CHAPTER III

AESTHETICS AND SOCIOLOGY OF PERFORMANCE AND CONSTRUCTION OF MEANINGS
Human beings have the ability to communicate through symbols. Be it in the artistic or social or cultural or political or even economic fields, humans constantly make signs and constantly try to make sense of them by employing the skill of de-codification. Even in the private space, also, the individual is conscious of the social semiotic codes, for instance, even how one makes different poses in front of the mirror. The above proposition is made more compact if we take language, both natural and artificial, into the fold of semiotics. In this way society is already replete with sign systems. It is theatre, in particular, which tries to re-present them in its performances, through various permutations and combinations. When theatre comes up with its own new sign systems it also has the social sign systems in mind, because it makes them, keeping the social sign systems as reference point so that the differences can be made possible and meaningful. For instance, anger in a play can be expressed through laughter, which is different from the normal human behaviour in the social contexts. A reference for difference! This means it has to mechanize a new rule of understanding the theatrical sign systems for the benefit of the observers, lest it will fail to produce a successful performance, be it what is called commercial or mainstream. This is where the thorny question of whether the modes of social interactions in a group or between individuals or groups of people in a social set-up can be discerned as ‘social drama’. This is an evolutionary paradigm of understanding the complex traffic between the two.\[443\] This engagement is very important to have a clear methodology of the study of both society and theatre. Though the two systems, drama and society, have their own networks of functioning, they are not mutually exclusive systems. Both have their ways of dealing with aesthetics but they are always in diffusing networks of relationship.

Before we go for the aesthetics of performance and its historicity we need to first delve into the structure and process of Shumang Lila, which make the performance of the plays possible. This prologue is important to ‘aestheticize’ the whole performance. Here

\[443\] This proposition is a critique of Victor Turner’s concept of ‘social drama’ which is used as a tool to analyze the various degrees of expression in social interactions between groups of people. The question remains: Is society imitating what the dramas do? Or is it the converse of it i.e. is drama just a cultural performance enacting what the society does? But ethnographies show that many societies are still in ignorance of what drama is though they have their own forms of performances, mainly ritualistic. Even the rituals are composed after the social behaviour. This is an indication that what he calls ‘drama’ is already present unconsciously in the society. One does not have to think of dramatic enactment every time he/she speaks or does something. They are human behaviours in a social set-up. So, it is quite possible to reverse the movement from drama to society and make it, instead, society to drama. There should be some other terms to explain the nuances involved in social interaction keeping the concept intact. See Victor Turner, 1975 – *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. London: Cornell University Press. (Chapter 1).
we are concerned about the rituals involved; the space on which plays are performed and the time of performance. They play very discrete roles in the sense that they are not visible in the performance proper, yet they are the basis by which the whole performance is made possible. They are not static in their own ways but have been part of the historical exigencies like the performances. This is because nothing is more important than the acceptance by the community when it comes to primordial subjects, including rituals. Even the concept of god can be changed or even obliterated. This is perhaps the difference between Social Science and Physical Science. In case of the latter there is the possibility for establishing the ultimate truth through rational verifications. But then human society is not all about science and rationality but irrationality may also be analyzed and has its own very respectable niche even in today's 'modern' (should we say 'post-modern'?!) world.444

1. Shumang Lila Rituals

The whole Shumang Lila cannot be construed as ritual though theatre and ritual are both performances and intertwining. In Shumang Lila, ritual is just a part and does not intervene the performance but is performed just before the commencement of the performance as a prelude and serves as a sacralizing act which is also meant to instill the belief to the performers that the performance is going to be smooth. Rituals, for that matter, are 'events anthropologists have always specialized in treating as codifiable, repeatable forms, rather than unique events'.445 In Shumang Lila the rituals are conducted by the performers, both in the sight of the spectators and also cloistered from them in the private space of the 'green room'. Spectators do not take part physically in the rituals (though these may be visible) but there is certainly a psychological participation through the semi-sacred ambience created by the rituals. However, in most of the ritualistic performances, in general, there is mass participation of the people. People congregate for a special occasion and every participant contributes to the materialization of the occasion. It is because of their common regard to the sacred world and its relations with the profane world. Here staying away means rejecting the congregation or being rejected by it as in

444 See how 'our top space scientists were busy seeking the blessings of Lord Balaji at the Tirupati temple for a safe launch of the polar satellite launch vehicle. A miniature model of the rocket was brought to the sanctum sanctorum of the temple and prayed over by priests in the presence of 15 scientists, led by the space agency chief, Dr. G. Madhavan Nair.' Meera Nanda – How Modern are We? The Cultural Contradictions of India’s Modernity. In Eastern Quarterly, Vol. 3, Issue II, July-September 2005.

excommunication, ostracism or exile. If only a few stay away, it is those who are absent who suffer; if many stay away, the congregation is in danger of extinction.

In case of Hindu society, like in many other societies, there is braiding of ritual and dramatic elements. M.L. Varadpande is of the view that

the rituals of the Vedic Aryans, performed on the occasion of the fire sacrifice, were highly dramatized. The priests and performers of the fire sacrifice assumed different roles during the course of ritual, delivered dialogues with meaningful and symbolic gesticulations, sang hymns and played on musical instruments. Their books, the religious scriptures, contained myths for enactment; their hymns used for recitation at rituals were in dialogue form, and, most interesting, they had dancing gods.

The dramatic elements are evident in the rituals performed by the Aborigines of Australia which are well documented by Durkheim. For him, rites are defined in conjunction with the object with which they are connected. The rites are connected to a special class of objects. But the nature of special objects is expressed in beliefs. In this connection, he brings in the concepts of ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ which is a bipartite division of the whole universe from the point of religion. According to him, ‘Sacred things are those which the interdictions protect and isolate; profane things, those to which these interdictions are applied and which must remain at a distance from the first. Religious beliefs are the representations which express the nature of sacred things and the relations which they sustain, either with each other or with profane things.’

So, rites are the rules of conduct, which prescribe how a man should behave himself in the presence of these sacred objects. He further defines rites in relation to beliefs, which are two fundamental categories, which are present in most of the religious phenomena. Beliefs are thoughts while rites are actions. In case of Shumang Lila rites sacrilize the objects offered and then the performance space where the object is placed.

The social face of ritual is also stressed by A.M. Hocart. According to him, ‘the ritual is a social affair, it requires the cooperation of many, and so society must organize itself for ritual. In this quest of life all the actors do not play the same part; they must, in

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449 Ibid. 40-41.
450 Ibid. p. 36.
Ritual is more efficacious in its motive than entertaining. This does not discount ritual's adherence to the latter but is a braided structure of efficacy and entertainment. The efficacy of ritual in Shumang Lila is seen in the first ritual called Mandali puja which is offering of fruits or betel nuts and betel leaves, put decoratively on a rounded plate of plantain leaf or steel plate, along with burning incensed sticks. This ritual is performed by the host of the play at the centre of the performance space some minutes before the commencement of the rituals of the play or the play itself. Once this ritual is performed the performance space becomes semi-sacred. Though the ritual sanctifies the limited space of performance, it is an obeisance to the tutelary deity of the locality or village, who has his/her rule over the small space. It is also an act to appease him/her for the smooth running of the performance. Sometimes their quest is not answered positively by the deity when performances are disturbed, and even terminated thereafter, by some of the mortal beings who feed on local liquor called Yu. But the deity is not to be blamed. It is the incursion committed by the mortals in the realm of the gods and spirits, which is responsible. It is believed that gods are infallible, and sometimes angry of the only too fallible mortals. This has a wider relevance to the Meitei world of belief (non-Vaisnavite). For a Meitei every space is ruled by some deity and above that, moved by the complex biodiversity of their land, many plants and animals are also members of the Meitei pantheon. So, whenever one ventures out in the wilderness or any unknown place he/she offers prayer to the tutelary deity of that area whoever he/she is. If it is wilderness he/she

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452 Ibid. p. 35.
453 Ibid. p. 35.
454 They are taken away when the performance starts not to limit the movements of the performers in the space.
offers a small portion of the food to *Lamaba Tumaba* (deity of the wilderness) just before starting his meal. This ritual of appeasing the deity is not limited to the physical boundary of Manipur alone but can be extended to areas like Delhi, New York or anywhere a Meitei goes.\textsuperscript{455} This is because the real domain of ritual does not lie in a physical space but in the believer’s mind.

*Mandali Puja* is also a furtive appeal to the audience to respect the tradition by not stepping upon the arena without any reason and if at all needed, it must be without shoes and slippers. It is also a tradition that the performers also wear only socks while performing. This ritual is also a harbinger of the commencement of the play and the audience readies itself for the play. Such ritualistic elements were very much present in ancient Indian theatre also. A religious *puja* was a compulsory ingredient of every theatrical performance.\textsuperscript{456} If it was skipped it was believed to bring trouble for the nation and the king and if it was performed it guaranteed the king’s wealth and luck to all men and women, young and old. This means the playhouse itself had a templar status and manifold sacral functions were centred on the *puja* and drama. The Natyasastra indicates the sacralization of the performance space by the priest by installing statues of *Siva, Visnu, Narayana, Indra, Skanda, Sarasvati, Lakshmi, Agni, Yama, Mitra* and other gods around *Brahma*, in eight sectors oriented on and between the cardinal points.

The ritualistic elements are more prominent in religious theatre. One extraordinary example is that of Ramlila which is performed during *Dushahara*, a festival which celebrates the triumph of the lord Rama against Ravana of Lanka, which mostly falls in September or October. Ramlila, especially of Ramnagar, a town near Banaras (Uttar Pradesh), is constituted by a series of rituals apart from the performance of the text, the Ramayana. The ritualistic span does not confine to the days of performance but begins months before the performance. By the middle of July a special *puja* is performed where Ganesha is worshiped. This *puja* is to initiate the boys who are selected to play the roles of *svarupas* (main characters) – *Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata, Shatrughna and Janaki*. These *svarupas* are all Brahman children between the age group of 8-13 years. After this Ganesha Puja, they will be known as the characters they are going to essay – Rama, Lakshmana,
Janaki etc. - not by their real names. This is a theatrical transformation when the svarupas eat, sleep, speak, walk, bless like the gods in the epic. This way they also receive respect from the people befitting to the gods. So, by July, the divine presence is already considered to have graced Ramnagar because two months before the performance gods are believed to be dwelling in the svarupas. So they become ‘the residence of divinity’.\(^457\) The next ritual is held ten days before the beginning of the performance. This puja is performed ‘in a place known as pakki, literally a house made of brick and mortar as opposed to one made of mud .... Here, on a specially prepared dais, Ganesha and the svarupas are worshipped once again, and after the puja the reading of the Ramcharitamanasa is begun.\(^458\) As the performance and the ambience are religious, the spectators are constantly involved in ritual series. One of the most important rituals is the arati which marks the end of every evening’s performance. This is the actual time when the svarupas become icons. They are frozen like the temple icons so that people may worship them. This way the evening of journeys and shifts is brought to a standstill. ‘The fierce blaze of the pink and white mehtabis that are lit while the arati is being performed is splendidly effective in arresting the moments enhancing the stillness of the svarupas. The mehtabis function like giant spotlights and are used almost exclusively for the svarupas who appear like effulgent images suspended in the dark. Indeed svarupas are displayed.\(^459\)

Rituals are also part of the Chho dance of Purulia district of West Bengal. It is a ‘folk dance’, which belongs to a non-literate tradition and is not elaborately codified. It is performed at the time of the Siva gajan on caitra samkranti in mid-April. This is a nightlong programme at the Chaurok puja, a major festival in honour of Siva in this region. The last day of this festival which runs for several days also include bhaugta ghora or ‘hook swinging’ rite. It is a rite when worshippers who have performed special austerities during the festival allow themselves to be pierced with hooks and are then swung from the chaurok pole. This is also a social gathering which is witnessed by people from other villages also. The dance performance in the night is a celebration of the successful completion of the puja and the return of the bhaughtas (devotees) to their normal lives. The chaurok puja is a harbinger for the dance season, which continues for


\(^{458}\) Ibid. pp. 7-8.

\(^{459}\) Ibid. p.15.
around two months from April to mid July. This is the dry season when agricultural activity is slack. The dance season ends when rain comes in mid-July.\textsuperscript{460}

In case of Shumang Lila, the ambience may not be religious though there are rituals. This is because the texts are varied ranging from secular to religious. But the rituals bind the spectators to the performance space and the performers, with their norms. The most important ritual in Shumang Lila, after \textit{mandali puja} is the worshipping of \textit{Khangjeng Lairembi}, the goddess of theatre, in the green room by the artistes immediately before starting the play. It is believed that she is also the deity of protection and also of police force. There is a very interesting anecdote on how the deity was invented and it became a tradition. According to Sanakhyya Ibotombi, a much respected theatre personality in Manipur, there is no deity by the name of Khangjeng Lairembi in the Meitei pantheon. She was introduced to the Manipuri theatre world, most probably in the later part of the first half of 20th century by some influential theatre person as theatre did not have a deity who can be called as theirs. It is believed that the tradition was invented following a scene in a play by the Aryan Theatre, a proscenium theatre group, during the said period. In that particular scene Bidhu Singh, the artiste, uttered a dialogue with frightened expression that he came across \textit{Khangjeng Lairembi} when he was walking alone. For him it was just a concocted term and a gag which means shrinking of the body with fear (\textit{khangba} = to be frightened; \textit{chengba} or \textit{jengba} = to shrink). There could not be more perfect timing than this for the deity deficit Manipuri theatre and they instantly adopted her as their deity. People may not have the propensity to question the tradition’s origin or its authenticity, but what is more important is how much it is able to serve them. On the other hand, Anthropologists and Sociologists’ interest lies in unearthing the conscious out of the unconscious codes, which may, sometimes, overturn the whole belief system of the community when rationality is imposed on the minds of the believers. Nevertheless, this so called irrational ritual serves the functional purpose of bracing up the performers for the test of their wit and confidence in front of the audience which is sometimes aggressive to them.

The next two rituals in the series are performed by the performers in the performance space. They are called Kouwaz and Beitha. They are, according to Sanakhya Ibotombi, the variants of the rituals called Sabha Vandana and Prastavna which is bowing to the audience and king during monarchy which are adapted from the Natyasastra tradition. The sustenance of these rituals in Shumang Lila is a subtle indication of the presence of the king as head of ritual. No matter its symbolic nature, kingship is still prevalent in the ‘sub-conscious’ of the performers and the spectators in a time when democratic administrative set up is prevalent. This brings us to the understanding of state as a ritualistic sphere where king is the head. This is also discerned by Hocart. He says, ‘The principal of the ritual, if he is human, is the head of the community. In a small tribe of low degree we call him the headman; in more advanced or larger communities we call him the king.’ King becomes the symbol of divinity, who is the main focus of rituals. Kings are of two types: ‘kings who include in their divinity the divinities of their chieftains, and kings who are one indivisible and only god, and whose chieftains consequently cannot be different gods, but only dimmer reflections of the same god as their liege.’ In case of Manipur the kingship is connected to the ‘god-king’ Pakhangba, the first king in the line which has been continuing for about two millennia.

It is to this kingship that Shumang Lila gives obeisance, indicating the presence of the monarchical elements in a coded form. The content of the songs may not necessarily be a direct address to the king or the audience but the very act of singing serves as the harbinger of the impending performance. This act is an address to the symbolic king or the audience to be ready to enjoy or be part of the performance. In the 1940s, when Shumang Lila established itself as a different genre after its departure from the precincts of the palace, it reformulated the ritual format as Kouwaz and Beitha. Kouwaz, Sanakhya Ibotombi claims, is an Urdu word which means marching by soldiers in lines. This is sensible from the procession of some performers in a single line from the green room to the performance space singing, one playing dholok and others kartal (small cymbals). This ritual is the showing of obeisance to the god. After its completion Beitha which is a

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61 See Chapter I for the Clifford Geertz’s account on Theatre State.
62 A.M. Hocart. op. cit. p. 86.
63 Ibid. p. 89. For elaborate discussions on kings and their rituals see David Cannadine and Simon Price.
64 See the Introduction for description of Pakhangba.
corrupted form of the Hindi word *Beithna* (to sit), is sung giving respect to the audience while they sit on one side of the space. These two forms also took different turns in their development. In the beginning *Kouwaz* was sung in Bengali and religious in theme invoking of Radha and Krishna to establish a *Sankirtan* in the performance space. But in 1957-58 both the lyric and tune were redone by Mutum Bori to introduce patriotic elements in Shumang Lila and to evoke the sense of historicity among the audience, instead of religious one. Bori was also a staunch follower of the newly emerging force of revivalism of Meitei religion and customs. It was a deliberate attempt from his side as he was afraid of losing the indigenous belief system in the face of Vaisnavism and other outside forces. It is said that he was so absorbed in the songs and the lyrics that he sobbed while singing them. He composed two *Kouwaz* and one *Beitha* songs.

The first *Kouwaz* song goes as follows (the approximate translations are given alongside the lines):

1. *Meitei leimani* ... (Mother Meitei land)
   *Ashangba phijet thonbini* (dressed in foliage green)
   *Meitei sana pung mayolni* (the golden land of the Meiteis)
   *Bharatki nongpokta nganbini* (glittering in the eastern flank of Bharat)

2. *Loibi chinglon mapalna koiri* (surrounded by nine hill ranges)
   *Khayum laina makei ngakli* (guarded by tutelary deities)
   *Malem palem khibiktagi* (of all the motherlands of the world)
   *Thoina henna phajabini* (brightest is my motherland)
   *Ritu tarukna matamgi phijet thonbini* (six seasons adorn the time)
   *Meitei sana pung mayolni* (the golden land of the Meiteis)
   *Bharatki nongpokta nganbini* (glittering in the eastern flank of Bharat)

3. *Paima pukchel phajabini* (beautiful is her soul)
   *Phougei chengei mamani* (the mother of treasures)
   *Chingtam poirei tuna* (caressing both hills and valley)
   *Thoina naoyok naokonbini* (with her motherly grace)
   *Ritu tarukna matamgi ohjet thonbini* (six seasons adorn the time)
   *Meitei sana pung mayolni* (the golden land of the Meiteis)
   *Bharatki nongpokta nganbini* (glittering in the eastern flank of Bharat)

*Meitei leimani* ...!! (Mother Meitei land)

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465 Gathered from M. Binod.
466 Gathered from K. Achoubi Singh.
467 Gathered from M. Binod.
The second one goes like this:

1. Lakkho lao changlasi lao  (come come let us enter)
   Metiei Ichil Inaosa  (o! Meitei brethren)
   Palemgji mingkhei sollasi lao  (let us sing the glory of motherland)
   Lakkho lao  ...!!  (come come)

2. Iril nambul imphal turelna  (Iril, Nambul, Imphal rivers)
   Pari mamom amrita pibiri  (are feeding the nectar to the sons and daughters)
   Shida hidak thabiri  (treating with the immortal medicines)
   Nada yaishu loiribini  (is the owner of gem to shoo away the ailments)
   Lakkho lao ...!!  (come come)

3. Paona Thangal Bir Tikendra  (Paona, Thangal, Bir Tikendra)
   Imagi shenglabaha machani  (are the real sons of yours)
   Eikhoi tara kuthshamna  (we ten hand in hand)
   Eegi eerm thirushi lao  (let us trace the blood line)
   (or eegi khongul lirushi lao)
   Lakkho lao  ...!!  (come come)

The first was more difficult to sing than the second one as it needed certain amount of technique in playing dholok and involved a little more complex note and rhythm. So the second was preferred by most of the troupes. This transformation from the Vaisnavite invocation to the patriotic theme sung in Manipuri language was a delight for many, especially those followers of Sanamahi movement (religious revivalist movement). Its sway was so strong among them that the elders who sat in the first row even presented the shawl they dangle around their shoulders to the performers as a sign of gratification and appreciation.

After this there were also changes in the lyrics and tune of the Kouwaz in 1980s. The new one is as follows:

1. (A cry by the leader) ‘Meitei Imagi Mingkhei Sholashe’ (Let us sing the glory of the mother Meitei Leima)

   (Reply in chorus) Sholase!! (Let us sing)

   Alap: Ho, Ima Chingtam Pokpi Nungshibi Ima (O! mother, beloved mother of both the highlanders and valley dwellers)

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468 This line carries almost the same meaning as that of the previous line but differs in word composition.
469 Gathered from K. Achoubi Singh.
470 Gathered from Narendra Ningomba.
2. *Meitei Ichill Inaosh * (Meitei brothers and sisters)
   *Imagi Khongul lurush lao* (come, let us trace the footprints of our mother)
   *Mikha Ponba Oiraduna* (who had been in shackles)
   *Kunja Kaya lotlurabi* (who had hidden for ages)
   *Imagi Khongul lurush lao* (come, let us trace the footprints of our mother)

3. *Paona, Thangal Pokpini,* (the mother of Paona and Thangal)
   *Tikendrajit ki mamani,* (and also of Tikedrajit)
   *Macha Kaina Meichakna* (the pang of separation)
   *Kaina meisha langhourab* (puts her into the fire of agony)
   *Imagi Khongul lurush lao* (come, let us trace the footprints of our mother)
   *Kunja kaya lotlurabi* (who had hidden for ages)
   *Imagi khongul lurush lao* (come, let us trace the footprints of our mother)

It can be observed in both the old and new versions of Kouwaz the presence of the feeling of nationalism. In the first composition of the old versions, the type of nationalism can be seen as sub-nationalism registering a nation, a Meitei nation, within a bigger nation, India, when it describes Manipur as a region in the northern part of Bharat. This reflects the majority feeling the masses had towards India. But the newer version does away with the mention of India in its composition which is also the reflection of the political crisis between the natives and the Indian state peaking in the 1980s. This is a nationalism of a Meitei nation which is imagined to be standing as sovereign despite the history of her occupation by the British and as part of the present Indian nation.

There have also been two Beithas, an old one by Mutum Bori and the new which simultaneously came up with the new version of Kouwaz.

The old version goes as follows:

1. *Ima Yaollo* (awake o! Mother)
   *Lengkhatpiro Meitei pokpi* (awake mother of the Meiteis)
   *Yaidagi numit thorakle* (the sun has risen from the middle of the east)
   *Ima yaollo lengkhatpiro Meitei pokpi* (awake o! Mother, awake mother of the Meiteis)

2. *Mamangeida mireibakyahounganbi* (once upon a time the early rising foreigners)
   *Phatraba motlaba wayenna* (ruled you with wickedness, williness)
   *Aremba chabiduna chaikhairamba shengdokpiro* (clean up the mess littered by those who ate freely)
   *Ima yaollo lengkhatpiro Meitei pokpi* (awake o! Mother, awake mother of the Meiteis)

3. *Imana warakpa kuirakleda* (long is your unhappiness)
Palemna warakpa shanglakleda

Korou shingbun kuurakle (numerous have been days)

Loidam thaja yamlakle (numerous have been months)

Ima yaollo Lengkhatpiro Meitei pokpi (awake o! Mother, awake mother of the Meiteis)

The new version:

Leikhal Naina Pareng Pareng (garland of mosaic of flowers)

Lengjare loubiyu Ima, (is made, accept this, mother)

Numitna thorakpa angouba korouda (In the bright glow of the rising sun)

Thoujalgi irikshu khikpiyu Ima, (shower upon us thy compassion, O! mother)

Leikhal naina Pareng Pareng (garland of mosaic of flowers)

Lengjare loubiyu Ima” (is made, accept this, mother)

The old version is an ode to the motherland evoking her past when she was under the rule of the British but the new one is a simple prayer to her to grace the people with her compassion. These two rituals, Kouwaz and Beitha, have also been severely affected by the much commercialized troupes of today and for them time is important. In their pursuit for maximum number of performances (around four by a troupe) in a single day, they tend to ignore these rituals. It indicates the general malleability of the rituals depending upon the convenience of the particular human group as they are also the product of the latter. Another arrangement which is not compelled by the time factor but a deliberate subduing of the tradition is its replacement by ‘modern day songs’ performed by the orchestra in the Eshei Lila genre. So, singing one or two songs, both film and non-film, is an indication that the play is going to be started soon.

2. ‘Camouflagization’ of Space

Space in Shumang Lila is an important element. It is the performance space which has to be ritualized before the performance starts so that decorum is maintained both by the performers and the audience. This makes the performance a community affair where there is ‘collective consciousness’. Spaces in Shumang Lila can be divided into four types.

First is the performance space, which is sacralized. Second is the passage, which serves as both entrance and exit and connects the performance space to the dressing room. This has almost the same meaning as that of the previous line. Ima and palem are two terms for mother. The root adjectives kuiba and shangba both denote length. Though both are understood here as denoting the length in time, in their usual usages kuiba is length in time and shangba is length in distance.

472 See the diagrammatic representation of division of spaces in Shumang Lila given in Chapter I.
Space is not sacralized but is marked out so that spectators may not disturb the movement of the performers. Third is the dressing room which is not completely private for the performers but may allow the organizers of the play or any curious spectator to enter. But his entry by the non-artistes should not disturb the dealings of the artistes. Normally, they are entertained before or after the play. But it is not a sacrosanct rule. Fourth space is the space occupied by the audience which, in traditional structure, is divided into female and male side.473

Before I go to the details of Shumang Lila space let me delve into the conceptual domains of ‘space’. Space is used in wide ranging fashion in addressing various geographical, social, political, economic and cultural issues, both in academic and mundane discourses. The recent social science theories employ space as various metaphors ranging from the territoriality to the ideational domains which enable the scholars to discern the contest and accommodation of the claimants over the same space. ‘Engineers conceive of space as a void; physicists and mathematically as a set of dimensions … in the late 20th century social scientists began to understand space not as a void but as a qualitative context situating different behaviours and contending actions.’474 The concept of space is understood differently in different cultures. Though etymologically derived from the Latin ‘spatium’, the English meaning of space is more closely related to the Latin extensio. ‘Hindu philosophy defines Akasa (akasha – space/ether. Sanskrit, from kas, ‘to shine’ as an infinite but indivisible imperceptible substance that has as its sole nature to be a static principle of extension (in contrast to movement, prana), or an eternal matrix or context of accommodation (kham-ahas).475

In Western Philosophical tradition space has been understood through two dominant schools of thought – first, substantivalism or absolutism which regards space as an objective thing comprised of points or regions at which, or in which, things are located; second, relationalism according to which the only thing that is real is the spatial relations between physical objects. The absolutism school was propounded by Isaac Newton, and his spokesman Samuel Clarke and the relationalism by Leibniz. Leibniz rejected the absolutist explanation through his two central principles: ‘the Principle of Sufficient

13 See Chapter IV discussing about this division in audience.
15 Ibid.
Reason and the Identity of indiscernibles. The Principle of Sufficient Reason holds that for every fact there is a reason sufficient to explain why it is the way it is and not otherwise. The Identity of indiscernibles states that if there is no way of telling two entities apart then they are one and the same thing. In order to prove his points he put up two hypothetical universes placed side by side in the 'absolute space'. According to him such arrangement is contradictory to his two principles. If the above arrangement were so: 'a) where a universe was positioned in absolute space would have no sufficient reason, as it might very well have been anywhere else, hence contradicting the Principle of Sufficient Reason, and b) there could exist two distinct universes that were in all ways indiscernible, hence contradicting the Identity of Indiscernibles.'

Newton and Clarke responded through what is called the 'bucket argument'. 'Water in a bucket, hung from a rope and set to spin, will start with a flat surface. As the water begins to spin in the bucket, the surface of the water will become concave. If the bucket is stopped, the water will continue to spin, and while the spin continues the surface will remain concave. The concave surface is apparently not the result of the interaction of the bucket and the water, since the water is flat when the bucket first starts to spin, becomes concave as the water starts to spin, and remains concave as the bucket stops.' So for them, the phenomenon of rotation and acceleration requires the existence of absolute space. 'In Newton's system the frame of reference exists independently of the objects which it contains; objects can be described as moving in relation to space itself.' For Leibniz space exists only as a relation between objects, and which therefore has no existence apart from the existence of those objects. One theory which came later is that of conventionalism which 'states that there is no fact of the matter as to the geometry of space and time, but that it is decided by convention'. Its proponents are Henri Poincar and Hans Reichenbach. Conventionalism might have been met with many objections in the philosophical circle but it fits well in sociological understanding of space where there is possibility of accepting and discarding a certain space as ritually important or otherwise depending on how the community perceives it to be.

477 Ibid.
Durkheim has been instrumental in the sociological understanding of space when he tries to relate ‘social structure’ with ‘the society’s notion of space’. According to Rob Shields,

(Durkheim) provided the example of Zuni Indians, concluding that their space was nothing else than, ‘the site of the tribe, only indefinitely extended beyond its real limits’. One could venture from reports of Aboriginal conceptions of space as the “Dreamtime” that landscape can become not just sedimented traces but an historiography, read through embodied presence, peregrination and pilgrimage. This view of social space is mobile and topological. This emphasizes qualitative heterogeneity, varying not only from place to place, region to region…; but it is not locked within one typology; …. This heterogeneous social space must be produced and reproduced as a cultural artifact and performance.

The Durkheimian understanding of space is again divided into ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’, though there is variability in the degree of sacredness. Durkheim, as mentioned in the previous section, puts the whole universe, not only space, into a bipartite division of the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane’ seen from the point of religion. For him sacred things are those which the interdictions (taboos) protect and isolate and profane things are those to which these interdictions are applied and which must remain at a distance from the former.

The distinction of sacred space from profane space is made possible by the level of sanctity of the objects present or events which have occurred in that particular area. One outstanding example is Gaya, a city in Bihar. The city is divided into two broad zones: ‘the sacred and the secular’. ‘The sacred zone extends … is characterized by a large number of shrines, old markets, and old buildings of the Gayawal priests, Brahman ritualists, and such other functionaries who are related to the religious performances…. The secular zone that has developed through the Muslim and British rules was known by different names until recently. Other than this Gaya, there is also another Gaya known as Buddha Gaya, six miles away from the city. This differentiation is to show that the latter is the birthplace of Buddhism. Buddha Gaya is another sacred zone which is made so by its historicity and the presence of many ancient temples, stupas, monasteries, the Bodhi tree, the celebrated

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480 Durkheim, 1976. op. cit. p. 56
tanks, several foreign monasteries, run by the Chinese, Tibetan, and Ceylonese Buddhist monks. 482

This ‘permanent’ sacredness of the Gaya notwithstanding, the contention of this section is that space like other objects has the potentiality to alter its characteristics depending on the importance, be it sacred or profane, bestowed on it by the people who own it through a set of normative actions. This normative action may be in the form of ritual when the particular space is deemed for sacralization. This is also an attempt to claim that there is possibility for a particular space to move in and out of sacredness. This is not to discount the fact that there are spaces which are bound to remain as sacred as ever as long as its sanctity is not disturbed through physical forces, both man-made and natural, like sanctum sanctorum of a temple where only the priest/priestess can have access. Even this can be stripped off its sacredness. Examples are numerous in the form of the destruction of temples. In this section there is an attempt to employ a term ‘camouflage’ to explain this changing character of space. This has been constructed from the term ‘camouflage’ which means to disguise oneself/object to look like the surrounding in which it is located. The best example, from the animal world is chameleon, a lizard ‘of the Old World family Chamaeleontidae, with prehensile tails and the ability to change colour according to their surroundings’. 483 So, there is the adjective ‘chameleonic’ which refers to the inconstant nature of any object or person. In our case the ‘camouflaging’ tendency of the space is not endogenous but exogenous in that the space by itself is not an active agent but its characters are defined by the human agency. This human agency is manifested through such acts as ritual, so that the space becomes sacred at least for a specified time period. There is ‘transportation’, not ‘transformation’, using Schechner’s 484 concept, of it from its present status to a different (mostly higher) status and back.

Then how are rituals instrumental in sacralizing an object or space or action? Durkheim uses the concept of axiology of social life to explain this phenomenon. Religious beliefs are to be explained and are expressed through axiomatic ways. Veena Das analyses Durkheim, ‘the concept of sacred, as Durkheim conceived it, separates the

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482 Ibid. p.3.
484 Schechner uses the concept of transportation when there is a brief change of status of the person to that of character of the play, he takes. Transformation is when there is permanent change of the status of a person to that of the character. See Richard Schechner, 1983. op. cit. p.154
domain of religious discourse from other types of discourse and bestows society with an
axiomatic, ‘taken-for-granted’ cognitive quality. The historically crucial part of religion in
legitimizing the particular institutions of a society as axiomatic is best explained in terms
of its unique capacity to ‘locate’ human phenomena within a cosmic frame of reference.
This process of cosmization endows the inherently precarious and transitory construction
of human activity with a security, durability and permanence, which takes on an axiomatic
character.485 A particular space becomes sacred through its cosmization when it is given
the axiomatic character. This cosmization is done through the instruments of rituals. Once
it is done people also start following the norms attached to that space as it has been
admitted to the cosmic realm which is also bound with the social world. It is also possible
that the space again returns to its own previous status of profanity once the cosmic
color is taken off from it.

The cosmization of the object for making an object sacred is reported by Durkheim
among the Arunta, the Loritja, the Katishe, the Unmatjera, and the Ilpirra tribes of Central
Australia. The object in focus is called Churinga, a sacred instrument used in their rites.
‘They are pieces of wood or bits of polished stone, of a great variety of forms, but
generally oval or oblong.’ According to him, ‘in themselves, the churingas are objects of
wood and stone like others; they are distinguished from the profane things of the same
sort by one particularity: this is that the totemic mark is drawn or engraved upon them. So, it is
this mark and this alone which gives them their sacred character.’ So, there is possibility of
any piece of wood and stone of the required shape and size to be churinga. Once it has
been given this status, many norms attached to it are followed by the tribe. Another two
ritually important objects which are also connected to the churinga are nurtunja and
waninga. ‘It is a rule that each nurtunja and each waninga last only during the ceremony
where they are used. They are made all over again every time that it is necessary, and when
the rite is once accomplished, they are stripped of their ornaments and the elements out of
which they are made are scattered. They are nothing more than images—-and temporary
images at that—of the totem, and consequently it is on this ground, and on this ground
alone, that they play a religious role.486 This shows that the churinga, the nurtunja and the
waninga are not sacred in themselves but they are because they are the bearers of the

totemic emblem. So, the sacredness lies in the totemic emblem only no matter what the bearer is. So, when the emblem is drawn in the ground that space also becomes sacred for the tribe and the sentiments attached to the emblem are also temporarily attached to that space. Once the emblem is taken off the things or space they return to their profane status.

The role of rituals in transforming space, which is part of nature, into one with cultural meanings is emphasized by Susan Visvanathan. Hindus and Christians of Kerala have shared concept of time, space and the body in social use. According to her, ‘these categories are seen as belonging to the domain of the natural world with nature itself becoming a cultural category’. So, building a house is accompanied by rituals which use ‘sacred materials—gold, silver, copper, bronze and iron, and of things such as sugar crystals, grapes, pounded rice, and puffed rice’. When the house is built the nature has given way to culture. Visvanathan writes, ‘the forest, earth, sea and mountain and other natural resources are bound down and accommodated to become a home’.

Now let us examine how these concepts of sacred and profane, and culture and nature are applied to Shumang Lila in particular and Meitei belief system in general. As we have discussed in the previous section on rituals, the performance space of Shumang Lila becomes sacred once the mandali puja is done on it and it is consolidated with the Kouwaz and Beitha. This space can be in various locations. In earlier times when there was sufficient space and less number of spectators, the plays used to be performed in the courtyard (usually big) of a house where there was tulsi at its centre. But due to rise of popularity the number of spectators also has increased over time. So, the plays are organised in a spacious places like village or locality playground, community hall, mandap (congregation hall in the Hindu temple) etc. In Imphal due to demographic constraint such spacious places are very rare but plays are anyhow organised in small playgrounds etc. But wherever they are performed, that space which is profane takes the sacred status. However, this sacredness can be of different degrees as compared to the sacredness of the sanctum sanctorum of a temple. The taboos are there but it is not very rigid in that its defiance does not invite a heavy penalty on the part of offender. For instance, once the rituals have been done nobody is allowed to enter the performance space with footwear. If somebody defies

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488 Ibid. p. 8.
489 See Chapter 1 for explanation on Shumang of a Meitei house.
this, his action is condemned like the way it is done when any folkways is defied but harsh penalty is not meted out to him. This is from the part of the audience. But the rule is rigid from the side of the performers. They strictly follow them as a tradition and no change is yet seen in this rule. It is reported that once one Tomal, an actor from Uripok (Imphal) was against this rule and wanted some reformations and deliberately wore shoes in one of the performances. His justification was that wearing of shoes is allowed in proscenium theatre and why not in Shumang Lila. The response from the Shumang Lila community was harsh for him. He was exterminated from the community and was never allowed to perform again in Shumang Lila. So, convention came in between Tomal and Shumang Lila. It has been a constant endeavour in the part of the Shumang Lila performers to maintain a unique status of its own, different from the stage Lila (proscenium theatre) in Manipur though there have been many diffusions between the two.

Here we may use the concept of degree of sacredness as suggested by Veena Das. Her idea comes in response to Durkheim’s idea of ‘good sacred’ and ‘bad sacred’. Durkheim’s assertion is that dichotomy of the sacred and the profane is not a condition for the sacred to become entirely good and profane entirely bad but there are ‘good; and ‘bad’ sacred within the sacred itself. It has been suggested that the Indian case of purity and pollution can be explained more appropriately not with good and bad sacred but rather with the degree of sacredness i.e. ‘less sacred’ and ‘more sacred’. Durkheim also deals with malevolence in the sacred but draws our attention to sacred versus mundane. Routine things are not profane in themselves but when in contact with sacred things.

This concept of degree of sacredness also fits well in case of Shumang Lila also where the sacredness of its performance space is not at par with that of Laiharaoba festivals. But structurally both the performance spaces are similar. Laiharaoba performance space is also a rectangular (square sometimes) with four corners of South West (Thanging), North East (Marjing), South East (Wangbren) and North West (Koubru). In Shumang Lila all the four are the same but the North East side is called Gouralila lamjang (Gouralila entrance) as it is mostly used as the entrance in the Gouralila, the Vaisnavite theatre form based on the life story of Chatanya Mahaprabhu. The tradition is that Shumang Lila prefers to use the North West and South West corner as the entry point. But

490 Gathered from M. Binod.
491 Veena Das. op.cit. p. 118.
it is not a hard and fast rule to stick to these two directions and manage as per the space given to them by the host. So, the performers have to reformulate their positions and movements in the performance as per the space. The chairs and table are usually placed in the opposite side of the entrance.492

It will be an important point if we compare and contrast the two spaces of Shumang Lila and Laiharaoba. The detail on the performance space of Laiharaoba has been discussed in the Chapter One. The space of the lai (deity) where the festival takes place is divided into two. The first one is one where the public performances of the rituals by the Maibis (priestesses), Maibas (priests) and Penakhongba (pena player) and followed by the select devotees. This is called laishumang (courtyard of lai). The other one is the sanctum sanctorum of the temple where only the ritual functionaries can have access. The ‘camouflageization’ takes place only in the first type of space. When the festival is on, this space is sacred and the interdictions are applied to all to follow the ritual norms. There are variations from place to place in terms of its profanization. In some places the ritual ambience remains for the whole period of the festival and once it is over it returns to the profane status. But in some places the space becomes relatively profane just after the completion of all the rituals of the day. This is the starting point of the performance of secular entertainment programmes like popular film dance, songs, thang-ta (indigenous martial art of sword and spear), Shumang Lila plays etc.

Laiharaoba does not only embrace the physical abode of the lai (deity) but also the village or locality where the deity is located. So, there are rules of dos and don’ts binding the residents of the village or locality during the period of festival. It does not mean that the festival is meant only for the residents but devotees from other places can also come and worship the deity. In some villages there is a very rigid rule that its Laiharaoba cannot be seen by residents of other villages. So it is closed door affair. One such Laiharaoba is that of Andro, a Chakpa (‘Scheduled Caste’) village.493 During the festival period the whole village becomes the abode of the deity and sacred in that it is a taboo for the outsiders. Once it is over the normal relationships are resumed between the people of the village and the outside villages.

492 Gathered from M. Binod.
Here, the attention will be on how the same space of the Laiharaoba behaves when any secular events are performed on it after the rituals of the day have been accomplished. For this a Shumang Lila performance (*Lidece-gi Gulap*) in a Laiharaoba at Malom Mamang Leikai, a locality at the fringe of Imphal city, will be taken up. It surprises us how there is drastic change in the status of the same space. Minutes before it was a very sacred space with all the rules of taboo applied. The courtyard is under a huge open hall. When the play is about to start the audience starts gathering around the courtyard leaving a small square in the centre for the performance. Now people were seen stepping on the space even with their footwear on. Now the temple building is the only sacred space in the entire complex of the deity. The spectators even sit with their backs towards the temple which is a taboo during the ritual performances and also they are seated on the verandah of the temple building. Also they criss-cross the front of the temple with all their profane belongings. Now the religious domain has taken the back seat and the secular one i.e. the play has taken the top priority in the minds of the audience and the Shumang Lila performance space is the only sacred space of the courtyard. Then the day after this profanized space will again be sacralized during ritual performances and this process will go on till the period of the festival lasts.

When the festival is over the temple is kept locked and the sacredness of the sanctum sanctorum is maintained. But the whole courtyard and the complex become profane. In villages this space starts serving various purposes of the people. It becomes playground for the children; community meeting place; *yakabung* (a place where youth congregate and gossip around in the evening); place for organization of entertainment programmes; and even a night shelter for the cattle which are too wayward to return to their owners’ sheds. So, it is profanization to the hilt. However the whole space still retains the respect and even fear among the people since it is a part of the deity’s abode. The potentiality to be sacred due to the permanent presence of the temple makes this space different, in degree, from the normal space, which also bears this potentiality, outside it.

This marks the point how space is important to the performance not only of Shumang Lila but also other performances in different cultures. In case of Ramlila of Ramnagar which spreads for an extraordinarily long period of 30 or 31 days depending on the lunar calendar, there is intricate weaving of different understanding of spaces, both

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494 The performance took place on the 18th of April, 2004 at 9 pm.
sacred and profane. Its performance style is a combination of the wordless tableaux, the *jhanki* and processional drama (like the British Mummers’ play) where actors move from one place to another place (followed by the audience) and exchange dialogues. The style of dialogue delivery by the actors (gods) is not realistic in the conventional sense of the theater but in a singsong manner. Unlike many Ramlilas in other parts of India, the Ramlila at Ramnagar is not confined in only one place for the whole performance. The locations over which the *lila* moves are spread over an area of about 2.6 square kilometers. Here, the important places associated with the Ramayana are recreated and relived. This is a perfect example of transformation of ‘there and then’ to ‘here and now’. Ramnagar truly lives up to its name (Ram-Nagar = Ram’s city). In order to adapt the Ramayana in real sense, some locations are specially created such as the pavilions at Pravarshana Mountain, and at Panchavati and some are part of the town’s landmarks, like the temple and the Rambagh. This means most of the locations in Ramnagar come within *lila*’s great boundary.\(^{495}\)

Ramlila at Ramnagar transforms the whole town into theatre space. Its building, lanes, grounds, trees, ponds all become part of this space. As mentioned elsewhere, the Ramlila here is a processional theatre where the audience follows the performance. This means the gods, the demons and spectators move from place to place when the story demands. Among the places where Rama, along with the spectators, visits are Ayodhya, Janakpur, Pampasar, Kishkindha, Panchavati, Suvela Giri, Rameshvara and Lanka.\(^{496}\) These are the places built at Ramnagar. When a city is to be shown as part of the *lila*, for instance, Janakpur or Ayodhya, locations and the main streets of Ramnagar are selected. This way fields are converted into battlegrounds, ponds and lakes of Ramnagar become ponds and lakes of the Ramayana. When Rama is in exile, the spectators follow him through mud and sludge and they are also in exile and as he moves further and further away from Ayodhya, they move further and further away from the centre. So, Lanka is the farthest place from Ayodhya, which is three kilometers from the centre of Ramnagar town. These locations are all both realistic and suggestive. In other words, while the locations create Rama’s landscape in miniature, they also become a metaphor for it. So, the whole town becomes a space for pilgrimage. The whole town is sanctified by the journey of the gods. The spectators become part of the journey of Rama and also share in the happiness

\(^{496}\) *Ibid.* p. 64.
and worries of Rama. This way a spectator becomes an Ayodhyawasi, a Janakpurwasi and a visitor to Lanka as the occasion demands. So, the Ramlila is a perfect example of processional theatre with elaborate involvement of town spaces. The ambivalent nature of space is described by Anuradha Kapur as

Dramatic space is not empirical; it is simultaneously real and imaginary: it exists and it does not exist; while it is materially present at one level, a great part of it must be constructed in the minds of the spectators. This if the town space has become theatre space, theatre space is layered over to become epic space, and epic space, since it is the space of Rama, is also sacred space where the vision finally alights. How this space becomes once again town space, the domain of the Maharaja, is by what I might call, somewhat figuratively, a palimpsest in space. The Maharaja recovers his ground, annexes his space, when he presents himself centre stage on the last day of the lila.

In case of Kathakali, the performance is organized traditionally in the open air. A simple rectangular space of 4-5 feet in width and 5-6 feet in length is cleared on the ground either in family compounds or in village temple. Four poles are erected one at each corner of the rectangle whose tops are joined to one another by four other transverse bamboo poles corresponding to the rectangle and by two diagonal poles. The roof and the backside of the area are covered by clothes. Then, the floor of this performance area is washed with mixture of cow dung and urine to purify it. After that the area is strewn with sand and grass. Phillip Zarrilli describes it thus,

Temple performances like The Complete Ramayana are usually held outside of the temple compound. Situating the performance outside the outer walls of the temple permits the entire village to gather. [Some temples, however, have introduced performances within the temple compound, also during annual festival days. Holding the performances inside in the past restricted attendance to those Hindus permitted within the confines of the temple.]

The audience gathers on three sides although the concentration of audience is in front of the performance space. Women usually sit to the left and men to the right. The patrons, guest of honour and connoisseurs sit closest to the ‘stage’ area. There is a large oil lamp with multiple cloth wicks, kept upon a stand of around four feet, between the


\[497\] Ibid.11-12. Also see Kapur, 1985. op. cit. p. 63-64 & 70-71.
\[498\] Ibid. 12.
audience and the stage area. In olden days, this served as the only source of light to witness the whole performance. The lamp is raised so, to illuminate the face, hands, eyes and upper body, which are the main foci of attention in this dance drama form. The actors enter the area either by passing through the audience or more commonly from the back of the acting area from the green room. One addition in this presentation is the use of a curtain in the front of the stage held up by two assistants.502

Today performances in the cities and town, organized by 'cultural organizations', are 'on proscenium stages such as Sri Kartika Tirunal Theatre, Thiruvananthapuram, which serve multiple purposes from the staging of modern dramas, to music or dance concerts, to political speeches and rallies. The playing space is large compared to the traditional outdoor space. With the raised stage and fixed seating, proscenium theaters lack the intimacy of the traditional audience-actor relationship. This change in the performance space is also evident of the changeability of the status of space from profane to sacred or vice-versa.

In case of Chho dance the performance space is called Asor and is marked out with wooden posts. It is a hard, dry ground usually near the Siva temple. The surrounding area is left for the audience who struggle to come closer to the Asor to have a better look of the dance. The Asor is lighted with patromax lamps. The machchas, string cots hoisted on long poles, form a semi circular gallery behind the seating area on the ground. These are the poles whose fall is the measure for the intensity and success of a dance performance. When the dance becomes more exciting the audience jump up and dance vigorously so that the machchas behind them are shaken and fall down. This indicates a clear case of theatre arousing emotions among the audience. But, sometimes, it happens that the supporters of the dance troupe release a harmless snake among the audience and the latter begins to jump in fear which leads to the fall of the machchas. Another sign of the good performance is when the dust from the Asor begins to fly.504

The communication between this-worldly and otherworldly beings is made possible through the space in the Early Noh of Japan. Its performance is mostly done in open-air. The performing open-air auditorium is surrounded by raised boxes (possibly in more than

502 Ibid. 149.
one storey) built in the perimeter of the circle of some 100 ft. in diameter. These boxes serve to accommodate people of rank away from the crowd and also to shut off the performance from the view of anyone outside the theatre. The main acting area or stage is set in the middle of the arena (auditorium). The access to this stage is by a bridge which connects the stage with the mirror room or dressing room. The bridge is built-in a curving arch, like a hump-back bridge. The bridge is not just an entrance but has a ritual dimension too. It is symbolic of the connection between the world of gods and the world of men. The acting area has places for different people such as musicians (hayashikata), stage assistants (koken), members of the chorus (jintai), comedians etc. The main stage has no props on which the actors can depend. This space can be used in most theatrical way. The space, besides being used realistically, can also be transmuted in the sense that a huge ground or distance can be created out of body movements and gestures. For instance, when an actor moves 10 meters or so in actual space, his journey is increased to hundreds of miles in the lyric description of travel called michiyuku. Likewise, time can be altered in similar fashion—speeded up, slowed, stopped. Like time and space, a stick can be transformed into huge tree only by theatrical considerations.

3. Time of performance

Time and space are two very important concepts involved in theatre. The relationship between time-space was given its prominence by Albert Einstein in the first decade of 20th century in his theory of relativity. His understanding mainly came from ‘the notion of relativity, understood as a generic opposition to everything intended to be absolute’. This concept was taken to the literary field by Mikhail Bakhtin in a similar fashion who called it chronotope. According to him, ‘We will give the name chronotope (literally, “time space”) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.... The special meaning it has in relativity theory (of Einstein) is not important for our purpose; we are borrowing it for literary criticism almost as a metaphor (almost, but not entirely).”

505 Richard Southern. op. cit. p. 34. Also see Ksh. Imokanta Singh, 2002. op.cit. (Chapter 2).
There is also fundamental difference between Einstein and Bakhtin.

Einsteinian thought explores the consequences of disconnecting what are considered fundamental concepts from the experience of the human senses, which obliges the notion of science to conciliate radical speculation with the need for an experimental demonstration of the facts. For Bakhtinian thought, it is a matter of defending a positive conception of knowledge, based above all on the primacy of the notion of history as a concrete instance of reality to the detriment of idealistic interpretation, which make use of transcendental presuppositions, especially concerning aesthetic questions, from which is derived the great emphasis given to the body as material reality of the world. 509

Western philosophy has been much concerned about the concept of time from the very beginning. There have been questions about the understanding of time and they are not yet resolved till today. Such questions include – Is time well thought of as flowing? If so, does it flow from future to past with us stuck like boats in the middle of the river, or does it flow from past to future, bearing us with it? Might it flow faster or slower? If we do not think of time as flowing, how do we conceive of its passage? What distinguishes the present from the past and future, or is there no objective distinction? Can we make sense of timeless existence, or can we only make sense of existence in time? Is time infinitely divisible, or might it have a granular structure, with there being a smallest quantum or chunk of time? 510 This long range of questions indicate the existence of various notions of time which oscillate from chronological to circular understanding of time or something beyond this two.

The homogenization of understanding of time in chronological fashion can be accounted to the spread of European power across the cultures in different parts of the globe. This conception is mainly attributed to the formalization of ‘clock-time’. It ‘no longer tracks and synthesizes time of the natural and social environment but produces instead a time that is independent from those processes: clock-time is applicable anywhere, any time. Context no longer plays a role.... Invariability rather than the integration of fundamental variance is the goal: variance means the clock is going wrong. Standardization, quantification and universalization are its singular achievements.... When

509 Luis Alberto Brandao. op. cit. p. 133.
510 Simon Balekbum. op. cit. 377-78.
the invariable time of the clock is superimposed on living systems, it tends to be the living systems that are required to adapt to the machine-time rather than the other way around.\textsuperscript{511}

This standardization not withstanding, time is a much older concept, probably as old as the humanity itself. It is eternally present in all societies with their own variants.\textsuperscript{512}

This whole understanding unfolds the specificity of a culture apart from the standardized conception of time within the frame of clock-time. The conception of day and night in the form of light and darkness does not necessarily follow the clock-time. Setting in of the Sun may signify the onset of night and the first ray of sunlight may herald the beginning of day. In traditional society like Manipuri society the crowing of rooster signifies the time intervals, especially during night. The first crow heralds the beginning of the day. It is known as \textit{yenkhong ahanba} (the first crow of a rooster). In religious ceremonies like \textit{Sorat} (death ceremony), \textit{Phiroi} (death anniversary), \textit{Luhongba} (marriage ceremony), \textit{Rasa Lilas} etc. sound of \textit{moibung} (conch shell), blown by a \textit{moibung khongba} (moibung player), signifies the passage of time. The \textit{sankirtan} singing in such ceremonies is reminded of the time in some specific time by him. So, there is also a tacit understanding between the singers and him whether to lengthen the singing session or not depending on the response from the invitees to the ceremonies. This timing does not necessarily depend on the clock-time but on the passage of the time of singing.

The traditional societies no longer are immune to the global systems of time today. With this change there are changes in other cultural and social systems too. This includes the performance timing of rituals and other modern form of performances like plays. Shumang Lila is no longer alien to this change. Shumang Lila plays used to be performed only in the night time till early 1970s and usually lasted around three hours. This was a time when there was adherence to the demarcation of time in a community according to its functions. The day time was normally meant for ‘productive’ economic activities like working in the field, office or in the commercial centres which sustained the family. After the day’s hard work the night was generally meant for recreation. So, the recreational activities including theatrical performances, dance and music were reserved for the night.

\textsuperscript{511} Barbara Adam \textit{Time}. In Mike Featherstone, Couze Venn, Ryan Bishop and John Phillips (eds.). \textit{op. cit.} p. 123.

\textsuperscript{512} Ibid. p. 120. Also see Mircea Eliade, 1989 – \textit{The Myth of Eternal Return: Cosmos and History}. London: Arkana.
time. This does not mean that the demarcation has been completely obliterated, but there have been additions with time.

Traditionally, in Manipur, most of the religious dance and theatrical performances are organized during the night time, including the Rasa Lilas. So, Shumang Lila also adhered to this convention for long. But the new trend of organizing the plays in day time even seems to suggest that the recreational time is extended beyond the night time which trespasses into the realm of ‘productive’ hour. This is evident of the change in the community’s conception and management of time. The change in the occupational structure and exposure to the global flow of knowledge through different media of communication are some of the catalysts which affect the way a community thinks. This probably is instrumental in rearranging the utilitarian values of time. For instance, night can still be time for work while day time can be time of recreation depending on the occasion and convenience of the people.

Shumang Lila performances also can be contextualized within this premise. Frequency of performances by a troupe sometimes goes up to four or five in a day, if the play is highly popular. For instance, Sanaleipak Nachom Artistes performed the play Lidece-gi Gulap three times on the 27th of March, 2004. This was so because the first performance was only in the afternoon and the last one at around ten in the night. If we include performances before noon then the number comes up to four or five depending on the length of the play and the distance between the places of performance. The performances during day time are generally organized for certain occasions like special day of a club or organization, or as part of a community festival like Cheiraoba (Manipuri New Year, in March/April), Chakouba (a festival of family congregation when the married daughters, sisters of the family are invited by their parents or parental relatives for a grand feast in the month of October), Yaoshang (Holi) etc. But it is not unusual for the troupe to perform in day time in any normal days, if the demand is high for a particular play. In fact all the plays during Shumang Lila Festival, which is held in the month of February/March, are performed during the day time. This marks the slow transformation of Shumang Lila to the structure of proscenium theatre. The Festival is organized inside a large auditorium at Palace Compound, Imphal and people from different places, even outside Imphal city come to see the plays. So, Shumang Lila which used to be performed in Leikais (locality) or Khuls (villages) and attended by audience from nearby places, is now being opened up
for universal viewing. This does not discount the fact that Shumang Lila is still a community affair. This change in the place and occasion of performance is also responsible for the change in the timing. Other than timing of performance of play, there are other forms of time. These include the times according to which a particular play is performed.\textsuperscript{513}

The chronological time in the performance is the same as in the text, but not the plot time. The latter is extended in the performance. In Shumang Lila plays which have been discussed in Chapter 1 and 2 all these three timings are important. Apart from these timings there are other forms of timings like time, pace and rhythm of the certain scene in a play. ‘By pace is meant the rate–rapidity or slowness–involved in the execution of business and speaking of lines. Comedies, comic scenes, scenes of excitement, and scenes of tension require in general a more rapid rate than do tragedies, serious scenes, and scenes that are relatively without tension. Light comedies and farces are far more effective if played at a rapid rate.’\textsuperscript{514} Timing is an extremely important ingredient in acting. ‘Not merely the way in which an actor reacts, but also the moment at which he reacts can be revealing.... Much of the comedian’s effectiveness depends upon the exact timing of business and lines.... There is an exact moment in the scene when the lifting of an eyebrow, the shrugging of a shoulder, or the dropping of a jaw will set the audience off into gales of laughter. Miss that moment, play the business or gesture too soon or late, and much of the comic effect is blunted.’\textsuperscript{515} Again rhythm is also important. By rhythm is meant the ‘patterning of time and therefore applies to both speech and movement.... Scenes likewise have their rhythmic patterns, and in certain scenes the rhythm becomes important as a means of producing the right effect.’\textsuperscript{516}

The pertinent questions in mind after discerning these aspects of timing in theatre, are: Are all these aspects of timing already present in human behaviours, both individual and group in private and public spheres? Is it really the society which is imitating these aspects of theatre or the other way around or vice versa? Is it really right to see the social behaviour as ‘dramatized’ forms rather than theatre being ‘socialized’? Even if theatre shows different way of human behaviour in its scenes, is it not in keeping the social

\textsuperscript{513} Anuradha Kapur, 1990. op. cit. pp. 9-10. Kapur talks of three kinds of timing – ‘the plot time’, ‘chronological time’ and ‘constant “now”’ of the play where everything that is shown appears to be always in the present’.


\textsuperscript{515} Ibid. p. 277.

\textsuperscript{516} Ibid. p. 279.
behaviour as reference point, 'a reference for difference'? Then, what about imposition of
the concept of 'drama' (in 'social drama') on society, albeit as an analytical tool, by Victor
Turner?

These questions are a quest to find the chronological framing of drama and society.
But to term every social behaviour as dramatic or 'front region' activity is to loose the
authenticity of human being itself. Though the concept of authenticity has lost most of its
zeal in today's world, there is still space where it is maintained, even in the public sphere.
In this sense theatre may serve as a means to recover and discover this authenticity. And
Shumang Lila is not less in this endeavour. All this can be executed in keeping with the
timing of the scenes. Otherwise the message may go awry.

The messages through such timings are also important in religious theatre forms
like Ramlila. According to Anuradha Kapur, the plot time in the Ramlila is the time for
moving from location to another location to suit the description of the text. Tulsidas may
have a brief mention of the journey but the actual performance may stretch the journey for
hours. The extension of plot time is seen in Bharata Milaya episode. For instance, on the
29th day (3 October 1979) of the Ramlila at Ramnagar, Bharata has been informed of
Rama's impending arrival at 7.40 pm in the evening; but the actual arrival takes place only
at 11 pm. It may be a long wait for a stranger but for the ones who have been waiting for
this moment, it is not wastage of time. This plot has been playing in their minds and it is
worth waiting with devotion. The drama unfolds slowly tantalizing the audience. The
drama has been deliberately done in order to arouse the curiosity amongst the spectators to
see their gods in action. So, this particular event is made up of action, devotion, flares and
suspense, which acquire a meaning that is quite separate from the text itself.

Time constitutes very important element in narrative forms. In fact narratives are
constructed on time. Some examples of narratives are Katha, Kahani and Jan Kahani.
Roma Chatterji explores the 'interrelationship' between these narrative forms and a village
in Purulia district of West Bengal. For her, 'it is only by looking at the interrelationship

between the narrative forms within an ethnographic context that the relationship between a particular narrative form and its symbolic function can be understood. 519

There are differences in the conception of time in these three forms of narratives. ‘Kahanis take one into the fictional time and treat the development of the self as a journey. Kathas, on the other hand, place great importance on synchronicity. In them the self is not limited by space or time. Riddles (Jan Kahani) highlight those areas of social life that are ambiguous and describe the self in paradoxical terms. ... Kahani does not have an open-ended character, perhaps because its role in regenerating the community is very limited. In contrast, the Kathas are open-ended. The reverberations that constitute them are still felt in the present. They provide patterns by which random, incoherent events are transformed into intelligible formulations. They provide the texts for the re-interpretation of traditional elements in the face of new experiences and also the reorganizing of new elements that enter social life in terms of tradition. ... Stories of Kathas can be opened again in another time and another place and they occupy both continuous and linear time and also discontinuous and reversible time. 520

There are also two values of time expressed in Kahanis and Kathas. ‘In Katha the consequence of each action reverberates throughout the cosmic universe, relating the different Yugas (ages) to each other. This kind of causality through Karma is absent in the Kahani or if present is so only as an afterthought, as an explanation for the circumstances in which the dramatis personae are placed. 521

In case of Katha, there is a ‘dialogic relation’ between the narrator and the audience. So, this narrative form takes the form of performance. In fact, ‘Kahanis, Kathas, riddles and songs have metaphoric and metonymic relations with the narratives of the individual selves, i.e. their biographies. 522 The manner in which narrative tradition constructs popular consciousness is approached differently in Chatterji’s thesis. She finds that the various narrative forms in her field address different aspects of the problems of society and hence constitute the self very differently. She uses the Meadian notion of the self, as a ‘reflexive’ process by which it becomes an object to itself. Thus it has been possible to see that in the Kahanis the reflexive process takes the form of the voyage of the

521 Ibid. Chapter 2.
522 Ibid. p.23.
hero, while in the biographies it is constituted by a conversation of many voices that makes up the conceptions of the self that are embodied in its narrative.\textsuperscript{523}

Very similar narrative forms are also present in Manipur. They are called \textit{Wari Liba} and \textit{Lairik Thiba-Haiba} which are narration of religious texts, both Hindu and indigenous. \textit{Wari Liba} is similar to \textit{Katha} in terms of structure and performativity. This genre mainly concentrates on narration of Hindu Epics of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. This is more open to secular elements and less rigid in its structure. On the other hand, \textit{Lairik Thiba-Haiba} is a dialogic narration by two narrators in which one reads out the texts written in Bengali or Sanskrit and the other translates them into Manipuri. This is performed mainly in a more structured manner and in more sanctified religious environment like in death ceremonies etc.

4. Aesthetics and Semiotics

After we have discussed the basis of performance i.e. rituals, space and time, let us now delve into the aesthetics of performance. This does not discount the role of time and space in aesthetics. For that matter even the rituals also are not divorced from the clutches of aesthetics in the sense that they are also composed in a way so that they serve both religious and entertainment purposes. The concept of aesthetics is originally philosophical but it is also at the same time sociological. The values are created and followed by the community. The utilitarian side of human beings is reflected when the values are in consonance with their sensibility. When we talk of aesthetics we generally talk of things related to the subject of beauty. Beauty itself is, primarily, also ethnocentric and egocentric in that the concept of beauty of one community may be different from that of another community. And also the taste of one person may also be different from other persons within the same community. However, it is not to claim that there are no universal concepts of beauty as such. The rule is equally applied to theatre also since it is also a product of society. The craft of theatre is constantly in work to produce something which is in consonance with the taste of the viewing public of the community.

Before we are swayed by the concept of aesthetics as limited to the matters of beauty, we should discern the philosophical intricacies of the concept. For Plato beauty serves 'as an exemplar of the very highest level of the ideal Forms and associated with

\textsuperscript{523} Ibid. p. 28.
truth and the good. Moreover beauty is seen as the inspiration and goal of philosophy itself. On the other hand he had very negative opinion about the art. ‘Defining such arts as \textit{mimesis} (typically translated as imitation though sometimes also as representation), Plato denounces them as an imperfect imitation of the forms of the phenomenal world, which for him are themselves but a distorted imitation of the ideal rational Forms that constitute true reality.’\footnote{Richard Shusterman – The Aesthetic. In Mike Featherstone, Couze Venn, Ryan Bishop and John Phillips (eds.). op. cit. p. 237.} So, Plato never considered art as aesthetic. However, Aristotle tried to salvage the damage done to art by Plato. He did so ‘by arguing that art imitated the essential and not mere superficialities, and by introducing the doctrine of \textit{catharsis} to show art’s arousal of the passion could be a good thing since they are expurgated within the protected context of art’s experience.’\footnote{Ibid. p. 238.}

The word ‘aesthetics’ was first used by Alexander Baumgarten (1714-62), a German Philosopher, by adapting it from the Greek word which means ‘to perceive’. He defined it as ‘the science of sensory awareness’. ‘Aesthetics become heir to a long philosophical tradition of interest in the idea of beauty. One twist given this tradition by post-Renaissance thought was to treat beauty as the predominant characteristic of works of art so that it was in contemplating works of art that we preeminently appreciate beauty….By mid-nineteen century ‘aesthetics’ had become generally accepted as the common noun referring to the study of the philosophical problems arising out of the existence of the arts.’\footnote{R.A. Sharpe, 1980 – \textit{Contemporary Aesthetics: A Philosophical Analysis}. The Harvester Press. p. 8.} These understandings of the subject became more problematic because of its overriding emphasis on the concept of beauty. Moreover it did not give any space for the activities or objects which are not the work of art but which give aesthetic pleasure. For instance, seeing a village landscape may give the viewer an aesthetic pleasure. Again man is constantly creating and recreating things which are aesthetically pleasurable but these creations may not necessarily be called works of art. In this sense man may be called an ‘aesthetic animal’. On the contrary many works of art do not give aesthetic pleasure if we restrict ourselves to the definition of aesthetics as the study of beauty. For instance, a horror movie is not beautiful but fearful; a thriller may not be beautiful but suspenseful. This means anything related to work of art may not necessarily be subsumed within the bracket of beauty. In the eighteen century, Burke classified the art
and the objects of aesthetic attention as: 'some were sublime, some beautiful, others graceful and yet others elegant'. 527 Aesthetics then became a special mode of perception. Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, widely regarded as the most pivotal and influential work of modern aesthetics, centrally deploys and intimately identifies the notions of taste and the aesthetic. 528 But again Hegel gave primacy to aesthetic over taste 'as the umbrella concept or explaining our appreciation of art and nature, just as it elevated art above nature as the privileged focus for aesthetic judgment and inquiry.' 529

At the turn of 20th century, there was the emphasis of aesthetic as 'the idea of disinterestedness, that aesthetic perception examines and appreciates its object not in terms of some ulterior motive or function – a desire for possession, power, material or political advantage, or instrumental use – but instead for the intrinsic value or pleasure of the appreciative experience itself.' 530 This idea was already subtly present in Kant's and Hegel's idea. This disinterestedness is also supported by Adorno who argues that art's true and vital function is to be functionless, thus defying the capitalist culture's overwhelming concerns with utility. He says, 'If any social function can be ascribed for art at all, it is the function to have no function.' 531 However, this idea of disinterestedness has come under heavy criticism. 'Nietzsche mordantly mocks the dogma of disinterestedness as an expression of philosopher's prudishness, innocence and second hand, spectator's view of art – contrasting it to the creative, hands-on view of the artist. The power of art and beauty, argues, derives not from disinterest but rather from "the excitement of the will, of interest".' 532

Given this plethora of problems philosophers are agreed more or less with the suggestion of M.C. Bradley. For him, aesthetics as subject may be defined as 'the study of problems which arise from the criticism of the arts'. This is because critics are engaged in criticisms, give judgments, offer reasons for their judgments and interpret works of art. 'In word aesthetics is metacriticism.' 533 So Aesthetics according to the philosophical

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17 Ibid. p. 10.
18 Richard Shusterman. op. cit. p. 239.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid. p. 240.
understanding gives attention to the aesthetic values associated with the works of art which may be literary, visual and performing arts.

How do we relate aesthetics with sociology, as aesthetics has been considered an exclusive domain of philosophers for long? The answer to this question has been partially seen in Nietzsche’s critique of disinterestedness in aesthetics movement. One way of seeing sociological aesthetics is to see aesthetics as a discipline with a social history. ‘The terms, assumptions and judgements which operate in traditional aesthetics are socially located and, in an important sense, ideological.’ This thesis was underlined by Bourdieu in his understanding of ‘the differentiation of taste as intimately connected with social and cultural relations of power’. This is to say that ‘the very products which aesthetics and art history posit as “works of art” cannot be uncritically taken as somehow distinguished by certain intrinsic features, but must be seen as produced in that history by specific practices in given conditions.’

If we understand the term aesthetics sociologically, it is now being used in varied forms so as to include activities and objects which are part of the day-to-day life. In the present thesis my attention will be on the works of art though they have been influenced by various nuances of human society and nature. How a work of art is made aesthetically worthy? The answer to this question will take us to the networks of the construction and deconstruction of the works of arts or in our case Shumang Lila. In theatre the construction of meaning is done through various interconnected systems of theatrical codes which mostly are concomitant with the symbolic systems in the wider society. In response to this is the system of decodification or deconstruction of these codes by the audience which is already equipped with its own societal and cultural bearings. This whole interaction embraces both linguistic and non-linguistic sign systems. So this brings us to the understanding of sociology and semiotics as a braided system.

Semiotics plays the greatest role in theatre since it is the product of various sign systems. On the performance space semiotization is of particular interest and importance with respect to the actor, the conscious use of body, his/her physical attributes and speech, since he/she is the dynamic unity of an entire set of signs. In Shumang Lila and other

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traditional theatre the actor’s body acquires its mimetic and representational powers by
becoming something other than itself. Through the semiotic representation, the theatrical
sign inevitably acquires connotative meanings for the audience, relating it to the social,
moral and ideological values operative in the community of which performers and
spectators are part.

What is sign, then?537 According to Pierre Guiraud, ‘a sign is a stimulus—that is, a
perceptible substance—the mental image of which is associated in our minds with that of
another stimulus. The function of the former stimulus is to evoke the latter with a view to
communication.’538 There is a communication between two or more subjects in sign
systems. Then can any object, including natural indications, be construed as sign? Is cloud
a sign of rain? They may be potential causes to certain effects but they lack the very basis
for which the sign system is built up. ‘A sign (therefore) is marked by an intention of
communicating something meaningful.’539 So, the cloud in the sky does not have that
intention to communicate. But when it is used in the weather forecast in television, then it
becomes a sign. In theatre also the cloud laden dark sky painted on the curtain serves as a
sign of prospective rain. This is accentuated by the body language of the actors; the
background music; and the lighting system. In Shumang Lila, however, this scene is
created through body languages due to the absence of any props, and recently augmented
by the background musical score.

Since all sign systems, not only the linguistic one, aimed at communicating, theatre
can be placed at the upper rung in the hierarchy of art forms where there is maximum
usage of these systems. The communication of ideas, in general, is done by means of
messages. According to Roman Jakobson, it involves ‘an object, a thing spoken about or
referent, signs and therefore a code, a means of transmission and..., an emitter and a
receiver.’540 This mode of transmission of message can be applied in toto in the more
condensed dramatic context where the message in codes is transmitted by a sender to a
receiver. When it comes to the larger theatrical context it involves a little complex system.
In the latter there is the source of the information, who may be the dramatist or the director

537 See Chapter I for discussion on sign. Also see Roland Barthes, 1967 (translated from the French by
1970 (originally 1966) (translated by M. E. Meek) – Problems in General Linguistics... Coral Gables:
University of Miami Press.
539 Ibid.
540 Ibid. p. 5.
or the designer or composer or technician etc. Then this idea is transmitted through the body, voice and costume of the actor or props or set or light etc. by using such signals as movements, sounds, electrical impulses etc. The message such as speech or gesture or music or scenic continuum etc. travels along physical channels like light waves and sound waves. Then this is picked up by the receivers which may be the eye or the ear of spectator etc. The receiver interprets the multiple messages as an integrated text, according to the theatrical, dramatic and cultural codes at his disposal and in turn assumes the role of transmitter of the signals to the performers in the form of laughter, applause, boos etc.

The important concept here is that of code through which the encoding and decoding of the messages is made possible. Code, then, is 'the ensemble of signs or signals together with the internal rules governing their combination and the rules responsible for assigning semantic content to the units in question....This is to say, it is an ensemble of correlational rules governing the formation of sign relationships.' Sometimes code and system are used synonymously. In theatre there is the usage of multiple correlated codes for disseminating messages. Some of the codes or systems are 'language, tone, facial mime, gesture, movement, make-up, hairstyle, costume, props, décor, lighting, music and sound effects.' This means some of them are temporal and some of them spatial. The creation of meaning is done through the multiple sedimentation of these systems. Synchronously, at any point of time during performance there is layering of gestural and linguistic references to the particular scene. These are characterized by what Roland Barthes calls 'density of signs'. And diachronically all the systems may not be operative at the same time but whenever they are required to create the aesthetically rich taste of the text. Linguistic messages are purely temporal while movement by the actors is spatial and at the same time temporal. The props also have spatio-temporal relationship amongst themselves. Movement, gesture and facial mime are in practice intimately connected and complementary aspects of the general kinesic continuum.

In case of Shumang Lila, there is least amount of props and décor on the performance space. The lighting is frozen into a monochrome and a static luminosity so that the night scene is created symbolically by the movements and gestures of the performer assisted by the sound system. The sound system plays a pivotal role in the

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542 Ibid. p. 45.
modem Shumang Lila, which was minimal in the olden days. The symbolic closing of
door in the empty performance space in a particular scene is made more realistic with the
sound produced by the sophisticated keyboard organ and violin. But it is also possible that
this action can be understood only through the gesture without the sound system. This is
done through transcodification where the syntactical expression of 'closing the door' is
translated into semiotic representation by the gesture. In the absence of many props,
pantomimic gesture becomes a very important message in Shumang Lila. The Phagi Lila,
the purely comic genre of early 20th century Shumang Lila was especially rich with
gestural representation. The story goes that when Abujamba Saiton, a comedian met
Heining Maru, another comedian, they asked each other from where they were coming
respectively. The former spread his arms straight to indicate Lamsang (meaning long land),
a name of the village and then the latter crouched his back to indicate Nambol (meaning a
humped back), also name of a village. Birjit Ngangom, an accomplished director of
Shumang Lila, narrates the performance of a play in 1960s. In the play a character in his
white pheijom (dhott), phurit (kurta) and a shawl dangled on his shoulder acted out a scene
of rushing to the palace as he was late. Without any word and supporting music, he entered
the performance space with one or two steps and then stepped in the side. Suddenly he
started running listlessly saying there was a snake. Then the spectators, sitting just next to
the performance space, also got frightened; got up; and started running in fear of the snake.
But he was just creating a scene in which he stamped on a snake on the side of the lane.
Such was the impact created by actors in their realistic creation of the scenes. Shumang
Lila is full of such anecdotes. Apart from the gestures, body decoration such as make-up,
hairstyle, and costume are also important factors to authenticate the textual performance.
For instance, in the historical plays red traditional costume or red scarf bound in the
costume indicates that a character is from Mangang Salai, black one for Khuman Salai,
violet for Angom Salai etc. indicating the specific colours accorded to these salais or
Meitei clans.

The message conveyed by non-linguistic signs is very prominent in Kathakali
dance drama also. It depends on the make-up of the face and the types of costumes the
characters wear. Indian Classical theatre is also replete with sign systems. Bhava

544 As told in a personal interaction.
545 See Ksh. Imokanta Singh, 2002. op. cit. (Chapter 2). Also see Kapila Vatsyayan, 1974 – Indian Classical
Dance. Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India. pp. 40-41
(emotion) and rasa (sentiment) are the space for codification and decodification.\textsuperscript{546} There are eight rasas—Srngara rasa (erotic sentiment), Hasya rasa (comic sentiment), Karuna rasa (pathetic sentiment), Vira rasa (heroic sentiment), Raudra rasa (furious sentiment), Bhayanaka rasa (terrifying sentiment), Bibhatsa rasa (repulsive sentiment), and Adbhuta rasa (marvelous sentiment).\textsuperscript{547}

Rasas are part of a wide spectrum of concept of Saundarya in Hindu philosophy. 'Saundarya could possibly be translated as beauty but its proper meaning is conveyed by the term beauty-ness, or even more awkwardly, beauty-hood.'\textsuperscript{548} It is abstract, a-rational and therefore above and beyond concepts or artistic constructs. It 'inheres in the object and is therefore primarily objective, but equally, while being received sensually from an object that is sunder, saundarya remains in the final analysis an inner, subjective and private perception. It is therefore half received and half perceived.'\textsuperscript{549}

Another theatre form, from outside India, which uses the maximum use of sign system, is Noh theatre of Japan. There is multi-purpose use of fan, most importantly the folding fan (chukei), depending upon the kata (graceful movement), conveys various meaning.\textsuperscript{550} Peking Opera also almost depends on symbolism in its narration of story through performance. Peking opera evolved from several types of local operas being staged in Beijing (Peking) some 200 years ago. It is just one among 100-odd local operas, performed in different dialects. In this form

particular bodily movements signify opening or closing a door, entering or leaving a room, going upstairs or down, climbing a mountain or wading across a stream. Circling the stage, whip in hand, suggests riding a horse; riding in a carriage is represented by an attendant holding flags painted with a wheel design on either side of the performer; walking in a circle indicates a long journey; four soldiers and four generals flanking both sides of the stage represent an army several thousand strong; two men somersaulting under a spotlight shows the audience how they are groping and fighting in the dark; and on a stage bare of

\textsuperscript{546} Ibid. Also see Chandra Bhan Gupta, 1991 – The Indian Theatre. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd.
\textsuperscript{547} Ibid. Also see Chandra Bhan Gupta. op. cit. p.132.
\textsuperscript{549} Ibid. p. x
scenery, a performer holding an oar or paddle and doing knee-bends to simulate a heavy swell, demonstrates traveling on a boat.551

In all the above cases there is communication between the performers and the spectators so that what the former convey is grasped by the latter. The theatrical codes are not divorced from the whole framework of more general cultural, ideological, ethical and epistemological principles which the spectators apply in their extra-theatrical activities in the wider social milieu. Nevertheless, there is certainly a boundary between the general cultural codes and the theatrical and dramatic norms, though the latter draw on the behavioural motifs of social intercourse and its linguistic, ‘kinesic’ and ‘costumic’ patterns. This is made possible by the ‘subcodes’ which are sets of secondary regulative rules, peculiar to drama and theatre. Subcodes are generally produced by overcoding which, in simple sense, is the modification, in the dramatic and theatrical space, over the basic cultural rules. For instance, distinctive kinds of exaggerated movements, make-up or voice projection are used for better visibility and audibility, though they may sometimes divert from the aesthetic taste of the spectators. In case of Shumang Lila there is heavy employment of melodrama i.e. over speaking, over crying, over dancing etc. One very peculiar overcoding is the use of a rhythmic style of speech in the mythological and historical plays, quite different from the one used in the day-to-day intercourse. It is also true that the subcodes, in many instances, outlive and outtravel the constitutive cultural codes on which they are originally based. Here the instance of the dialogue style of historical plays, which recreate the past in the present with its own contextual norms, can be cited. This creates a theatrical space which goes beyond the contemporary social space.

Along with overcoding is its opposite undercoding. This is the formation of rough and approximate norms in order to characterize a phenomenon which is not fully understood or which is only vaguely differentiated for the spectators. This is found mainly in innovative techniques of theatrical production, for instance, the avant garde, experimental theatre etc. Incase of Shumang Lila, a completely new form of experimental theatre is difficult given the variety of individual spectators. So, it has to take their taste in its production design so that it becomes convincing and easy to understand instantly. But then theatre also involves a complex dialectic of code-observing, code-making and code-breaking which is not unlike what happens in the wider society also. This is made more

complicated with the 'idiolectal' factors such as the personal, psychological, ideological and stylistic traits of the renowned dramatist, director, actor or designer.\footnote{Keir Elam. op. cit. pp. 46-50.}

Coding and subcoding need signs which are their constituents. Some of the signs which are of importance in theatre are what Charles Sanders Pierce classified as icon, index and symbol. According to him icon represents its object 'mainly by similarity' between the sign vehicle or the signifier and its signified. Indexical signs have cause and effect relationship between the signifier and the signified often physically or through contiguity. For instance, knocking of door indicates that somebody is waiting for the door to be opened. Symbol is a sign where there is conventional and unmotivated or arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified. The linguistic signs are the best example. Out of these three, iconic signs are best used in theatre. Pierce subdivided the icon into three classes of image, diagram and metaphor. The cane flower basket is the direct image of the one described in the dramatic text, while its mimic representation by gesture is diagrammatic and its substitution by a paper basket is metaphoric. In addition to metaphor, Roman Jakobson discovers its opposite called metonymy which is in the realm of index. Metonymy is the substitution of cause for effect or of one item for something contiguous to it, for instance, white house for the American President. What is more applicable in theatre is another form of metonymy which Jindrich Honzl calls scenic metonymies or synodoche i.e. representation of the whole by a part. In Shumang Lila a frying pan represents kitchen. In this theatre form there is multilayered usage of all these signs but linguistic, diagrammatic and metaphoric signs are more in use. The empty performance space becomes a metaphor of living room or garden or market or battle field. Nevertheless, using of iconic signs in theatre calls for qualification. The principle of similitude is highly flexible and strictly founded on cultural convention i.e. there is space for the spectator to freely establish the analogy between the signifier and the class of signified. This is where the role of interpretant or spectator comes in for his/her own connotation. So, a play can be read in many ways, though there is a general theme of it, depending on the spectators' understanding. For that matter the same sign can also be interpreted in different ways.

The importance of theatre is the special type of social action operative between the performers and the spectators. The mere act of going to the theatre by the spectators itself
is a social action where there is a pre-emptive understanding of the interactional situation in their minds between themselves; and between them and the performers. While they are in the theatre there is understanding of certain conventions which guide the dramatic performance. This is what Goffman calls frame. "Frames are conceptual or cognitive structures to the extent that they are applied by participants and observers to make sense of a given ‘strip’ of behaviour, but derive from the conventional principles through which behaviour itself is organized."\textsuperscript{553} This constitutes the frames which are present in the dramatic performing text. In addition to this there is also the differentiation of the frames of the performers and the spectators which are understood by both the parties. This means there are elements which do not fall within this frame which Goffman calls ‘out-of-frame activity.’ During performance there are so many extra-textual actions happening such as noise in the audience, late arrivals of the spectators etc. The performers and the spectators have to ‘disattend’ such elements so that they remain glued into the frame.\textsuperscript{554} In case of Shumang Lila the spectators know which elements are within the frame and which out of the frame. For instance, the spectator who steps inside the performance space to praise the actors by presenting money is perceived as one who is outside the dramatic frame. However, it is always not possible to ‘disattend’ the out-of-frame elements especially when some spectators cross certain limit and disturb the smooth running of the frame. This happens in Shumang Lila when there breaks out drunken brawls in the audience. This diverts the attention of the audience when the dramatic frame is abandoned and this out-of-frame activity becomes the frame itself for the time being or even the whole performance is ended instantly.

Being within the frame and understanding the text also demand the intertextual knowledge on the part of the spectators. A text, in many cases, is permutation of texts, an intertextuality. In regards to a particular play there is comparison with other plays in terms of written text (bearing generic, structural and linguistic relations with other plays), the actor (his previous performances in other plays), directorial style and so on. For instance, if there is play performance by \textit{Sanaleipak Nachom Artistes} then there will be a heavy attendance because the troupe has an established image of producing enjoyable plays. So, people judge them through their previous performances. People are also excited to see the

\textsuperscript{554} Goffman. 1974. op. cit. p. 201.
histrionics of Hemanta, the comedian of the troupe as he is one of the best comedians in the history of Shumang Lila. In addition to these theatrical conventions there are also the extra-theatrical cultural texts which play vital roles in understanding the text. In order to make the text understandable to the spectators, in Shumang Lila the plays with foreign themes such as *Hamlet, Ledicigt Gulap, World Trade Centre, Gusmaogi Khudol–East Timor* etc. are localized. The decodification is made easier if the spectators are equipped beforehand with the readings of the reviews of the plays by critics in newspapers etc. But then there is always space for connotation of the text which may enrich the whole treasure of meaning of the text. Here comes the subjective understanding, especially in the polysemic signs, depending on time, place, class, gender, ethnicity, age and experience of the decoder i.e. spectator. This is because theatre rarely involves scientific codes which require objective understanding which are constituted by monosemic signs. In general terms theatre is an open system rather than closed one. This is equally true of the symbolic interaction in a cultural setting where there is the possibility of interpretation of the actions of the parties involved. If there were no space for interpretation in such interactions there would not arise any disagreement between them, here perception being objective always. Life of a human being is immersed in various sign systems and theatre is one of them.

### 4. Performance and Technology

Theatrical performances, irrespective of the original places of the genres, are not immune to the rapid technological developments happening outside the theatrical domain. This has been accentuated with the highly diffusive nature of technology, especially in this age of globalization. Expansionism of technology! But the eliciting power of technology is that the receivers, most of the time, are not offended by it given its capacity to make life more comfortable. This means there is a relative judgment by the receivers when they compare and contrast the new entrant with the older ones which bestowed almost the same task. For instance, bulb is seen in comparison with the kerosene oiled lamp. Science and technology make life easier to live but they become nagging needs when they create fetishes among the users. So, when scientism takes over every walk of life there is a danger of obliterating human values which bind people to each other; to the age-old wisdom; to the primordial elements of the community etc. Technology in this vein comes with a costly proselytizing baggage along with its myriad benefits.
Shumang Lila also has been incorporating many modern technological products in its endeavour to make the genre aesthetically more presentable, though retaining the basic structure of its performance. Performing techniques have also been changing, partly augmented by the technology. But they can also be rendered without the modern tools. The changes, which have taken place, are in the fields of acting style, presentation of dialogue, make-up, use of personal properties of the actors, lighting system, amplification of sound, and music. Lighting system used to be minimal. One or two lamps or patromax dangled from the horizontal bar of the two jointed poles in the centre of the performance space were often used. It was in use till 1980s and then it had been replaced by tube lights run by generators or electricity from the public lines. This lights up the whole area including the seating spaces of the audience, not only the performance space that used to be such in the time of half lamps. This also increases the visibility of the audience and interaction, if not verbally but through sign systems including eye contact. It has been a sight among the audience that some, mainly between boys and girls, establish their own frames in parallel to the dramatic frame of the play. And gifting of eatables, mainly by the boys to the girls, is also a common behaviour. This does not mean that all this started with the coming of modern lighting system.

First big change in Shumang Lila came in with the introduction of microphone in 1960s.555 According to M. Binod, there was paucity of this new instrument and its use created a kind of fashion and was also considered to be flaunting of one’s new found status. Only one microphone was used for the actors who moved around in the performance space in their embodiment of the characters and could not just confine to the area nearby the microphone. This means they had to literally shout to be heard. But then it had always been this way in the period precedent to microphone. In 1970 the technique of background sound effect was used in the play Sarugi Polang (skeletal) by his troupe. For this one microphone was used in the green room where the adequate sound for the scene was created with clarinet, harmonica and pukhram (plates). Then the batteries running these microphones were short lasting and a whole lot of problems were faced. It was the initial hiccup of technology!

What does technology do to the effectiveness of theatre as a whole? It has brought in comfort both to the performers and the audience for sure. In the flip side it brought

555 Gathered from M. Binod.
restraints in performers' movement and also increased impatience among the audience. In
the pre-microphone era in addition to dialogues, there was also wide-scale use of body
languages and even acrobatics like man-onba and sharit-sharat (forms of indigenous
acrobatics). This meant the audience had to be disciplined and glued to the performance.
Even a meek conversion in the audience was a noise. This meant disturbance both to the
fellow spectators and the performers. However in the microphone era this norm has been
considerably cut down. The performers need not shout while delivering their lines and
have to be nearby the microphones (four at least). The conversations among the spectators
are not a noise today, as long as they do not literally disturb the whole performance, and
moreover the sound of the conversations is drowned by the sounds of the loudspeakers.

Another strong technological change is the introduction of modern musical
instruments with the introduction of Eshei Lila genre. The plays which used to be
performed with simple dholok (indigenous two sided drum) and kartal (cymbal) in the
olden days have given ways to the ones backed up by musical effects done by trained
musicians, seated on one side of the performance space, in each and every move of the
play. Though the musicians are not numerous, five or six, their music is comprehensive
created by violin, guitar, flute, tabla, pad-drum, and the magical instrument called
keyboard which can create any imaginable sound. The audience has also been swayed by
this technology and the latter has become a form of fetish which limits the choices of the
audience. The audience either desires to be presented the same or better but not lesser one.
So, Dialogue Lila which used to be once the only form of Shumang Lila withered away
with the impact of technology. Nevertheless the sound system has made the performance
more realistic. The wind is created by the body language of the performer ably supported
by the background music. This scene was done only with the help of body gestures in the
pre-Eshei Lila era and the imagination of the sound was left to the audience. In today’s
Shumang Lila the audience receives the sense data through eyes and ears to understand the
body gestures but before, only through eyes.

With the coming of background music the emphasis on the body has relatively
decreased. Actors need not work hard to adequately present a scene. This gap is filled by
the music. In theatre culture in general there is ‘celebration of body’ today with
marginalization of the ‘spoken word’. This is also an impact of globalization of culture
where there is search for wider audience beyond the boundary of the native language.
Rustom Bharucha writes, "Theatre language" opens up a totally different set of propositions and possibilities, in so far as "the word" in theatre is entirely literary, but mediated through the bodies and voices of actors in a specific *mis en scene*, wherein the meaning of a particular theatrical representation is shaped, enunciated, and embodied. Language in theatre exists only in a state of translation on the stage. This truism is what distinguishes the gestural, synaesthetic, syncretic, and concrete dimensions of theatrical representation from the logocentricity that continues to be affirmed in the "dramatic texts", which curiously survives the onslaught of deconstructive performative strategies, non-verbalism, physical theatre, invisible theatre, and a spate of non-textual activist interventions and infiltration.\footnote{Rustom Bharucha, 2005 (originally 2001) – *The Politics of Cultural Practices: Thinking through Theatre in an Age of Globalization*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. pp. 85-86.} In this globalizing world some of the Shumang Lila plays are also giving emphasis on the ‘dramaturgical acts’, rather than the literary text, albeit with the able support of background music.

Today Technology has dwarfed the physical activities and at the same time human beings also, up to certain extent, justify this domination as they are caught in an ever-growing time machine. Return to the antiquity from this point would have to face an uphill task since technology in a way has taken the form of an ideology i.e. scientism. So, Shumang Lila is always in the forward journey and keeps on giving justification of the innovative intervention from time to time and the audience also is in agreement with it. So, aesthetics for Shumang Lila is not a thing of ‘being’ but ‘becoming’. This is ruled by the convention which can be created also. It seems the time is not far away when it will completely imitate the proscenium style of presentation and introduces multicolour lighting systems in its productions. Then the proscenium stage might be the next. This is the anxiety the people who had been exposed to the original form of Shumang Lila have today. If these happen at all in future, then the question remains: will it be still called Shumang Lila, the courtyard theatre?