



An analytical study of linear drawing in the *Khutlou* Manuscripts of Manipur

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Abstract

Khutlou Manuscripts are one of the important illustrated manuscripts of Meitei society. It reflects the rich literary and artistic traditions of early Manipur. Among the different forms of Khutlou manuscripts, the present paper attempts to explore one of the Khutlou manuscripts, which was collected from Yumnam Chaoba Meitei (b.1957), an old puya (old manuscripts) custodian in Manipur. The manuscript has 55 folios, compiled from unbound loss sheets. There were 10 folios with pictures or illustrations, only written text on 29 folios, and 16 folios were blank. The size of the manuscript is 12 x 7.2 c.m. and it was made up of agar-bark. The study examines illustrations, visual language, symbols, line drawings, their relationship with accompanying text, and embedded symbolic meanings in manuscripts. In fine arts, an approach to studying a work of art fundamentally starts with formal analysis; the same applies to studies that focus specifically on one of the main elements of art, i.e., line. How lines, as main elements of art, are used in the drawing of this Khutlou manuscript. Line-drawing and its representation of forms and objects are often conveyed through ornamental motifs and visual symbols in the visual art of early Manipur culture. To achieve the aim of the study, the content of the written text and its corresponding illustrations were comparatively analysed, examined in their context, and assessed for how the visual language of the illustrative narration complements the text, and the study examines their writing style. The Khutlou manuscript's expressive line drawings convey movement, emotion, and symbolism, while documenting indigenous artistic techniques and visual vocabulary that enrich understanding of early Manipur's cultural and artistic heritage. It highlights the significance of illustrated manuscripts as valuable sources for the study of traditional art, manuscript production, and Meitei cultural heritage. The findings also establish the manuscript as a distinctive example of indigenous visual communication in which line drawing serves as both an artistic and narrative medium.

Keywords: Agar-bark Manuscript; Illustration; Khutlou Manuscript; Line Drawing; Visual Language.



1. Introduction:

Manipur is one of the Indian states; it is located in the north-eastern part of India. It is a home for many ethnic groups. The state was once an independent Asian country. Among the ethnic groups inhabiting the region, only the Meitei communities experienced the advent of writing, developed their own script, and created numerous manuscript texts on various subjects.

In Manipur, inscriptions evolved during the reign of King Khongtekcha (AD 763-73) when the time writing had begun with a script collectively known as Meitei script, which was initially the scriptures on stone and copper plate (Th. Tombi, 2020). The development of writing with the Meitei script was historically significant yet ambiguous in its progression. Cheitharol Kumbaba, a manuscript of royal chronicles was written; under the command of royal authority when King Khagemba (1547-1652) ruled Manipur. Till then duties were assigned on account of scribing manuscripts and other services by establishing institutions (loishang). The manuscript texts dealt with various subjects like astronomy, genealogy, climatology, mineralogy, battle strategies, etc (Mutua, 2005).

There is an abundance of old Illustrated manuscripts found in Manipur. Records of collected old manuscripts were kept in institutions; like Manipur State Kala Archive, Manipur State Archive, Mutua Museum, etc. Also independent research centres which run accompanied with the youth of the state that had shown interest as to do such research in the area of manuscript studies. Consequently, at the peripheral part of the valley region of the Manipur state, like Khurkhul, Andro, kakching; Thoubal, Nambol, Kakyai which are located at a distance from central valley area as well as Imphal area, had gone to take part in the survey. Thus, an old illustrated *Khutlou* Manuscript was found in the survey.

The *Khutlou* Manuscript is an important illustrated manuscript that reflects the rich literary and artistic traditions of early Manipur. *Khutlou* manuscript is a hand-written document combined with illustrated painting and literary text on the codex. The literature was written in a script, commonly the script was known as Meitei Mayek. Each painting interprets according to their corresponding texts. It is used for telling someone what will happen to them regarding wealth, health and service on the basis of their day-to-day activities.

The *Khutlou* manuscript, which underwent the current study, was acquired from Yumnam Chaoba Meitei (b.1957), an old puya custodian in Manipur. The manuscript has 55 folios, compiled from an unbound single folder. There are 10 folios with pictures or illustrations, only written text on 29 folios, and 16 folios are blank. The size of the manuscript is 12 x 7.2 c.m. and it was made up of agar-bark.

1.1. Significance of the study :

This study contributed to a deeper appreciation of the artistic expression and visual language reflected in the illustrations of the *Khutlou* Manuscripts. It helps identify the distinctive characteristics that set these manuscripts apart from other manuscript traditions in Manipur, thereby enriching understanding of the region's visual and cultural heritage. The study also provides valuable insights into manuscripts, thereby preserving important aspects of the *Khutlou* Manuscripts. The study promotes wider recognition and appreciation of the richness and uniqueness of early Manipuri visual art traditions, thereby contributing to their preservation and future scholarly exploration.

1.2. Objectives of the study:

1. To interpret the text and writing style of the *Khutlou* Manuscript
2. To identify the tools of writing and the preparation of ink for writing and drawing
3. To understand the visual language and symbols present in the illustrations of *Khutlou* manuscript.

2. Text and writing style of *Khutlou* Manuscript

There are 25 texts written in each single folio, the texts are written in old Manipuri script known as *meitei mayek*, and language was archaic *meiteilol*, hardly readable and an unease to understand. "Recognition of hand-written script is the real challenge faced by research community because of massive variation in the writing style of different individuals" (Sanasam Inuganbi & Praksh Choudhary, 2018). In the top left of every text there is an illuminated invocation symbol known as 'ANJI'. In the end part of the text there is a decorative ornament it assumes to be line fillers. The line filler is composed of double-danda and in-between the double-danda 3 to 4 circular dots were put, and it ended with a simple decorative motif that looks like a teal. The *Anji*, an illuminated initial sign, the body of the text written in calligraphic style and the ending decorative teal formed by a simple floral motif gives an illusion of an organic being. As if a head as (*Anji*), body the text and teal the ending motif while looking at the overall part of the texts in psychological assumption. There is a belief that the imagination of letterform in the creation of Meitei-mayek has been personified.



Fig 1: Anji

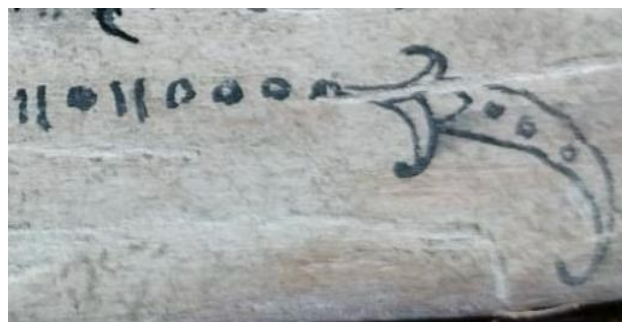


Fig 2: Line filler

2.1. Parsing the text structure:

Probably, the *Khutlou* Ms. was used to be an interpretative divination for the purpose of divination practice because of the writing nature of text. When we look closely at the text structure of a sentence and pattern of the writing, it can be parsed into three sections

First:- Parenthetical expression: Initial words were written as [wa-ashi-ti] in every text. It indicates as lexical verb, the meaning of the word can be assumed as "for this matter as such"

Second:- Portent statement: In the potent statement content [aduki-khel-ne] it may be understood as "hence", it is based on a fictional story, according to the story, to interpret the prediction of good and bad that may happen as result of the divination

Third:- Declarative statement: According to the indicated story mentioned in the portent statement, to declare the result whether good or bad accordingly (see Figure.3).



Fig 3: Specimen of a Khutlou Ms. from (Page 53)

Script	: Meitei Mayek
Language	: Meteilo
Yellow	: Parenthetical expression
Red	: Portent statement
Blue	: Declarative statement

2.2. Writing style:

When meitei-script is writing the letters meitei-mayek, it does not join each other, there is a gap between each morpheme e.g. in fig 3. the yellow heighten part; to be read as [wa-aa-shi-ti] so there are four morphemes. In text-setting meitei-mayek as letterform have multiple vertical strokes that appeared repeatedly but in the case of manuscripts or inscriptions the appearance are not the same, it has changed a lot in the promotion and an not properly structure the letterform it is because of the different writer and scribes (Nillakash, 2011). This case happened exactly in this Khutlou Manuscript writing. Similarly in manuscript illustration, the application of colour used and depiction of pictorial language and value are also dependent on the ingenuity of the individual writers or scribe (Bahadur, 1991).

2.3. Tools of writing:

(Nilakash, 2011) continued by mentioning the nature of stroke to make the letterform. There are two shapes in the stroke of letterform; (i) mono-linear (equal thickness) and (ii) modulate stroke (different in thickness). To differentiate in that way is based on the tools of writing that have been used in, i.e. nips of the writing tool. Old manuscripts are written by the sharpened tools made up of bamboo, reed, quill feather, etc. In this Khutlou manuscript. The letterforms were written in modulate strokes. That means the letters were written using a broad nib pen. It may be the reason why the flow of the manuscript writing would be the spontaneity and natural flow of stroke.

This manuscript's writing started from left to right, commonly there are 8 (eight) to 10 (ten) lines in script. It was written in calligraphic style, the tools used in writing as well as drawing the illustration are the same. Used from naturally prepared ink on wooden planks. The letters are not that much visible and also fragmented because of the tool which was written as it was made up of bamboo stakes. In these manuscripts there is no evidence for using any colour, all were written in black ink, probably it was locally made ink.

2.4. Preparation of Ink for writing and drawing:

Colour and ink used in the old tradition of writing culture in Manipur can be divided into two categories; the first category may be considered as an earlier phase when their knowledge of the preparation of ink were purely indigenous to make it their own way. The second category can be a latter phase when the imported tool and colour were introduced, in some old illustrated manuscripts available in Manipur had images of illustrations that were supposed to be made using modern colour-pen. But it is not that all the



earlier tradition was substituted by the newly introduced tools and colour-pen, both were co-existent. The ink used for the writing and drawing of this Khutlou manuscript was only a black-colour and was probably prepared by the writer/ scribe themselves who had already acquired the indigenous knowledge of making it. Mutua Bahadur (1991) researched how the black-ink was made, thus he studied the process of the preparation of ink as; “the black ink is made from lac, soot and grains of rice. ‘Khari’ (an alkaline substance) is mixed in ‘uni machi’ (filtered liquid of alkaline ash); lac is added and the mixture is boiled. Powdered burnt rice, black in colour, is put in this mixture and drained with a thin piece of cloth. Soot is lastly put in and the mixture is squeezed to extract the ink. Writing done with this ink has a glaze. It also lasts long. Lac is used in the preparation of colours also for getting the shiny effect.” It was mentioned in his Subika leishaba manuscript, mostly all the process was the same for the preparation of ink used in early manuscript writing.

3. Illustrations of *Khutlou* manuscript

As a tradition of Indian art, line drawing has been used as the main element of visual language, line is considered as the main element of Indian art, the beauty of Indian art comes through the beauty of line (Rani, A. 2021). In Khutlou manuscript, illustrations were present in 10 (ten) leaves out of the total numbers of folios, all were drawn using only simple line drawing. Andreson Gamma (2016) says that drawing is a “way of knowing morphology” so a view from that angle; the line drawings present in the *Khutlou* manuscript can be analysed to identify the forms and representational meaning in which context it is symbolised. It can be said that almost all the drawn pictures were mainly based on representational objects. Drawing the representational object like house, plants, trees, snake, mouse, fish that had been depicted in ornate type rather than naturalistic representation of image. The object drawing is not merely a singular design motif but it was a composite decorative element thus it forms a composite motif form. These composite motifs were drawn in small size because of the relative folio’s size of the manuscripts. The illustrations of this motif form are line-drawing and done using only local-made black ink. There is no value, tonality and any colour drawing are present. One thing to know is that the local-made ink was commonly used in old illustrated manuscripts of Manipur such as Subika leishaba, Khutlou, Pompokang Shekning, and so on. The illustrations from all these Manuscripts were found similar in their forms and styles however can differentiate through their nature of representation and content of the forms. The main visual language of these Khutlou manuscripts was its line-drawing which makes a distinction from other illustrated manuscripts. The nature of the line drawing was predominantly curvilinear line and minimal line yet it gives an essence of beauty of the line-drawing. Categorised into three types for better understanding and identified the objects depicted in the illustration of the *Khutlou*, they are

- I. Architectural and geometrical motif
- II. Floral and Vegetal motif
- III. Zoomorphic motif

I. Architectural and geometrical motif

There are many types of lines; thick, thin, horizontal, vertical, zigzag, diagonal, curly, curved, spiral etc. An artist used the line to decorate with the help of a simple pattern of lines (Bharadwaj, 2021).

It can be assumed that the architectural motifs are associated with not just a decorative design but a composite ornamental motif in the form of temple or fura structure. Both the structures have in common

as representation of temple/ fura however comparative can be done through their ornate-type of architectural motifs. Mutua Bahadur (1978) affirmed that the Pagoda roof-style of Chinese's architecture is depicted in Subika, also he wrote, otherwise the Hindu temple architecture was also interested by Manipuri artists, the roof-style as Cacahris at Khanpur had been found similar.



Figs. 3 & 4 (left & right) Specimen of *Khutlou* illustration Ms. from; Illustration : Architectural Motif;
Size :12 x 7.2 cm.

Both the illustrations are free hand drawing using simple lines, it seems a well completed drawing by adding simple motifs. The double lines are drawn horizontally at the bottom as the base line suggests the plinth of the temples; it darkens in one image but not in the other. Each side of the plinth appears a pair of two parallel lines which are drawn vertically; it may be the suggestions of the walls of the temples. There are circular marks between the parallel lines, the lines do not overlap each other. Such embellishment of the basic motifs like circular marks give the sense of completeness of the drawing.

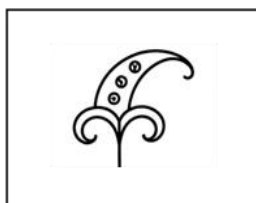


Fig. 5

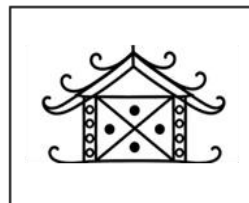


Fig. 6

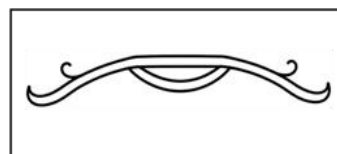


Fig. 7

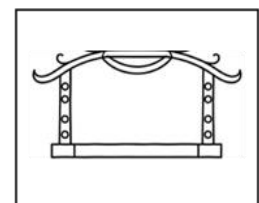


Fig. 8



Fig. 9

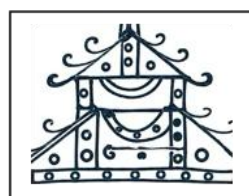


Fig.

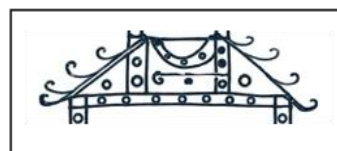


Fig.

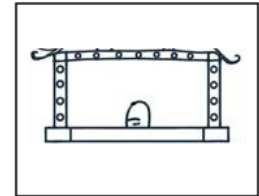


Fig.

The differences of the two architectural forms are visible more in the upper portions of it. One architecture had the curvilinear roof structure (**Fig. 3**) and another had an angular slope roof (**Fig. 4**). One temple which had curvilinear roof was adorned with a single shrine-like shape, present a sign of X cross mark; four dot marks within the cross mark (**fig. 6**); it may presumably a symbol of tradition for constructing the Kai (a traditional ornamental motif of an architectural structure). The image of another

temple structure had a double-storey small shrine-like structure (**fig.10**). To draw this structure mainly double-line are used, two curved motifs were drawn inside the double-story; it may imitate the hanging elves of the roof. From both sides of the walls, extend two slanting lines in downwards direction till it touches the edges of the above bar of the main rectangular shape then it makes the shape of trapezoid elevated roof structure (**Fig. 11**).

In the uppermost portion of the picture, a beautiful line drawing was rendered in an ornamental floral motif. Such a motif, adorned at top, was an elegant element that signified most of what the structure was: a fura or temple. Or, in other words it may be signified as the finials of temple architecture (**fig. 5**). This prominent floral form with a three circular mark gives the sense of softness of the picture (**fig.5**). Whereas, in another temple (**fig.4**) which had double-story, the finials motifs are vertical panicles and give the impact of upward thrust (**fig.9**). These vertically stacked were supported from a triangular shape of small roof (**fig. 10**). There are hook forms of line motifs that can be seen on the triangular roof. The main component of the motif in this visual form is the hook form motif. It is the main visual language of this art form. Character of the line and what the line could make were those that visually appeared as volute hook form, rectangular, triangular, trapezoid, curvilinear and circular motif. Circular dots were placed within the vertical and horizontal double lines, this may suggest that the dot supports a decorated element to make it complete.

II. Floral and Vegetal motif

In the 18th -19th centuries an old illustrated manuscript known as 'Pombilang Sekning' was the one of popular illustrated manuscripts that had a number of floral motifs at most. It was illustrated by the Manipuri old artist who were themselves a writer/ scribe of the manuscript. They painted floral motifs inspired from nature itself (Bahadur, 1978). Hence, it came to know that in the early period, the old Manipuri artists were familiar with and adapted to drawing floral motifs using the tools and medium available to them. They had knowledge and skill to control the line in drawing and depict beautiful floral motifs; the witness of this excellence came through the nature of their line-stroke. Lines produce lucid and graceful shapes that are both hard and soft (Alok Das & Sudha, 2020). The floral motif present in khutlou seems very graceful and appealing to see because of their softness and lucid nature of the lines drawing.



Figs. 13
Specimen of *Khutlou* illustration Ms. from (Page 30)
Illustration : Floral Motif
Size : 12 x 7.2 cm.



Figs. 14
Specimen of *Khutlou* illustration Ms. from (Page 46)
Illustration : Floral Motif
Size : 12 x 7.2 cm.

Artist's nature of line-stroke: In Indian Art history, a talented artist K.K. Hebber can be mentioned in this paper for his drawing technique. His skill of using only line drawing "to depict the very essence of his subject matter in only an open line" (Rani, A. 2021). Lines are spontaneous in the stroke, a rhythmic flow of line that appears as various foliage of the motif plants; a patiently repeated touch in short makes and tiny circular dots reflected by skilfully employed the finger-driven movement of the artist therefore that became the stigma of the plants. Movement of the precision control in balancing shows the artist's understanding in use of compositional space and coordination with subjects and elements in it.

Old Manipuri artists can Illustrated different parts of plants very well in ornate type, yet with a subtle shape of deceptive simplicity. Through the line-drawing the artist enhanced creativity in drawing of distinctive shapes and forms that has led to dissemination of the knowledge of the shape and the forms as it became culturally a significant motif.

III. Zoomorphic motif



Fig. 15
Specimen of *Khutlou* illustration Ms. from
Illustration : Oriental fish
Size : 12 x 7.2 cm



Fig. 16
Specimen of *Khutlou* illustration Ms.
Illustration : Snake and mouse
Size : 12 x 7.2 cm

Line is a tool of thinking and drawing; line is the most important means of expression in arts...; line can serve different purposes; throughout history, line has been a means of self-expression of the human being (Nilgun Kuloglu, 2011). Animal forms were found drawing using lines only in an expressive way. There are three figures of zoomorphic form of drawing in two separate leaves, ornate illustrations of an oriental fish, a serpentine snake, and a mouse in a cage. All the figures were facing on the left. In old illustrated manuscripts depicting Manipur, animal forms were often depicted. A reptilian creature is also a commonly found subject.

4. Conclusion and suggestion:

The linearity of the *Khutlou* illustrations have been made predominantly with a crude line, having the same line weight and thickness. To classify its motif into three (i) Architectural and



geometrical motifs, (ii) Floral and vegetal motifs and (iii) Zoomorphic motifs. In the present analysis, identifying basic common motifs like hook-form, spiral line, circular dot, and serpentine line are often seen. Hook-form motifs would be the essence of the illustrations. Such analysis is just scratching the surface; to justify those motif-characters in relation to the old illustrations tradition of Manipur, there is much more inquiry in need.

Furthermore, these studies suggest that systematic documentation, preservation, and digitization of the Khutlou manuscripts and other related manuscripts should be undertaken to safeguard them from deterioration, damage, and eventual loss. Comparative studies can be conducted between Khutlou manuscripts and other illustrated manuscripts, such as Subika Laishaba and Pombilang Sekning, to identify their distinctive characteristics. Government agencies should provide institutional support for the preservation of these manuscripts and promote greater public awareness of the rich heritage of Manipuri illustrated manuscript paintings.

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