



Significance of Lai Haraoba in Manipuri Society

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I. INTRODUCTION

Lai Haraoba is a festival which is celebrated annually in different areas of the Manipur State and is related with the tradition, ritual and belief of the Meitei communities. The festival shows an image of the Meiteis way of living, tradition and customs and this festival is the original source of dance, music, rites and rituals, indigenous games and primitive live of Manipur. The Lai Haraoba is perhaps the most authentically Meitei of all the traditionally festivals, and the one which most closely preserves the ancient Manipuri culture. As one Manipuri Scholar and writer has put it:

Lai Haraoba festival is not merely a dance or a series of dances but a drama, a dance-drama so to speak, associated with ancestor-worship, village deities numbering more than 300, Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi with Manipuri priests and priestesses being the directors and star performers. The Lai Haraoba mirrors the entire culture of the Manipuri people. It reveals its strength and weaknesses, the belief and superstitions, and perhaps also the charm and happiness of the Manipuri people, (E. Nilakanta, 1997).

Different scholars and writer have given different interpretation regarding the literal meaning of Lai Haraoba. J. Shakespear interprets Lai Haraoba as “pleasing of gods”. According to Louise Lightfoot interpreted Lai Haraoba as “spirits pleasure”. T.C. Hudson views Lai Haraobca as “the rejoicing of the gods”. E. Nilakanta opines it as the “merry making of the gods and goddess”.

The various act which were performed by the Almighty God for the creation of the universe are expressed in the form of dance, song etc in Lai haraoba festival. Lai Haraoba also signifies the creation of the universe by the Lord Asiba. Thereby, Lai Haraoba is said to be cosmology. This festival is performed in front of a particular Lainingthou (God) and Lairembi (Goddess). The venue of the performance is known as the “Laibung”. Lai Haraoba conducted with the help of three ritual functionaries called maiba, maibi and penakhongba. They played the major role during the festival. Lai Haraoba mirrors the entire culture of Manipur people. It is in belief the culture of Meities communities are derived from Lai-haraoba.

Origin: One cannot trace the origin of Lai-Haraoba in the history of Manipur and there is no historically authentic evidence to show how and when Lai Haraoba started. Traditional scholars are divided in their views regarding the origin of Lai Haraoba. The first group is said that the Lai Haraoba was first originated on the top of “Koubru Hill” and another second group opines that Lai Haraoba was first performed at “Langmai hill” (now known as Nongmaiching Hill). This viewpoint was based on Meitei text “Panthoibi Khongul” taking it as the sole authority. Many of the traditional scholars associated the origin of the Lai Haraoba with the Leisemba myth (creation myth of the universe). They supported the original source of Lai Haraoba as expressed in the ancient Puya – “Lai Hoi Laoba” which means rejoices of the God.

Types Lai Harsaoba is celebrated in different villages or for a clan in Manipur. According to the tradition of the village or a clan, Lai Haraoba can be divided into four types.

- 1) Kanglei Haraoba: Imphal and surrounding areas.
- 2) Kanglei Haraoba:- A place about 45 km to the south west from Imphal (at Moirang celebrated in honour of Lord Thangjing).
- 3) Chakpa Haraoba:- Andro about 40 km distance to the east from Imphal,

Sekmai about 25 km far to the north from Imphal, Leimram about 25 km far to the west from Imphal and Khurkhul and Kwatha about 100 km on the Indo Burma road 15 km before Moreh Bazar etc (All non-Vaishnavite villages).

- 4) Kakching Haraoba:- A place about 45 km far to the South, East from Imphal.

Kanglei Haraoba:- This type of Lai Haraoba performed a ritual during the festival called the “Kangleithokpa”. It is also known as “Lai Nupi Thiba”. In Kanglei Haraoba, Lai Ekouba is done on the bank of the river or pond, Lairen Mathek (a serpent move) known as “Yumjao Phaphal” is performed, annually Lai Lamthokpa is done during Lai Haraoba. On the day of lairoi (the last day of Lai Haraoba festival) ritual song known as “Qugri Hangel” is sung and after Lai Haraoba, Mukna (wrestling), Lamjel (race), a kind of sport is performed.

Moirang Haraoba:- It is celebrated during the month of May-June annually. It takes three years to celebrate this festival. In the first year of this Lai Haraoba, Yum phamba is celebrated. In the second and third year Lamthokpa and Khongchingba are celebrated respectively. Lai Ekhouba is done on the bank of Moirang river, “Nanbi Maril”, Lairel Mathek known as Tillu Lairu is performed. Olugri Hungel is sung on the eve of Khongchingba, Mukna Lamjel (a kind of sports) is performed during Lai Haraoba festival.

Chakpa Haraoba:- Lai Haraoba performed by a GROUP OF Chakpa people (Non-Vaishnavite communities) is known as Chakpa Haraoba. According to the place they settled the number of God and the process of Lai Haraoba is different. They worship their ancestor Chakparel Sawang. Almost all the Chakpa village use animal for “Saren Chanba”.

Kakching Haraoba:- In Kakching Haraoba, Leiroi Hanjaba (a person in charge of collecting flower), a long with his khongbu (partner) go in search of flower in Purum village a day before the commencement of Lai Haraoba. God and Goddess are carried in the palanguin and go for Ekhouba and carried out the process of Ekhum Etaba and Ekaba. On the last day of Lai Haraoba, Ngapurum Tanba (eel hunting) programme is performed.

Rituals:- One day before the commencement of the Lai Haraoba festival, the ritual of Lai-phisetpa (dressing up the deities) is performed by the maibas and maibis. In this ritual, idols of Lainingthou and Lairembi are made from bamboo and are clothed.

Main Rituals of the First Day in Kanglei Haraoba:-

The festival begins with the ritual of Lai-ekouba, which signifies the summoning of the spirit of the deity from the water. The maibas (priests) and Maibi (priestess) along with people of the villages, walk to the designated Ekhoupham (river or pond) in two rows. The maiba (male priest) invokes the God by throwing Konyai (gold and silver coins) and rice into the water. One maibi danced meanwhile another maibi produces the Hirilung (thread made of cotton) from an Ehaiphu (earthen pitcher) and ties the Leiyom (a particular species of leaves) to a stick three times. Holding it in her right hand, she dips the stick in the water and then, with the left hand, rings a bell, chanting the Laihourol (Hymns of creation) till such time as the spirit of the deity enters her body. Immediately afterwards she falls into a trance and begins to predict the future of the people.

One the ritual is completed, the procession returns back to the shrine maintaining the former order in two lines. This part of the ceremony is known as the “Hikaba or Lai Higaba”. The spirit of the god and that of the goddess now reside respectively in two Ehaiphu carried by two Lai-pubas. This procession is headed by a maibi who dances, rings a bell in time with the pena (a string instrument) and beats the Harao pung (a drum). Lastly, these occurs a ritualistic sequence corresponding to the infusion of the spirits in the urns, by which the installation of the God and Goddess is carried out. After the installation ceremony, the divinities are worshipped daily. Prescribed ritual are performed in the morning as well as in the evening.

II. MORNING RITUAL

Lai yakaiba:- Everyday in the morning Pena khongba sits in front of the two presiding deities and sings Yakairol, a song of invocation inviting the deities to the day’s programme.

Laimang-Phamba or Laipao Chenba:- The Maibi sits in front of the deities and transports herself into a state of trance and delivers laopao (prophecy or oracle). This session is called Laimang Phamba, and then she danced Jagoi Katpa for the two deities.

Evening Ritual:

Lei-Langba:- Men, women and children in their traditional costumes go to the Laibung, the venue of the festival, to offer flowers to the deities. The actual offering of flowers is known as the Lei-Langba.

Hoi Laoba:- The maiba sings Lai Hoi Laoba with accompanied by pena player and a harao pung. A few participants joins them in the singing while clapping.

Thougal Jagoi- The maibis and the participants dances the Thougal jagoi which invoke the deities.

Laiching Jagoi:- The maibi dance with the Langthrei (a special leaf) held between their fingers. This sequence involves a variety of expressive movements where the spirit of the deity is invited to enter maibis body. It also includes the Laisem Jagoi or the enactment of the creation of the earth by nine God (Laibungthou mapal) and seven Goddesses (Lainura taret).

Laibou or Laipou:- Laibou is an important ritual in which the maibi and the other performers or participants will enact the whole process of the life on the earth, starting from the mystery of sexual union to the

humdrum existence of men and women. The performers who were in the procession of Ikouba will now make two rings around the Laibou-la and maibi will shout instructing the performers to remain silent and motionless because an important ritual act called Hoirou Haya Laoba is going to be enacted. The maibi will utter some meaningful lines by way of incantatory singing to the accompaniment of pena music.

Hakchang saba or Hakchang sagatpa:- The maibi performs the important dance of hakchang saba depicting the formation of the human body limb after limb in the mother's womb. The various parts of the body are made through dance and symbolic gestures. The complete process of building up of human anatomy takes almost sixty four (64) intricate Laibou Khutheks or hand movement, gestures, mimes that are highly dramatic & theatrical. In the 64th Laibou khuthek the infusion of the soul into the body or thawai happa is enacted.

Yumsarol:- Yumsarol is the detail enactment of building of a house or construction of a house of a house. After the construction the house is offered to the Gods.

Panthoibi Jagoi:- After the Yumsarolk, the maibi and the procession perform Panthoibi Jagoi for the prosperity of the whole community. This particular dance which is accompanied by a romantic song sung by the maibi and penakhongba refers to the love of the mythical hero Nongpok Ningthou for his spouse Panthoibi.

Phisarol Jagoi:- After the Panthoibi jagoi, the next item in the sequence of performances is that of the preparation of cloth and offering it to the presiding deities. With a series of gestures, body movements, songs and dialogues the maibi and the members of the procession will depict the whole process of the plantation of cotton plants, preparation of cultivation, sowing of seeds, the flowers offer it to the Gods.

Longkhoh Jagoi:- Longkhoh jagoi is the ritual of gathering the soul of the deities. The symbolical representation of gathering of soul is done by "Long" (a type of basket to catch fish). The maibi begins the long khonba from the south west corner.

Chongkhong Jagoi Phibul Jagoi Pachuba (Lai Kaba):- The PLhijang cycle begins with the end of the Panthoibi cycle. Phijang cycle includes elaborate rituals like PLhibul habi, Chongkhong yetpa, Chongkhong litpa and Lairen mathek that are performed beneath the Phijan (a cloth spread out). Four men take their respective position and dspread out a new innafi or cloth forming a rectangle in the place where the Laiboula had be place earlier.

Phibul ahabi (dance with cloth balls):- The first sedfquence of the plhijang cycle is Phibul ahabi or dance with Phibuls (a kind of ball made of cloth). The four corner of the spread out phijang held by the chong bearers raise it to the shoulder level. Two pristress (maibi) take out two -phibuls or cloth balls representing "Lainingthou and Lairemma". The cloth balls are placed on the Phijang. The Amaibi dances "Phibul Jagoi" by running short quick steps, beneath the white cloth.

Chongkhong Yetpa:- The second part of the phijang cycle is Chongkhong yetpa literally meaning encircling the Chongkhong (Chong's post). The Amaibi representing Lainingthou and Lairemma in the ritual will run underneath the phijang holding the balls on their right hands by twisting and turning on the posts. The anticlockwise and clockwise movements all round the post form "8" like pattern. Still holding the balls, back in their original position, the Amaibi dance and sing songs.

They proceed towards the Lainingthou chong post standing behind the post bearer and touch the two balls to the chant of "Chui-chui" which is known as "Pachuba". This act is repeated again in the other posts.

Yumjao Paphal:- The phijang cycle ends with Lairen mathek ritual. Lairen Mathek can be interpreted as the curve of the python in which the whole community or procession participate. The spread out plhijang is raised up higher than earlier. The right and left lines symbolizing Lainingthou & Lairemma merge into one. The Amaiba leads the procession for the lairen mathek ritual, starting from right side of the presiding deities (one from Thangjing side south west). Then line marches ahead moving like a serpent beneath the white cloth, dancing between the around the form post or chong post of the phijang. On reaching the centre of the phijang (the spot where the Laiboula was earlier kept). The Amaibi touch the last person of the lines which is known as "Makok Mamei Chiknaba" or Yumjao paphal.

Wakol Laoba:- The priestess (Maibi) announces the Laikaba ritual (to retire the Lais for the day). The participants assemble together forming a circle and sing the wakol lyrics along with the priest (maiba). The song wakol is accompanists by the loud sounds of the drum. Wakol is sing.

Naosum Eshai:- After the Wakol Laoba, the pena player sings the cradle song (Naorum-eshei) to put the deities of sleep. Naosum eshei is sung to end the day celebration. The daylong celebration comes to an end with deities symbolically put to sleep until the next early morning to repeat the ritual again.

The concluding rituals include:

Lai-lam-thokpa:- On the day before lairoi or concluding day of Lai-Haraoba, in the afternoon, the masks or the devices representing the deities are placed on a dolai or palanguin and carried to a selected place away from the main area of performance. This ritual item is called Lai-Lam-Thokpa which is some kind of an outing or a trip for sightseeing.

Kanglei – Thokpa (Lai Nupi Thiba):- On the penultimate day, amaibi goes into a trance, utters the laipu (message from the deities) and chooses a bride from among the audience. She is ordained as a maibi and devotes her life to the service of the deities.

Lairoi:- Lairoi is the final ritual performance of Lai Haraoba. On the last day of the whole ritual sequence the daily items of performance will also be carried out. But on this last day some important items like Loujanba, Thang Jagoi, Ougri, Kengcho, Uyanlon, Hijing-Hirao etc are added. These items are performed after the laipou has been successfully completed.

After the Lai Haraoba festival is concluded, the next day there is a ceremonial function known as the Lei Khomba. In this ritual all the items used in the festival such as flowers, fruits and plantain leaves are buried in the premises of the temple.

The importance of the Lai Haraoba for Manipuri religion is very great. It is not only the most important of the traditional rituals; it is also a very valuable source of information about traditional Meitei religious rituals. The dancers of Manipur have maintained its continuity from generation to generation. They have preserved, practiced and performed this ritual dance festival and celebrate it to this day. It is thus that the Lai Haraoba festival plays a significant role in inspiring and guiding the emotional and cultural life of the Manipuri people.

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