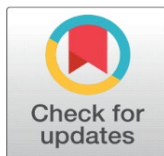


# PRESERVING TRADITIONS AMIDST MODERNITY: A STUDY OF MEITEI YUMJAO CONSTRUCTION METHODS

Sarangthem Bobby Singh<sup>1</sup>✉

<sup>1</sup>Research scholar Manipur International University



## Corresponding Author

Sarangthem Bobby Singh,  
[bobysarangthem@gmail.com](mailto:bobysarangthem@gmail.com)

## DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.iICETDA24.2024.1347](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.iICETDA24.2024.1347)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

**Copyright:** © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



## ABSTRACT

The traditional construction methods of Meitei Yumjao houses are rich in cultural significance and deeply rooted in the heritage of the Meitei people. In this study, we delve into the intricate techniques and rituals associated with the construction of these houses, exploring the importance of measurements such as Paring Tingba and the auspicious alignment of pillars. Drawing from ancient wisdom, the Meitei people have developed a comprehensive system for constructing houses, considering factors such as the day of birth of the owner and the layout of rooms. From the initial laying of the foundation pillar, known as Jatra Hunba, to the meticulous spacing of pillars and the erection of Loi-yu, every step is imbued with meaning and tradition. Furthermore, the design and materials used reflect not only practical considerations but also spiritual beliefs. The placement of rooms and pillars is carefully orchestrated to align with cosmic energies, while materials like bamboo and mud connect the house to the natural environment. However, amidst modernization, there has been a shift towards more contemporary construction materials and techniques. While these innovations offer durability and convenience, they also pose a challenge to the preservation of traditional knowledge and practices. Yet, the enduring reverence for ancestral traditions ensures that elements of Meitei Yumjao construction endure, adapting to contemporary needs while safeguarding cultural heritage. This study sheds light on the resilience of cultural traditions in the face of change, highlighting the importance of preserving indigenous knowledge for future generations. As Meitei Yumjao houses continue to evolve, they serve as a testament to the enduring legacy of the Meitei people and their deep connection to their land and heritage. It is our great dreams to propose to highlight suggestions to protect the Meitei yumjao possessive of moral value, spiritual value, cultural and traditional value which are going to extinct due to the modern boomed, hardly people understand such a valuable treasure-house. As time rolls on modern minds are detracted by modern way of life.

**Keywords:** "Meitei Yumjao Construction: Cultural Heritage, Ancient Wisdom, Resilience, Preservation Amidst Modernization."

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Particularly for the Meitei community, Meitei Yumjao is one of the special old houses of Manipur. These kinds of homes won't be found anywhere else in the world. This unique home was built using unique techniques that are connected to its philosophical, spiritual, and cultural significance. These kinds of dwellings were first built by the Meitei community over 2000 years ago. These days, one might only find these kinds of homes on the outskirts of the hamlet rather than in the city of Imphal. These homes are currently decreasing in number due to the shifting landscape of modernity. These architectural marvels are now increasingly scarce in urban areas like Imphal, relegated to the fringes of villages as modernity sweeps through the region. The encroachment of contemporary urban development and changing societal norms has led to the gradual disappearance of these ancestral homes, their significance fading amidst the yell for progress. Yet, amidst the relentless march of time, the importance of preserving the Meitei Yumjao cannot be overstated. Beyond mere structures, these houses serve as living monuments to a bygone era, repositories of ancient wisdom and

cultural traditions passed down through countless generations. Each beam, each thatched roof, bears witness to a way of life steeped in reverence for nature, community, and spirituality. Efforts to safeguard the Meitei Yumjao must encompass both conservation and revitalization endeavors. Through education, advocacy, and community engagement, we can ensure that these architectural treasures endure as symbols of resilience and cultural pride. By honoring the legacy of the Meitei Yumjao, we not only pay homage to our past but also lay the foundation for a more connected and culturally enriched future. During the reign of King *Yoimongba* and his younger brother *Toothimgang* in the second century AD, the construction of the Meitei Yumjao, featuring nine partitioned rooms, began. Legend has it that during a wild storm, two bamboo plants bent down, revealing a rainbow in the sky. Since then, it became customary to construct thatched houses with slightly bent roofs, mirroring the shape of the rainbow. Later, during the rule of King *Khagemba*, elaborate decoration was added to the main pillars of the houses, showcasing the skilled arts and crafts of the time. Following the influence of Hinduism on the Meitei community, significant changes occurred, including modifications to traditional housing styles and the incorporation of Hindu temple designs into newly built Meitei houses. Despite these changes, the underlying philosophy of the Meitei Yumjao remains rooted in human physiology.

## 2. NEED FOR PRESERVING MEITEI YUMJAO( HOUSE)

The art and architecture of Meitei Yumjao houses are disappearing, but we need to save them for future generations. These houses are special because of their unique design and cultural significance. Meitei Yumjao houses are part of the *Hingkhoh* area, representing the head of a symbolic god called *Pakhangba*. They have thatched roofs made from materials like *Tumnou* and bamboo poles called *humdang*. These houses are not just beautiful; they also hold important spiritual and ritual significance for the Meitei community. However, they are at risk of disappearing due to modernization. Despite some limitations compared to modern houses, Meitei Yumjao houses offer benefits like earthquake resistance and zero pollution. Preserving them not for the assets of Meitei culture but also would be a valuable contribution to fighting global warming.

## 3. ABOUT THE UNIQUE MEITEI YUMJAO'S ORIGIN

According to tradition, a sacred furnace is maintained to keep fire burning day and night, symbolizing the presence of three deities: *Mangang*, *Luwang*, and *Khuman*. This furnace is believed to be the dwelling place of the goddess *Emoinu*, who is revered as the protector and benefactor of the family. Offerings are made to *Emoinu* at every meal. Additionally, specific areas within the house are designated for other deities, such as goddess *Leimarel* in the northward direction and *Sanamahi*, the household deity, in the southeast corner. The main entrance door symbolizes the entirety of the human body. During the time of King *Yoimongba* and his brother *Toothimgang* in ancient times, they started building a place called the *Meitei Yumjao*. This place had nine rooms separated by partitions. Legend says that during a big storm, two bamboo plants bent down and a rainbow appeared. Because of this, people started making houses with slightly curved roofs to resemble the rainbow. Later, during King *Khagemba's* reign, they began to decorate the main pillars of the houses very beautifully, showing off their artistic skills. When Hinduism started influencing the Meitei people, they began to make changes to their traditional houses. They also started adding designs from Hindu temples to their new houses.

## 4. UNDERSTANDING THE AREA

Before starting construction, it's crucial to know the area, including its size and shape. This helps in designing the house and deciding how many rooms to have. "*Paring Hunba*," which is the actual measurement process, is very important here. It helps in figuring out where the foundation pillar should go, how many rooms and pillars there should be, and how to design everything properly. So, people often seek experts in "*Paring Hunba*" to make sure the construction goes smoothly. So, starting a house with *Parinhunba* or *Paringlon* is quite complex because it requires precise measurements of the area. Without knowing the exact size, initiating *Parinhunba* becomes impossible. Once the area's dimensions are determined, the next crucial step is pinpointing the exact starting point for *Parinhunba*. Additionally, spiritual considerations, such as reciting mantras or chants, play a significant role in this ritualistic practice. These elements are essential for invoking blessings and ensuring the success and spiritual sanctity of the construction process.

## 5. MEASURING FOR GOOD FORTUNE

Before building, it's important to measure the land. The length and breadth are measured, and then a special calculation called "*Paring Tingba*" is done. This helps determine if the land is suitable for building. The calculation also depends on the day someone was born. If the remaining number after the calculation meets certain criteria, it's considered good for building.

## 6. INSTALLATION FOR THE FOUNDATION STONE OF THE MEITEI YUMJAO (HOUSE) :

The first step in building a house is setting up the foundation pillar, also known as "*Jatra Hunba*" or "Head Pillar Erection" in the local language. It's really important to do this right. An expert is needed to choose the perfect spot and time for laying the foundation. They follow traditional methods to make sure the design and structure are correct. This tradition has been passed down through generations and is seen as sacred. Choosing an auspicious date for laying the foundation is crucial. If mistakes are made during this step, it's believed that bad things might happen to the homeowner, like accidents or problems with the house. So, it's really important to be careful and seek advice from an expert. One of the unforgettable things is that the person doing the foundation ceremony should be knowledgeable and not widowed or physically challenged. It's also believed that someone who has fallen from stairs shouldn't do it. Everyone involved, like the homeowner, carpenter, and priest, should wear clean clothes, be pure, and take a bath.

## 7. SPACING OF AREA WHILE BUILDING A HOUSE:

When constructing a house, there are specific rules for placing pillars and maintaining distance between them. For example, certain rooms like *Leimarel Shidabi* should have slightly larger pillars and spacing. In the room dedicated to *Lainingthou Sanamahi*, pillars on the eastern side should be wider by about one and a half feet, while those on the northern side should be narrower by the same amount. The space between these pillars is called *Sagunthong*. It's believed that if *Sagunthong* is wide, it invites thieves into the house. The spacing between pillars at *Naktha* is important too; if it's wider than at *Phammen*, it's believed to bring bad luck and even death to the family.

## 8. ROOM DISTRIBUTION:

In a Meitei yumjao house, rooms are planned according to specific areas called "*ka*." These include rooms for different purposes like sleeping, dining, worship, and storage. Each room is arranged to show respect for tradition and to give privacy to family members. Beds are usually placed in the northern part of bedrooms, and dining areas are typically in the center of the house. A special fireplace called "*Funga*" is important for keeping warm, and stories are often shared around it to teach moral lessons.

## 9. FUNGA FIREPLACE:

The Phunga Meifam is a vital part of the Meitei lifestyle. It's more than just a place to cook food; it's a symbol of warmth, tradition, and community. Without a *Phunga*, our way of life, especially our love for roasted or dry fish, wouldn't be the same. Picture this: inside a Meitei Yumjao (traditional Meitei house), the *Phunga Meifam* not only serves as a kitchen but also as a fireplace. During chilly winters, it becomes the heart of the home, spreading warmth and creating a cozy atmosphere for everyone. The fire in the *Phunga* is kept burning all day long, ensuring comfort and togetherness for the family.

But the *Phunga* isn't just about practicality; it's deeply woven into our culture and stories. Our Phunga Waries, or folk tales, are incomplete without it. These stories, passed down through generations, often feature scenes around the *Phunga*, where families gather to listen and bond. Nowadays, these tales have become bedtime stories for children, but sadly, many of them may never experience the true magic of sitting around a Phunga, munching on baked potatoes and sweet potatoes. In essence, the *Phunga Meifam* isn't just a place; it's a tradition, a source of warmth, and a storyteller. It's a reminder of our roots and the importance of coming together as a community. So, even as times change, let's cherish our *Phunga* and the rich culture it represents. The *Funga* fireplace is an important part of the house, especially during winter. It's kept burning all day to provide warmth, and it's a place where stories are told to pass on traditional teachings and values.

## 10. ERECTING A LOIYU PILLAR:

In traditional *Meitei Yumjao* construction, pillars are erected in a specific sequence. First, the foundation pillar is raised, followed by pillars like *Phammen Saitil Tareng* and *Mangshok Saitil Tareng*. This process continues until all fifteen significant pillars are in place. Afterward, attention shifts to erecting the *Loiyu* pillars. These are placed according to a specific order, starting behind the foundation pillar and concluding adjacent to the first *Loiyu* pillar. This meticulous process ensures structural stability and adherence to cultural traditions in building Meitei Yumjao houses.

## 11. HUMDANG YANBA:

*Humdang Yanba*, a ritual, begins on a Sunday and ends on the owner's birthday or the third day after. When hanging *Humdang*, it's important to follow certain rules. For instance, *Humdangs* in the *Leimarel* room should be narrower, not wider, than the *Loiyu* pillar. *Humdangs* are also placed strategically, such as near corners or narrow pillars, and serve various symbolic purposes.

## 12. DESIGN OF YENGAI:

*Yengai* is a decorative wooden structure above the main door. It's triangular in shape and adorned with bamboo strips shaped like birds or flowers. *Yengai* is a special space above the main door of the verandah. It's covered by a triangular structure made of woven bamboo, known as *shangmai* or *yengai*. This structure has bamboo strips arranged vertically and horizontally, forming a grid-like pattern. On this framework, intricate designs of birds and flowers are crafted using thin bamboo strips. These designs add beauty to the triangular space. The *shangmai* is not solid; it's perforated, which means there are tiny holes or gaps in it. This allows light to pass through, so people inside the house can tell when dawn is breaking. It's like a natural alarm clock, signaling the start of a new day. So, the *yengai* serves both as a decorative element and a practical feature for keeping track of time.

## 13. PAYA (BINDING WIRE):

Paya is a type of wire used to tie bamboo poles together. There are two types: *Kabuk paya* for rough objects and *Kanam* for thatched roofs. Paya is treated to make it durable and is sometimes smoked to prevent insect damage.

## 14. WALL CONSTRUCTION:

Meitei yumjao houses have two main types of walls. One is made of mud reinforced with straw and bamboo, while the other uses bamboo frames filled with mud and cow dung. These thick walls help insulate the house and are coated with a smooth earth mixture for a natural look. These type of wall construction has two kinds. The first type has walls made from a mixture of thick mud and straw. These walls are built all the way up to the roof. Inside these walls, bamboo posts are placed to support the structure. Additionally, special grass rods called *Pungjei*, which come in different heights, are used to strengthen the walls.

## 15. LEIMU TEIBA (WALL PAINTING)

*Leimu* is a special substance that is used to adorn Meitei Yumjao walls during construction. This is an important tradition. Characterized by a unique smoky or grey color, *leimu* is a type of earth that is primarily found in the local areas of Manipur. *Leimu* is more significant culturally because it is not widely available. The preparation of *Leimu* involves grinding the earth into a fine powder and then mixing it with water to form a smooth paste. This paste, known as "*Leimu*" which is applied to the walls of the Meitei Yumjao houses. The application process requires skilled craftsmanship, as the *Leimu* paste is delicately spread across the surface of the walls to achieve an even and consistent coating. Once applied, the *Leimu* paste dries to form a durable and distinctive *greyish* finish on the walls. Beyond its aesthetic appeal, *Leimu* holds cultural and historical importance in Meitei tradition, symbolizing a connection to the land and heritage of Manipur. While the practice of using *Leimu* in wall construction and decoration has been a longstanding tradition, its rarity and cultural significance contribute to its preservation and continued use in Meitei Yumjao houses.

## 16. THATCHING ROOF OF MEITEI YUMJAO:

To thatch a roof in the Meitei Yumjao style, gather materials such as *Ee*, grass, reeds, or *Tumnou leaves*. Ensure the roof structure is sturdy before starting. Begin layering the thatch from the bottom, overlapping each layer to provide proper coverage. Secure the thatch in place using traditional weaving or tying techniques. Build up the thickness of the thatch by adding successive layers until it offers adequate protection. Shape and trim the thatch to achieve the desired



appearance, often characterized by a distinctive curved shape. Regularly inspect and maintain the roof to address any damage promptly. Consider local climate conditions, especially regarding rain and wind. Prioritize safety, especially when working at heights. If needed, seek guidance from experienced thatchers to ensure a successful and culturally authentic *Meitei Yumjao* thatched roof.

### 17. MATERIALS FOR CONSTRUCTION OF A HOUSE:

Traditionally, houses were built using materials like bamboo, mud, and cow dung. Nowadays, people may use bricks, wood, and synthetic paints. Roofing materials have also evolved from grass to aluminum or zinc sheets.

Special tools and materials are used in the construction of Meitei Yumjao homes.

*Thatched Roof:* A Meitei Yumjao house's roof is composed of thatch, which only lasts for eight to ten years. The thatches are made of materials like *tumnou*, *shingnang charot*, *charu*, and *ee*.

*Cultural Symbolism:* The construction process may involve symbolic elements representing the Meitei culture and beliefs, such as the arrangement of spaces within the house and the layout within the *Hingkhoh* area.

So, constructing a Meitei Yumjao house requires a combination of traditional craftsmanship, specific materials, and adherence to cultural and spiritual principles.

### 18. BUILDING TECHNIQUES OF MEITEI YUMJAO:

Meitei Yumjao houses are primarily built with bamboo and other locally available materials. Skilled artisans use traditional techniques that have been passed down for centuries, ensuring quality construction that reflects the heritage of the Meitei society.

The ancient artisans of Manipur employed specialized techniques to construct Meitei Yumjao houses:

*Thatching:* Skilled artisans used locally sourced materials like *Tumnou Ee*, and *Charu*(a kind of straw) to create durable thatch roofs lasting up to a decade.

*Bamboo Construction:* Bamboo was the primary material, meticulously crafted into sturdy frameworks and walls, including the distinctive gable-shaped roof.

*Symbolic Layout:* The layout of Meitei Yumjao houses held deep symbolic meaning, reflecting spiritual beliefs and cultural practice in Manipur.

### 19. METHODS OF HOUSE CONSTRUCTION:

In the past, when houses were made of wood or logs, laying the foundation pillar was a must. Nowadays, with brick and stone houses, it's done differently. Sometimes, it's just digging a hole and placing a stone with all the rituals. People might also put a small stone in a hole in the wall or pillar. Some might even build without a proper ceremony, but they might later perform it to bring good luck. Whether it's a wooden, bamboo, or brick house, the process and rituals are the same. In ancient times, when houses were predominantly constructed using wood or logs, the laying of the foundation pillar was considered a crucial step in the building process. This pillar served as the base upon which the entire structure would rest, providing stability and support. The process of laying the foundation pillar was accompanied by elaborate rituals and ceremonies, symbolizing the sanctity of the endeavor and seeking divine blessings for the dwelling. However, as construction techniques evolved and materials such as brick and stone became more prevalent, the approach to laying foundations also changed. In contemporary times, the method of laying the foundation may vary depending on factors such as the type of construction, regional customs, and personal beliefs.

In some cases, particularly in rural areas or communities adhering to traditional practices, the process of laying the foundation may involve digging a hole and placing a stone or symbolic object within it. This act is often imbued with significance, representing the establishment of a firm foundation for the home and invoking blessings for its inhabitant.

### 20. NEED FOR PRESERVING MEITEI YUMJAO( HOUSE):

The art and architecture of Meitei Yumjao houses are disappearing, but we need to save them for future generations. These houses are special because of their unique design and cultural significance. Meitei Yumjao houses are part of the *Hingkhoh* area, representing the head of a symbolic god called *Pakhangba*. They have thatched roofs made from materials

like *tumnou* and bamboo poles called *humdang*. These houses are not just beautiful; they also hold important spiritual and ritual significance for the Meitei community. However, they are at risk of disappearing due to modernization. Despite some limitations compared to modern houses, Meitei Yumjao houses offer benefits like earthquake resistance and zero pollution. Preserving them not for the assets of Meitei culture but also would be a valuable contribution to fighting global warming.

## 21. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Meitei Yumjao is a symbol of culture and tradition in Manipur. Sadly, its construction methods are fading as modern houses become more popular. But Meitei Yumjao is more than just a house—it represents the beliefs and identity of the Meitei people. Every part of it has meaning, from the rooms to the pillars. Yet, these houses are at risk because fewer people are building them. We need to save this cultural heritage. We should record how they are built and teach others about their importance. Also, we can use modern ideas to make them more sustainable. It's important for the Meitei community to be proud of their heritage. By protecting Meitei Yumjao, we honor our past and keep our traditions alive. Let's work together to ensure these special houses are around for future generations. Lastly, Meitei Yumjao holds deep cultural significance in Manipur, reflecting the traditions and identity of the Meitei people. However, with the rise of modern housing, traditional construction methods are fading. It's essential to preserve Meitei Yumjao as a symbol of cultural heritage while embracing modern sustainability practices. By doing so, we honor our past and ensure that future generations can appreciate the rich legacy of *Meitei* architecture.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Apanthoi, J. (2018). A cultural symbol of Meitei Yumjao. *Journal Name*, 5(12).
- Bahadur, M. (2013). *The Art of Bamboo*. Manipur.Centre. (2022). *Tabu Nungi Yumsharol* (1st ed.).
- Gajananda, P. (n.d.). Scientific principles of ancient Manipuri Yumjao and its courtyards. Retrieved from [URL]
- Kangjam, B. (Ed.). (Year of Publication). *Meitei Yumjao: Endangered Art*. Retrieved from [URL]
- Mangang, L. T. (2010). *Leimapokpam Tanjou* (1st ed.). Nambol Bazar: B K Printing Press.
- Meitei, I. (2010). *Yumsharol Amadi Kanglagi Laiphamlen* (3rd ed.). Ganesh Printing: Imphal.
- Ningthouja, I. (2016). *Meitei Yumsharol*. Pratap Printing Works.
- Naoroibam, I. (2020). *Meitei Yumsharol* (7th ed.). UK Printers Kanglapak: Imphal.
- Saha, K., & Choudhuri, S. J. (2021). A study of vernacular architecture and settlement of diasporic Manipuri community in Bangladesh. *Journal Name*, 8(1).
- Shamungou. (2013). *Meitei Yumjao Chatna Kanglon* (1st ed.). Iboyaima Printers Moirangkhom Loklaobung: Imphal.