

EXPLORING THE TRADITIONAL GAMES AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MAO

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Abstract

Traditional games constitute an integral component of Mao Naga festivals, functioning as dynamic expressions of social structure, cultural heritage, and indigenous knowledge systems. This study analytically examines selected indigenous games such as Kaka, Leri Kaphi, wrestling to understand their cultural significance beyond recreation. It argues that these games operate as informal pedagogical institutions that transmit ecological knowledge, martial traditions, physical discipline, and collective values across generations. Kaka and Leri Kaphi reflect agricultural symbolism and ecological familiarity through the use of locally available materials, while wrestling embodies ideals of strength, bravery, and customary martial preparedness. The study concludes that Mao traditional games are not merely recreational activities but enduring cultural institutions that sustain social cohesion, preserve heritage, and affirm indigenous systems of knowledge in the face of modernization.

Keywords: Traditional games, Indigenous Knowledge, Mao, Culture, Agriculture.

Introduction

The Mao tribe is one of the prominent Naga tribes in Manipur, primarily inhabiting the northernmost region of the state. They are predominantly concentrated in the Senapati District, which shares borders with regions occupied by various other Naga tribes. To the north, they are neighbored by the Angami and Chakhesang tribes, while the Maram Naga and Zeme Naga tribes reside to the west and south. To the east, the Mao people share boundaries with the Tangkhul and Poumai tribes.

Linguistically, the Mao people speak the 'Mao' or 'Emela' language, which falls under the Angami-Pochuri branch of the Tibeto-Burman language family, as classified by Burling (2003). They inhabit a terrain of rocky hills, forests, and fertile plains that has been sculpted by monsoon agriculture. Their knowledge systems, social structure, and way of life have all been profoundly impacted by this ecological environment. As a result, skills pertaining to defense, cooperation, endurance, and cultivation have developed and become ingrained in festival customs and communal life. Among the Mao Naga of Manipur, traditional games are more than just pastimes. They are living systems of indigenous knowledge that pass down social philosophy, values, and skills to future generations. Moreover, traditional games and sports reflect on different cultural expressions, and create a bridge between cultures for a better mutual comprehension' (S.C. Das, et al., 2014: 129).

Within this socio-cultural framework, games such as traditional wrestling, *Kaka* (a seed game played mainly by women with St. Thomas beans), and *Leri Kaphi* (a spear-based war game using the East Himalayan cardamom plant) function as indigenous pedagogical institutions. Wrestling fosters courage, discipline, and resilience, *Kaka* develops precision, strategy, and teamwork while Leri Kaphi trains men in speed, coordination, and tactical maneuvering training them for war. Like the Native American game of Lacrosse which was originally a ceremonial contest but has now evolved into a sport showcasing physical prowess and emphasizing teamwork and strategy (Carey Jeffrey, 2012) these traditional games among the Maos are played to show their bravery, tactical intelligence and teamspirit. Together, these games reflect the Mao people's unity, strength and ingenuity, ensuring that ancestral knowledge remains vibrant and meaningfully integrated into everyday community life.

Theoretical Framework.

Among the Mao Naga, traditional games function as living systems of indigenous knowledge that transmit skills, values, and social philosophy across generations. Shaped by a monsoon-based ecological landscape, Mao livelihood practices required cultivation skills, cooperation endurance and defense. These competencies became embedded in festivals and communal institutions like the *morung* where games served as indigenous pedagogical practices.

Through activities such as wrestling, *Kaka* and *Leri Kaphi*, the community cultivates bravery, strategy, discipline, and collective identity.

Johan Huizinga's idea in *Homo Ludens*, which views play as a fundamental component of culture rather than just entertainment, theoretically helps us understand these practices. This concept is best illustrated by Mao traditional games, which are organized, governed by rules, and have social significance, influencing moral order and collective memory. In a similar vein, Clifford Geertz's theory of culture as a symbolic system aids in the interpretation of these games as "texts" that use performance and ritual to convey virtues like bravery, hierarchy, cooperation, and social rivalry. Indigenous knowledge theorists also stress that, rather than formal education, education in many traditional societies is experiential, community-based, and passed down through participation. According to this framework, Mao traditional games serve as dynamic institutions of informal learning that preserve cultural continuity by teaching ecological adaptation, physical skill, social responsibility, and ethical behavior.

The research objectives of the study are to examine Mao traditional games as indigenous knowledge systems that transmit skills and social values across generations. It also seeks to analyze their role as informal institutions in sustaining cultural continuity in the context of modernization.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to examine traditional Mao Naga games as indigenous knowledge systems embedded within cultural, ecological, and social contexts. Since the research focuses on lived experiences, symbolic meanings, ritual practices and intergenerational transmission of knowledge, a qualitative approach enables in-depth, contextual, and interpretive understanding. It integrates descriptive and analytical methods, descriptively documenting the structure, rules, participation patterns, ritual significance, and social functions of games such as wrestling, *Kaka*, and *Leri Kaphi*, and analytically interpreting them through theoretical perspectives, particularly Johan Huizinga's concept of play as a cultural foundation and Clifford Geertz's theory of culture as a symbolic system. Data are collected from both primary and secondary sources, including participant observation during festivals and communal gatherings, oral narratives from elders and players. Secondary sources comprise scholarly literature on indigenous knowledge systems, Naga cultural studies, and relevant ethnographic and historical works. The data are analyzed thematically, focusing on games as ecological knowledge systems, informal pedagogical institutions, martial training mechanisms, and symbolic performances that reinforce social identity and cohesion, while also examining the impact of modernization on their continuity.

Leri Kaphi

Leri Kaphi is a traditional martial game of the Mao community played with the East Himalayan cardamom plant known as *Lerii*, which symbolically represents the spear and sword used in customary warfare. Participation in this game is strictly restricted to men, reflecting its martial character and its association with masculine roles in traditional society. The competition takes place between two social divisions of Pudunamei village the Upper Society and the Southern Progressive Society (Shiihrakho, Pudunamei) thereby mirroring the village's traditional social organization and structured rivalry. The event is organized over three consecutive days according to age groups: the first day is reserved for elders (*Opemei* and *Opfomei*), the second for adult men and youths above eighteen years, and the third for boys aged seven to seventeen. This age-graded structure ensures both continuity and mentorship within the community.

The game begins with a preliminary ritual that determines which side will start. In this opening act, two representatives symbolically attempt to shoot each other and return safely, and the outcome establishes the starting team. In the main phase of the competition, approximately twenty to twenty-two men stand in a line holding *Lerii*, while a single opponent from the rival group enters the field to attempt a strike. The lined players may dodge the attack but are permitted to retaliate only if they are struck. If the attacking player successfully escapes without being hit in return, his team continues the turn, thereby intensifying the competitive spirit and strategic engagement of the game.

Beyond its competitive dimension, Leri Kaphi functions as a training ground for martial skill and physical excellence. The game sharpens spear-throwing techniques, agility, alertness, and escape strategies such a skills historically vital for defense and warfare. It identifies and highlights the fastest runner, the most accurate thrower, and the most skillful maneuverer within the group. Outstanding performers are publicly acknowledged in

communal spaces such as morungs and other village gathering areas, reinforcing social recognition, honor, and masculine ideals. Through this structured practice, Leri Kaphi not only preserves martial tradition but also strengthens social bonds and intergenerational transmission of indigenous knowledge.

Wrestling

Traditional wrestling is one of the most respected and celebrated indigenous games of the Mao community in Manipur and Nagaland. It is usually conducted during festivals and important village gatherings, where young men display their strength and skill before elders and fellow villagers. The game symbolizes courage, endurance, discipline, bravery, and the warrior spirit. Victory brings honour not only to the individual wrestler but also to his family and village, strengthening communal pride.

The nature of Mao wrestling centers on the objective of overpowering, throwing, or pinning the opponent firmly to the ground. It requires balance, agility, stamina, quick reflexes, tactical intelligence, and mental alertness. Wrestlers employ techniques such as gripping, body locks, leg holds, lifting, and tripping to defeat their opponent. The game is governed by customary village rules under the supervision of elders and does not follow formal scoring systems or weight categories, unlike modern styles such as Freestyle wrestling and Greco-Roman wrestling.

Historically, wrestling was practiced especially by strong young men, including those from Warrior village of Pudunamei. It fostered friendly rivalry and cultural exchange with neighbouring tribes such as the Angami Naga, Chakhesang Naga, and Poumai Naga (Manikho, Daili). Beyond recreation, it served as practical training for hunting, cultivation, and village defense. Wrestling continues to promote discipline, unity and a strong sense of collective identity.

Kaka

Kaka is an indigenous seed game of the Mao community of Manipur, traditionally played with St. Thomas beans. Although participation is open to both men and women, the game is predominantly played by women and is especially popular during leisure hours and festive gatherings. Each round is generally short in duration, making it both lively and engaging. Traditionally, the game involves twelve players divided into two equal teams. It is played in an open space marked by two parallel lines, one designated as the starting line and the other as the end line. At the end line, beans are carefully placed upright as targets, while members of the opposing team roll or shoot their beans along the ground in an attempt to knock them down.

The rules of Kaka are simple yet demand skill and coordination. Both teams are provided with an equal number of beans, ensuring fairness and balance in competition. Success depends on accurately striking and toppling the upright beans according to mutually agreed rules. Precision in aim, control in rolling, and careful judgment of distance are essential for victory. The structured format of the game encourages strategic planning, as players must decide the force, angle, and timing of each attempt. Though seemingly simple, the game requires concentration, steady hands, and coordinated teamwork to outmaneuver the opposing side.

Kaka is further enriched by its twelve distinct playing styles—Chahore, Mathio, Mapra, Chiikhobo, Pikhereo, Ibiro, Khochuru, Hotsiicho, Tsiisopfi, Kakuo, Hotuho, and Mopfuchiito—each adding variety and complexity to the game. Beyond recreation, Kaka cultivates strategic thinking, precision, agility, balance, and cooperation among participants. Its widespread popularity during festivals and communal leisure time reinforces social interaction and healthy competition. At a deeper level, the use of locally available beans reflects agricultural symbolism and ecological familiarity, embedding indigenous knowledge within playful practice. Thus, Kaka serves not only as entertainment but also as a cultural medium that sustains community bonds and preserves traditional values.

Findings of the Study

The study finds that traditional Mao games function as structured indigenous knowledge systems embedded within the community's agrarian ecology and social organization. Games such as *wrestling*, *Kaka*, and *Leri Kaphi* transmit ecological knowledge, survival skills, martial techniques, agricultural symbolism, and physical competencies including endurance, agility, balance, and strategic thinking. They also cultivate moral and social values such as courage, discipline, cooperation, fairness, humility, respect for elders, and collective responsibility.

The use of locally available materials (e.g., St. Thomas beans and the Lerii plant) reflects ecological awareness and sustainable resource knowledge. Age-graded participation and gender-specific roles ensure systematic intergenerational transmission of skills and values. Recognition in communal institutions like the morung reinforces social validation and preserves collective memory. Thus, traditional games operate as living repositories of indigenous epistemology rather than mere recreational activities. The paper reveals that Mao traditional games function as informal pedagogical and symbolic institutions that sustain cultural continuity. They serve as experiential learning systems where knowledge is transmitted through participation, observation, and ritual performance rather than formal instruction. These games reinforce social hierarchy, village organization, communal unity, and collective identity through structured competitions and public recognition.

However, modernization, digital entertainment, urban migration, commercialization of festivals, and competition from global sports has led to declining youth participation and weakening of traditional mentorship structures. This shift threatens the continuity of embedded indigenous knowledge systems. Despite these challenges, the study finds that the continued practice and potential adaptation of these games demonstrate cultural resilience and the possibility of sustaining indigenous identity in contemporary society.

Contemporary Challenges due to Modernization and Digital games

The traditional games of the Mao including wrestling, *Kaka*, and *Leri Kaphi* have historically served as vital expressions of cultural identity, social unity, and physical training. However, modernization and the rapid growth of digital entertainment have led to declining youth participation. With increasing access to smartphones, online gaming, and social media, many young people now prefer virtual activities over physically demanding traditional games. This shift weakens intergenerational transmission of skills, values, and cultural knowledge, as fewer youths engage in practices that once formed an essential part of community life.

Another major challenge is the erosion of indigenous knowledge systems embedded within these games. Traditional activities such as *Kaka* and *Leri Kaphi* carry knowledge related to agriculture, survival strategies, teamwork, and social organization. As participation declines, techniques, customary rules, ritual meanings, and oral traditions risk being forgotten. When these games are no longer practiced regularly, they may lose their deeper cultural significance and become mere symbolic performances rather than living traditions rooted in everyday community experience.

Urbanization and changing lifestyles further contribute to the weakening of traditional games. Migration to towns and cities for education and employment reduces the time young people spend in village environments where these games are traditionally played. Urban settings often lack open communal spaces, structured village festivals, and morung-based mentorship systems that once supported the practice and transmission of indigenous games. At the same time, sedentary digital lifestyles reduce physical engagement, leading to declining appreciation for the strength, endurance, coordination, and agility required in traditional sports.

Additionally, indigenous games face competition from commercial and globally recognized sports such as football, cricket, and Olympic wrestling, which receive institutional support, funding, and media visibility. Traditional games often lack formal recognition, structured leagues, and inclusion in school curricula. Changing social values and gender perspectives may also challenge certain customary restrictions, while festival commercialization risks reducing these games to staged entertainment rather than meaningful cultural practices. The decline of elder-led mentorship further weakens skill transmission. Despite these challenges, thoughtful adaptation—through documentation, educational integration, organized tournaments, and digital promotion—offers a pathway to sustain Mao Naga traditional games in contemporary society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the traditional games of the Mao Naga such as indigenous wrestling, *Kaka* and *Leri Kaphi* are not merely recreational activities but dynamic cultural institutions deeply embedded in the community's agrarian ecology, social organization, spiritual worldview, and indigenous knowledge systems. Rooted in the hill-based environment of the Mao people in Senapati District, these games function as informal pedagogical and martial institutions that cultivate courage, discipline, agility, endurance, strategic thinking, cooperation, and collective responsibility. Through structured participation across age groups and social divisions, supervised by elders and recognized in communal spaces like the morung, they transmit ecological knowledge, agricultural symbolism,

survival skills, ethical values, and social philosophy across generations. Theoretically illuminated by perspectives such as Huizinga's concept of play as culture and Geertz's view of culture as symbolic performance, Mao traditional games embody moral order, collective memory, and identity. However, modernization, digital entertainment, urban migration, commercialization of festivals, shifting gender norms, and competition from global sports now threaten their continuity by weakening youth participation and eroding indigenous knowledge transmission. Despite these challenges, the continued practice and thoughtful adaptation of these games demonstrate the resilience of Mao cultural heritage, affirming that they remain vital expressions of unity, identity, and cultural continuity in contemporary society.

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Use for Citation: A Kazhiini, Dr. Mamata Pandit. (2026). EXPLORING THE TRADITIONAL GAMES AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MAO. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Technology*, 7(2), 11–15. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18708657>