

## Exploring Social Dynamics within the *Lai Haraoba* Festival: A Case Study of Meitei Culture

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### Abstract

The *Lai Haraoba* festival is a significant religious event celebrated by the Meiteis, an indigenous community in Manipur, India. This cyclical celebration encompasses a wide array of rituals, dances, music, and sports, all performed within the social frameworks of lineages, clans, or villages. Central to this cultural heritage is the portrayal of the world's creation and human existence through various aesthetic art forms, guided by specialists known locally as *Amaibis*, *Amaibas*, and *Pena khongbas*. These rituals also serve to invoke supernatural forces for the fertility and prosperity of the community. This study aims to contextualize the festive spirit of *Lai Haraoba* through empirical methods such as interviews and observations, shedding light on its symbolic representations of joy, social cohesion, fertility, and prosperity within a religious context.

**Keywords:** *Lai Haraoba*, Meitei, Manipur, social cohesion, fertility

### Introduction

The festival is a ubiquitous aspect of human culture, serving as a marked occasion for ceremonial celebration and social interaction across diverse societies. Its rich tapestry of colours, dramatic flair, and historical underpinnings, often involving indigenous peoples, has long captivated the interest of observers (Falassi, 1987). Ceremonialism, whether religious or secular, leverages the spectacle of ritual to reinforce communal beliefs and values (Herskovits, 1974). Rituals, characterized by repetitive symbolic activities such as dance, song, speech, and gestures, are deeply ingrained in cultural schemas and often imbued with mythological significance (Schultz and Lavenda, 1998). The *Lai Haraoba* festival of the Meiteis stands as a prime example of such ceremonialism, blending celebration with commemoration (Singh and Singh, 2018). Central to this festival are the "lais," revered deities or ancestors whose sacred dwellings lie within forest realms. The festival is a testament to the Meiteis' reverence for these entities, expressed through offerings, dance, and fertility rites aimed at fostering village prosperity, known as "khunjao leichaoba." This highly structured religious event features elaborate rituals and ceremonies led by designated sacred performers, while informal participation occurs at the group level.

Recent studies have shed further light on the intricate dynamics at play within the *Lai Haraoba* festival. For instance, research by Farber (2018) explores how primal celebrations like *Lai Haraoba* are often situated within cyclical time, emphasizing their enduring significance and cyclical nature. Additionally, contemporary analyses have delved into the festival's choreographic and aesthetic dimensions, revealing how it serves as a locus for the expression of cultural identity and community cohesion in Meitei society. Understanding the complexities of the *Lai Haraoba* festival offers valuable insights into the intersections of religion, culture, and social interaction, providing a nuanced lens through which to examine the enduring traditions and evolving dynamics of indigenous communities in Manipur, India.

### Literature Review

India, often referred to as the land of festivals, boasts a rich tapestry of cultural diversity, with a plethora of secular and religious celebrations that serve as integral aspects of people's lives, fostering unity and camaraderie among its diverse ethnic groups. Scholars have noted various reasons behind the observance of festivals, ranging from mythological narratives to environmental factors (Dunghav, 2015). These festivals, particularly religious ones, serve as public expressions of faith, strengthening believers' spiritual connections (Arwa, 2020). Additionally, they contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage, reinforcing the normative beliefs and practices that define a community's identity

(Herskovits, 1949). Recent studies have expanded on Herskovits' observations, delving deeper into the intricate interplay of cultural elements within festival rituals. Authors such as Dunghav (2015) and Arwa (2020) have explored the multifaceted meanings and symbolism embedded in festival practices, shedding light on the complex web of causality, logic, and social processes that underpin these cultural expressions.

Moreover, recent research has examined the role of festivals in contemporary Indian society. Gupta and Singh (2005) investigated the impact of globalization on traditional festivals, highlighting how modernization and changing societal norms influence festival dynamics. They emphasized the adaptive nature of festivals in response to evolving cultural landscapes. The study by Patel et al. (2012) explored the economic dimensions of festivals, revealing their significant contribution to local economies through tourism, commerce, and employment generation. This economic perspective provides insight into the multifaceted benefits of festivals beyond their cultural and social functions. Further the research by Mishra and Sharma (2018) delved into the psychological aspects of festival participation, uncovering its role in enhancing individual well-being and psychological resilience. Their findings underscore the therapeutic effects of communal celebrations on mental health and social cohesion.

Moreover, contemporary scholars like Reddy (2020) have examined the environmental implications of festivals, addressing issues such as waste generation, pollution, and resource consumption. Their work advocates for sustainable festival practices to mitigate environmental degradation while preserving cultural traditions. In essence, festivals serve as dynamic arenas where cultural, social, and religious dimensions intersect, offering valuable insights into the complexities of human societies and the enduring significance of cultural heritage in contemporary contexts.

### **Objectives**

The present research aims i) to describe the different types of Lai Haraoba, a ritual festival of the Meiteis; ii) to encapsulate the process of the festival and elucidate its significance within the Meitei worldview; and iii) to explore how Lai Haraoba acts as a unifying communication tool fostering inter and intra-ethnic cohesion among the Meitei community.

### **Materials and Methods**

The present investigation utilized an empirical approach, focusing on four sacred sites in Manipur: Nambol Maibam in Bishempur district, Singjamei Yumnam Leikai in Imphal West district, Nongpok Ningthou Panthoibi, Yairipok Top Chingtha in Imphal East, and Moirang in Bishnupur district. These sites were selected due to the differences observed in the ritualistic festivals of Lai Haraoba. The primary data were collected through in-depth interviews from both participants and non-participants of the festivals. These interviews aimed to gather insights into the cultural significance, rituals, beliefs, and experiences associated with the festival. The researchers also conducted detailed observations of the festivals, focusing on various aspects such as rituals, performances, community interactions, and expressions of cultural identity. Both participant and non-participant observation techniques were employed to gain a comprehensive understanding. Additionally, secondary sources such as writings from old manuscripts, locally known as puya, were utilized to supplement the primary data. These secondary sources provided historical context and cultural insights into the Lai Haraoba festivals.

### **Lai Haraoba Festival of the Meiteis**

#### **Origin:**

The term "Lai Haraoba," meaning 'pleasing of the gods,' encapsulates the essence of a ritual deeply ingrained in Meitei culture (Parratt, 1997). Its primary objective is to summon the 'Lais' or deities and perform rituals to bring them joy. This festival, characterized by merrymaking and reverence, is revered as a fount of literature, culture, and philosophy among the Meitei people (Dhiren, 1991, p. 244). Scholars trace its inception back to the 4th Century B.C., underscoring its ancient roots (Khelchandra, 1971, p. 25). The term itself finds its derivation in the mythic narrative of 'Lai-Hoi-Laoba,' signifying the jubilant shout of 'Hoi' during the Leisemba creation myth. According to this myth, Atiya Sidaba, the son of the Supreme God Atingkok Sidaba, faced the challenge of populating the earth after its creation. Guided by divine wisdom, Atiya Sidaba entered his father's mouth, thereby ushering forth all living beings, evoking a resounding chorus of 'Hoi.' This exuberant shout,

henceforth known as 'Lai Haraoba,' symbolizes the festival's essence – a re-enactment of creation through rituals, ceremonies, hymns, and dances aimed at pleasing the deities. Although accounts of Lai Haraoba are scarce in written form, a few traditional sacred manuscripts known as puyas offer insights into its sacred narrative. The festival's geographical origins are subject to debate, with some asserting its genesis atop the sacred Koubu hill, while others claim its inception at Langmai hill, now known as Nongmaiching hill, based on the 'Panthoibi Khongul' puya (Singh, 1963). Regardless, its introduction predates the reign of Pakhangba, the first Meitei king, believed to have occurred in 33 A.D., who possessed both human and divine attributes (Singh and Singh, 1967, p. 691).

#### **Variations:**

Despite the uniform philosophical essence and core rituals of Lai Haraoba, regional variations abound, particularly evident in dances, songs, hymns, and rituals. Scholars note these distinctions across different locales (Ngariyanbam, 1972; Wahengbam, 1989; Naorem, 2009; Sharma, 2010). According to Pandit Loishang, an esteemed institution of religious leaders in Manipur, Lai Haraoba manifests in four main forms: Kanglei Haraoba, centered around the royal precincts; Moirang Haraoba, hailing from the Moirang region; Chakpa Haraoba, performed by the indigenous Chakpa community; and Kakching Haraoba, a vibrant expression among the people of Kakching. In essence, the Lai Haraoba Festival, with its rich tapestry of myth, ritual, and tradition, stands as a testament to the cultural heritage and spiritual depth of the Meitei people.

#### **Time and Space:**

The commencement of the Lai Haraoba celebration typically coincides with the early summer season, following the selection of an auspicious date by village authorities in consultation with the Pandit Loishang. Usually falling during the lean period of the agricultural cycle, this festival spans several days, although in certain regions such as Moirang, it extends for a month. Notably, the duration is often set in odd numbers, aligning with the chang, si counting system, with odd-numbered days preferred. Ritually, the festival unfolds within the expansive, forested confines where the deity resides, with the shrine, known as Laishang, oriented towards the East or South. Adorned with thrones embellished with thakhan, the central shrine is flanked by an open rectangular or square space termed 'laibung'. Symbolic elements such as pe (giant umbrella), chung (circular structure), and chhatra (canopy) embellish the sacred precincts, while the corners of the laibung are designated for guardian deities. Socially, the festival serves as a conduit for communal prosperity, focusing on lineage or clan welfare and the overall health of the village. Discipline is maintained by appointed elderly officials, with hierarchical seating arrangements signaling social order. The festival's host, the piba, oversees proceedings, while designated individuals fulfill specific roles such as flower collection, provision of plantain leaves, and firewood arrangement.

#### **Ritual Specialists:**

Integral to the Lai Haraoba are three principal ritual functionaries: the Amaiba (priest), Amaibi (priestess), and Pena asheiba (musician). Clad in white attire, Amaibas orchestrate rituals and performances, drawing upon their expertise in myths, hymns, and dances. Amaibis, addressed as Ima (mother), serve as mediators between mortals and immortals, embodying divine communication during states of possession. Pena asheiba, the primary musician, skillfully plays the indigenous fiddle, contributing to the festival's auditory landscape.

#### **Performance Structure and Social Interaction:**

The Lai Haraoba festival unfolds through a tapestry of interconnected rituals, beginning with formal invocations and deity adornment. Lai ekouba, the calling of divine souls from water sources, symbolizes the union of cosmic principles, while khayom lakpa enacts the synthesis of male and female forces. Ritual dances, devoid of embellishments, underscore communal reverence for deities, with strict adherence to dress codes reflecting moral ethics. Evening rituals, such as laibou-la-thaba, embody heightened spiritual presence, necessitating respectful conduct. Performances symbolizing creation myths and agricultural rites underscore the festival's thematic depth, while the amaibis' trance states offer insights into community concerns and prophetic foresight. The festival's culmination, lairoi, features sword dances, symbolizing union and purification, alongside symbolic fire lighting and romantic dramas. Ougri song and dance showcasing both protective and destructive aspects, further enrich the festival's cultural tapestry. In sum, the Lai Haraoba Festival, with its intricate rituals and

vibrant performances, serves as a nexus of social cohesion, spiritual expression, and cultural continuity within Meitei society.

#### **Present Trends of Lai Haraoba in Manipur:**

The present trajectory of Lai Haraoba in Manipur reflects a rich tapestry woven from mythic origins and historical evolution. Legend traces its roots to antiquity, while some scholars pinpoint its development as far back as the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. However, it burgeoned into prominence during the reign of King Khagemba in the 16<sup>th</sup> century A.D., as attested by royal chroniclers. Yet, the advent of Vaishnavism and its subsequent consolidation under King Garibaniwaj (1709-1748 A.D.) ushered in a period of decline for Lai Haraoba, challenging its continuity. It was during the reign of Bheigyachandra (1759-1761, 1763-1798) that revitalization took place, characterized by a synthesis of Hinduism and traditional belief systems, breathing new life into the ancient rites. This period witnessed a renaissance of sorts, as Lai Haraoba was reimagined and reshaped to harmonize with the evolving sociocultural landscape. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century marked a pivotal juncture with the advent of 'Meitei revivalism,' a movement aimed at reclaiming and reaffirming the distinct cultural identity and worldview of the Meitei community. In this fervent atmosphere of cultural resurgence, Lai Haraoba emerged as a paramount vehicle for cultural preservation, revered as a repository of tradition and heritage.

However, amidst the winds of change sweeping through Manipur's socio-political and religious realms, the outward manifestations of Lai Haraoba have undergone subtle transformations. Variations in songs, offerings, attire, dances, musical accompaniments, organizational structures, and spatial arrangements reflect the flux of modernity intersecting with tradition. Despite these surface alterations, the essence of core rituals remains largely untouched, preserving the sanctity and continuity of ancient practices. Contemporary expressions of Lai Haraoba have seen the incorporation of new performing arts and dances, catering to modern sensibilities while retaining a sense of cultural authenticity. These innovations serve not only as forms of entertainment and amusement but also as dynamic reflections of a living tradition, adapting and evolving to resonate with changing times.

#### **Conclusion**

The festival of Lai Haraoba serves as a sacred enactment, a reverent performance aimed at appeasing ancestral deities while invoking their blessings in return. At its heart lies a symbolic representation of the cosmic genesis, the unfolding of the universe and its myriad life forms. Each ritual, meticulously crafted, mirrors the union of the Supreme Male (pa principle) and the Supreme Female (pi principle), embodied by Father Sky and Mother Earth. Central to the festival's daily rites is the evocation of fertility, portrayed through both fission and fusion symbolism. This portrayal carries profound implications, subtly advocating for the prosperity of the people. The underlying logic suggests that a flourishing population contributes to the strength and vitality of the community, fostering a robust human resource base essential for a thriving society. From the inaugural day to the culminating moments, the rituals of Lai Haraoba intricately weave a narrative of cosmic evolution, human growth, and the development of society and culture. It is a saga that unfolds in layers, a tapestry rich with diverse yet harmonious religious and folk elements. Embedded within its fabric is the essence of collective solidarity, extending from lineage and clan bonds to inter-community harmony.

In essence, Lai Haraoba embodies a multifaceted celebration of life's abundance and vitality. It is a festival steeped in the primal urge for procreation, nurturing the seeds of vitality, abundance, and communal well-being. As participants immerse themselves in its rituals, they partake in a timeless tradition that reaffirms the interconnectedness of all living beings and the cyclical rhythms of creation.

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