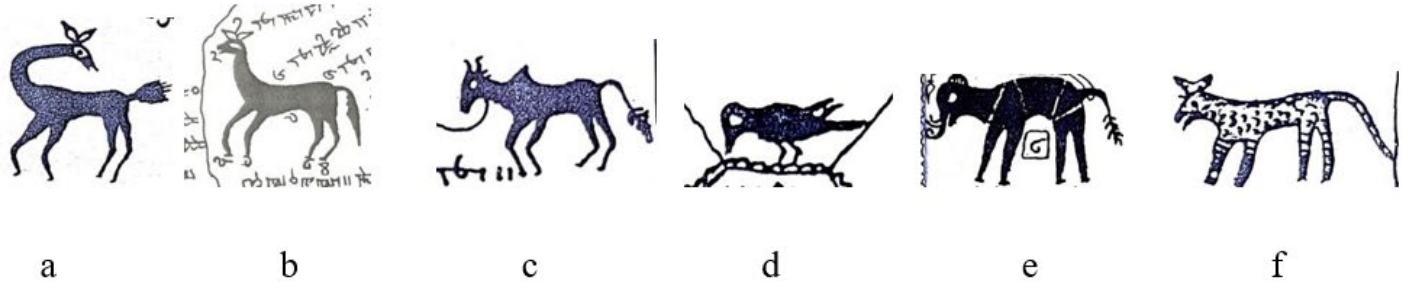


Figure 7 Animal and Bird  
Source Bahadur (2005)

4) **Tree:** The stem of the tree is represented by various numbers of vertical lines of Indian-red colour meeting at one point classifying the bottom and top part. The lines emerging from the stem with petal shapes at the end represent branches. The petal is in yellow colour and a dot of brown colour is arranged within the petal shape. Sometimes, lines are protruding at the bottom part of the stem.

Figure 8

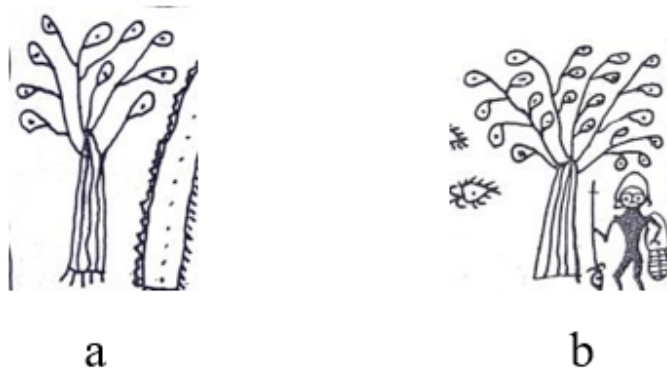


Figure 8 Tree  
Source Bahadur (2005)

5) **Serpent:** Different forms of serpent are drawn with outlines of Indian-red colour classifying head, body and tail part are shown in Figure 9a, b, and c. The head is in Indian-red colour, body is in yellow colour with numerous dots in brown colour inside and outside the body is arranged. The values of

light and shade distinguish head and body part, as well as, tapering of two lines suggests the tail. There is indication of lips and legs. The dots around the body and protruding lines on the head portion differentiate the two body parts. In [Figure 9 a and b](#), numerical signs are accompanied with the figure. There are twenty-seven (27) astrological numbers arranged inside and outside the boxes. There is a design of diagonal weft and irregular curve lines that classified the spaces [Figure 9a](#). In [Figure 9b](#), two horns are projected upwards and astrological numbers from one (1) to nine (9) are also accompanied.

Figure 9

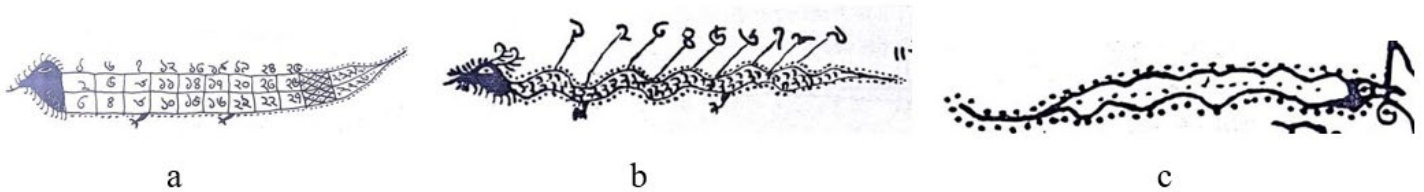


Figure 9 Serpent  
Source [Bahadur \(2005\)](#)

**6) Platform:** Various lines such as vertical, horizontal, diagonal, zigzag and curved lines are used to outline the platform in decorative shape using Indian-red colour. Moreover, a variety of lines – long or short, thick, or thin, smooth, or rough, continuous, implied, dotted, dashed, and curved lines are superimposed in brown colour. So, various texture, geometrical design, and patterns of checker, plaid, weft and warp, diagonal, cross diagonal pattern are found prevalent. Even if there are various designs and textures, the main structure of the platform is rectangular in shape. Most of the platforms have two or more levels of yellow in colour which is vertically elevated and tapering towards up. Sometimes, platforms are either in two legs filled with yellow colour or without legs, and some platforms have two or four extended bars which are in curvilinear shape emerging from the angles in yellow colour ([Figure 10 a and b](#)). Moreover, the figure arranges on the platform in symmetrical balance give uniformity visually.

Figure 10

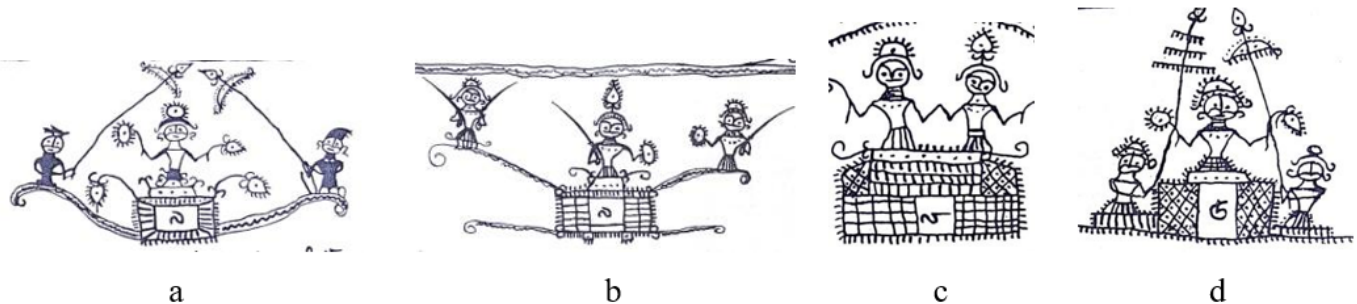


Figure 10 Platform  
Source [Bahadur \(2005\)](#)

7) **Palanquin/Coffin:** Structurally, the shape of palanquin/coffin is similar to the shape of platform and even the treatment of colour. Exceptionally, the designs of the pennon which are diagonally and vertically protruding from the edge of each storey make them to differentiate from the structure of the platform. If this structural shape is not carried by humans, then it is considered a coffin or crematorium. The flags are in yellow colour with brown dots arranged inside it. The arrangement of diagonal pennons in symmetrical balance gives a motion effect visually.

Figure 11

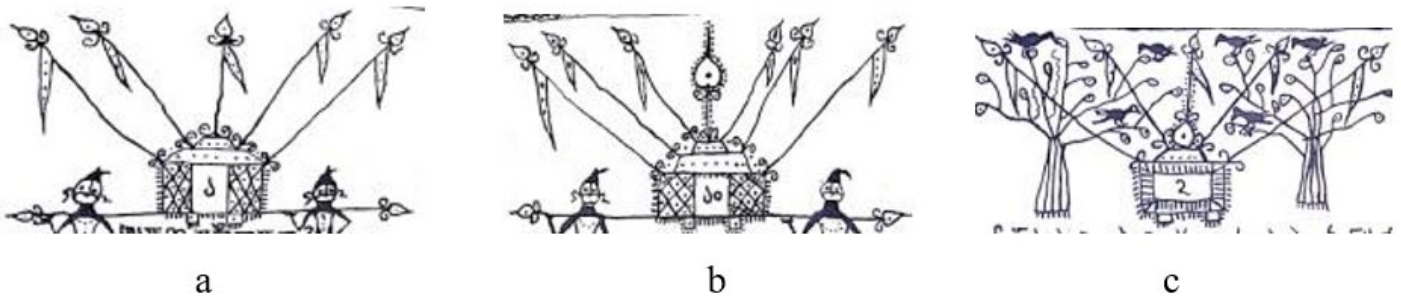


Figure 11 Palanquin/Coffin  
Source Bahadur (2005)

8) **Cultic object:** There are recognizable and unrecognizable cultic objects which are associated with human figures. Organic shapes are found to be used as a pattern which is repeatedly associated with hands of the human figures (Figure 12a and b). The design shown in Figure 12b is found at the end or top of any objects like pennon, *chhatra*, parasol, coffin, palanquin, etc. The cultic object image shown in Figure 12c and Figure 12d look like *chhatra* and parasol from their visual structural representation. The floral design which is found on the top in both cultic objects is similar to the Figure 12b. The outline is in Indian-red colour, the dots and protruding lines are in brown colour, and the form is filled with yellow colour.

Figure 12

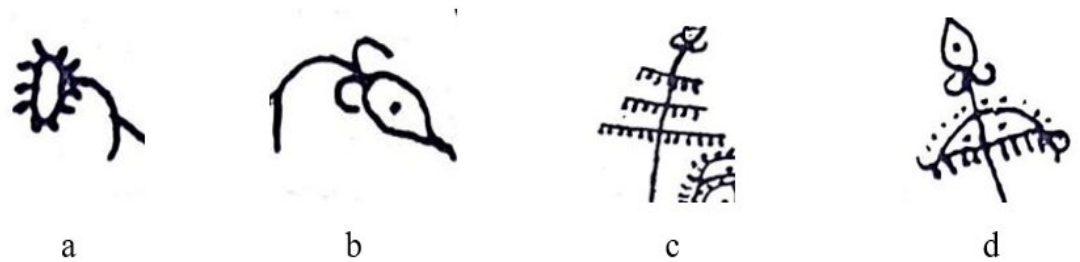


Figure 12 Cultic Object  
Source Bahadur (2005)

## 5. TEXT AND ITS VISUAL LANGUAGE

The *Subika Laisaba* contains ten illustrated pictures, and each picture has two sections depicting a different theme from the content of the text written along it. So, there are twenty numbers of sections of paintings and each of the paintings is marked with numerical numbers starting from 1 to 10. The first seven numerals correspond to the days of a week, namely, 1- Sunday, 2- Monday, 3-Tuesday, 4-Wednesday, 5- Thursday, 6- Friday, and 7- Saturday. The remaining three numbers represent the celestial bodies, for instance 8 stands for Rahu, 9 stands for Ketu, and 10 for completion of ten units.

**First Illustration:** This pictorial illustration has two parts depicting the content of the text. The first section on the left side has a maxim, free translation of the illustration is given below:

*Kumsing langfam yengpane, langmaiching asita thoklakpati phate, Chengpak kapok chuhi sangkom palna kwa ahaio athum philoi yaona kokchou o, Khang-o.*

“It is the prediction of year, fortune. It is a bad omen if it happens this Sunday. Be extricated with champak (flattened boiled dried rice), kapok (rice cake), sugar cane juice, milk, palna- betel leaf (a chewable leaf), Kwa (a chewable nut), tasty-sweets, clothes. Know.” (Luwang 2017,10)

Pictorially, two human figures of the same outfit carrying a coffin on their shoulder indicate the same position or same group of people. However, the two people are lower in social status than the deceased person. Culturally, *Kairel Kaijao* (a grand coffin for a king or a nobleman) signifies the deceased belongs to a higher rank in society and indicates respect to the deceased person. Here, the coffin has two legs that symbolize mobility which is not a fixed one. The coffin is marked with numeral number one (1) that represents Sunday, the first day of a week. Moreover, the association of pennon represents higher position and gratitude to the dead person. Here, the five numbers of pennons are the sign of five souls for the creation of the human body. The main theme of the illustration depicts a bad omen that may happen when a person is at the position of Sunday. Further, it is advised to perform a ritual for offering certain foods to extricate the bad omen.

The second section on the right side has a maxim, free translation of the illustration is given below:

*“10 sing asita thoklabati phatte, khoilu thaomei phiral, palna kwa, changpak kabok, chuhi sangom hei palna kwa, filoi yaona, chaona katchou-o, heitarati, waye, khang-o.”*

“It is a bad omen if happens at number 10. Relinquish extensively with great offering along with wax lamp, flag, palna- betel leaf (a chewable leaf), Kwa (a chewable nut), champak (flattened dried boiled rice), kapok (rice cake), sugar cane juice, milk, fruits, clothes. It is distress if not clever. Know.” (Luwang 2017, 49)

Like the first section, this second section also depicted thematic image from the text. Visually, the two sections are almost the same except some extra figures are added in the second section. Here, the coffin is marked with numeral number 10 which represents the position of an astrology chart that signifies the fate of a person who is on the way to the crematorium. It means the possibility of death is foretold. The coffin has six pennons, and a wax lamp is kept on the top of the coffin. Further, it is advised to perform a ritual for offering certain foods to extricate the bad omen.

Figure 13

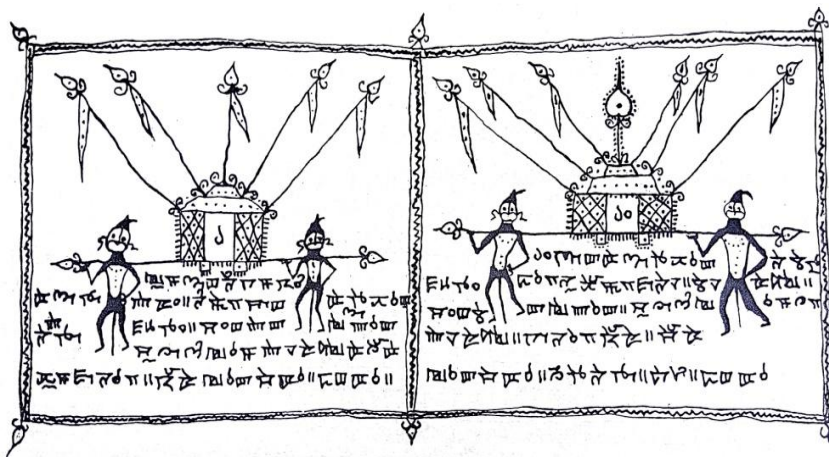


Figure 13 Source Bahadur (2005)

From the above discussion, it is known that the scribe or the painter paint or draw the visual image from what they have perceived and how they believed the world around them. Their painting is reshaping the reality of the community presented in an understandable way. They did not attempt to depict the natural form of the found objects. The various images are drawn or painted with the use of several qualities of line, shape, form, colour etc. However, the figures or the shape of any image found to be less shading and the concept of volume that gives an idea of spiritual connection to the readers. Such images enriched the value of the text that leads to another world in which the mind connects to the metaphysical world. Interestingly, the visual arts and its text have deep cultural meaning that signifies their cultural values, perception, cosmos, belief systems etc. The visual art of *Puya* becomes the material culture of the Meitei community following a certain behavioural pattern embodied with symbolical meaning. This visual art communicates, perpetuates, and develops the collective psychological unconscious to manifest original pure ideas of the community.

## 6. CONCLUSION

A precise analysis of the dates, origins and styles of the Meitei manuscript painting is hard to find because of less availability of historical records. *Subika Laisaba* is a composition of cultural motifs such as human figures, animal figures, birds, cultic objects, palanquin/coffin, and serpent. Exceptionally, some are clearly identifiable as something already exists in their mundane world and some are not identifiable, maybe a design. Since the illustration is anonymous, it is very difficult to say a particular style belonged to a particular artisan or scribe. However, it is assumed that, perhaps, the visual arts were the manifestation of creative images constructed in the psyche of the scribe or the artist's influence from the cultural worldview. Moreover, tradition of rewriting or reproducing the text by the learner makes the images produce variation. Although there might be various styles, holistically it is the product of mechanized and trained scribes under a political institution of guru-shishya tradition. The style of *Subika Laisaba* is the result of a composite art form made by creative composition of pre-existing features and other influences stimulated from their cultural worldviews. Moreover, the local scribes create and recreate their themes in a new range of expressions that create variation

because of individual skill and technique. Such cultural ethic of scribe makes them create a unique style which is used in a pattern to distinguish from other styles. So, the cultural motifs depicted in the manuscript in *Subika Laishaba* indicate unique regional features that focus on the specific features of the Meitei genre, period and nationality which are derived from the thematic content of the text. Such style of manifesting cultural visual motifs is seen as indication of establishing a thought of school in which cultural and regional features are highlighted.

The untrained or unskilful scribes manifested the various figures in their own ways balancing in symmetrical and asymmetrical. The tension which is inherited within the object in relation to their shape, size, colour, and location create a spatial relation that has magnitude and direction among the different elements contained in a picture. Each of the objects is influenced by the boundaries, other subordinate visual elements, and some hidden structural factors. The strength and distance of these factors determine the effect of total configuration. The rhythmic outline and curvilinear lines in the representation of figures gives a sense of movement and also the connection with every object. So, the balancing of composition of every illustration is perceived and determined from the psychological and physical balance. Illustrations of *Subika Laishaba* are depicted by using various treatments of lines, rendering of colours such as black, brown, red, yellow, and arrangement of shapes that gives immense quality and effect to identify the style of *Subika Laishaba* from visual art form.

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

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