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## Lai Haraoba – The Legacy Of Sanamahism

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### ABSTRACT

This research paper titled as 'Lai haraoba- the legacy of Sanamahism' is a work of detailing the significance also an overview of the traditional festival that is celebrated which is hardly known to the world. This celebration holds an immense importance for the Meitei people keeping the tradition alive by honouring the Creators and pleasing the deities expressing through dances and songs as a form of ritual. Here, right from the beliefs and various other forms of pleasing the God which is performed during the celebration over the time period- will be briefly highlighting in this paper by focusing mostly on the Kanglei form of Lai haraoba. As per the methodology while writing this paper I had predominantly used secondary sources such as a book written by Shri Kulachandra Singh and some translated Bengali script, originally written by Atombapu Sharma for understanding the significance behind the Lai haraoba rituals. And also, over the due research, I had also consulted and interviewed with many experts in this field so, that I could give more insight through out this paper with many other observations I had over the time period. Significantly, the Lai haraoba celebration can be understood as a unique event that has a series of explanations behind it and a ritual which is performed by the Maiba Maibi and the locality expressing the grate fullness of all the creations we have to the Creators.

*Keywords- Lai haraoba, Maiba Maibi, rituals, jagoi, spiritual.*

### INTRODUCTION

The Lai haraoba is a traditional festival uniquely celebrated at different places of Meitei community in Manipur from the very early time. The exact meaning of Lai haraoba is to make God happy where the name itself describes the celebration that to be performed. Manipur being a state in northeastern India with many religions living together in harmony, but the roots of the ancestral worship, culture and tradition had a deep connection with the people intertwining the existing religion and the Sanamahism as a form of preserving the ancient Manipuri culture. We can also see through this festival the rich cultural heritage and its socio- religious system of the state and unlike any other festival it is normally celebrated in a wide- open space in-front of the shrine that is

being worshiped at that pantheon of the Meitei's cosmology as a form of pleasing the God. The deities are made with brass- material which resembles a face of a humankind but never in a form of an image. It is usually celebrated during the month of April- May and goes till June like wise the celebration is held at different places throughout Manipur and lasts about five days to a week and depends on the desire of the locality taking care of the shrine in suggestions with the maiba & maibi (priests and priestess). And there are three types of Lai haraoba according to sources that is the Kanglei which is performed at the palace (capital), Moirang- a form performed in honour of the Thangjing God of Moirang, and the other one Chakpa, a form performed by the Loi community, but the way of celebrating is similar to each other with a minor difference.

The spiritual belief of Meitei is diverse that at the heart of its mythology, there lies a series of explanation about the creation of the world we are living in, the earth and its existence, the universe and all of these creations are being worshipped. And this festival is actually performed to honour and please the God and Goddesses that is locally known as Umanglai, the forest deity. In another version, it is also being known as Lai hoi laoba as according to the Meitei's belief the God Ashiba – while creating the world, under the instructions of Guru there was a confusion of forming a living being but after showing the form by the Guru through the mouth which has to be made, the God Ashiba shouted the word 'Hoi' meaning Yes! With a joy. Remembering this moment people celebrates the creations by satisfying the Gods and Goddesses. And here people don't usually pray for the fruits but instead takes part in devotional dance which is a part of ritual in the celebration of Lai haraoba, and it is believed that blessings are given by the God through satisfaction. The devotional dances such as Laitai- nongdai jagoi, Paringa Langa Sanga jagoi, Maibi jagoi are performed as a way of prayers dedicating to the God in-front of the idols at an open space in-front of the shrine. The music also plays an important role depicting the stories of the creations, mythical tales and folklore. People participates in Lai haraoba, with a main purpose to please the deities and it is also believed that the celebration leads to happiness, prosperity and overall self-realisation. They also offer flowers, fruits, sweets etc. to the deities coming from different places. The celebration of Lai haraoba also showcases the rich traditions of Manipur, its history, culture, diversity, folklore and most importantly its ancestral worship. The dress of the priesthood is also very distinctive in Lai haraoba, that is by wearing all in white colour or in particular performer look of the Maibi (priestess) always wears a white full sleeve top and phanek wrapped with skirt like clothes again in white with a border of red and the hair in high ponytail. And the Maiba (priest) with a white dhoti, shawl, long jacket and turban. Like wise there are also many other forms of attire worn particularly for the people participating in the procession and devotional dances that to be performed later at the shrine courtyard.

### **Rationale and Objective of the Dissertation:**

In context of my research I specifically aims with the belief that, being a Manipuri myself always wanted to express the beauty of this celebration where in some of the other sources had already written down but in my thesis, I specifically wanted to put out the study by explaining in detail the significance of performing the rituals and its dimensions from time to time.

And objective of this research:

- To understand the cultural and rituals significance.
- Promote through documentation.
- Contemporary evolution re – collection.

**Methodology used:**

In this research, I had used Secondary sources.

Other methodology includes:

- A participant observation
- Expert semi- structured interviews.
- Community engagement.

**RITUALS OF PLEASING THE GOD**

There are different rituals which plays an important role in honour of the deities, starting from the early morning till midnight, it is filled with many rituals for both the priest and the locality. Also, the rituals here are very much different from other traditions, and it's done by the Maiba Maibi with a sacred mantra which is in unintelligible words along with a flow of specific musical instrument called 'Pena'. Prior to the first day of celebration, a day before Lai phi setpa (dressing of the God) is done completely already by the priest. At the first day, a ritual ceremony called as 'Lai ekouba' is performed that is an invocation of the God from water by Maiba Maibi (Priest & Priestess) Khayom lakpa ritual is done here after residing next to the pond where the invocation has to be done, it is done in a banana leaf with placing some raw rice and a egg in the middle which resembles the Guru Shidaba himself where a small hole is made in this egg dropping small piece of gold, silver, and three leaf of Langthrei plant (hemp) which will be entirely represent as the Atiya Guru Shidaba and Laimarel Shidabi, which showed as Guru having the power. And the other ritual of putting the earthen pot which indicates that the earth is round and placed by a thread of hiri depicting that all the things in this world is inter- related in-front of the shrine. Before the ritual, Maibi dances near the pond remembering the event of saving the earth by rain Goddess Nongthang Leima, from the God Haraba. The Invocation of God is done by residing next to the pond where the Maibi deepens to the water which shows that the God lived in water and after the formation of earth started residing in the land which will be formed by the God Lainingthou and Goddess Laimarel after their separation from Guru to create again it will be depicted by the Maibi with a two layoms being placed from water to the two separate pots which is performed followed by the Pena player and the important material carrier of the God, It also marked as the beginning of the festival by welcoming the God with many people of the locality being dressed up in traditional attires of Manipur's different community, gathered following the walk till the holy water that to be performed along with the music parade of Dhol (drum), Saxophone, Pena and dances. Nowadays, it is even followed by riding horses in the beautiful traditional attire of Meitei's mythical tale 'Khamba Thoibi' and martial arts attires. After coming back from the holy water, again at the temple, by the Maiba Maibi takes out, nine and seven flowers out of the layom pot of Lainingthou amd Laimarel respectively and placed at right for the male deity that is Lainingthou and left side for the female deity, as Laimarel.

After this important ritual of Invocation, as it is expressed through dances, a jagoi called Laitai-nongdai is performed by the priest, priestess and locality people also by singing remembering the union of heaven and earth. And over the time period as it evolved, we can see in celebration of the Lai haraoba, there is a ceremony of combined devotional dance performed at the open space ground in-front of the shrine named as 'Laibou Chongba'. Jagoi (dance) is performed in round assembling the solar system where the planet revolts around the sun, circling a stepped procession leading by the Maiba and Maibi with beautiful defined dances known as 'Chali saba' with the flow

of the music of dhol, pena etc. Nowadays, the locality also uses mike, sound boxes and people celebrate it in a bigger scale by decorating the entire shrine areas. Many people participate in this jagoi because it is the way of praying by performing itself dedicating to the God by both Men and Women of different ages dressed up heavily and danced till night. And this Laibou chongba is performed everyday before the start of the other events during the planned celebrations period of days.

Following the first day, in the early morning of next day before the sunrise a ritual called 'Lai Yakaiba' (Morning invocation) is performed by a Maiba singing in a distinctive tune of folk song along with the flow of pena music-instrument is performed which marks the beginning of the new day welcoming the deity. Meanwhile, the other arrangers clean the shrine. After this ritual the localities or other place visitors comes to the temple to offer fruits, flowers etc. And with this, the visitors or the locality people gets to hear about their future and troubles if there is incase, spilling out by the Maibi as a part of the ritual making the humans know about the state conditions. It is a ceremony known as 'Laiphao' where, the Maibi who already has the senses of spirituality possessing herself sitting in-front of the shrine covered with a white clothe and a small bell ringing aside and shaking the entire body with the connection of the Goddess, its a tradition that is hardly known to the world and with this there might be also a way spelled – like a solution to the troubles so, people usually tries to get there to pray for their future as well.

Interestingly, with the arrival notice of Lai haraoba festival being a place known for its rich and diverse classical world-famous variety of dances people starts practising under a dance teacher by choosing the ones they want to perform of all the folk dances to show officially at the temple during the celebration. They can dance either dance solo or in group. Dancers can be also from other places, as it is always welcoming to please the deities. The names of the participants are given to the managing authority of the shrine, and it is usually divided according to the total number of performances to be shown calculating the number of days left of the celebration. As planned by the authority, the day of performance are assigned to the participants beforehand so that, they could arrange it all together and be prepared beforehand. Being notified of the day, the celebration begins, where in the mornings the important necessary rituals are done by the Maiba Maibi and in the evenings the locality joins the rituals by the time around 4 PM to 4:30 PM starting with the devotional dance procession 'Laibou chongba' by many people following the Maibi, here the songs were sung in live dedicating to the almighty creators and followed by the performances of the participants. Many audiences also start gathering at the wide- open space in- front of the shrine to watch. The most common dances are of the Manipuri folk dances such as 'khamba Thoibi jagoi' a dance of the manipur mythical story of Khamba and Thoibi. Similar to the attire there is a kind of dance known as 'Thougal jagoi' that are usually performed in a duet by both Male and female with a distinctive attire worn by Male in a dhoti of khamen chatpa mayek with a wrapped orange colour called khwangchet around the waist and a shirt made of velvet fabric in dark green colour along with a peacock feather designed turban on the head and the female attires in the same dark green velvet top, phanek (mapan naibi), khwangchet along with other accessories such as the jewelleryes, headdress around forehead called 'Kajenglei' with a white feather are worn in this particular folk

dance. This dance is well-known folk dance which are also mostly performed in Lai haraoba's celebration.

Fig: Dance performances at Lai haraoba (Lainingthou Khamlangba haraoba)

There is also a performance that is performed by only the female that is known as 'Leima jagoi'. Adding to it, every performance's music instruments, and folk songs are also played and sung live aside the performer. In other dances such as the 'Maibi jagoi' that is a form of dance performed by the priestess, here the steps of the dance are typically performed like a tale of the creations according to the Meitei's cosmology, appreciating the creators in different types of dances within the Maibi jagoi, such as Laiching jagoi – in this particular dance it is choreographed depicting the creation of heaven and earth. Hakchang Saba – choreographed depicting the re-enactment of the growth of a child in womb, the limbs, organs being shaped describing by the lyrics. Pamyang Lon – here the dance sequence, depicted the growth of mankind through cultivation, sowing, harvesting etc. other being the Yumsharol jagoi depicting the stages of house construction as for Meitei, the houses are yet strictly followed the sequence of placing the important elements under a house at a definite place as followed by the ancestors. Panthoibi jagoi – a dance that celebrates the divine love of the Lord Nongpok and Goddess Panthoibi with all these dance steps express by the Maibis in 364 khutheks (hand gestures), with the flow of music and lyrics describing the beauty as a tale about all the creation, and re-enactment that has brought into life by the creators.

As the song and dances forms as a way of rituals in Lai haraoba, the lyrics highlights the celebration by singing in a beautiful unique folk tune expressing the love through dance steps and song.



Lyrics of the folk song sung (In Manipuri language)

*Soraren gi Mapari, (Son of the sky- father)*  
*Numit na ngallingei kahouro (Grow whilst the sun shines)*  
*Tha na wanglingei wang houro (Lengthen whilst the moon waxes)*  
*Epa machum taro, (Blessings of the father)*  
*Epu na machum tarase. (Blessings of the fore- fathers)*  
*Ting Ting chaoro (Grow – Grown, be grown)*  
*Chaoro – Shango (Grow – Tall)*  
*Ho yah yah ho yah! Ho ya ya ya ya yah!*

This way the songs are sung and there are many others, like singing in a conversation style, and all of these is dedicated to the deities expressing the love while celebrating the festival of Gods.

There are also tribal dances such as Kabui Naga dance – traditionally a duet performance wearing the tribal costumes where, the boys carry a sharp weapon called daos in their hands and dances along with the girls and it differ from one another as it has a series of stylised dances for

the Kabui tribes. But mostly, it is accompanied by a heavy music flowing of the instrument drums, drumming paying the chorus footsteps along with a high-pitched song being performed live aside the performance. It is a very energetic form of dance which needs a strong force of dance by the foot stepping so, mostly it is danced by the young boys and girls. It also attracts the audiences for its eye-catching energetic dance steps. It has also been choreographed a lot in mix forms calling it as a Tribal composed dance. The Luivat pheizak jagoi a dance of Tangkhul Naga is also one of the most popular dances from the community. And it can be said as the most selective option among the performers for its energetic steps. From time to time, the art of performing dances has been growing among the localities with this passion of showcasing the steps as a form of rituals to the Deities had made the Gurus of Dances composed many other forms like the Soraren jagoi and other composed tribal group dance.

This way the dances are scheduled by the authorities according to the day limit where on the other hand follows the same rituals and ceremonies of Lai Yakairol every morning and other ceremonies such as the 'Lai lam thokpa' it can be translated as the sight seeing of God, which differs from one to another, Lai haraoba but to the ones that performs like for the Ibudhou Koubru haraoba, Lai eshing chaibi, Lainingthou Puthiba haraoba does it by carrying the deities in a Palaki by the group of male as a attendant of God for that ceremony after performing the important rituals by the Maibis. It goes out of the shrine in the near places under their care with a procession like the Lai loukhatpa has made, gathered by many people dressed up in many traditional costumes heading by the Maiba Maibi with the flow of dhol, saxophone, pena and many other instruments singing along the procession. Distinctively, as the spirit of the deities are within the idols, in this ceremony, the palaki that is carried by the attendants goes along the path the oracle wants to during this rite, it has been even witnessed to carried down the river as well sometimes but not necessarily in every rite as there is belief to happen in some extent terming as 'Lai ngaoba' where it occurs if the God us demented while coming back to the shrine.

People also strictly follows the commands of the priest to follow the proper rules of its sight seeing ceremony. Because, during this ceremony it is believed to have some profane like if people happen to cross the street during this ceremony at that specific area, can have some troubles even a chances to loss their life but even if so, one who got hurt can pray for their well beings to the shrine, as the God is merciful, answers to the prayers. And this ceremony is not performed everyday but organised only once either on Monday or Friday during the celebration days. As the days goes, performing the rituals as a form of pleasing the Gods. On the last day, there is a ritual ceremony called the 'Lai Nupi Thiba' or the 'Kanglei Thokpa' that is a trance dance performed by Maibi which serves as the most dramatically beautiful in Kanglei type of Lai haraoba. In the backbone of ritual there lies a series of explanations according to the Meitei's belief and mythology. The- Lai Khoriphaba, a God that was a great warrior and a sportsman, as it is known for being the first team of the polo game of Gods. Like a weapon he is believed to carry a Polo stick with him, where it is portrayed by the Maibi as well by carrying the polo stick while performing the rituals. The performance is sequenced with the story behind, that is in search of the bride being the main ritual performed here. The God Koubru (a ruling God) gave his permission to choose any bride of his choice with this, it has happened to choose a woman in his first choice who is already a wife a God Loiyanakpa, but the Koubru Lai couldn't accept this also on the same time the Lord didn't want to take back the words he said so, he led the Khoriphaba choose again of his choice but he has to be blindfolded. With this backbone story, yet in every Kanglei Lai haraoba the Lai Nupi Thiba is performed which involves a group of Maibi taking care aside the induced Maibi.

The Maibi who has induced takes the bride after being blindfolded with the polo stick being grazed as an actual taking of bride of the Lord Khoriphaba during the past times, and this chosen girl had to become a Maibi, where the family of her has to accept the fate of the girl but this process was

banned in the 1950's and even stopped. Hence, it was modified, and it was now performed for its rituals purpose only. This trance dance itself is a piece of art performed by the Maibi who is believed to be spirited, accompanying by the other group of Maiba and Maibi checking to stop from catching a bride while the Maibi in trance walks and roam near the audience with full strength and desire to select a bride. The hit of polo stick can result into some health consequences so the audiences who are sitting at that open- space watching the ritual runs out of panic when the Amaibi comes nearer to them on the other hand, it gives chills to the excitement level at its peak of the audiences which highlights the performance loved by the people and its taboos still continues.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CELEBRATION**

Manipur being a state to many different traditions, and culture the celebration of Lai haraoba other than its legacies it also serves as a medium of preserving the rituals, traditional dances, music and also as a way of promoting it. Particularly, this festival makes the younger generation aware about the ancestral worship, which is hardly found or known to the world. The priest that is known as is Maiba and Maibi wears a distinctive attire and performed the rituals in this entire celebration and whats more unique is that their ability to trance the moment they want to perform an important ceremony. The beauty of the Lai haraoba lies in the various art that is performed during this festival. It also gives a platform to foster a sense of unity among the diverse communities of Manipur by bringing the people all together celebrating under a same shrine, dedicating the dance amd music as a form of prayer. Even in terms of the Art and Music of Manipur, which is famous worldwide for its elegant and beautiful hand gestures gives an inspiration among the people in field of Dance and Music to promote furthermore and bring out more creativity and showcase their artistic talents by performing in Lai haraoba. The kid of even under 11 years was planed by the parents to let their kid have at least once perform to the shrine, with this it gives a lot of knowledge about the culture at the very young age which can form a habitual of preserving and love of dedicating it again when it comes next year celebration and it can also seen as a support of the dance teachers, not promoting their arts but also preserving by the leaners outside the celebration.

The mythical belief of Meitei, the Umanglai which is being worshipped in this celebration reminds the people of its origins and many other creations that has been associated with the deities along the path of modernisation, as a way of preserving it by having an occasion other than a festival that is celebrated in home, but in Lai haraoba, as people from many places gathered at a same place though its celebrated differently but the localities gets the chance to celebrate together as a spiritual fulfilment and a ceremony such as Lai loukhatpa chatpa (procession of God Invocation) makes the people of all ages flaunt the traditional attires and many other costumes all over again. It can be said as a perk of the celebration giving the generation a sense to know about how rich by making it visualised the traditions and culture of Manipur and its diversity. And among the many types of Lai haraoba, the Moirang Thanjing Lai haraoba- one of the biggest celebrations which is has been celebrated from the time beings of the forefathers and for mostly 30 days which gives an opportunity for people to visit the important holy site situated at the Bishnupur district a little away from capital Imphal. And with this people from various places out of dedication plans to perform there and get the blessing from the God and Goddesses. It also gives a platform to share the knowledge about the history of the land worship knowing from the elders by socialising and have a bonding among the people from different districts once in a year as a way of learning and preserving it from a generation to another generations.

As per the Tourism of Manipur, people from around the world who loves to explore the new cultural experiences can visit during this celebration as it gives a variety of opportunities openly to explore that is uniquely celebrated and related to it, the art sectors and industries of handloom and

handicrafts can promote the rich variations of clothing that can be worn during such festivals. It also gives boost to economic with its growing number of clients in such fields as well as to the tourism sector to show the hidden gem of Manipur to not only in India but also to the world at large. Adding to this beautiful culture of Manipur, knowing the meaning behind every rituals of Lai haraoba would add more value and awe in realisation of how rich and unique the traditions is and in every aspect of ceremony that is performed blends with the idea of appreciation of all the creations in our world as a tale in the flow of folk song with the beautiful musical instrument accompanying the every moment of the celebration.

## CONCLUSION

After looking into the various sources and the significance behind the rituals, it can be concluded that the Lai haraoba is not just a traditional festival of the Meitei's spiritual beliefs but also a celebration of the creations, nature, socio- cohesion overall a remembrance of the past and it can be stand as an internal example of the Meitei's cultural beliefs and religion which is greatly honoured by performing different rituals and ceremonies that is distinctively performed by the Maiba Maibi (priests and priestesses) for all the important rituals where on the other hand, rest of the locality performs or take part in ceremonies such as Lai loukhatpa chatpa, Laibou chongba- chali saba, Lai lam thokpa and many other traditional folk dance of Manipur which serves as a form of prayer. This festival is also unique in itself that in every ritual it serves as an event of depicting the creation of the world, forming of living beings making of houses, food, agriculture etc. It is also believed to be said that during this celebration, one doesn't get the fruit by praying but through satisfaction-the blessings are given from the God. But many people participate out of love and not just for blessings as the legacies of the Meitei's belief can be seen at this festival bright and clear. The way of celebration is also differed from one to another, while some Lai haraoba carries out deities for sight seeing during the celebration in a palaki and some don't. It depends on the deity that is being worshipped at the specific area. This celebration holds an important role in fabric of the state as a way of remembering and pleasing through rituals of dances and songs to the forest deity, Umanglai by many people over the centuries. The Lai haraoba also gives a sense of unity which combines the people under an Indigenous identity also by giving an opportunity to express and showcase their cultural significance-dedicating to the deities when the celebration arrives. In this growing phase of many influences around the world such traditional festival that is organised every year, reminds the people of their roots and also the entire existence by also giving a moment to re- vibe the traditions.

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