

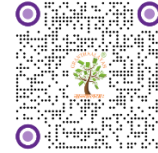


Original Article

## LAI HARAOPA: A RITUAL RE-ENACTMENT OF CREATION MYTH OF THE MEITEIS

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### ABSTRACT

Lai Haraoba provides the Meiteis/ Meeteis with a distinct identity. An Identity of a community as we understand is the sum total of its cultural, social, political, economic and religious practices and beliefs. When we discuss identity, it embraces the concept of who we are, how we perceive ourselves as a community and the characteristics that define us as 'Meitei' or 'Meetei' and what are the elements that differentiate ourselves from the others.

**Keywords:** Lai Haraoba, Meitei, Meetei, Manipur, Identity, Culture, Ras Leela, Manipuri Dance, Vaishnavism, Krishna Bhakti, Pre-Hindu Tradition, Hand Gestures, Footsteps, Cultural Heritage, Community Identity

### INTRODUCTION

Lai Haraoba provides the Meiteis/ Meeteis with a distinct identity. An Identity of a community as we understand is the sum total of its cultural, social, political, economic and religious practices and beliefs. When we discuss identity, it embraces the concept of who we are, how we perceive ourselves as a community and the characteristics that define us as 'Meitei' or 'Meetei' and what are the elements that differentiate ourselves from the others.

Manipur has a rich history and cultural heritage. The state is known for its contribution in the field of dance, music and sports. Ras Leela, a classical Manipuri dance form is well known all over the world for its aesthetic and the philosophy of Bhakti. It is one of the great Classical dances of India. To many people the Manipuri Ras Leela represents the identity of the Manipuri Meitei after embracing Vaishnavism. It has its basis on the philosophy of Krishna Bhakti and Krishna Leelas. Though this dance form shows great influence of Vaishnavism, the body movements and hands gestures exhibit similarity with the one that are used in the Lai Haraoba dance that existed from the pre-Hindu period. It is believed that most hand movements and footsteps in Ras Leela were highly influenced by the Lai Haraoba dance as it is believed to have existed from time immemorial, long before the creation of Ras Leela.

Before we deal with the ritualistic dances of Lai Haraoba and its significance, we need to decipher the meaning of the term Lai Haraoba. What is Lai Haraoba? How does it define the identity of the Meitei Community, their myths and beliefs? What are the dances performed during Lai Haraoba? How prevalent is it in the present-day society?

Generally, the term Lai Haraoba is believed to be the "pleasing", "rejoicing", or the "merry-making" of gods and goddesses. The word Lai signifies the gods and goddesses (the Sylvan deities) and Haraoba stands for 'pleasing' or 'rejoicing'.

Lai Haraoba is the ritualistic festival of the Meitei community of Manipur. It reflects the belief system, the creation myth and the fertility rites of the Meitei community. It is also considered as an ancestor's worship. It is more of an offering of prayers to the

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presiding deities of the village or a locality by singing and dancing in praise of their creations. If we look at the underlying meanings of the activities that are involved in the Lai Haraoba, we will find that it is also the celebration of life by humans to bless with fertility and abundance. Hence it is known as fertility rituals where humans seek the blessings from the creator. Like the Greek Dionysian festival, it is ritualistic performances executed in honour of the god and goddess symbolizes newness in life, a joy, a new beginning, a rejuvenation of life, a sign of fertility, of growth and reproduction- the continuity of life. In both the ritualistic festival of Dionysus and in Lai Haraoba we find that rituals are performed not only by the priest and priestess (Maiba and Maibi) but it also involves the audience. Though in the Greek Dionysian festival there is not much restriction about the hierarchy amongst the audience, in the Meitei Lai Haraoba we find that even the audience has to follow certain norms and restrictions. Though it is not much prevalent in the present-day society, during the olden days strict rules had to be followed by the spectators regarding the seats to be occupied. The hierarchical order of the Phamnaiba and Phamnaibi are strictly followed and maintained in Moirang Haraoba till date while not much is known about the Chakpa Haraoba as sharing of any kind of knowledge of Lai Haraoba by the Chakpa people to the outsiders is prohibited.

Lai Haraoba can be mainly classified into four forms according to its place of worshippers. Basically, there are Kanglei Haraoba, Chakpa Haraoba, Moirang Haraoba and Kakching Haraoba. Though the basic patterns and structures of ritualistic festivals of Lai Haraoba and the philosophy of it almost remain the same, each Haraoba or celebration has its own unique and distinct activity or rituals meant only for a particular Lai Haraoba. For instance, the Lai Nupi Thiba (finding of consort) in Kanglei Haraoba is not found in other Lai Haraoba of Chakpa, Moirang or Kakching Haraoba. This particular activity which is prevalent only in Kanglei Haraoba can be traced back to the myth in Meitei cosmology. In accordance with the myth, Ibudhou Khoriphaba is the son of Soraren and Haorokcham Konthoujam Chanu Tampha Lairembi. Soraren is the deity while Tampha Lairembi belongs to the mortal world.

The brief outline of the story is that Soraren, one of the deities of Meitei Pantheon married Tampha Lairembi and they got a son who they named as Khoriphaba. In the story Tampha Lairembi was not allowed to visit the mortal maiden's home in the human world. But one day she saw a smoke smouldering from her home and urged Soraren to let her go to the mortal home claiming that some misfortune had befallen her home. With much persuasion, Tampha Lairembi succeeded in convincing Soraren, and the latter allowing her to climb down the golden ladder to visit her mortal home. She failed to keep her promise to Soraren that she would maintain her purity and would not indulge in the mortal world, the ladder was being pulled back and she could not return back to her husband and son. Years later, Khoriphaba started questioning his mother's whereabouts. In order to search for his mother, he came down to the human world. In his journey he came across the merry making of the gods and goddesses headed by Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi. And he was caught by the deities while witnessing the celebration. He confided that he was no mortal being, that he was the son of Soraren and Tampha Lairembi. With the approval and counsel of Nongpok Ningthou and the guarding lords of the four directions Ibudhou Wangbren (South-east), Ibudhou Thangjing (South-west), Ibudhou Marjing (North-east) and Ibudhou Koubru (North-west) advised to find a consort by using the Sagol Kangjei (Polo) in order to join the Lai Haraoba celebration. This same story from the mythology is being re-enacted as one of the rituals called Kanglei Thokpa in Kanglei Haraoba wherein the Maibi takes the role of Lainingthou Khoriphaba and "... mimes different actions like mukna (wrestling) sagol kangjei (polo) and search for a paramour" [Nongthombam \(2005\)](#).

In the olden days it is said that the Maibi (priestess/ shaman) visited by the spirit used to choose the paramour from among the audience witnessing the rituals. But later it was not in practice. In this ritual of Kanglei Thokpa the Maibi choose amongst themselves in the present scenario of Kanglei Haraoba. Scholars like Nongthombam Premchand are of the view that such performances show that the community "...is still in touch with the supernatural forces, the mystery of the past and its present life is a continuation of the life of their tribe started by deified ancestors" (ibid.38).

On the other hand, there are scholars who are of the view that the term Lai Haraoba is derived from the creation myth of Lai hoi laoba wherein the Lai (God) shouting of the hoi. As mentioned in the creation myth of the Meiteis, the Almighty God Atiya Guru Sidaba directed his son Aseeba to create the Earth. After completing the task, he sought after the next step. Seeing the son's confusion " the supreme father opened his mouth widely and showed the whole world of living beings who were supposed to populate the earth" (ibid. 39). God Aseeba is also known as Sanamahi, who is worshipped till today in every house including those Meiteis who have embraced Vaishnavism. This belief of Aseeba creating the earth and shouting hoi to call out the living beings with joy is believed to be the origin of the term Lai Haraoba.

According to Panthoibi Khongul Lai Haraoba started with the dedication of the shrine to Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi. The Kha Ngangba clan was blessed to witness the celebration of Lord Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi in Nongmaijing Ching(hill). With this the Kha Ngangba clan started worshipping Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi and conducting the ritualistic festival every year to get the blessings and favour from the presiding deities, to have peaceful life and prosperity [Elam \(2001\)](#).

The various versions of the origin of Lai Haraoba mirrored the nuances of the term and the fact that this ritualistic festival started from the time of the establishment of human life on earth. The existence of different types and forms of Lai Haraoba mentioned earlier has certain common elements. Lai Haraoba is mostly celebrated during the summer season before the arrival of monsoon. The duration of the observance of the rituals can be of one day to fifteen days or more than that in special circumstances.

Though in this paper we would not deal in detail about the religious rituals performed by the Amaiba, Amaibi and Pena Khongba but certain rituals that highlight the mythological beliefs would be apt to mention here. There are rituals of calling upon the spirit of

the presiding deities as in case of Kanglei Haraoba, the rituals of Lai Ekouba are generally carried out on the bank of any water body, be it from a river or pond. Apart from the rituals to be performed by the Maiba, Maibi and Pena Khongba (player of indigenous musical instrument Pena), there are dances to be performed by the Maibi/ Maibis accompanied by Pena Khongba. They are an integral part of the ritualistic festival of Lai Haraoba.

Maibi (priestess/shamans) plays a significant role and performs various dances. One of the most important dances to be performed by the Maibi is the Laiching jagoi which includes in it the Leihou jagoi, Leipek jagoi, Leitie jagoi, Nongtei jagoi, Kambong or Kongol jagoi, Kangjao jagoi, Leinet jagoi, Leisi jagoi. Padmashree Elam Indira, Guru of Lai Haraoba dance shared that these dances included in Laiching jagoi shows how the earth was formed, how life begins and human life establishes. The Meitei believes that life begins from the water body. In Guru R.K. Singhajit Singh's book titled "Dances of India: Manipuri" described how the gods and goddesses created the earth "The gods with their hand movements created solid material out of nothingness and the goddesses pressed them down with their feet to make mounds on earth. He further states that "the hands movements of the gods in empty space were known as Nongdai jagoi and the footwork of the goddesses to shape the earth became (to be) known as Leitai jagoi". This dance symbolises the union of heaven and earth which are the core concepts of creation (17). This dance is performed by the Maibi or the priestess during the Lai Haraoba rituals. On the contrary, in some of the Lai Haraoba in Manipur, outsiders are not allowed to enter the village during the time of this ritualistic festival. There are many speculations on it. A possible reason for not allowing the outsiders to take part in a particular Lai Haraoba is that, it is sacred to the particular community and the only time to please the deities, seek abundance, fertility and prosperity of the concerned community is during this ritualistic festival. And the politics behind it may be that the blessings of fertility and abundance should be granted to their community and not to the outsider who does not belong to their village. Such restrictions seem to be prevalent in the Chakpa Haraoba.

The dances of Lai Haraoba depict the creation of life, the building up of the human body, of house, of weaving clothes and of agricultural activities, etc. Apart from the religious ritual dances to be performed by the Amaiba, Amaibi and Pena Khongba, it is important to mention here the dances which are performed by the Amaiba, Amaibi and Pena Khongba along with the worshippers or the people of the locality namely the Laibou jagoi, Hakchang Saba (dance depicting the building up of human anatomy and calling of soul from Atiya Guru Sidaba), Yumsharol (dance depicting the various stages involved in building of house), Panthoibi Jagoi (a duet dance portraying the myth of Panthoibi and Nongpok Ningthou, Pamyarol jagoi (dance of cultivation, planting of cotton seeds and weaving the clothes and offering to the deity), Lairel Mathek (dance performance following the serpentine pattern symbolizing the eternal cosmic creation), Kanglei Thokpa (finding of a consort) which we have already discussed earlier. Kanglei Thokpa or Lai Nupi Thiba takes place on the odd day, that is on the third, fifth, seventh or ninth day of the Lai Haraoba festival. Apart from this, there are rituals to be performed by the Amaibi and Penba Khongba such as Ta Khousaba (Meitei's martial arts using the Spear), Tangkhul Thokpa (the appearance of Tangkhul tribe). It is also a re-enactment of the coming together of Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi incarnated as a Tangkhul maiden. This is followed by Augri Hangel dance where prayers are offered for the well-being and prosperity of the particular village concerned. The appeasement is carried out for the evil spirits as well in the rituals called Lai-Tin-Thaba and Saroi Khangba. This shows the belief of the Meiteis that for the welfare and prosperity of the people there should be a balance of influence of both good and evil spirits. Lai Haraoba also encourages the healthy existence of the people. On the last day of Lai Haraoba, games and sports like Mukna (wrestling), Sagol Kangjei (Polo), Lamjel (athletic race), Thouri Chingnaba (tug of war), etc. are held at the courtyard of the shrine. In the dance performances as well as in the games both men and women are allowed to participate. The Pena Khongba offered prayers in the evening seeking forgiveness for any kind of mistakes committed during the ritual performances. It is known as Keining Kumba. This is the brief outline and the general understanding of the Lai Haraoba performances.

The very fact that even in the 21st century we are performing this particular rituals is because it plays a bigger role than just being a religious ritual. The process and the pattern that is followed in each of the four types of Lai Haraoba is different though the basic underlying philosophy remains the same. Lai Haraoba thus becomes the identifying elements of the people and its community. It is the belief system and the collective consciousness that binds the people together as belonging to one community. There are greater politics and factors involved in it. With the revivalist movement undertaken in Manipur there are organizations like Umang Lai Kanba Lup (UKAL) that check whether the rituals are carried out following the established cannons. Diversion of any forms have been condemned. This includes the performances of various ritual dances, performances and sequences that are involved in the observation of the Lai Haraoba rituals. The revivalists are of the view that anything that is indigenous should be safeguarded from influences of social changes and should be practiced with utmost reverence and seriousness. Lai Haraoba reinstates the identity of the Meitei community, and if the community has to safeguard their identity, then it is by safeguarding the defining practices that give them social, religious, and cultural as well as political identity.

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