

Documentation of *Phiribi* Applique Craft of Manipur

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ABSTRACT

Phiribi appliqué craft is an indigenous traditional textile art of Manipur with considerable cultural, religious and artistic value for the *Meitei* population. The craft combines hand-cut motifs, traditional tools, and symbolic design elements influenced by nature, folklore, and ceremonial traditions. The current study aims to document the origin, historical context, textiles of *Phiribi* craft, and motifs. The study was based on both primary and secondary sources of data. Historically, *Phiribi appliqué* was used to embellish ritual clothes, ceremonial garments and related fabrics associated with festivals and other socio-religious occasions. This craft was originally executed by trained artisans who passed the method down through generations. The motifs of *Phiribi appliqué* are deeply based in Manipuri culture, nature and belief systems. These motifs are carefully cut and combined to express symbolic meaning. The practice of this *appliqué* craft has steadily decreased due to modernization, commercial fabrics and shifting lifestyles hence documentation was crucial to its preservation.

Keywords: *Appliqué*, Fabrics, *Meitei*, *Phiribi*, Textile

INTRODUCTION

India's textile crafts are well-known throughout the world for their diverse embellishment techniques that have been employed for centuries (Dholakia, 2013). In terms of diversity, technique and material use, the Indian craft tradition is unique in the world. These crafts are utilized not just to meet people's basic necessities, but also for ornamental and religious purposes (Negi *et al.*, 2015). *Applique* is an ancient Indian skill. *Appliques* are another type of fabric embellishment. *Applique* is derived from the French verb *appliquer*, which meaning "to put on". It is a technique for creating a decorative look by superimposing patches of coloured textiles on a foundation fabric, with the edges sewed in some stitchery. A coloured piece of fabric cut into various snowflake-like shapes, abstract renditions of birds and animals or basic linear patterns is stitched onto the surface of another coloured cloth. *Applique* is manufactured using two separate procedures, and its origin may be determined by the

manner of fabrication, colour utilization, composition, and the type of forms or patterns utilized (Dholakia, 2013). People all across the world utilize the *appliqué* technique to create bold, highly coloured and occasionally three-dimensional designs for usage in a variety of circumstances. The work is typically done by hand (Samall, 1998).

India is home to traditional *appliqué*, which is available in many different forms. Important *appliqué* craft traditions can be found in the Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Odisha. With varying degrees of sophistication and stylization, each has its own distinct style, color scheme, and assortment of motifs: *Mahajan* from *Saurashtra*; Rajasthan's *Satwara*, *Marwari* and *Meghwal*; Gujarat's *Rabari*, *Kathi*, *Mochi*, and Muslim *applique*; Odisha's *Pipli*; Tamil Nadu's *Tanjore*; Uttar Pradesh's *Tharu*; and Bihar's *Khatwa* (Rana and Swami, 2023). Two techniques are employed in *appliqué* art, one in which different shapes, sizes and pattern and the entire

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composition is attached. The intricate patterns and designs of these traditional crafts can easily be transformed into modern shapes to suit a range of textile goods in line with current fashion trends. Styles vary widely, demonstrating the artist's inventiveness in modifying patterns to meet the demands of the market. The processes have stayed constant since the beginning of time (Sharma *et al.*, 2020).

Among all those *applique* craft, Manipur has its own *applique* craft known as *Leeba* or *Phiribi*. The word *phiribi* is detained from *phie* means fabric and *leeba* or *riba* signifies hemming. A craft that thrived around the capital city of Imphal thanks to royal sponsorship, but suffered a blow when this assistance was unexpectedly discontinued after unification (Ghosh and Ghosh, 2003). It is an ornamental work on cut out materials by stitching it onto the surface of another material. It is a development of embroidery in an attempt to give aesthetic excellence. *Applique* technique gives fine blending of two fabric in harmonious combination, more prominent than the needle works. The dress with such technique and design are used mostly in socio-religion functions (Devi, 1998).

A particular vendor known as "*Phiribi Potpham*" (*Phi*-cloth, *Ribi-Leebi*-Persons engaged in *applique* work, *potpham*-Vendor) was introduced by king Bhagyachandra (1759-1762 and 1763-1798 A.D.) for selling the product of *applique* work and this vendor is still existing in the *Khwairamb and Keithel* of Imphal to sell the special cloth items of *applique* work to be used as ritual dresses, cultural and customary and to be worn by the nobles or noble families (Bahadur, 2007). Motif is the basic unit with the help of which a design or a composition is made. Motifs are often inspired from nature and are also closely linked to natural, cultural, religious and socio-economic factors prevailing in any society. A motif is the most basic unit or the smallest unit of pattern. Motifs are repeated in different ways to create patterns (Azmat and Hadi, 2018).

Objectives:

To document the *Phiribi applique* craft of Manipur and its traditional applications.

METHODOLOGY

The present study was conducted in the Imphal District of Manipur. A structured interview schedule was

designed to obtain data from the artisans. The tool comprised of closed-ended questions designed to obtain information about many topics such as the historical basis of *Phiribi* craft, motifs employed, materials and tools used in this craft, method involved and problems encountered by artists. The information were collected from primary sources including personal interview with Lourebam Bino Devi, Padma Shri Awardee, Gurumayum Goshwami Sharma state Awardee, Khaidem Tarubi, Manipur State Kala Academy Awardee and N. Prabhavati Devi, State Awardee in *Applique* crafts of Manipur and some other artisans so that they would have an in-depth knowledge about the *Phiribi* craft. Secondary sources such as books and internet were also referred for understanding motifs and traditional practices.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Historical background of *Phiribi* craft:

Needlework was widely practiced in Manipur since 17th century. The art of decorating the fabric in the *applique* work of Manipur locally known as *Leeba* or *Phiribi*. It is an ornamental work which used cutwork fabrics by stitching it onto the surface of another fabrics. It was an attempt to give an aesthetic appeal on to the fabric. Fine blending of the two fabric in a harmonious blend. The exact origin of *Leeba* *applique* work in Manipur is uncertain yet garments from *Ngangkhalawai* village are said to have been reportedly worn by *Khamba* and *Thoibi* of Moirang. This specific craft is believed to have been found in Manipur from the 11th century A.D. In the Meitei manuscript titled *Loiyumba Shinyen* precisely indicates that a cloth is seen incomplete in traditional practice until *Leeba* is incorporated. The predominant artisans were women employed under the prince consort. These artisans were bestowed honorary titles and ranks corresponding with the social status, along with the patronage of the ruling family as well as the support of the ruling family. The chief artisans of the guild were called "*Phirungbi*". The art of "*Phiribi*" or "*Leeba*" was practiced within the four walls of the King's palace. During the reign of Maharaja Nara Singh (1844 to 50 AD), the art of *Phiribi* gradually emerged from within the palace guild's four walls. High quality fabrics were used since the "*Leeba*" was created for the temple, royal family and officers prior to the merger in Manipur. For making the "*Phiribi*" *applique* craft new fabric should

be used as no reclaimed or used fabric were utilized since the applique craft would be given to the clan's chief. The "*Phiribi*" applique craft articles were allowed to use by the people of high rank as it represent their social status. Only the best artisan were hired to enhance the wearer's status. The artisans should become the members of the *Loishang* under the chief's patronage. The artisans were predominantly women, some of whom belonged to noble families who garnered honour and respect from the chief and his consort, designated as the leader of the "*Loishang*" for women.

Methods of needle work:

The methods of needle work can be divided into two types. These two categories are as follows:

- (i) The needlework was done on the wrong side of the cloth, and the right side, where the design is formed was worn.
- (ii) The needlework is put to the right side of the material and used while wearing. The *Meitei* women use many needlework techniques, including satin stitch, chain stitch, *Romanian* stitch and others. The design was created by applying coaching work to a cloth that includes applique work.



Fig. 1 : Earlier used textiles of *Phiribi* craft

Earlier used of the *Phiribi* craft:

Traditionally *Phiribi* or *Leeba* craft were used in various articles which were worn by the high rank people to represent their social status. Specified particular design of applique work and their colours were used depending

upon the differences in the ranks of the nobles, King and Queen. Some of the articles are discussed below:

- a) *Monmai* (end face of round pillows): This is a decorative circular applique art piece used in covering both ends of the traditional Manipuri bolster pillow.
- b) *Kangkhan Sanjap*: Decoration on the front face of curtains
- c) Border of the *Ningkham*: *Ningkham* is a waist band with V shaped protrusion in the wear. It was worn by the King.
- d) *Samjin*: *Samjin* is a headgear piece worn by men in ceremonial dance or cultural contexts (e.g. in the *Khamba Thoibi* dance)
- e) *Innaphi*: *Innaphi* is a traditional shawl which were sworn by Kings, nobles and queen.
- f) Border of the *Kumin*, *Ras* costume: During the reign of *Meidingu* Chandrakriti (1834-1844 A.D.) the *Phiribi* craft began to be used on the border of *Kumin* (*Ras* Costume).

The dresses with such technique and designs are mostly used in religion functions. In the past, various *Phiribi applique* work their styles and colours were utilized based on the ranks of the mobility, monarchs and queens.

Motifs of *Phiribi* craft:

The *Phiribi* or *Leeba* crafts of *Meitei* in Manipur used delicate motifs that required a meticulous needle work. All the motifs used in this craft are the "*Khoi*" and its derivatives, no natural floral or any other forms of motifs were used. Some of the motifs that are used in *Phiribi* craft are as follows:

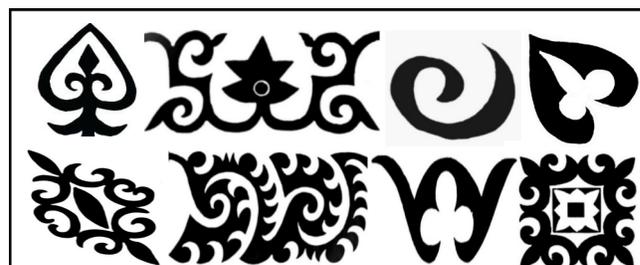


Fig. 2 : Various motifs of *Phiribi* craft

- a) *Khoi*: It is a uniform series of semi-circular figures in which the head is concentric inwardly. The figures are alternately arrange, the head faces upward in one unit, followed by downward facing in the next unit and so on. Each of these

units is called *khoi* which means a hook or the bee. This design was first adopted in Manipur around the 10th century by King *Yanglou Keiphaba* (969 to 984 AD). During this era, the *khoilonba* design was introduced to the *phanek* border. This motif was discovered in *Ningkham Samjin*, Manipur's national clothing, as well as in *Mukna Sanaba*, a celebratory boat rest and *Laiharaoba* dance performed by westerners.

- b) *Thambal Chedplei*: It is shaped like a lotus petal blossom. *Thambal* means lotus and *chedplei* means arranged or patterned form. This pattern was used on the king's *Khadangchet* (fillet wrapped over his chin).
- c) *Phantup Mayek*: *Phantup* means edging or outer decorative finishing and *Mayek* means motif. This design is used in a triangular piece of cloth worn by nobles in *Ningkham*.
- d) *Pakhangba Mayek*: It is a *Khoi*-derivative. *Pakhangba* means the primordial serpent-dragon deity, symbol of creation and protection and *Mayek* means motif. It was employed in the *Meitei* king's *Ningkham* (decoration triangular cloth tied at the waist with the tip tapering below the knee on the back).
- e) *Kwakli*: *Kwakli* formerly known as *kwalei*, is a dark bluish orchid (*Venda Coebulea*) that blooms. It was traditionally used as lace on the edges of noble's *sanjin*.
- f) *Harao Phijin*: *Harao* means festivity and *Phijin* means border. This motifs was used on the border of girl's chaddar to be worn by ordinary girls on the occasion of *Lai Haraoba* festivals.

Traditional motifs used in *Monmai*:

- g) *Nagamhaimamit*: This sequin resembles *Nagamhai*, a kind of small bony, silvery fish (*Ambassisrna*). It was used in *Mommai*, side cover of the pillow.
- h) *Ising Mapi*: It is a big decorative metal work motif. This design looks like *Isingmapi* which refers a tiny aquatic fast moving insect.
- i) *Kongonthinba*: *Kongon* means cowrie shell and *thinba* means to place. This motif depicts the arrangement of cowrie shells and was used in *monmai*.

Conclusion:

The current study concludes that *Phiribi* is a decorative work on cut-out materials that was stitched onto the surface of another material and thrived in the capital city of Imphal. This technique produces a fine mixing of two fabrics in a harmonic mixture that is more noticeable than needlework. *Phiribi* reflects the community's social and cultural values. This work was losing popularity day by day. This work was largely performed by women. This craft was distinguished by precise hand stitching and excellent workmanship, as well as the passing of ancient knowledge down through the generations. Motifs are symbolic in nature, representing local beliefs, flora, fauna and socio-cultural traditions. The study's overall findings demonstrate that *Phiribi* craft was an important cultural asset rather than just a decorative textile technique. To preserve this art and increase its relevance in modern textile and fashion applications, proper documentation, preservation and design intervention are crucial.

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