

Performance as Philosophy in the context of the Lai-Haraoba

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Abstract

The paper makes an effort to claim that the Lai-Haraoba of the Meitei performs a philosophy. Approaches to making this claim come from recent works in the philosophy of rituals and performance studies. One line of thinking that has emerged in these works is that performances can embed truth claims. This line is extended in this paper to contend that the Maibi, the principal performers of the ritual dances of the Lai-Haraoba perform a text that asserts a reality.

Key Words: Lai-Haraoba, Maibi, Dance as Philosophy, Rituals, Body.

I

This paper examines the worldview of the Meitei¹ of Manipur as performed in the Lai-Haraoba, in the light of the idea that performance can be philosophy. This new line of thinking in performance studies argues that there is philosophy in performance. Within the context of this development the performances of Lai-Haraoba, especially its dances, perform a philosophy of a community.

The Lai-Haraoba is the social, cultural and religious expression of the Meitei worldview. It is an annual ritual festival. The meaning of the term Lai-Haraoba is not without contestations. Some scholars translate it as merry-making of the Gods. It could also be in some sense understood as appeasing or appeasement of the Gods and

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Goddesses. There is also the view that Haraoba is a corruption of the term *hoi laoba*. It is a description of the shouting of the word 'hoi', which herded out the cosmos from the belly of Atingkok². This interpretation captures an important aspect of the ritual festival because as much as the Lai-Haraoba is a festival to appease the deities and the spirits, it is a festival in which the creation of the cosmos, the settlement of the Meitei people and its civilization is performed through songs, dance and rituals. The dances are predominantly performed by the Maibi.

The Maibi has been understood as shamans.³ There are limitations to this categorization, but nevertheless this characterization can give a starting point to understand the Maibi. The Maibi have many functions within Meitei society. They are herbalists, midwives, clairvoyants, dancers and spiritual leaders. They are also priestesses who tend to the Gods and Goddesses, and who conduct the rituals in the temple of the deities. But most importantly, they are the performers of the dances of the Lai-Haraoba, which expresses the worldview of the Meitei. They are the chosen ones through which the gods and spirits speak. No person becomes a Maibi through choice; it is only through a divine or extra-mundane intervention that someone becomes a member of the institution of Maibi. A chosen one after manifesting signs of being chosen seeks a destined teacher, an already established Maibi, who would then take her through an institutional training – training of dancing, singing, divination, performance of rituals.

The metaphor of the cosmic womb from which the cosmos germinates has representation in the hand gestures of the Maibi in the Lai-Haraoba dance. Maibis perform the moment of the release of creative energy in the beginning of the cosmos. This is registered in the very beginning of their dance sequences, in the Lai-Haraoba. This moment is registered in their dance as the upper part of the body breaks from the complete stillness into a slow movement recapturing the primal rhythm. Maibis use 364 hand gestures during the dance sequence. It starts with the re-enactment of the creation

by nine male deities and seven female deities. This is followed by dance representing, through fine gestures, the development of the human body in the womb. Then the birth of the child, the growing up stages, the building of houses, civilization through cultivation of land, various stages of weaving are recreated elaborately. There are also various dance sequences which depict the continuity of human life.⁴

At a first glance, therefore, the Maibi dance represents a worldview. There would not be good grounds to contend otherwise, taking into consideration the purpose of their dances. But to say that what they dance is philosophy needs some preparations. If philosophy is a second order reflection on any subject, then the claim for philosophy of dance would be difficult to be discounted. Consider the phrase, “philosophy of X”. It is an ambiguous phrase. But we can get two important senses here, which are derived from the discussion of the phrase “philosophy of religion”. It has been pointed out that “philosophy of religion” could mean philosophy of the object of inquiry that is religion or it could mean the philosophy that belongs to religion.⁵ This analysis has brought in the idea that these two senses could be there in the general phrase “philosophy of X”. Hence, the idea of dance as philosophy could be available over and above the philosophical question regarding dance as the object of inquiry.

Philosophy can mean many things but some of the central understandings as listed in any discussion of its definition would be 1) an intellectual activity 2) a theory derived at as a result of philosophical inquiry 3) a comprehensive view of reality and man’s place in it.⁶ It would be difficult to conceive of dance as an intellectual activity. In the Cartesian divide between mind and body, movements of the body could hardly be called an intellectual activity. Therefore, it would be far-fetched to claim that dance is a theory derived at as a result of philosophical inquiry. But some dances do try a representation of a worldview – a comprehensive view of reality and man’s place in it. The Socratic sense of philosophy which concerns knowing oneself has been extended by

Albert Schweitzer's conception of philosophy as reflection on man's place and destiny in the natural world.⁷ If the meaning of philosophy means a comprehensive view of reality and man's place in it, we could claim that the performance of Maibi in Lai-Haraoba, which represents a Meitei world-view – a comprehensive view of what reality is and her relation to it – is a philosophy in this conception of philosophy *albeit* a very broad understanding of philosophy.

Graham Priest undermines the deflationary understanding of philosophy of latter Wittgenstein who has answered that philosophy arises from a certain mistake. Priest also rejects Derrida's indeterminate meaning of truth, for both these understanding of philosophy is self-refuting. Priest defines philosophy neither by its subject matter, nor by its method, but by its spirit – the spirit of unbridled criticism.⁸ If philosophy has this character of unbridled criticism, and if it has to have that, then performance and dance in particular could hardly be called philosophy.

II

Yet, recent studies in ritual performances have seen some original contributions to the idea that rituals embody metaphysics, and that rituals have a noetic element.

The general understanding of performance is as an act of executing, presenting something to an audience. It could be in the form of dance, play, song, etc. Dance comprises of bodily movements and gestures usually to a set of rhythmic pattern and choreography. Some forms of dance are considered fine art, some dances are to do with rituals, and some are social dances which includes dances, for the sake of entertainment and enjoyment. Sometimes these forms of dances can overlap without blurring these distinctions.

By ritual we understand ceremonial actions or practices performed by particular community which gives the sense of continuity of life, the sense of belongingness, which gives meanings to our existence. "Ritual reminds us of a larger archetypal reality

and involves in us a visceral understanding of such universal paradigms as unity, continuity, connectivity, reverence and awe.”⁹ There is meager contribution of philosophical thought to the study of rituals because the assumption that “ritual activities are thoughtless, i.e. rituals are typically seen as mechanical or instinctual and not as activities that involve thinking or learning”¹⁰ is rife. “The assumption has been that bodily movements are not representations and therefore whatever is going on in the movements of rituals must be something other than thinking.”¹¹ But on the other hand... “ritual is often interpreted as symbolic activity, and on this interpretation rituals may symbolize knowledge.”¹²

This line of thinking has been objected on the ground that it would engender everything and anything as philosophy. Performance as philosophy is distinguished from philosophy of performance in these objections. Performance as philosophy is resisted for some obvious reasons. “For some, though to say that performance is philosophy or experience is thinking risks rendering ‘philosophy’ a term that means everything and nothing; it is to dissolve the identity of philosophy altogether”¹³. What Cull has pointed out is a genuine difficulty for anyone to identify some performances as philosophy. This has called in a new tact in finding new way of philosophizing.

It has been observed that if philosophy would not admit dance to be a philosophy, then it is imperative that a new style of philosophizing be undertaken - “...a faithful thought and experience of dance cannot be included within philosophy but would require a new style of philosophy.”¹⁴ For, “...the figure and possibility of dance link the concepts of philosophy, meaning and life.”¹⁵

Heidegger says that poetry reveals truth, as thinking, as philosophy, would reveal truth. The truth that poetry (and other arts possibly) reveal is beauty. Though thinking cannot be identical with poesy; though philosophical thinking could not be identical with the performance of philosophy, they are the same at a certain level.

We modern men presumably have not the slightest notion how thoughtfully the Greeks experienced their lofty poetry, their works of art – no, not experienced, but let them stand there in the presence of their radiant appearance...Yet this might be clear to us right now: we are not dragging Hoelderlin's words into our lecture merely as a quotation from the realm of the poetic statement which will enliven and beautify the dry progress of thinking. To do so would be to debase the poetic word. Its statement rests on its own truth, and here truth means the disclosure of what keeps itself concealed. The beautiful is not what pleases, but what falls within that fateful gift of truth which comes to be when that which is eternally non-apparent and therefore invisible attains its most radiantly apparent appearance. We are compelled to let the poetic word stand in *its* truth, in beauty. And that does not exclude but on the contrary includes that we think the poetic word...what is stated poetically, and what is stated in thought, are never identical; but there are times when they are the same – those times when the gulf separating poesy and thinking is a clean and decisive cleft. This can occur when poesy is lofty, and thinking profound.¹⁶

Though the activity of philosophy might not be identifiable with the action that is performance, they are at a level. The level in which they are same is the end of both the activities – the uncovering of truth.

Modernism in dance argues for the subjective genitive reading of 'of' in the phrase philosophy of dance.¹⁷ "And dance that devoted itself to the modernist project undertook the theoretical or philosophical task of 'defining its own essence' or 'interrogating its own conditions of possibility.'"¹⁸ Kristen Boyce extends this to argue that the two readings are interdependent. Though Boyce delimits her investigation to the realm of art dance, her approach opens investigating the idea that the ritualistic dance of the Maibis contain philosophical reflections and thought.

Dance as gestures translatable to propositions and statements could claim representative of certain end points in philosophical

reflection. Boyce citing Greenberg notes that the cognitive turn in modernism (dance is thinking) is a response to a crisis. In the wake of newly developed scientific methods, the arts (along with religion and philosophy) were denied the kind of seriousness they had traditionally been taken to have – seriousness in their being sources of knowledge. They were therefore faced with the task of demonstrating that they afforded a kind of experience that was ‘valuable’ in their own right and not to be obtained from any other form of activity.¹⁹ In its hope to regain ‘seriousness’ i.e., knowledge communicated through dance, “they returned dance from its self-preoccupation to an engagement with the world and human concerns.”²⁰ The interesting thing to note here is that the Maibi dance is all about this engagement with the world and the concerns of the community. Thus, the seriousness that is sought to claim that dance is philosophy is already present in the dance of the Maibis. The standard approach of the modernist dancers is to fit dance to a conception of philosophy. The attempt has been to make dance philosophical, to make it carry philosophical reflections to meet philosophy, to regain its “seriousness”. As an alternative to this approach Boyce makes the argument that philosophy can approach dance to recover philosophy which is already in the movements.

Some of the arguments that have been made to advance the idea that movement is thinking and embodiment of knowledge are encapsulated in the following. “For if knowledge is to be derived from experience as most philosophers as well as all experimental scientists pretty well agree that it is, then it must be the whole of experience, experience in all its parts rather than only in some, that is meant. Action must be included as well as thought and sensation.”²¹ If thinking is an embodied activity that represents thought, then dance which is an embodied activity cannot be denied the relation with thinking. The centrality of the body in the Meitei worldview comes very lucid in how the body is written in the very letters of its writing system. The significance of the body in Meitei culture and worldview is presented in Ray’s insightful study on how the body and its parts become scripts, writings and cosmology.²²

To some society or community dance could represent a whole of reality. This has slowly gained recognition. “Until, recently, it might have been hard to imagine how dance could fruitfully be conceived as involving any form of reflection. Copeland, for example, argues that for much of its history, dance has suffered the effects of a deeply entrenched Cartesian dualism: because its medium is the human body, dance has been conceived (and often conceived itself) as ‘mired’ in the body, feeling and subjectivity – more suited to serve as a therapeutic antidote to the ‘abstractions and deceptions’ of reason than as a medium of thought.”²³

In the line of the idea that thinking is embodied activity, one could also speculate that dance is an embodied thinking though a highly developed activity of thinking process. In a more radical way one could say that dance expresses things beyond our ordinary languages. It says that dance (in particular and arts in general) say something which is not available in language of words. The representational contents of the Maibi dance in Lai Haraoba articulate something which is beyond our ordinary languages. Contrary to our initial intuition that dance cannot think, a sort of reversal in this intuition is taking place in such pronouncements as, “If we cannot make sense of what it is to act with our bodies, neither can we make sense of what it is to think that something is the case.”²⁴ This is re-enforced by the observation that “Many philosophical approaches today seek to overcome the division between mind and body. If such projects succeed, then ritual activities that discipline the body are not just thoughtless motions, but crucial parts of the way people think.”²⁵

III

We have noted above that the Maibi performs a worldview. A worldview need not merely relate to “a people’s understanding of its social environment, but also to its understanding of an even more inclusive environment, reality itself.”²⁶ Worldview could then become metaphysics, if we understand the later to be “inquiry into

the generic or necessary features of human existence.”²⁷ As part of the Lai-Haraoba, the community dances, led by the Maibis. Here, through the act of dancing, the participants come to know that they belong to the community. As Schilbrack puts it the ritual body, here in this case the dancing body, comes to know metaphysical truths “in the flesh”. These metaphysical truths inform authentic existence. Metaphysical truths are how things really are. Thus, to participate in a performance of a representation of how things really are is an effort to live in consonance with that truth. Through the rituals of the Lai-Haraoba, enacted through dancing, the community participates in how the Gods act and behave. There is the legend that the Lai-Haraoba is a mimesis of the humans perceiving the behavior of gods.²⁸ “Such metaphysical knowledge, inscribed on bodies through ritual, is also practical knowledge. This ritual knowledge of reality is used to shape conduct, to get people to act “properly”, as “we” act, as “true humans” act, or as the Gods act.”²⁹ In this way, ritual metaphysics is used to alienate a range of possible behaviors as not in accord with ultimate reality, and thereby to fabricate *authentic* human beings, authentic in the sense that their behavior is authorized by the very nature of things.”³⁰

The dances of the Lai-Haraoba inscribe body as texts. “But these texts are metaphysical texts”³¹ for they are metaphysically informed body dancing in tune to the metaphysical truths which the body attempts to represent, express, convey and also to come to know those truths through the act of dancing. Thus, the dances of the Lai-Haraoba have elements of the metaphysical and the epistemological. This conclusion can be further pushed to claim that the dances itself are forms of inquiry – not just a representation of knowledge gained through some means but the source of knowledge itself, “ritual can be seen in some cases at least as a form of inquiry itself, a source of knowledge in its own right.”³² Schilbrack grounds this on writings of Theodore Jennings as in “ritual action is not only the product but is also the means of a noetic quest, an exploration which seeks to discover the right action or sequence of actions”³³.

Some of the Lai-Haraoba dances are for community participation. Through these ritual dances a young girl or a boy comes to know who they are in the world, or what they are capable. But more importantly, such participations “give rise to metaphysical thinking when they induce participants to experience features of the ritual as features of the human condition generally.”³⁴ A muslim going on a trip to Mecca may come to experience that trip not only as a particular trip but through that trip experience life itself as a journey. Likewise, a young girl participating in the Lai-Haraoba following the steps and gestures of the Maibi might come to experience the synergy and the rhythm of creation and the cosmos through that particular dance individuated by a particular time and place. This participation is a question, an inquiry because it reveals an answer, a metaphysical answer.

IV

The most convincing reason for the idea that dance can claim a philosophy comes from some philosophers who argue for modern art dances as philosophy in movement. The point of their argument is the identification of dance with philosophy not through direction of fit from either of the fields. This is done so that neither of the two fields is given priority. The identification is instead done at a common meeting place, which is aesthetics. “On the alternative approach, philosophical reflection belongs to some forms of dance in virtue of a reciprocal relation of mutual dependence that obtains between the artistic power of the dance and the philosophical reflection that is present in it. From the perspective of this approach, dance’s philosophy is not of interest because it appears to secure respectability for dance. It is of interest because investigating proximity between philosophical and artistic power, which has been poorly understood, promises to deepen our understanding of both philosophical and artistic endeavor”.³⁵

The Maibi dance can be called art without difficulty though it is more a ritualistic dance rather than a self-conscious aesthetic

endeavour. Yet, it is easy to see it as an art for it is the progenitor and the source of the Manipuri Ras Dance, which is one of the recognized classical dances of the country. This canonization is recognition of its aesthetic qualities. So, on Boyce's reciprocal relation between dance and philosophy the Maibi dance, which can easily be shown as a repository of aesthetic qualities and values, is an art because it achieves something philosophically important. One could surmise that the achievement lies in the performative assertion of what constitutes as the beautiful. In this line of thinking, one can note that the Maibi dance represents, and teaches norms that are to do with living. Taking a cue from Boyce one could contend that the Maibi dance achieves not only a representation of a moral order but an assertion of that order. Therefore, something philosophically important has been achieved. Boyce's dictum that because a dance achieves something philosophical, it becomes art would meet objections from some sections of artists especially those who believe in the idea of art for art's sake. Art for art's sake is a deliberate attempt to make art ground in itself. But, that could very well be a philosophical stance regarding art.

Every time the Maibi performs in the Lai-Haraoba, they are remaking a world of the Meitei which is already there. While dancing they are actualizing each of the Meitei's worldview. Each moment performed is a lived experience for the Meitei. "Embodied practice always exceeds the limits of written knowledge because it cannot be contained and stored in documents or archives."³⁶ If worldview is to be allowed entry into the realm of a generous understanding of philosophy, then dance of the Maibi is philosophy. In the line of the idea that dancing is highly developed activity of thinking process, Maibi dance is an involved activity in which there is not just a theoretical understanding of a worldview but a presentation and assertion of a worldview through performance.

End Notes

- ¹ Sir Charles J. Lyall in his Introduction to *The Meithei* by T. C. Hodson gives a synoptic view of the Meitei.

It was my fortune to visit Manipur only once (in February, 1888) during my service in Assam, and I am thus acquainted with the subject chiefly by hearsay. But I have always taken a lively interest in this singular oasis of comparative civilization and organized society, set in the midst of congeries of barbarous peoples, over whom its rulers exercise an authority, which if scarcely approaching the settled polity of more advanced communities, is at least in the direction of peace and order. The valley of Manipur in several respects resembles in miniature its neighbor, that of the Irawadi. In both the civilized people who occupy the central settled and organized region are nearly akin to the wild folk who inhabit the hills which enclose the alluvial plain. While Burma has accepted the mild and gentle religion of Buddha, and thus profoundly modified the original animistic cult, Manipur has been taken into the pale of Hinduism, and has imposed upon itself burdensome restrictions of caste and ritual from which its greater neighbor is happily free. In both countries, however, the older religious ideas still survive beneath the surface of the philosophical systems borrowed from India, and in reality sway to a large extent the lives and sentiments of the people. (Lyall, 1908, p. xvii)

- ² Atingkok is a primeval being, which could be translated as void or emptiness. Adhikarimayum (2013, p. 35)
- ³ Ibemhal (2006), Ray (2004), Walter & Fridman & (2004), Kehoe (2000)
- ⁴ Sharma (1992)
- ⁵ Mautner (1996)
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ Angelo (2008)
- ⁸ Priest (2006)
- ⁹ Hennes (2013)
- ¹⁰ Schilbrack (2004, p. 2)
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ Cull (2012, p. 25)
- ¹⁴ Colebrook (2005, p. 5)

- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ Heidegger (1968, pp. 19-20)
- ¹⁷ Modernism in dance is a 20th century phenomenon and is not to be mistaken with philosophical modernism though there is the similarity between the two in the latter's reflection on itself – its conditions and possibilities.
- ¹⁸ Boyce (2015, p. 39)
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.* p.37
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ Feibleman (1976, p. 170)
- ²² Ray (2009)
- ²³ Boyce (2015, p. 37)
- ²⁴ Weil (1978, p. 7)
- ²⁵ Schilbrack (2004, p. 4th Cover)
- ²⁶ *Ibid.* (p. 128)
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ Adhikarimayum (2013)
- ²⁹ “The origin of the festival is that the gods held the first Lai Haraoba on the Koubru Hill, so that their descendants should imitate them and perform the same as it had been done by the deities so that they will never forget the secret and the sacred story of the creation of this universe and the birth of the different lives on this earth.” Caesar, Chaningkhombee, & Sanasam (2012, p. 278)
- ³⁰ Schilbrack (2004, p. 131)
- ³¹ *Ibid.* (p. 133)
- ³² *Ibid.* (p. 136)
- ³³ As quoted in Schilbrack (2004, p. 136)
- ³⁴ *Ibid.* (2004, p. 138)
- ³⁵ Boyce (2015, pp. 48-49)
- ³⁶ Taylor (2008, p. 101)

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