



Research Paper

The Maibi Phenomenon: A Site of Crisis and Resolution

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ABSTRACT: This paper makes an exposition of the phenomenon of Maibi within the Meitei worldview. Through this exposition, an observation is made that it is a site of conflict between Tradition and Modernity. The existential aspect of this conflict from the perspective of the Meitei self is delineated. The question, which this opens up, as to whether a possible resolution through philosophical resources could be achieved, is then discussed.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The present generation of the community called Meitei is embedded in its system of beliefs and practices, just as any other community would in their own system. This generation has empathy and desire to sustain the community's understanding. Apart from this 'education', this generation is schooled in a system of modern education defined by scientific attitude and temperament. Through this process, a parallel conviction has been drawn out from the present generation of Meitei. Richard Feynman (1999), the physicist describes of a "human difficulty that happens when you are educated in two ways".

Sir Charles J. Lyall in his Introduction to *The Meiteis* 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... 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... While Burma has accepted the mild and 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)

Central to the Meitei experience is the Lai-haraoba. The Lai-haraoba is a cultural, social and cosmological expression of the Meitei. It is an annual ritual festival celebrated by the Meitei. 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 goddesses. There is also the view that 'haraoba' is a corruption of the term *hoilaoba*. It is a description of the shouting of the word 'hoi', which herded out the cosmos from the belly of Atingkok, the primeval being (Pudin, 2015). 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 Lai-haraoba is a performative enactment of a collective memory, self-understanding of one's origin and relation to the world.

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)

The Lai-haraoba is indispensable for the Meitei self-understanding to the extent that it would be difficult to call one-self Meitei without having a relation with it. The Lai-haraoba constitutes meaning for the

Meitei self. The constitution of meaning comes through the metaphysics, cosmology and epistemology that constitute a worldview. The performance of the Lai-haraoba constitutes continuity with the past. The norms and values of a community are performed in the Lai-haraoba.

Lai-haraoba accents performance of a worldview. This is a unique phenomenon in human history. The Meitei has written script and a body of writings on different subjects ranging from genesis to such arcane topics as cloud reading. This body of works is called the *puyas*. The making of knowledge, storage and transfer through written words does not encroach upon the textuality of the performance of the Lai-haraoba, through rituals, songs and dances. At the center of these complex is the Maibi, whom the Meitei consider as one of the living media of its tradition which modernity and science would diagnose as a case of a mental disease. This results in a conflict, which is a felt existential crisis.

II. THE MAIBI

Maibi within the Meitei worldview is one of the institutions that uphold it. The categories of modern science, on the other hand, make Maibi phenomena an aberration. This encounter is a locus of conflict which has existential consequences for those entrenched in the Meitei worldview. This is because science, which no longer can be ignored, undermines and negates the fundamental aspect of the Meitei.

The Maibi of Manipur has been understood as shamans in Ibemhal (2006), Ray (2004), and Mishra (2007). There are limitations to this categorization, but nevertheless this characterization can give a starting point to understand who a Maibi is. The Maibi has varied 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. 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 shows signs of being chosen. The chosen one then seeks her teacher, an already established Maibi, who would then take her through an institutional training of the chosen one – through training of dancing, singing, divination, performance of rituals.

The Meitei word for dance is *jagoi*. As cited in Christel Stevens (2006), the word according to the Australian anthropologist, Louise Lightfoot, means “*chak-koi*, which means the going round/ uncoiling (*koi*) of the ages/ time. Stevens equate the dance of the Maibi with history. Dance in Meitei society serves to transfer specific information from generation to generation. This transfer is through immersion in the community dancing led by the Maibi or through experiencing the dances of the Maibi.

The Meitei society has three *Loishang* or institutions which are considered to be the three legs of the tripod on which Meitei culture, history and religion rest. The Maibi is one of the legs. The other two are the Maiba and the *Pena-loishang*. These institutions had full patronage of the state and the ruler. The Maiba again has also been termed as shamans, which is truer to the general understanding of term. They are medicine man, they are adept in magic. They are learned and are the guardians of the *Puyas*. The *Pena-loishang* is the institution of the singer/ *pena* players, who accompany the Maibi in their dancing. They also perform ritualistic singings in the temples. Their songs are based on myths and legends. The Maibi occupies a central place in the conduct and performance of the Lai-haraoba – starting from their invocation of the spirit, which commences it, to the very end wherein they are “released” from the festival.

III. SITUATING A CONFLICT

The present generation of Meitei inherited an understanding of who a Maibi is. At the same time it cannot forsake the categories that science has bequeathed. Modern medical science, to the question of who/ what is Maibi, would reply that it is a phenomenon rooted in schizophrenia.

An ongoing study at the Department of Clinical Psychology, Regional Institute of Medical Sciences (RIMS) in Imphal into the personality of Maibi, with specific focus on their mental health conditions, found striking similarities between the Maibi phenomenon and Western scientific explanations of schizophrenia and dissociative disorders, especially the trance and possession syndrome. Assistant Professor Lourembam Roshan who has been conducting the study, adds however that the behaviour of Maibi cannot be equated to the above explanations in toto. “There are many things still unknown and unexplained by science in the Maibi phenomenon. More studies such as on the Maibi’s capability to control their oracle giving and the genetic factor also need to be studied to fully understand it,” he says, explaining that many Maibi speak about having some other in their ancestry. (Samom, 2012)

Those trained in modern medicine takes the Maibi phenomenon to be a cultural expression which has its roots in schizophrenic experiences. And this is in line with the characterization of shamans in general as a case of mental illness. Julian Silverman, the American Psychiatrist, wrote that the psychological state of the shaman is a form of acute schizophrenia characterized by “grossly non-reality oriented ideation, abnormal perceptual experiences, profound emotional upheavals and bizarre mannerisms”. Modern medicine, at least for

some practitioners, accepts that normality is an arbitrary concept. One of the more vocal psychiatrists who maintain the arbitrariness of normality is Thomas Szasz, in whose words, "If you talk to God, you are praying. If God talks to you, you have schizophrenia" (Szasz T. S., 1973, p. 113). Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that from the perspective of modern science the Maibi are persons suffering from mental illness and need the proper medical attention. Madness as a construct, both self and social, could provide a philosophical intervention.

It is acknowledged now that the Maibi, like other shamans, have had positive roles as spiritual leaders and healers. The Maibi institution has been phenomenally successful in "curing" the "illness" of the Maibi through the training and inculcation of the dance movements and the development of the persona of the spiritual leader to the extent that after a period of training they return home to be part of the community. In contrast to this, Modern Science takes schizophrenia to be a disease whose prognosis is not good even with the latest developments in the medical sciences. But this line of thinking would be conceding to the claim that the Maibi phenomenon is rooted in an illness. This is problematic for the Meitei society that rests on the Maibi institution for the sustenance of its world-view. The problem is more acute because we cannot sideline modern medicine anymore. What then would be the recourse of the Meitei that has to embrace modern medicine while retaining continuity with its traditions and belief system?

The problem then is the conflict that arises out of this encounter between the two perspectives. As a Meitei, is there a way to align one-self so that one does not forsake what modern science has to offer and at the same time one does not forsake a central element of one's culture, tradition and identity? If one accepts modern medicine's characterization of the Maibi as a case of schizophrenic expression, then Maibi as understood in the Meitei community is undermined. The validity of the role and function of the Maibi cannot be sustained if one entertains the diagnosis and characterization of modern science. In this scenario, the Meitei worldview, Meitei culture has to have a radical shift. How the Meitei who is committed to its culture and worldview, who self-understands themselves as defined by that worldview and who also admits the validity of modern science reconcile the conflict in the encounter of the two perspectives on Maibi? The Maibi phenomenon thus becomes a locus for a conflict of categories of two conflicting understandings.

Worldview according to Nudler consists of four main key elements.

Namely, an ontology, or a theory about the basic elements that populate the universe (for example, you can assume that only material entities are real, or else you can believe in the separate existence of ideas, numbers, souls, etc.), a theory of world order or, in other words, a theory about the ways in which those elements relate to each other (for instance, whether they are ordered in hierarchies or in networks or they are in a basically disordered state), an axiology or a value theory (which part or state of the universe, if any, you think is more valuable than others), an epistemology (how do you know, to what extent do you know, etc.). [Nudler, 1993, p. 4]

These elements are intertwined together to form a worldview. Often enough, worldviews come into collision course. This coming together is not necessarily dialectic but more often a monolectic where one is sacrificed for the other. In some cases, there could be a dialectical evolution. Or in some cases the conflicts are irresolvable, and not a dialectical evolution but an archetypal repeatation.

Such a repeatation is the dionysian vs the apollonian outlooks which shaped Western civilization according to Bertrand Russell (Russell, 2004). Though they are found in the same culture, the difference in the set of ontology, axiology, and epistemology and how they are related are so divergent that they are effectively worlds within a world. The apollonian, reason driven worldview's conflict with the mystical, emotional drive of the dionysian worldview came to be manifested as the conflict between the Enlightenment and Romanticism.

Science which has always been under the worldview of religion came into conflict with the latter. The conflict seems to have reached its heights in the present times where the contribution of science to humanity cannot be ignored, and wherein the absurdities of repressive practices of religions and catastrophic interreligious conflicts have taken its toll materially and psychologically.

Encounters between worldviews, changes and evolution within a worldview form a part of the larger history of mankind. Western history as a series of such encounters has been chalked in Tarnas (2010). Closer home, we have the encounters of worldviews in Buddhism and Taoism in China and Buddhism and Shintoism in Japan. These encounters were synthesizing encounters without the erasure or sacrifice of one view by the other.

In the home front, we have the encounter between Hinduism in its different forms with the traditional worldview of the Meitei, with its unique cosmology and theory of genesis. At one juncture, the *puyas* or the sacred manuscripts on different topics were consecrated to the flames by the King Pamheiba, also known as Garibniwaz, on the advice of his spiritual guru Santidas Goshai. Though it is accepted that such an event happened the exact date of this event is still under some controversy (Singh C. A., 2014). This is encounter at one point, for the coming of Hinduism was in waves and not in one big push. But somehow, Hinduism that began to be the predominant religion of the valley incorporated the pre-hindu worldview of the Meitei. A place for the worship of the Sanamahi is found in all Hindu households and Meitei Hindus take part in Lai-haraoba.

The sacred Meitei sites inside Kangla are maintained while constructions of Hindu temples were made. The three institutions as mentioned earlier were still under the patronage of the Meitei king, and Lai-haraoba was celebrated without fail by the converted Meitei.

Encounter with Hinduism was costly for the worldview of the Meitei, but the encounter with scientific rationality seems to hold a larger danger for it seems to nullify one of the central figures in that worldview.

Acculturation and syncretism were seen in all the conflicts with varying degrees of erasure. Ideal situations could best be described in the case of Japanese acceptance of Buddhism, where the Japanese say that they have a wedding in Shinto temple and have a funeral in a Buddhist monastery (Shinto and Buddhism in Japan, 2017). The side by side existence of temples and monasteries are architectural evidence of this ideal of encounter between worldviews. Though it cannot be claimed that a similar situation was ushered in, in the case of the Meitei encounter with Hinduism, it is to a large degree a syncretism of two different worldviews.

These interactions and encounters listed above seem to be different from the specific interaction between religion/ tradition and science. When science is seen to be in conflict with tradition, it is most probably the religious grounding of tradition that it is in conflict with. The terms religion and science are relatively new and what they stand are not static but undergoes changes. Nowadays, the two realms are distinguished through Popper's criteria of science through the notion of falsifiability (Cruz, 2019). Under this distinction tradition/ religion cannot be falsified and hence its distinctiveness from science. Another approach in distinguishing is to do with methodological naturalism, which restricts science to only natural phenomenon while neither denying nor affirming questions of the supernatural. Ontological naturalism or philosophical naturalism is the view that the supernatural does not exist. This would be the characterization of science that would be in conflict with religion, and therefore with the worldviews of say the Meitei. This is said while acknowledging that science itself can be counted as one's tradition and one's worldview.

Though there is the position that science and religion are at not at war but complementary (Cruz, 2019), our concern here is that in the case of the Maibi phenomenon, science as in medical science do pose a threat to the understanding of this very phenomenon. Still the reconciliatory moves of religion towards science seems to confirm Tarnas's remark that at one point of time science worked hard to be in line with religion but now the table seems to have turned.

There are three possible models of interaction between science and religion/ tradition. One is a model of complete independence, which we shall ignore. The second one is that of complete overlap, which is not tenable considering that there is perceived conflict. The third one takes the model of conflict, open to continuing conflict or some future harmonization. We could note that a scientist could be a believer or even an ordained priest. This would be an extreme example of harmonization. Whether there is harmonization or some kind of split and self-deception is something debatable which we would not go into. Within this broad background of encounters between worldviews, especially that between religion and science, within the larger conflict between tradition and modernity, the crisis of the Meitei worldview and the Maibi phenomenon finds a natural place.

IV. REVISITING SUBJECTIVITY

There is a need to revisit the notions of selfhood and subjectivity to locate the Maibi self. From the worldview of the Meitei explored above, possible alignments with the notion of subjectivity in philosophical literature, especially as that found in Gadamer's *Truth and Method* is examined here.

'Self' and 'Subjectivity' are terms which are treated as synonymous in certain contexts. In some other contexts their distinctions are highlighted and maintained. Subjectivity is taken as the self-reflective capacity of the self (Atkins, 2005). Subjectivity can mean many things (Hall, 2004), but the most relevant, to our project, is subjectivity as to do with "a subject of knowledge, most familiarly perhaps of the discourse of social institutions that circumscribe its terms of being" (Gagnier, 1991). It can be extended to mean the subject of knowledge, the knower; the substrate of consciousness and action, the doer and creator, and also the subject of aesthetic and sensual experiences; that which enjoys and senses. The history of the notion of subjectivity speaks, on one end of the subject devoid of self-constitution, and on the other extreme, of radical self-constitution. This refers to the transcendent Platonic order as one extreme, and the Nietzschean rejection of it through the primacy of the will as the other. Within these extreme positions, subjectivity is also understood as a textuality (Hall, 2004) that opens up avenues of interpretations and re-interpretation towards self-understanding.

The Meitei self is a composite. The essence of the self is a combination of five principles along with shadow collectively known as *Thawai manga, migathanatarukmak* (Pudin, 2015). Comparison with the *Panchbhuta* of Indian metaphysics suggests itself here. But the details would see such comparisons as mistaken. The inclusion of shadow in the complex is a rare conception of subjectivity. One can find such a conception in Egyptian mythology, where the shadow of the body is taken to be a vital part of subjectivity (Dassow, 2008, p. 152).

The idea that the self, as understood in Meitei worldview, is situated can be evidenced in the idea of *Thawai mi konba*. In this ritual act, the spirits are gathered together. It can be a daily act of the head of the family to safeguard the souls of the family members. There is evidence that the conception of self that transmigrates. The idea of the soul could perhaps capture the Meitei self, if not for its composite nature as mentioned above. The legend of *Moirang Sai*, which tells the story of Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi is based on the concept of selves which were destined not to be united for seven generations. In the Meitei epic *Khamba Thoibi* story is told of Khamba falling sick and becoming worse day by day. Kabui Salang Maiba, seeing that the five *Thawai* and one *Mi* of Khamba have dispersed, goes on an expedition to collect them to restore Khamba's health (Ibemhal, 2006, p.72). Certain prevalent beliefs, atleast for certain section of the Meitei society, that particular birds are transmigration of the self strenghtens this observation. That there are also certain birds which 'snatches' the selves from the individual person also seems to confirm this idea. In the Lai-haraoba ritual of *Kheiyom Lakpa*, the multitudes of souls are represented by rice grains. Plurality of soul is thus believed. For these mentioned reasons self or subjectivity in Meitei worldview is to be taken as substantive.

Theories of the self could be broadly categorized into two. There is the idea of the soul or subjectivity as a kind of substance. Then we have the idea of self or subjectivity as a process or becoming. The self as *Jivātma*, or soul as substance upon which qualities inhere would belong to the first category. Descartes's idea of the self as a 'thinking substance' would be an example of this concept of the self. The Buddhist notion of self as an aggregate, which are in a process of becoming would be a good example of non-substantial or processual understanding of the self. The idea of substantive self as in the Cartesian thinking being has been challenged since Hume. He challenged this substantiality of the self with his notion of the bundle of perceptions thesis. Hume's conception has been extraordinarily influential but it cannot explain the Meitei self because as we have pointed out it is a bundle as in a complexity but the complexity is not just association of processess and ideas but of substantial entities.

Materiality of the self, especially the idea that self cannot be divorced from the body but that is embodied has been one of the notions that we have used fruitfully to bring forth the idea of performance as some kind of a knowing and transmission of knowledge. While doing so we have not curtailed the place for elements of the non-material. We cannot reduce the self to the material as far as Meitei worldview is concerned. For, to do so would defeat the very being of the Maibi, the medium between the human and the non-material divine spirits. Locke was the first to stress the importance of the body for the notion of the self, the person (Locke, 1998). But the criteria of sameness through self reflective identification of the same 'I' of psychological continuity, as in memory, cannot function as a criterion for the divided self of the Maibi, who straddles the world of the divine and that of the world of the humans. This critical self-reflection nor psychological continuity might not be available to the Maibi self. This problem would carry over to Marleau-Ponty's embodied subjectivity. For Ponty, the body structures our pre-reflective consciousness, which is a logical stage before reflective consciousness (Atkins, 2005). This grounding of subjectivity on the body could be interpreted as materialism, which would not explain the spiritual dimension of the Maibi self.

Neither the notion of subjectivity in Kant wherein the noumenal realm is inaccessible nor the notion of human subjectivity as grounded in the rational as in Hegel can explain the Maibi self. This is for the reason that the Maibi self accesses the noumenal realm and for the reason that the Maibi self is based not on the reason but the unreasonable and the unexplainable. For the same reason Heidegger's characterization of human subjectivity as self-reflective understanding of itself as for which certain questions are important cannot capture the Maibi self.

The idea of the subjectivity of soul as centered, rational and coherent has been challenged by the notion that it is de-centered, fragmented and irrational, as found in post-structuralist notions of the self (Atkins, 2005). The idea has its roots in Nietzsche. The self of the Maibi is a captured self in the sense that a divine intervention has happened that has split the self of the Maibi as a member of a family or society but at the same time a medium through divine interventions to the society is made. The agency of the Maibi is compromised in episodes of these episodes of communion. It could definitely be looked upon as a transformation of the self no doubt, but atleast initially, the Maibi loses control over her body, mental and emotional equilibrium. But the Maibi cannot cut her connections to the past. Since the shift is radical in a way, a break can be seen.

Within predominant social constructivist theories of subjectivity and self, Strawson's concept of person does away with historicity. He claims that certain core metaphysical issues are ahistorical (Snowdon, 2019). Such a case would be human subjectivity. But the positing of 'person' as logical primitive in the scheme of things is against the Maibi self which is logically after the tradition. That tradition comes prior to the self or subjectivity is a major line of thinking in Gadamer. Gadamer is not alone in this idea. We find the constitution of self and subjectivity in the matrix of social and cultural forces in Foucault as well as Feminist philosophy. But Gadamer's non-insistence on these forces as repressive and oppressive alligns better with the Maibi phenomenon, which escapes any ready reading of suppressive forces. Though quite rare, man can become a

Maibi. Unlike many other cultures where in woman cannot take priestly roles, the Maibi in Meitei society are truly in physical as well as spiritual contacts with the gods and goddesses.

Within these different accounts of subjectivity, the question of construction of a compromised self, in the sense of tradition which constitutes the self toes the line of science, and the question of the impossibility of choice to sustain one's inherited identity are discussed. The Maibi self is given through an external agency, a divine choosing. As far as the Maibi goes, there is the impossibility of a compromise. Whether, a non-Maibi Meitei self, which inherits a tradition in the face of modernity, could make such a compromise is a question that demands discussion. The translators of *Truth and Method (TM)* have the following observation.

Erfahrung is something you undergo, so that subjectivity is overcome, and drawn into an "event" (*Geschehen*) of meaning. Gadamer typically uses the term *Erlebnis* with a critical overtone, and the term *Erfahrung* with a positive one. (2013, pp. xii-xiii)

This observation from the translators of *TM* gives a clue as to how Gadamer's implicit theory of the self or subjectivity captures the self of the Maibi, if not the substantial self of the Meitei. *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* are German equivalents of the English word experience. *Erfahrung* has the root *fahr* which alludes to travel. This kind of experience has a sort in it the kind of extended experience overtime. On the other hand, *Erlebnis* stands for relatively fleeting sort of experiences. Subjectivity as the capacity to self-reflect is an important aspect of the self, to the extent that we sometimes take them to be synonymous. Gadamer takes this suspension or overcoming, of this particular defining capacity of humans, as positive. Gadamer would then take the self as defined by that which overtakes it, in the sense that it gets its meaning in this overtaking, which initially sounds absurd.

In Gadamer art, tradition and history are not defined by humans but they have a prior being through which humans get their share of meaning and identity. The central concepts of art as play, the hermeneutic circle, and the ontology of festival reveals the notion of subjectivity and self in Gadamer. Subjectivity or self as that found in Gadamer would explain the being of the Maibi, in their transcendence or overcoming of their individuality for the experience of the community.

When we speak of play in reference to the experience of art, this means neither the orientation nor even the state of mind of the creator or of those enjoying the work of art, nor the freedom of a subjectivity engaged in play, but the mode of being of the work of art itself. (2013, p. 106)

From the above, it is seen that the work of art is not dependent on the subjectivity. It seems that in Gadamer, subjectivity has a lower role to play as compared to the idea of the author as in the creator and the interpreter as the authority. Gadamer does not consider subjectivity to be more primary than the work of art or the culture. The subjectivity as the creator, the performer or the audience are not the primary term but art or culture, which gives experience to the subjectivity, which makes the possibility to develop and make sense; and in turn create. It is clear as far as Gadamer is concerned that we cannot put subjectivity in the center to understand something. The subjectivity for Gadamer is a site of the manifestation of the historical, the cultural and the artistic. This is a relevant point for the Maibi self is a site where the historical, the cultural and the artistic find expressions.

Subjectivity is being present in something. This idea comes forth in Gadamer's discussion of the being of Festivals, as a paradigmatic element of tradition and the nature of art. Gadamer makes the claim that individuality is not subjectivity but living power. This describes the being of the Maibi, which is not so much defined by her subjectivity but shines as a living power of god's choosing and medium through which divine interventions are made. Through this the deities are served and their souls gathered for the Lai-haraoba.

Another source that puts subjectivity below the authority of tradition is in Gadamer's development of the dialectic of understanding is his concept of the hermeneutic circle. Here, subjectivity, as a movement of the interpreter, is subsumed in its relation with tradition. The meaning that governs our understanding of a text is not solely an act of subjectivity. The subjectivity is constantly being formed in our relation to tradition and its encounters with other traditions. Tradition in turn is not simply a permanent precondition but something that is in a relation to us. The circle is not a methodological circle but a circle of the very being of understanding.

Gadamer's self or subjectivity is mediated by tradition and culture in its movements through conflicts of misunderstanding. This model gives room that the conflict that arises in the Meitei self could also go through a dialectical movement with the sources of the conflict towards another stage of understanding.

V. A HERMENEUTICS OF UNDERSTANDING

The conflict that has been drawn could be conceived as a conflict of self-understanding. The interpretation concerns the text i.e., the Maibi, and to an extent, the non-Maibi Meitei. An establishment of the conflict in this light opens up a possible hermeneutic resolution. Our effort to understand the Maibi phenomenon finds sympathy in the Gadamerian observation that " 'tradition' or 'what is handed down from the past' confronts us as a *task*, as an effort of understanding we feel ourselves required to make because we recognize our limitations, even though no one compels us to do so" (Weinsheimer & Marshall, Translator's Preface, 1975).

The Gadamerian idea that “a self can be formed without breaking with or repudiating one’s past and that this formation cannot be achieved by any merely technical or methodical means” (Weinsheimer & Marshall, Translator's Preface, 1975), gives promise on two counts: a promise for a means, and also more importantly a resolution of the conflict through that means. This section explores the means of creating a self at a historical juncture where two time lines cross paths in the Meitei self. Here, an attempt to find how the conflict between the worldviews of science and modernity on one hand and the Lai-haraoba which is at the core of Meitei tradition and worldview could be understood and possibly resolved in the framework of Gadamer’s philosophy as found in *Truth and Method*. We look at the conflict from the point of Gadamer’s philosophy.

Truth and Method, as Gadamer asserts in the Introduction, is about the problem of Hermeneutics and the questions surrounding the phenomenon of understanding. In the opening paragraphs, he gives indication that the domains of science informed by scientific method, which relies on 1) Repeatability 2) Verifiability and 3) Induction, is not the only possible way of inquiry to understand texts in its varied forms and presentation. He puts this in the following words.

The hermeneutic phenomenon is basically not a problem of method at all. It is not concerned with a method of understanding by means of which texts are subjected to scientific investigation like all other objects of experience. It is not concerned primarily with amassing verified knowledge, such as would satisfy the methodological ideal of science—yet it too is concerned with knowledge and with truth. In understanding tradition not only are texts understood, but insights are acquired and truths known. But what kind of knowledge and what kind of truth? (p. xx)

With the question at the end of the passage, Gadamer has indicated that there may not be one kind of knowledge or one kind of truth, a unique truth and a unique knowledge dictated by the natural sciences. Different domains need not necessarily be in conflict. Conflict arises only when the question of domination comes into the picture. As shall be seen, there has been such an irresistible force coming from natural sciences that has dominated the understanding of texts. With it, truth and knowledge claim of other kinds of understanding has been invalidated. The question that Gadamer here repeats would be considered as an invalid question. Such is the reach and extent of the domination of the scientific worldview.

Given the dominance of modern science in the philosophical elucidation and justification of the concept of knowledge and the concept of truth, this question does not appear legitimate. (p. xx)

This is where the conflict emerges between the domain of methodological understanding of the prescription of science and other forms of understanding, for example tradition. Those who have a deep respect for the historical has not been able to shake away the influence of the success of natural science and have tried to emulate what has made it immensely successful and influential. Gadamer notes,

In modern life, our historical consciousness is constantly overstimulated. As a consequence—though, as I hope to show, it is a pernicious short circuit—some react to this overestimation of historical change by invoking the eternal orders of nature and appealing to human nature to legitimize the idea of natural. (p. xx)

Such approaches have had a pernicious effect on the truth claims of tradition and the historical aspects of our being to the detriment of understanding them. Those who have realised the worth and significance of tradition have knowingly or unknowingly erred in the eyes of Gadamer in this approach. He gives a sort of prescription that they should try not to take this approach.

A reflection on what truth is in the human sciences must not try to reflect itself out of the tradition whose binding force it has recognized. (p. xxiii)

Doing that would make matters worse the conflict between these different forms of understanding, which have their own valid domains. It is to be noted that Gadamer does not denounce natural science and its method. He would rather urge that its impulse to dominate be resisted.

This does not in the slightest prevent the methods of modern natural science from being applicable to the social world. Possibly the growing rationalization of society and the scientific techniques of administering it are more characteristic of our age than the vast progress of modern science. The methodical spirit of science permeates everywhere. Therefore I did not remotely intend to deny the necessity of methodical work within the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*). (p. xxvi)

Another source of conflict is in the idea that method can exhaust understanding of tradition. This has to be resisted for it reduces tradition to just a scientific object, which it is not. A proper understanding in a way has to come from tradition itself, tradition has to give the means to understand itself. Science grates against how concepts are to inform our thinking. Amongst philosophers also, Gadamer notes, there are those who recommend that there is no other way then let the methodology of science dictate how we should understand tradition and recover any truth that it might offer. But he finds it absurd for that would mean a destruction of the very nature of tradition (p. xxvi).

Where it is recommended that we approach understanding tradition and truth through certain principles and methodology, Gadamer recommends that this is not the right approach. Here is the conflict; tradition shall reveal what it is in its own terms, and in its own voice but methodology wants to probe with its principles and

tools. This misunderstanding undergirds the conflict thematized. We have to let tradition talk to us, if we have to validate it. Tradition and a culture is not an object to be prodded, but something that we converse with.

The main reason for differences between worldviews and science lies in the insistence of the natural sciences that there is only one kind of truth and one kind of knowledge namely, the one that it defines (p. 3). It is an assertion that the model of the natural sciences has had a dominant force upon the human sciences and in turn on how we understand tradition. We need to explain why this domination gives rise to conflict. The answer is in the alienation of tradition by the sciences when it declares that it is devoid of truth or knowledge, as it has been claimed. The conflict arises of this misunderstanding partly innocent but also partly that arises of a certain arrogance and hubris that comes from 'taming' its objects. Natural science fails to see that tradition has a reason, and that tradition fulfills something important in the realisation of our kind of being. It has failed to understand the nature of what constitutes tradition and culture. The demarcation that science fails to see is drawn again deeper by Gadamer. He notes that,

Man is characterized by the break with the immediate and the natural that the intellectual, rational side of his nature demands of him. (p. 11)

Science cannot understand this break; tradition steps in. There is immediacy in our aesthetic or historical consciousness. And this immediacy is something that cannot follow through a rule or a method. In the context of Vico, Gadamer points out that there is an excess that science and its methods can neither access nor comment. It is pertinent that the Maibi, in its institution gives a *sensus communis* to the Meitei worldview. This is a humanistic concept that Gadamer brings in to show that tradition is a source of knowledge and truth.

The word '*Bildung*' has a religious and mystical origin. Herder gave it a cultural dimension, by saying that it is the rising up to the universal through culture. Humbolt reverts back to the word's origin, and its reference to the mystical sharing that we have with god that must be developed to its fullest. The word refers more to the process, the becoming, than the end result which is the formed. It is not achieved in the manner of a technical construction but achieved through some kind of an inner process of formation and cultivation. In *Bildung*, end and means are not separated. That by which cultivation takes place becomes a part of one's own.

It is clear that there is a realm beyond what man knows and experiences immediately. The essence of *Bildung* is a return to oneself. This is important in the sense that the nature of art would be conceived as that through which one returns to oneself. It is not part of the natural equipment but it has a sureness of the senses, which somehow makes judgment in the particular without evoking the universal. This ability to make judgment in particular situations without the help of a method is tact. There is no doubt universality in tact and *Bildung*, the gaining of a perspective of the others, but this is not the kind of universality of the concept or understanding. It is more of universality of perspectives. This is an important point that we have to take from *Bildung*. There is knowing and truth in *Bildung*. This truth has universality, but it is not the universality of the concept or understanding but that of the senses.

The possibility of truth and knowledge in the sphere of tradition does not derive from method of the natural sciences but from the concept of *Bildung*, Gadamer has pointed out. That mathematics and logic cannot come to help tradition, religion is shown in the absolute failure of the Jansenists to explain miracles on the basis of science. Saying the right thing is an art, and since it is the right thing it has a power to set things in order and to set things in a new direction. This power since it has this efficacy participates in some kind of a principle, a truth.

From Kant's usage of the concepts of taste and genius to theorize the nature of art, Gadamer forges art as contra method. For taste is not mediated by reason nor genius constrained by method. But in Kant's aesthetics, aesthetic judgment though universal does not belong wholly to the domain of understanding but somewhere between understanding and imagination. Thus, aesthetic judgment, which has universality, cannot be claimed as knowledge on par with judgment that the faculty of understanding gives. This subjectivization of aesthetic judgment is resisted by Gadamer by inverting the relation between art and the subject. Gadamer would take art and tradition to constitute the subject unlike Kant's accent on subjective judgment to pass judgments on art.

Taking cues from Schiller the term aesthetic judgment comes to mean more than a form of judgment or a faculty of reason. And for whom art is the art of beautiful appearance, in which the framework of scientific reality is denied, it becomes a source of truth for itself. It is its own reference point. Tradition and culture, then becomes not just a worldview but a world itself. This is a revelation that Gadamer takes to frame his ontology of the work of art.

All such ideas as imitation, appearance, irreality, illusion, magic, dream, assume that art is related to something different from itself: real being. But the phenomenological return to aesthetic experience (*Erfahrung*) teaches us that the latter does not think in terms of this relationship but, rather, regards what it experiences as genuine truth. (2013, p. 76)

This is an important development, which Gadamer would eventually take over to understand truth of art. The nature of aesthetic experience is that it cannot be disappointed by scientific evidence to the contrary. This is a self-conscious turn against the strictures of science on what truth and knowledge are to be.

For Kant and Schiller, play was in the subjective realm but Gadamer takes the concept of play to understand art itself.

For my starting point I select an idea that has played a major role in aesthetics: the concept of *play*. I wish to free this concept of the subjective meaning that it has in Kant and Schiller and that dominates the whole of modern aesthetics and philosophy of man. When we speak of play in reference to the experience of art, this means neither the orientation nor even the state of mind of the creator or of those enjoying the work of art, nor the freedom of a subjectivity engaged in play, but the mode of being of the work of art itself. In analyzing aesthetic consciousness we recognized that conceiving aesthetic consciousness as something that confronts an object does not do justice to the real situation. This is why the concept of play is important in my exposition...

The mode of being of play does not allow the player to behave toward play as if toward an object. The player knows very well what play is, and that what he is doing is “only a game”; but he does not know what exactly he “knows” in knowing that. (p. 107)

A certain correlationism comes to the fore in this pronouncement. The work of art is not an object that stands over the subject, but it gains its true being when it becomes an experience that changes the subject who experiences it (Gadamer, 1986). This is the key point in Gadamer regarding the relation between art, tradition and culture with us. A crucial concept that could answer the nature of truth and possibility of knowledge in Gadamer’s philosophy would be his concept of ‘transformation into structure’. This is the appearance or the realisation of the work of art in its being experienced. This gives what we called transformation into structure its full meaning. The transformation is a transformation into the true.

In being presented in play, what is emerges. It produces and brings to light what is otherwise constantly hidden and withdrawn. Someone who can perceive the comedy and tragedy of life can resist the temptation to think in terms of purposes, which conceals the game that is played with us. (p. 117)

Gadamer is not straight forward regarding the nature of these truths. But it seems that art talks about life, its experiences, fears and hopes that cannot be quantified, that cannot be reduced to methods, but that which comes to presentation in experience, with the unmistakable nature of the senses. The nature of art and tradition that Gadamer explicates in *Truth and Method* seems to support the idea that the Meitei worldview and its central figure of the Maibi, seems to carry knowledge and a sense of truth. This knowledge claim, it is clear, shall be denied by the criteria of scientific knowledge. But Gadamer’s analysis gives a possibility to get a philosophical validation of the grounds of the Meitei worldview and the Maibi self against the onslaught and destructive intent of the scientific temperament.

VI. CONCLUSION

That the phenomenon of Maibi performs, perpetuates and communicates a worldview had been argued. This in Tandem with insights from Gadamer’s philosophy make a position that gives a deeper understanding of the crisis as due to a narrow understanding of truth, meaning and knowledge. The prescription of modernity regarding these central notions in epistemology comes from a metaphysics proper to that of the modernistic and scientific worldview. But that is just a worldview although it is the predominant worldview now. The present paper comes to a reasoned conclusion that the sphere of the human is more than the borders that modernity imposes. Without discounting the truth that science delivers, one has the need to negotiate with it in such a way that one still retains one’s link with tradition. This be done in the recognition of the *hubris* that modernity carries with it that it is sovereign over matters of truth and meaning. This is resisted, for to be human is to open up to contradictions, possibility of other perspectives, and the mystery that resides beyond the domain of science.

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