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Poumai Naga Wrestling on Socio-Cultural and Spiritual Significance

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Abstract

Traditional wrestling among the Poumai Nagas of Manipur represents an important component of indigenous sporting culture and serves as a significant expression of socio-cultural identity, spirituality, and community values. Beyond its function as a physical contest, wrestling is deeply embedded in the social and ritual life of the community and is closely associated with agricultural festivals, customary practices, and inter-village interactions. The present study aims to explore the socio-cultural and spiritual significance of traditional wrestling among the Poumai Nagas and to document its role in preserving indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage. The study employed an exploratory and ethnographic approach based on field observations, oral narratives, interviews with community elders, wrestlers, and local residents, supplemented by relevant secondary sources. The findings reveal that wrestling functions as a symbol of cultural identity, social cohesion, and communal solidarity. It serves as a medium for transmitting traditional values such as discipline, respect, courage, and perseverance among younger generations. The practice is also closely linked with ritual beliefs and festival celebrations, reflecting the spiritual worldview of the community. Furthermore, the study documents several indigenous wrestling techniques that demonstrate the richness of traditional sporting knowledge. Despite the challenges posed by modernization and changing lifestyles, traditional wrestling continues to play a vital role in strengthening ethnic identity and preserving cultural continuity among the Poumai Nagas. The study highlights the importance of systematic documentation and community-based preservation efforts to safeguard this valuable element of indigenous cultural heritage.

Keywords: Poumai naga, traditional wrestling, indigenous sports, cultural identity, spirituality, cultural heritage, manipur.

INTRODUCTION

The Poumais are the descendants of grand old man “POU” one of the great leaders of the Naga who migrated to Khyafii commonly known as Makhel.Poumai Naga is one of the major tribes mainly settling in Senapati District Manipur India. By the artificial boundary some of the Poumais are settled in the Chakhesang area in Phek District, Nagaland [1]. In geographical terms, the Poumais have four sub-communities inhabiting four major areas viz: Poamata, Lepaona, Chilivai, and Poumai Chakhesang in Razeba Range’s Nagaland. After the end of headhunting the wrestling started in the Poumai area and ‘Poyu’ is an official dialect of wrestling. Among all the traditional games wrestling is one of the most popular games played by mans. However, traditional wrestling had different seasons of playing the game varies from village to village. During festivals different villages organized traditional wrestling were conducted in the form of inter-village friendly competitions [2]. The people of Paomata organize

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the game during the 'Laonii' festival that falls in the month of 'Lao khou' (July) while the people of Lepaona region conduct the 'Poyu' competition during the paddy transplanting festival known as 'Paoki' that falls in the month of 'Khanakhou' (May). The people of the Chilivai region organize the game 'Poyu' during the 'Daonii' festival which falls in the month of 'RoupaKhou' or 'KhoniihKhou' last week of March and the first week of April. The people of Poumai Naga follow the "LUNAR" calendar for its customs and traditions. Wrestling is one of the most growing and popular games in the Poumai Naga tribe, in these ritual game women are strictly prohibited and they are not allowed to participate in the events [3].

Wrestling is a game that enthralls the crowd by displaying the men's physique, tricks, skills, tactics, and strength. Wrestling plays a vital role in bringing togetherness and harmony among the Poumais where there are no haters against any particular individuals or any villages; it brings good relationships between two neighboring villages or more. The categories of the wrestlers may be between the same age group and a similar weight [4].

The people of Paomata organized the traditional wrestling in the ritual festival called 'Laonii' which is one of the sacred festivals celebrated on the completion of the paddy plantation that falls in the month of 'Lao Khou' (July). Before the festivals all the paddy works have to be done or completed, if any field is not planted before the festivals is to be extremely wicked for the year as it is believed that the paddy transplanting after the festivals does not yield crops. Laonii festival is a twelve-long day celebration during this festival all the villages are strictly prohibited from going and working in paddy fields. During this 12-long festival celebration, the youths are allowed to organize traditional wrestling [5].

Paonii is also known as Paoki and it is one the biggest and most lavishly celebrated festivals of the Poumai. The celebration takes place every year in the month of 'KhanaKhou' (May) to mark the first paddy transplanting day of the year. In the olden days, this festival was celebrated by a few villages which are situated in the middle part of the Poumai region namely; Onaeme (Oinam), Purul, Koide, Maiba, Phuba, Chaonamai (ThingbaKhullen) and Shomai (ThingbaKhunou), etc. Paonii/Paoki festivals are the best for the people of Lepaona, a sub-community of Poumai [6]. Paoki is a four-day long celebrated festival by the people of Lepaona, which starts with 'Ranai', on this day the paddy field is kept ready for planting, and apart from planting the foodstuff is also kept ready for the guests as well. On the second day 'Thaopai' is reserved for seedlings from jhum land during the day time and in the evening of the second day the guests and relatives were invited for the festive to the respective house with the traditional foods with rice-beer, pork, fish, beef etc. On the night of the second day, it marks the most memorable moment for the boys who participated in the wrestling competition where conducted between the host villagers and the challengers from the other villages or neighboring villages, thus sometimes wrestling continue till the dawn of the next day. On the next day the third day 'Khanai' is the main day of the Paonii/Paoki festivals, paddy plantation starts in the early morning with the ritual performed by the housewife by offering a slice of meat along with drops of wine to God and the paddy field deity asking for fertility and healthy growth of paddy to be transplanted. During the day boys pay a visit to the girls who they are interested in or admire and help them in planting and enjoying delicious foods and wine which is served by girls. On the last day of the festival 'Khanaithai' on this day boys usually visit the fields and extend their hands to the families who had not completed their plantation works [7].

The people of the Chilivai (Proumai) region organized wrestling during the festivals of Daonii which falls in the month of 'RoupaKhou' or 'KhoniihKhou' last week of March and the first week of April. While the other villages which fall under Chilivai celebrate the festivals as marunii. Daonii / marunii is an indigenous festival for Proumai and Raimai, it is the festival of seed sowing and cultivation of crops by tradition. This festival is observed for four days and it's restricted to villagers to work in the field [8]. On the first day, animals were butchered in preparation for the celebration. Daughters who are married to other villages would be invited along with their husbands and clan members on the next day when they returned to their husband's villages the daughter's families would

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be given meat as a traditional token of love and share with the in-laws. On the second day, 'Chidzii', a ritual prayer and offering to the house deity would be performed. On this second day, the wine is poured into each cup and offered to the deity with the words 'Ra Paipaoh, nehaizaopraivesohlou-o' which means 'come and be served your cup of wine'. In the evening young men would gather and prepare to wrestle and prove their strength and defend their village from the challengers that come from other villages or neighboring villages and the winner of the wrestling competition would be named as the strongest man of the year and he would be awarded [9].

Although studies have documented Naga festivals and indigenous sports, limited scholarly attention has been given to the socio-cultural and spiritual dimensions of Poumai Naga wrestling. Therefore, the present study seeks to fill this gap by examining wrestling as a cultural institution, ritual practice, and marker of ethnic identity [10].

Objective of the Study

1. To examine the socio-cultural significance of traditional wrestling among the Poumai Nagas.
2. To evaluate the role of youth to instilling cultural pride among the generation
3. To document the indigenous techniques and rules of Poumai wrestling.

Methodology

The methodology used in this research is exploratory, historical, and analytical in design since so far no in-depth research has been undertaken by any other scholar or writer about the Poumai Naga tribe. The study is mainly based on the primary source to be used in the fieldwork conducted and the other sources collected during the fieldwork with the help of individual as well as group interviews, exploration of oral traditions, old documents, and also adopted to the socio-religious and cultural activities, in addition, extensive use of the availability of secondary source in order to get more information in the research [11].

REGULATIONS OF POUMAI NAGA TRADITIONAL WRESTLING

Wrestling Arena

1. The length and breadth of the wrestling ring/ arena will be 40 sqft in diameter.
2. The wrestling arena will be encircled with strong ropes.
3. For the safety of the wrestlers, enough space will be provided, for which a minimum space of 5 feet should be there in between the ring and the rope.

Waist Binder

1. The organizers or host villages will provide the waist binder to both wrestlers.
2. The waist binder will be 1 meter in breadth and 2 or 2 ½ or 3 meters in length, which should be cotton cloth.
3. The waist binder will be tied in 2 rounds around the waist on the navel.
4. The wrestlers will check their opponent's waist binder before the first bout and will not complain whatsoever before the completion of that bout. In the second and third bouts also the same rule will apply with that of the first bout.
5. In the process of wrestling if the waist binder breaks or loosens incapacitating further wrestling, then the referee will stop the bout and tighten the binder properly and the opponent will not complain after that.
6. The waist binder will be tied binder in a traditional reef knot.
7. For each bout, the waist binder can be re-tied.
8. Once the wrestling starts, no wrestlers will complain about the belt before the completion of the bout of two minutes.
9. Both the wrestlers will stand in the proper position so that each one can hold their opponent's waist binder with both hands. Kneeling, moving away to escape his opponent from holding the binder before the start is not allowed.

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10. The tournament officials will tie the waist binder of the wrestlers from outside the arena to save time.

Time

1. Two minutes will be given in each bout. If it ends in a draw, two minutes will be given for the third bout to decide the winner.
2. In the first bout, if both the wrestlers waste the allotted time, they will be made to stand straight, their toes and stomach touching each other and facing each other face to face and start the bout allowing each other to apply the tactics. If the wrestlers return to the same passive position, within 5 seconds the referee will ask the wrestlers to re-start the standing position till one is victorious. The same will be applied in the second and third bouts to decide the winner.

Fall

1. If the chest, back, shoulder, buttock, or thigh touches the ground, it is a fall.
2. The elbow, knew and head touching the ground is not considered a fall.
3. If a wrestler had applied the tactics from within the ring and if the opponent fell on the line or outside the arena, it was a fall.
4. The wrestlers may still be applying tactics but if they have gone out of the arena. The referee can stop the match and bring them back to the center of the arena to restart the match with the remaining time.
5. In the process of wrestling if both wrestlers have parted and not holding each other, then the referee will call them back to the center of the ring and re-start the match with the remaining time.
6. Wrestlers will not be allowed to go out of the wrestling arena without informing the referee. If anyone does so the referee will declare the opponent as the winner.
7. In the process of wrestling, if anyone puts down his opponent to a kneeling position but cannot apply further tactics, then the referee can ask both to stand up and restart the match. But if the wrestlers continue to apply tactics, the match will not be stopped.

Time Out

1. Only in the case of injury, time out or rest time of 2 minutes can be availed. In about wrestler can be availed only for once for an injury time out, but on the advice of the physician another 2 minutes may be added to the injury time. If the injured cannot restart the match after a lapse of injury time out, then his opponent will be declared the winner.
2. There is no rest time or time out given to any player other than injury.

Restriction

1. If wrestlers, with ill intentions, intentionally apply tricks which is dangerous to their opponent then the referee will give a warning to the guilty, but if the warning is not heeded, then his opponent will be declared the winner while the guilty will be barred/expelled from the tournament.
2. In the process of wrestling pushing their opponent's thigh or pulling their ribs/chests will not be allowed.
3. No wrestler will hackle each other with ill intentions but will wrestle in a friendly way.
4. If any player removes/untied his waist binder before the completion of the bout then the referee will tie the waist binder accordingly as a punishment.
5. Wrestlers will not apply oil on their bodies or use other substances that are banned by the organizers.
6. Wrestlers will not be allowed to participate with long nails (fingers and toes).
7. Wrestlers will not be allowed to pull/push the thighs/legs of their opponents. Such actions call for a warning from the Referee.
8. During the bouts, no wrestlers are allowed to have eatables while still in the Arena.

Judes and Referees

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1. There will be three judges to manage the match and the result will be decided by the majority opinion. In case there is no clear verdict to decide the winner, the bout will resume with the remaining time allotted for the bout.
2. For all the bouts, and its interval the referee will start and stop.
3. Before the start of any tournament – Referees /judges' oath and clinic taking will be held for the smooth conduct of the tourney. If any officials fail to attend this then they will not be allowed to officiate in the tournament.
4. Referees/Judges were highly aspect intoxicants during the tournament, if anyone was found guilty then his official registration shall immediately be suspended or canceled without any further notice from the association.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Wrestling as a Symbol of Cultural Identity

The findings reveal that traditional wrestling occupies a central position in the cultural life of the Poumai Naga community (Figure-1) Wrestling is not merely a competitive sport but serves as an important marker of ethnic identity and collective memory. The practice is deeply embedded within major agricultural festivals such as Laonii, Paonii (Paoki), and Daonii, where participation reflects adherence to traditional customs and community values [12].

Among the Poumai Nagas, wrestling provides a platform for the younger generation to connect with ancestral traditions and reaffirm their cultural belonging (Figure-2). The organization of wrestling competitions during festivals demonstrates the continued importance of indigenous sports as a medium for preserving cultural heritage. The community regards successful wrestlers as representatives of village pride and cultural strength, thereby reinforcing a sense of collective identity [13].

This finding supports previous studies on indigenous sports which suggest that traditional games function as cultural symbols that preserve historical traditions and strengthen ethnic consciousness. Traditional wrestling among the Poumais therefore acts as a living expression of cultural continuity amidst social change [14].

Wrestling and Social Cohesion

The study found that wrestling contributes significantly to social cohesion and inter-village relationships. Competitions are commonly organized between neighboring villages during festival celebrations, attracting participants and spectators from different communities [15].

Unlike modern competitive sports that emphasize individual achievement, Poumai wrestling promotes communal participation and mutual respect. The wrestling arena becomes a social space where relationships are strengthened, disputes are minimized, and collective celebrations are encouraged. Villagers gather not only to witness physical contests but also to participate in communal feasting, cultural performances, and social interaction [16].

The role of wrestling in fostering social solidarity reflects the broader function of indigenous sports as mechanisms for maintaining social order and strengthening community bonds. Through these events, individuals develop a stronger sense of belonging and responsibility toward their community [17].

Wrestling as a Rite of Passage and Construction of Masculinity

The findings indicate that wrestling serves as an important mechanism for the socialization of young men. Participation in wrestling allows young males to demonstrate physical strength, courage, endurance, discipline, and self-control. Success in wrestling often enhances an individual's social prestige and reputation within the village [18].

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Traditionally, wrestling was considered an avenue through which young men proved their readiness to assume adult responsibilities. Competitions provided opportunities to display qualities that were valued in traditional society, including bravery, determination, and leadership. Consequently, wrestling contributed to the construction of masculine identity among the Poumai Nagas [19].

The association between wrestling and masculinity is consistent with observations from other indigenous societies where physical contests function as symbolic demonstrations of manhood and social maturity. Thus, wrestling serves not only as a sport but also as an educational institution that transmits culturally approved gender roles (Figure-3).

Spiritual Significance of Wrestling Practices

One of the most significant findings of the study is the spiritual dimension associated with traditional wrestling. Wrestling competitions are closely connected with ritual observances, indigenous beliefs, and customary norms. Prior to competitions, participants often observe specific taboos and traditional practices believed to bring success, protection, and blessings (Figure-4).

The timing of wrestling competitions during agricultural festivals further illustrates the relationship between sport and spirituality. Ritual offerings, prayers to deities, and ceremonial activities performed during festivals demonstrate that wrestling is integrated into broader religious and cosmological beliefs. The wrestling arena is therefore viewed not only as a place of competition but also as a sacred cultural space where spiritual and social values intersect [20].

These observations highlight the inseparable relationship between religion, ritual, and sport within indigenous communities. Wrestling functions as a symbolic expression of respect for ancestral traditions and spiritual forces that are believed to influence human well-being and agricultural prosperity (Figure-5).

Indigenous Knowledge and Transmission of Traditional Values

The study reveals that traditional wrestling serves as a vehicle for transmitting indigenous knowledge and moral values from one generation to another. Through participation and observation, younger members of the community learn important cultural principles such as respect for elders, discipline, honesty, cooperation, and perseverance (Figure-6).

The rules governing wrestling competitions reflect the ethical foundations of the Poumai community (Figure-7). Wrestlers are expected to compete fairly, demonstrate self-control, and respect opponents and officials. Such practices reinforce moral education and contribute to character development among youth (Figure-8).

Traditional wrestling therefore functions as an informal educational institution through which cultural knowledge, social norms, and community values are preserved and transmitted across generations (Figure-9).

Technical Skills and Indigenous Sporting Knowledge

The documentation of various wrestling techniques such as Lei Pfiiyu, Pohyu, Kou Daoyu Nya, Khou Khe Yu, Va Dao, Kou Pfiiyu, Khou Teayu, Liikhea, Siikha Nya, and Phi Daoyu demonstrates the richness of indigenous sporting knowledge within the Poumai community (Figure-10).

These techniques require not only physical strength but also balance, coordination, timing, tactical awareness, and technical expertise. The diversity of techniques reflects generations of accumulated experience and adaptation within the local cultural context (Figure-11).

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The preservation of these techniques is important because they represent unique forms of indigenous knowledge that may gradually disappear under the influence of modernization and the increasing popularity of global sports (Figure-12).

Challenges of Modernization and Cultural Preservation

The findings suggest that traditional wrestling continues to remain popular despite increasing exposure to modernization, urbanization, and global sporting practices. However, concerns were expressed regarding declining participation among younger generations, changing lifestyles, and reduced familiarity with traditional customs (Figure-13).

The expansion of formal education, migration, digital entertainment, and modern sports may contribute to a gradual weakening of indigenous sporting traditions. Nevertheless, community-based wrestling competitions continue to play a significant role in preserving cultural identity and promoting cultural pride among the Poumai Nagas.

To ensure the long-term survival of this cultural practice, systematic documentation, cultural education programs, and community support are necessary. Traditional wrestling should be recognized not only as a sport but also as an important component of the intangible cultural heritage of the Poumai Naga community (Figure-14).

Traditional Wrestling Techniques of the Poumai Nagas

The field investigation documented several indigenous wrestling techniques practiced by the Poumai Nagas. These techniques reflect generations of accumulated knowledge, physical skill, and tactical understanding. While the socio-cultural significance of wrestling constitutes the primary focus of this study, the documentation of these techniques contributes to the preservation of indigenous sporting knowledge and provides insight into the technical dimensions of Poumai wrestling traditions.

Skills of Poumai Naga Wrestling

This technique to takedown relying on strength, and timing to unbalance and defeat the opponent.

This technique demonstrates raw strength, control and tactical position making an effective takedown to the opponent.

This technique the wrestler maintains body contact and positioning to ensure he dictates the direction of the opponents fall.

The wrestler has tightly gripped his opponents' waist and lifting him off the ground by using his hips and lower back to generate power for a high-impact throw.

This technique is a combination of body control and leg positioning makes its highly effective for throwing the opponents off balance

This is a powerful takedown technique where the wrestler in blue ribbon has secured a body lock around the opponent's waits and attempt to lift and off-balance their opponents. It relies on body control to execute a clean takedown

The wrestler with the purple sash has secured a strong grip around the opponent's waist and lifting them off the ground, this type of throw is commonly used to off-balance and pin the opponent effectively.

The wrestler are engaged in by the collar and elbow tie-up with a body lock grip, it is a common stance in traditional wrestling style, the positioning may setting for a takedown or throw.

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This is a technique where the attacker lifts the opponent from behind and either throws them backward or takedown. This move is common in indigenous wrestling styles that focus on body lock and throws.



Figure 1. Lei Pfiiyu.



Figure 2. Two athletes practicing Pohyu (traditional wrestling).



Figure 3. Kou Daoyu Nya Right.

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Figure 4. Two competitors locked in a tense match of traditional belt wrestling.



Figure 5. Natya/ Nearai Right.



Figure 6. Athletes demonstrating a lift in Inbuan (Mizo indigenous wrestling).



Figure 7. Competitors demonstrating a clinch and belt grip in Inbuan.

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Figure 8. Khou Teayu.



Figure 9. Liikhea right.



Figure 10. Siikha Nya.

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Figure 11. A referee monitoring a dynamic lift during an Inbuan competition.



Figure 12. PhiDaoyu



Figure 13. Khou Khe Veiyu

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Figure 14. Liikhea right.

CONCLUSION

The present study demonstrates that traditional wrestling among the Poumai Nagas is far more than a physical sport; it is a multifaceted cultural institution deeply embedded in the social, spiritual, and communal life of the people. The practice is closely associated with major agricultural festivals and serves as an important medium through which cultural identity, collective memory, and indigenous values are preserved and transmitted across generations.

The findings reveal that wrestling plays a significant role in promoting social cohesion, strengthening inter-village relationships, and fostering a sense of belonging among community members. The sport also reflects the spiritual worldview of the Poumai Nagas through its association with customary rituals, traditional beliefs, and festival observances. Furthermore, the documentation of indigenous wrestling techniques highlights the richness of local sporting knowledge and demonstrates the community's unique contribution to the cultural heritage of Northeast India.

Despite the growing influence of modernization and changing lifestyles, traditional wrestling continues to remain an important symbol of ethnic identity and cultural resilience among the Poumai Nagas. The survival of this indigenous practice depends on sustained community participation, systematic documentation, and greater academic attention. Therefore, efforts should be made to preserve, promote, and transmit this valuable cultural tradition to future generations as an integral component of the intangible cultural heritage of the Poumai Naga communit.

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