

Music, Hymns, and Creation Myths in the Lai Haraoba Rituals of Manipur



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Orange marigolds, white jasmines, young girls in the brightest *inaphees*¹ and *phaneks*², the beat of drums, the soulful strains of the *pena*³ fiddle, men in black on Manipuri ponies, and the deities carried in gilt-edged sequined palanquins – the Lai Haraoba⁴ festival in Spring is a kaleidoscope of colours and sounds. Adding grace and dignity to the proceedings, are the more soberly dressed Maibis,⁵ the high priestesses who guide the festivities and prayers. Such a sight can be seen in Meitei-populated areas across the length and breadth of Manipur providing a vivid reminder that the Manipuris have ensured the survival of their traditions over centuries.

So how did this beautiful festival which has a rich cultural and ecological concept of protecting sacred groves of forests and all living beings originate? Local lore traces its origins as far back as 2,000 years when the Meiteis⁶ came up

¹ Inaphee is usually a piece of cloth worn over a woman's upper body.

² Phanek is an ankle length cloth wore around the breast or waist by Meitei women.

³ Pena, an instrument made from a bamboo rod and the shell of a gourd or coconut. The pena is an ancient instrument that is a sort of national symbol for Manipuris.

⁴ Lai Haraoba literally means 'Pleasing of Gods' through reenactments of strict structural rituals.

⁵ Maibis are female priestesses often dressed in white and they act as mediums linking the natural and supernaturals orders of life.

⁶ Meiteis forms the majority ethnic group of Manipur. Though they have adopted Vaishnavism, the Meiteis still retain elements of their indigenous Manipuri (Meitei) culture and faith of the ancient time. We can see the two different faiths—Vaisnavism and Meiteism—mingling and going together in this culturally fertile land.

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Image 1: The procession being led by Maibi and the Penakhongba (the fiddle man)



*Image 1.2: The procession of Lai Haraoba in the streets of Imphal.
Photo by Nongamba Sorokhaibam*

with their creation myths; their symbolic narrative of how the world began and how people first came to inhabit it. Creation myths usually address questions that are deeply meaningful for society and help people in creating their worldviews and frameworks for self-identity and expression. Creation myths develop in oral traditions and therefore typically have multiple versions and central to such myths is the Lai Haraoba festival which mirrors the culture of the Manipuri people. It reveals its strengths, its weaknesses, and its beliefs and superstitions, and perhaps more importantly also the charm and happiness of the Manipuri people. It reflects the people when they are at their most intense (Nilakanta, 1982).

Manipur is nestled in the easternmost corner of India and is marked by deep mythological stories that have been passed down orally through generations. Geographically it occupies an area of 22,327 square kilometres and has a population of about 27 lakh. The territory of Manipur covers a valley surrounded by a chain of hills. The state is a small microcosm of democratic India, embodying unity in diversity with various ethnic communities with their own unique cultures living together.

For those who want to get a deeper understanding of life on earth and the Manipuri existence this can be done by entering the universe created by the rituals of Lai Haraoba.

The centerpiece of every Lai Haraoba is known as the *laibou*, where all the ritual acts and performances take place. It is a choreographed cycle of dance and songs which tell different episodes of the Manipuri creation story—starting from how dry land first came into being from vast, endless stretches of water. ‘Then inception of life takes place and microorganisms evolve into plant life, fish and animal, to human being’ (Byron, 2016, p.13). Led by a Maibi priestess and fiddler Penakhongba, the *laibou* is participatory and local folks join in.

Lai Haraoba’s Origins

Lai Haraoba is a primary and most important ritual of the Meities. Even after Hinduism spread in the 17th century and *Ras Lilas*⁷ started being performed the indigenous festival Lai Haraoba retained its hold and remains popular to this day because of its larger philosophy, the way it embraces nature and nature conservation, and the honouring of ancestors and as a ritualistic embodiment of the life of the primitive Meities. Literally, Lai Haraoba means ‘Pleasing the God.’ The word *lai* means god and *haraoba* is merrymaking.

⁷ Ras Lila is the Manipuri classical dance invoking the love between Krishna and Radha.



Image 1.3: Lai-Ikouba (invocation or awakening of God, called Lai in Meiteilon, from sacred source of water)



Image 1.4: *Lai –ikouba (invocation or awakening of the god from sacred source of water)*

Apart from worshipping major gods like the creator Atiya Sidaba, the sky god Soraren, and the market goddess Keithel Lairembi, the Meiteis also worship their ancestral originatory gods, clan gods, gods presiding over the area, etc. For instance, the people in Moirang area worship their ancestral and presiding deity, Thangjing Lai. There are more than 300 *lais* and many more ancestors of the different clans/surnames, who are honoured during this festival in different regions. The festival includes rituals, dance, music, and recitation of chapters from epic literature (as chants or songs). Besides dealing with larger philosophical questions like the purpose of life and a community's ethics, the festival also tells the tale of how human beings took to settlements, how they satisfied their basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter, how they built their homes using wooden logs and bamboo shoots, and how they wove their fabrics on narrow looms.

Occurrence

Lai Haraoba is generally performed just before the arrival of the rainy season when people start going to the fields. After a year's work, it is a time when labourers and farmers are free to sit and enjoy archaic songs of *pena* players, mythological stories, battles fought by great warriors, and legends of numerous kings. After a successful completion of the Lai Haraoba comes the rainy season when people go to the fields to work till the harvesting season and another Lai Haraoba celebration follows.

The Meities believe that after the ritual performance of the Lai Haraoba, praying to or propitiating deified ancestors and other supernatural forces controlling human life and nature will help them reap a rich harvest.

The Lai Haraoba is celebrated for one day or three days or one week or even a month as in the case of the Lai Haraoba festival of Moirang Thangjing. In other lineage groups belonging to *sageis* (clans) the performance is generally for one day or a little more than two days.

Lai Haraoba in the poetical words of Lightfoot is:

The Lai Haraoba is held annually in or near the month of May just as the rains are beginning and when the country is donning its new verdant dress, frogs chanting in the evenings, dark blue rain clouds rolling over from the west, monsoon sunsets illuminating the skies, yellow sunlit bamboo, and birds perched high aloft trilling in insistent happiness. At that time, if we trace the sound of gently murmuring Pena instruments to its source, we may come to an open square among the cottages, with a tiny one-room temple at its edge. This is the place where the Lai Haraoba will be performed (Lightfoot, 1958, p.12).

The Maibis and their role in Lai Haraoba

A Maibi is the most significant performer in Lai Haraoba; she also orchestrates the entire performance and guides commoners in chanting hymns in ancient, archaic languages. The Maibi acts as the medium through which attempts are made to link the natural and supernatural. Elaborating on the importance of a Maibi in Lai Haraoba, Manjusri Chaki Sarkar commented: ‘the Maibis are the most spectacular presence in a Lai Haraoba ritual...they attract the undivided attention of the spectators and their ecstasy reaches a climax in trance, Lai-Tongba’ (Chaki Sarkar, M., 1984, p. 213). A Maibi’s oracular power has a tremendous effect on the audience and sometime exerts far-reaching influence upon society. The power of prophecy uplifts a Maibi’s status, and her role is thus extended far beyond the village boundaries. This is also the only role for women in traditional Meitei society that involves rank and competition for professional success, both of which belong generally to the man’s world. (Chaki Sarkar, M., 1984, p. 213)

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Image 1.5: Lai Tongba (the intense possession of Lai on Maibi during the ritual)



Image 1.6: Young Meitei girls in Maibi's attires for performing during the ritual

During ceremonies, both male Maibas and female Maibis participate but the oldest/guru Maibi is the leader and female Maibis are more important than their male counterparts. Apart from spiritual knowledge, it is also necessary that both Maibas and Maibis be expert singers and dancers. Women play a more prominent role in the rituals and it is only the female Maibi who is possessed by the *Lai* and who can deliver the oracle. Interestingly, any male Maiba who experiences being possessed by the spirit has to dress in the Maibi's women clothing and be called a 'Maibi.' If he also delivers an oracle then he is addressed as Ima Maibi (*Ima* meaning 'mother').

In society, a Maibi is addressed respectfully as 'Ima'. However, people have a fearful and ambivalent attitude towards her. Perhaps this is because of the belief that she is associated with supernatural powers or it could be because of her strange behaviour during a trance (a phenomenon which no one is allowed to watch because of the belief that a god has descended into her to cause the trance). Though flirtatious and expressive in retelling love stories like that of the mythical god and goddess, Nonpokningthou and Panthoibi a Maibi does not descend to lewdness and obscenity and neither her dignity nor prestige in the community is lowered because she tells stories of love and lust from ancient times. Even though they do not conform to the standard Meitei social roles, a few Maibis have their family lives with husbands and children but a majority live apart from secular society and stay with their gurus during their training and later only associate with fellow Maibis.

How does one become a Maibi? Someone who lives apart from society and yet is crucial for its social norms? Sometimes Maibis are selected from the audience when the lead Maibi goes into a trance or sometimes a girl or woman could be at home cooking or outside doing chores when the gods possesses her. A girl may become possessed at an early age; even as young as 7 years. A Maibi's dress is distinctive. The *phanek* (ankle-length waist wrap/sarong) and *inaphee* (wrap used around shoulders) has to be pure white. There is also an additional white waist wrapper called a sarong and half-length, worn on top of the *phanek*. Often a long-sleeved blouse is worn and the hair is decorated with flowers.

Meitei society also has Nupa maibis (males performing the duty of Maibis). This shows that Maibis are essentially seen as mediums and that gender has nothing to do with their effectiveness in the role. Rajo, a male Maibi, who has written some valuable books on Meitei rituals and myths says, 'A *Maibi* cannot be judged by sex. A *Maibi* is sexless, outside the norm of life. A *Maibi* is in between the *Lais* and human beings, like intermediaries'. (Khagendra, N., P.215)

The Pena and Penakhongba in Lai Haraoba

Pena is the traditional fiddle of Manipur which is believed to have originated in pre-historic times. There is a traditional Manipuri belief that ‘whenever there is *pena* music, the universe will continue,’ which philosophically means that, ‘whenever there is friction between the two opposite energies, the universe will continue.’

Groups of singers who wear traditional attire of block-printed dhotis and green velvet half-sleeved coats and multi-hued headgear, and the *Pena* are called *pena palas*. In the early period, all Meitei ritual ceremonies like birth, *nahut nareng* (piercing of the ears), marriage, and death had *pena* performances but now *pena* music is more likely heard only during Lai Haraoba.

The Penakhongba or the master fiddler is highly revered in Manipuri society. While several instruments are used in Manipuri music, its central instrument is the humble *pena*, a one-stringed fiddle which is capable of playing the most complicated notes in the hands of a skilful player. A Penakhongba is also a religious functionary and his presence in the Lai Haraoba is as essential as that of the Maibas and Maibis. In Lai Haraoba the Penakhongba accompanies some of the dancers and he also acts as a cantor, chanting sacred lyrics to his own playing. The singing technique has to be learned and it has its own idiosyncrasies. *Pena* music has a distinct tonal quality which expresses different moods and which is prescribed for specific sequences in Lai Haraoba.

Laibou: The creation of the human cycle and life on earth

Everyday the Lai will be awakened by the liturgical prayers known as Yakeiba performed by the Penakhongba to witness the celebrations. The *pena* that is upon the breast represents the mother and the bow, which is in the right hand, is the father.

Laibou is an important ritual in which the Maibis and other performers or participants enact all the facets of life, starting from the mystery of sexual union to the routine humdrum existence of men and women. Before *laibou* starts, the Maibi shouts instructions to the performers to remain silent and motionless. The Maiba then starts an incantation in sync with *pena* music. Even though the incantation talks of procreation, the lyrics do not sound improper or titillate the senses. Some of the lyrics go like....

*O Hoirou O nage Hoirou Nage
Hoirou Hoirouye Nageda*

These lines contain words which when viewed separately are obscene and not used in daily life. But because of their underlying philosophy these lines are unashamedly sung with great gusto. This ritual is the re-enactment of the mystical sexual intimacy between Lainingthou (father principle) and Lairembi (mother principle). Its dramatic narration makes it almost theatrical in its presentation. The Maibi forms a receptacle with her palms and fingers' joined together and with a gentle swaying movement keeps it at the height of her breasts but about half a foot away. This signifies the mother receiving the germ of life from the father. The members of the procession imitate the same hand gesture and movement. Led by the Maibi, the procession takes rhythmic dance steps to the accompaniment of the songs sung by the Penakhongba. The procession moves around three times and after the third round the Penakhongba sings a song called *Anoirol* which describes the origin of dance, and the Maibi performs the important Hakchangshaba dance depicting the formation of the human body limb after limb in the mother's womb. All the members of the procession follow the dancing Maibi's gestures and movements.

The enactment goes on...

Maibi: *Ho lainingthou lairembi manaisa* (O servants of Lainingthou and Lairembi)

Procession: *Hao* (yes)

Maibi: *Laibak saro* (make the forehead)

This is followed by a dance showing the way in which the forehead is formed.

Procession: *Sare* (yes, we have made)

Maibi: *Pishum saro* (make the eyebrows)

Followed by a hand gesture depicting the formation of the eyebrows.

Procession: *Sare* (yes, we have made)

Maibi: *Mitchi saro* (make the corners of the eyes)

Followed by a hand gesture depicting the formation of that part of the body.

Procession: *Sare* (yes, we have made)

In this way, the Maibi and the members of the procession moving and swaying gently in two rings perform 64 different items of dance depicting the formation of different parts of the body. The 64 different dance movement sequences are

called *Hakchang Langumba* which depict the making of the whole body. The 64th item is an infusion of the soul called *thawai happa* which is enacted by pressing both the hands on the navel with the right hand above the left.

After the completion of the making of the body and the infusion of the soul it is time for procreation. Almost all the important phases in the growth of a child are enacted and at the stage of full manhood the Maibi says that the man needs a house. Then the Maibi and the procession enact the whole process of constructing a house by referring to every minute detail. After its construction, the house is offered to the gods and 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 the Penakhongba refers to the love for mythical lovers Nongpokningthou and Panthoibi. The last part of the dance has songs that deal with social welfare. Controlling lust, practicing discipline, and maintaining celibacy are very clearly and forcefully sung to remind all the participants of the importance and the value of life in this human birth. Pre-marital sex was not approved in Manipuri pre-historic society and this is also the case today.

Lairen Mathek and Chongkhonglitpa are performed to represent the continuity of human life. *Kanglei-thokpa* or *lai-lam-thokpa* is a play performed outside the Laibung, the ritual performance space, in any place suitable for assembling a large number of participants.

Lairoi, literally meaning the end of Lai-Haraoba, is the final ritual performance and is very important. It includes performances such as *ougri hangen* (a song for controlling the mind), *khencho* (the concept of the third birth or the next birth), and *hijan hirao* (song of cutting big trees for two big boats: one for the male deity, the other for the female deity and with these a boat race is held).

On the day after Lairoi *mukna* (Meitei wrestling), *kangjei* (Meitei field games like hockey/polo), and races are held and prizes are given to the winners. Lai Haraoba is the only cultural activity in which social, philosophical, and religious aspects of the Meiteis come together. With such cultural activities, the deep ethos and beauty of Manipur gets preserved and is handed down from one generation to the next and centuries-old ancient stories get a new life with each retelling.



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