



Semiotic Approaches To Material Culture And Cultural Identity In The Folktales Of Manipur

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Abstract

Material objects are an important part of folktales because they reflect everyday practices, social relations, and cultural values. This paper examines how such objects acquire meanings beyond their practical functions and contribute to the representation of cultural identity in Manipuri folktales. The study uses Semiotics as its sole theoretical framework and adopts a qualitative textual approach based on close reading and interpretation. The analysis focuses on three folktales, *Keibu Keioiba*, *The Mystic Cat and Pebet*, and *The Carpenter and Chaoren*, which present a range of material objects, clothing, domestic spaces, tools, food, and other cultural elements. Particular attention is given to how these objects function as signs within their narrative and cultural contexts. The *Utong* in *Keibu Keioiba* signifies practical knowledge and agency, while the nest and banana leaf in *The Mystic Cat and Pebet* signify protection, care, and survival. In *The Carpenter and Chaoren*, furniture, craft objects, clothing, food grain, and the wooden sculpture signify occupation, gender, livelihood, domesticity, and social identity. The study argues that material culture in Manipuri folktales functions as a system of cultural signs through which everyday life, social practices, and cultural values are represented and transmitted. A semiotic reading thus reveals how ordinary objects participate in the construction and preservation of cultural identity.

Keywords: Semiotics, material culture, cultural identity, folktales, material objects

1. Introduction

Folktales are important forms of cultural expression. They preserve stories, beliefs, values, customs, and social practices. They also represent aspects of everyday life. Objects, clothing, tools, food, houses, and other material elements are therefore significant parts of folkloric narratives. Material objects are not limited to their practical functions. They can also communicate social and cultural meanings. A piece of clothing may indicate gender or cultural belonging. A tool may signify an occupation. A household object may represent domestic life. A weapon may signify protection or collective power. Semiotics provides a useful framework for examining these meanings. Saussure's theory of the sign distinguishes between the signifier and the signified. The sign is produced through the relationship between a material form and the concept associated with it (Saussure, 1983, pp. 65-67). This basic distinction can also be applied to material objects. An object can function as a physical entity and, at the same time, communicate a cultural meaning. Barthes extends semiotic analysis to everyday cultural objects and practices. His work shows how ordinary signs can acquire wider social and cultural meanings (Barthes, 1972). Eco similarly treats semiotics as the study of processes of signification and communication. He emphasizes the role of codes and cultural systems in the production of meaning (Eco, 1976).

The present study applies these semiotic principles to three Manipuri folktales: *Keibu Keioiba*, *The Mystic Cat and Pebet*, and *The Carpenter and Chaoren*. *Keibu Keioiba* was translated into English by Nganthoi Lourembam from B. Jayantakumar Sharma's *Fungawari Singbul* and was published on *e-Pao.net* on July 9, 2015. *The Mystic Cat and Pebet: Houdong Lamboiba and Pebet* was translated by Bidyarani Thingujam and published on September 25, 2016. *The Carpenter and Chaoren: U Suba Amadi Chaoren* was translated by Nganthoi Lourembam and published on April 28, 2015. The three narratives contain several material elements. *Keibu Keioiba* includes a hut, food, cooking, the *Utong*, knives, and a hammer. *The Mystic Cat and Pebet* includes a nest, a tree, and a banana leaf. *The Carpenter and Chaoren* contains furniture, spinning implements, clothing, food grain, jewellery, and a wooden sculpture. These objects are not merely decorative details. They participate in the actions of the characters. They also communicate meanings related to family, work, gender, protection, livelihood, and social relationships. The present study therefore examines how material objects function as signs and how their meanings contribute to the representation of cultural identity in Manipuri folktales.

2. Theoretical Framework

Semiotics is the study of signs and signification. It provides the sole theoretical framework for this study. Saussure provides the basic foundation of semiotic theory. He conceptualizes the sign through the relationship between the signifier and the signified (Saussure, 1983, pp. 65-67). Although his theory was developed primarily in relation to language, the concept can be extended to cultural objects. A material object can serve as the signifier, while the cultural idea associated with it functions as the signified. For example, a *Phanek* is a material object. Within the narrative context, however, it also signifies gender and cultural identity. Similarly, a carpenter's tool is a physical object, but it can also signify occupation, skill, and social identity. Barthes develops the study of signs by examining how everyday cultural forms acquire broader meanings. He demonstrates that objects and practices can become associated with cultural ideas that extend beyond their immediate functions (Barthes, 1972). His approach is particularly useful for this study because the selected folktales repeatedly transform ordinary objects into meaningful narrative elements. Eco expands semiotic theory through his emphasis on signification, communication, and cultural codes (Eco, 1976). Material objects become meaningful within particular cultural contexts. Their interpretation therefore depends on the relationships and practices in which they occur.

In the present study, material objects are examined at three levels:

1. Material level: the physical object and its practical function.
2. Narrative level: the role of the object in the story.
3. Cultural level: the wider meaning that the object communicates.

The study therefore moves from object to sign and from sign to cultural meaning.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative textual approach based on close reading and semiotic interpretation of three Manipuri folktales. It focuses specifically on material objects and practices that contribute to the construction of cultural meaning. The primary corpus consists of three English-translated folktales published on *e-Pao.net*. The first is *Keibu Keioiba*, translated by Nganthoi Lourembam from *Fungawari Singbul*, compiled and edited by B. Jayantakumar Sharma, and published on July 9, 2015. The second is *The Mystic Cat and Pebet: Houdong Lamboiba and Pebet*, translated by Bidyarani Thingujam and published on September 25, 2016. The third is *The Carpenter and Chaoren: U Suba Amadi Chaoren*, translated by Nganthoi Lourembam and published on April 28, 2015. These translated versions constitute the primary textual corpus of the study. Since the analysis is based on the online translated versions, citations refer to the translator and year, followed by the relevant paragraph numbers. The texts are examined for material signs, including household objects, tools, clothing, food, weapons, domestic spaces, craft objects, agricultural products, and objects used for protection or deception. Each object is examined in relation to its practical function, narrative role, and cultural meaning. The analysis does not assume that every object has a fixed symbolic meaning. Instead, its meaning is determined by its use, context, and function within the narrative.

4. Material Signs in *Keibu Keioiba*

4.1 The Hut as a Sign of Domesticity and Separation

Keibu Keioiba keeps Thabaton as his wife in a hut in the jungle. He brings edible items from the jungle, while Thabaton cooks food (Lourembam, 2015, para. 9). The hut is therefore more than a physical shelter. It signifies domestic life. It becomes a household space for Keibu Keioiba and Thabaton. At the same time, the hut represents Thabaton's separation from her family. Her brothers must search through jungles and forests to find her (Lourembam, 2015, para. 10). The hut thus carries two meanings. It signifies domesticity, but it also signifies separation from the original family.

4.2 The *Utong* as a Sign of Practical Knowledge

The *Utong* is one of the most important material signs in the tale. It is described as a wooden pipe with holes on both sides (Lourembam, 2015, para. 12). Thabaton asks Keibu Keioiba to use the *Utong* to fetch water. He repeatedly fails because the water escapes through the holes (Lourembam, 2015, para. 12). At the practical level, the *Utong* is a household object. At the semiotic level, it signifies knowledge and intelligence. Thabaton understands the properties of the object. Keibu Keioiba does not. She uses this difference in knowledge to create an opportunity for escape. While Keibu Keioiba is occupied with the *Utong*, her brothers rescue her (Lourembam, 2015, para. 13). The *Utong* therefore becomes a sign of practical knowledge, intelligence, and agency.

4.3 Food and Cooking as Signs of Domestic Organization

Keibu Keioiba brings food from the jungle, while Thabaton cooks it (Lourembam, 2015, para. 9). Food has an obvious practical function. It provides nourishment. Within the narrative, however, the preparation of food also establishes a domestic relationship between the two characters. The activities of obtaining and preparing food therefore signify a division of household labour. The material practice of cooking consequently becomes part of the representation of domestic life.

4.4 Knives and the Hammer as Signs of Collective Protection

The seven brothers carry knives when they begin searching for Thabaton (Lourembam, 2015, para. 8). The knives signify readiness and protection. Later, the brothers prepare themselves with weapons before Keibu Keioiba arrives (Lourembam, 2015, para. 16). They attack him with knives and finally kill him with a hammer (Lourembam, 2015, para. 17). The weapons therefore signify collective strength and family protection. Their meaning comes from the brothers' shared purpose.

5. Material Signs in *The Mystic Cat and Pebet*

5.1 The Nest as a Sign of Family and Protection

Pebet lives with her eggs in a nest in the jungle. Seven young birds hatch, and Pebet takes care of them (Thingujam, 2016, para. 1). The nest is a physical structure. It also functions as a sign of family and protection. It represents the space where the young birds are raised. It is therefore associated with motherhood, care, and security. The nest signifies home, family, and protection.

5.2 The Tree as a Sign of Refuge

When the cat attacks, Pebet and her children move to the top of a nearby tree. The youngest bird, however, is caught by the cat (Thingujam, 2016, paras. 9-10). The tree functions as a temporary refuge. It provides physical distance from the threat. The tree therefore becomes a sign of safety and survival. The movement from the nest to the tree also reflects the changing conditions of the characters' struggle.

5.3 The Banana Leaf as a Sign of Resourcefulness

Pebet tells the cat to bathe the young bird and place it on a banana leaf to dry in the sun (Thingujam, 2016, paras. 11-12). The cat follows her instructions. The young bird eventually escapes (Thingujam, 2016, para. 13). The banana leaf is an ordinary material object. Its narrative function, however, is much greater. Pebet uses it as part of her strategy. The banana leaf therefore signifies practical intelligence and resourcefulness. It becomes meaningful through its use in a situation of danger.

6. Material Signs in *The Carpenter and Chaoren*

6.1 Household Activities as Material Practices

Chaoren is a farmer. He also performs many domestic activities. He cooks, washes clothes, cleans utensils, wipes the floor, and cuts wood (Lourembam, 2015, para. 1). These activities establish the material world of his everyday life. They also signify independence. Chaoren manages his household without a wife or children. Material practices therefore help establish his social identity at the beginning of the tale.

6.2 Carpentry Objects as Signs of Occupation

The carpenter makes several objects, including *Upu*, *Kangthol*, *Kaptreng*, *Tareng*, and *Yongkham* (Lourembam, 2015, para. 2). These objects are signs of his occupation and craftsmanship. The carpenter's identity is connected with his ability to transform raw material into useful objects. His products make his skill visible within the community. The objects therefore signify craftsmanship, occupation, and social identity.

6.3 The Wooden Sculpture as a Sign of Desire

Chaoren asks the carpenter to make a beautiful wooden sculpture of a woman (Lourembam, 2015, para. 4). The carpenter decorates it with colours, hair, clothes, and jewellery (Lourembam, 2015, para. 5). The sculpture initially signifies an artificial representation of a woman. Chaoren later dresses it and performs a marriage ritual with it (Lourembam, 2015, para. 8). The object therefore becomes associated with his desire for companionship and family life. When it later becomes a real woman, the distinction between object and person becomes unstable (Lourembam, 2015, paras. 10-11). The sculpture can therefore be interpreted as a sign of desire, companionship, domesticity, and social identity.

6.4 Traditional Clothing as a Sign of Cultural Identity

Chaoren dresses the wooden sculpture in *Phanek*, *Innaphee*, and *Khudei Matup* (Lourembam, 2015, para. 8). The clothing is significant because it gives the sculpture a recognizable social and cultural appearance. At the material level, the garments are items of dress. At the cultural level, they communicate gender and cultural belonging. The clothing therefore functions as a sign of gendered identity and cultural identity.

6.5 Food Grain as a Sign of Exchange

Chaoren pays the carpenter five loads of food grain for the sculpture (Lourembam, 2015, paras. 6-7). The grain functions as a medium of exchange. It connects agricultural production with craftsmanship. Its significance is therefore economic as well as material.

Food grain becomes a sign of livelihood, value, and social exchange.

7. Material Culture and Cultural Identity

The three folktales show that material objects can communicate cultural identity through their use and context. In *Keibu Keioiba*, the hut, *Utong*, food, and weapons are associated with domesticity, practical knowledge, and family protection (Lourembam, 2015, paras. 8-17). In *The Mystic Cat and Pebet*, the nest, tree, and banana leaf are associated with family, care, protection, and survival (Thingujam, 2016, paras. 1, 9-13). In *The Carpenter and Chaoren*, furniture, craft objects, clothing, food grain, and the wooden sculpture are associated with occupation, gender, livelihood, and domestic identity (Lourembam, 2015, paras. 1-11). These objects become signs because they are embedded in social practices. The *Utong* is not simply a wooden pipe. It becomes a sign of Thabaton's intelligence. The nest is not merely a structure. It becomes a sign of family protection. The traditional garments are not simply clothing. They communicate cultural and gender identity. The meaning of each object therefore depends on its narrative and cultural context.

8. Discussion

The semiotic analysis reveals three interconnected levels of meaning in the material culture of the tales. First, objects have practical meanings. The *Utong* is used for fetching water. The nest shelters young birds. The carpenter's objects serve household and occupational purposes. Second, objects have social meanings. The *Utong* becomes associated with domestic knowledge. The nest represents family. Carpentry objects represent occupation. Food grain represents economic exchange. Third, objects can acquire cultural meanings. Traditional clothing communicates cultural identity. Weapons communicate

collective protection. The wooden sculpture communicates desire for companionship and domestic life. This process demonstrates the usefulness of semiotics for studying folktales. Material objects do not communicate their meanings in isolation. Their meanings emerge from cultural practices and narrative relationships.

The three tales also show that material signs can communicate values without directly stating them. Family protection is represented through the brothers' weapons in *Keibu Keioiba*. Maternal care is represented through Pebet's relationship with the nest and her young birds. Craftsmanship and domestic identity are represented through the material world of *The Carpenter and Chaoren*. Material culture thus becomes part of the cultural language of folktales. The analysis also indicates that material signs contribute to the construction of character identity. Thabaton's use of the *Utong* demonstrates her practical intelligence. The carpenter's products establish his identity as a skilled craftsman. Pebet's use of familiar objects demonstrates her resourcefulness. Objects therefore help define not only what characters possess, but also who they are.

9. Conclusion

This study has examined material culture and cultural identity in three Manipuri folktales through the framework of Semiotics. The analysis shows that material objects have meanings beyond their immediate practical functions. They become signs within the social and narrative contexts of the tales. The *Utong* signifies practical knowledge and agency. The nest signifies family and protection. The banana leaf signifies resourcefulness. Carpentry objects signify occupation and craftsmanship. Traditional clothing signifies gender and cultural belonging. Food grain signifies livelihood and exchange. These meanings emerge from the relationship between objects, characters, actions, and cultural practices. The study therefore demonstrates that material culture is an important semiotic resource in Manipuri folktales. Objects help communicate ideas about family, work, gender, livelihood, protection, and social identity. The material world of these folktales is consequently not merely a background to the stories. It is an active system of signs through which cultural meanings are created, represented, and transmitted.

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