

THE LAI HARA OBA OF MANIPUR: DRAMATURGY, IDENTITY AND REINVENTION

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Doctor of Philosophy

Usham Rojio Singh



Theatre & Performance Studies
School of Arts & Aesthetics
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi - 110067

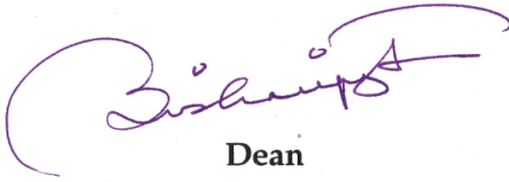


कला एवं सौन्दर्य शास्त्र संस्थान
School of Arts & Aesthetics
जवाहरलाल नेहरू विश्वविद्यालय
JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY
नई दिल्ली-110067, भारत / New Delhi-110067, India

Telephone : 26742976, 26704061, 26704177
E-mail : aesthete@mail.jnu.ac.in

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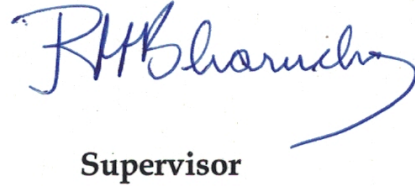
This is to certify that the dissertation titled "The Lai Haraoba of Manipur: Dramaturgy, Identity and Reinvention", submitted by Usham Rojio Singh, Theatre & Performance Studies, School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of Doctor of Philosophy is an original work and carried out by the candidate under my supervision. It has not been submitted so far in part or in full for any other degree or diploma to this or any other University. It is hereby recommended that the thesis may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.



Dean

Prof. Bishnupriya Dutt

 Prof. Bishnupriya Dutt
Dean
School of Arts and Aesthetics
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi-110067



Supervisor

Prof. Rustom Bharucha

 प्राध्यापक/Professor
कला एवं सौन्दर्य शास्त्र संस्थान
School of Arts and Aesthetics
जवाहरलाल नेहरू विश्वविद्यालय
Jawaharlal Nehru University
नई दिल्ली / New Delhi-110067

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Usham Rojio Singh

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List of Abbreviations

AMUHC	All Manipur Umanglai Haraoba Committee
AFSPA	Armed Forces Special Powers Act
ACC	Asia Cultural Council
ABU	Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union
GTB	Govindajee Temple Board
ICCR	Indian Council for Cultural Research
ILP	Inner Line Permit
LSTB	Lainingthou Sanamahi Temple Board
LSTK	Lainingthou Sanamahi Thougal Kanglup
LEP	Look East Policy
NDA	National Democratic Alliance
NSCN-IM	National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah)
STDCM	Scheduled Tribes Demand Committee of Manipur
SNA	Sangeet Natak Academi
UKAL	Umanglai Kanba Apunba Lup

Introduction

This dissertation titled *The Lai Haraoba of Manipur: Dramaturgy, Identity and Reinvention* is an attempt to contextualize the Lai Haraoba within the contradictions and changes of contemporary political culture in Manipur. An ancient ritualistic festival of the Meeteis, the Lai Haraoba re-enacts the creation myth in honour of the ancestors and traditional deities known as *Umanglai*. Celebrated at different times between the months of April and May in every *leikai* (locality) and *khul* (village) around the shrine-like structure of the *laipham* (abode of gods), the Lai Haraoba is a form of community worship wherein the site of worship is situated outside the home in the public domain. The celebratory rituals combining hymns, dance, music, trance and processions can last from a few days to a month.

This dissertation examines different types of Lai Haraoba in diverse locations - the Kanglei Haraoba celebrated in Imphal by the general Meetei community; the Moirang Haraoba performed by the Moirang clan in Moirang; and the Chakpa Haraoba performed by the Loi (outcaste) communities in their own villages. While there are many common features linking these Lai Haraobas, there are also significant differences, which I would like to highlight in order to problematize the essentialization and homogenization of Meetei identity.

Instead of getting entrapped within the ritualism of Lai Haraoba, this study prioritizes its systems of organization, multiple dramaturgies, identity politics, and reinventions of the Lai Haraoba in order to understand the complex nature of its social dynamics. The study also takes into account the

role of the state, bureaucracy, the middle class, religious boards and councils, committees and civil society organizations in the overall management of the Lai Haraoba. In the final analysis, the dissertation attempts to trace the ongoing relations between the ritual enactment of Lai Haraoba and the clash of identities in the larger context of a new market economy, supplemented by continued tensions relating to insurgencies and ethnic conflicts, and the ambivalent relationship of Manipur in relation to the Indian state.

Brief Background

In ancient times, Manipur was known by various names such as Tillikoktom Ahanba, Muwapalli, Kangleipak, Poirei Meitrabak, among other names in a larger nomenclature. It was only towards the beginning of the 18th century, when Meeteis were converted to Vaishnava Hinduism that this land came to be known as Manipur. In the olden days, the people of the neighbouring countries called this land by different names. The Burmese called it Kathe, the Assamese Mekhle, while the Bengalis called it Moglai.

The present state of Manipur has Myanmar in the east, Nagaland in the north, Cachar district of Assam in the west and Mizoram in the south. It has a territorial area of 22,327 sq. km. out of which only one tenth can be described as the plains. It has a bowl-shaped valley, called Manipur valley, surrounded by mountain ranges from all sides. Previously, there were nine districts - Imphal West, Imphal East, Bishnupur, Thoubal, Senapati, Chandel, Churachanpur, Tamenglong and Ukhrul. The first four were located in the plains and the last five in the hills. Recently on 9 December 2016, the former Congress government led by Chief Minister Okram Ibobi issued a gazette notification creating seven new districts, bringing the total number of districts to sixteen. The new districts are Jiribam (bifurcated from Imphal

East), Kangpokpi (bifurcated from Senapati), Kakching (bifurcated from Thoubal and Chandel), Tengenoupal (bifurcated from Chandel), Kamjong (bifurcated from Ukhrul), Noney (bifurcated from Tamenglong) and Pherzawl (bifurcated from Churachandpur).

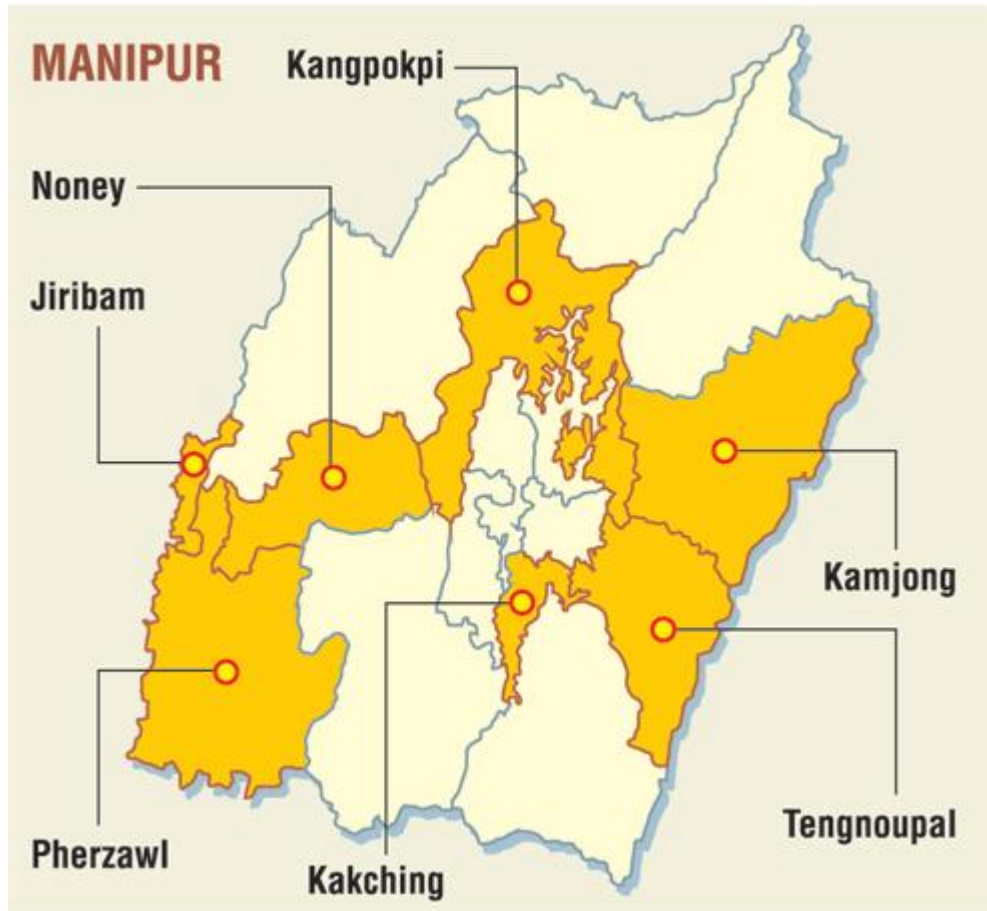


Figure 1 Map of Manipur indicating the new seven districts (Source: *The Telegraph*, Dec. 10, 2016)

While there is a concomitant relationship between the hills and plains not only in terms of social, cultural and economic dynamics but also in terms of geographical factors, there are also tensions and contradictory claims by ethnic based organizations, which are used to promote political agendas that do not always concern the existential realities of the masses. Geographically

speaking, there cannot be plains without hills. The hills are mainly inhabited by different ethnic groups, which come under the major umbrellas of the Kuki and the Naga. They have been categorized under the 'Scheduled Tribes' (ST) category in Indian constitution. The valley is inhabited by the Meeteis who are the majority people, the Lois (presently recognized as Scheduled Caste), the Meetei Pangans (Muslims), Mayangs (non-Mongoloid Indians), Nepalese and a small percentage of Naga and Kuki tribes.

There are various interpretations of the origin of the Meetei/Meitei. It is still a contested issue. There are three popular theories. The first one is the Indo-Aryan narrative, which came up after the Hinduisation of the Meetei/Meitei, trying to trace the ancestry of the Meetei/Meitei to the Aryan race. The second narrative is grounded in the autochthonous origin of the Meetei/Meitei from the Koubru peak in the North West part of present Manipur. These two narratives stand as binary opposites, tinged by religious and cultural existential anxieties.

The Indo-Aryan position is vigorously affirmed by writers like Atombapu Sharma, W. Yumjao Singh, L. Ibungohal Singh, E. Nilakanta Singh and R. K. Jhalajit Singh. Jhalajit (1965: 4) goes to the extent of saying that Manipur has always been a part of India. According to Jhalajit (1992: 4-5), the Meiteis are the descendants of Babhrvahana, the son of Arjuna and Chitrangada of the Mahabharata. He gives references to the episodes of *Mahabharata* like *Adi Parva* (when Arjuna went from Hiranyavindu to Mahendra mountains and then to 'Manipura' where he married Chitrangada, the Princess of that kingdom); *Ashwamedha Parva* (when the sacrificial horse followed by Arjuna was stopped by Babhrvahana and there is a fight between the father and the son); and *Mahaprasthanika Parva* (when

the five brothers and Draupadi leave their capital city with a dog towards heaven in flesh and blood and Chitrangada returns to Manipura city) to justify his claim that the 'Manipura' city mentioned in these texts is the present Manipur. The explanation given to justify this claim is that 'Manipura' of the *Mahabharata* is located in the Eastern frontier of the whole earth bounded by the ocean.

At a more indigenous level, there is the propagation of a royal genealogy, which connects Pakhangba, the first king (recorded in history) as the son of Sooprabahoo, who is again a son of Babhruvahana. This theory is rejected by many scholars as a myth. Many British and Indian scholars do not support this and locate Manipura of the *Mahabharata* in or around Kalinga in Orissa, which is located on the eastern borders of India adjoining the sea. This entire cultural project of creating a royal genealogy is seen as an aspect of 'Sanskritisation' and as an attempt to gain recognition and respectability in the Hindu world (Kabui 1988: 4). In this regard, it should also be pointed out that a determined group of non-Brahminical Meetei scholars forcefully and convincingly argue that the name 'Manipur' is a Hinduised name which came into existence around the early eighteenth century when Hinduism was adopted by the Royal family. The purport of this claim is that the original name of the kingdom was Kangleipak (Kabui 1988: 5). Though there has been persistent contact with both Western and Eastern people with the Meetei through trade and migration, it would be really a courageous step to claim that the Meetei are the descendants of the Aryans.

The second theory is based on the mythology of the Meetei/Meitei. It is believed that the first human settlement in Manipur took shape on the

Koubru Peak when the entire valley was a vast lake (Tombi 1975: 48). The legend says that a powerful god drained the water by drilling a big tunnel by the name of *Chingnunghoot* (a hole inside the mountain) on the Eastern fringe. When water drifted away, the present valley showed up and was thus arranged for human settlement and human civilization. Taking this as a premise, Dr. R. Brown (cited in T.C. Hodson 1908: 7) made an interesting speculation to claim that the Meetei/Meitei are the descendants of the tribal people inhabiting the hills of Manipur. According to Brown (ibid: 7), some members of the hill people came down to the valley and started cultivation; after the harvest, they went up the hills again. Then, due to the growth of more cultivable land, people started to settle down permanently and started a settled life. This theory was the nodal point when some orthodox Hindu Meetei/Meitei started propounding the Aryan theory in the late 19th century to claim the Kshatriya status of the Meetei/Meitei, in order to disconnect from the hill people who were then considered lower in status due to the implicit caste structures embedded in the Hinduisation process.

The third group of scholars tries to substantiate the origin of the Meetei/Meitei from the ethnonym 'Meetei/Meitei' itself. B. H. Hodgson (cited in T.C. Hodson 1908: 10) argues that 'Moitay' is the combined appellation of the Siamese 'Tai' and the Kochin Chinese 'Moi'. He maintains that Meetei/Meitei belongs to the 'Moi' section of the great tribe called 'Tai.' This theory is criticized by T. C. Hodson (1908) from the perspective of language, culture and tradition of the Meitei. According to Hodson (1908: 10), there was great political and cultural influence from the Shan but to group the Meetei/Meitei with the Tai race is difficult to justify on linguistic grounds. Meetei/Meitei language is more closely affiliated to the Tibeto-Burman group of languages. Another scholar Ch. Budhi (1988: 74) takes a

great leap to claim that the Meetei/Meitei is the ethnic blending of people of 'Mei' and 'Ti' tribes of ancient China. He claims that 'Timei' is the original name, which was later on anagrammatized into 'Meitei'. But this position has been critiqued on the grounds that there are no historical findings and even no oral tradition to support this point of view.

However, today the word 'Meitei' is mainly used by Hindu Vaishnavite groups following the logic that Meitei comes from fire (*mei*). Hence, the name 'Meitei.' Another origin myth tells that man was sculpted (*teiba*) after the image (*mi*) of the creator. Hence, the name 'Meetei'. While Meetei and Meitei are used interchangeably in many writings and also in daily conversation, I would prefer to use 'Meetei', since Meetei has been increasingly used by the present generation and in contemporary political discourse, which prioritizes the spelling 'Meetei' on the ground that it sounds appropriate, following the Meetei creation myth of sculpting (*teiba*) from the image (*mi*). The word *Mee* (human) is derived from *Mi* (image). Since I am dealing with the Lai Haraoba, ostensibly a non-Vaishnavite festival, I will stick to the word 'Meetei.'

The Manipur valley is densely populated, highly fertile and has advanced technology and better social and economic organizations which all led to the growth of kingdoms and principalities, while in the hills the political systems have not been able to develop beyond the village society or village republics (Kabui 1988: 8-9) because of their geographical location. According to the Census report of 2011 (Census of India 2011), the total population of Manipur is 2,855,794. It also indicates that the four plain districts have a sizeable population of hill communities, though there is a presumption that they are inhabited only by the Meeteis. In this study, I will

be confining mainly to the valley society of Manipur; and particularly that of the Meeteis and other ethnic groups who come under the Meetei fold since the study of Lai Haraoba is concerned with the Meetei. However, mention will be made of other communities wherever called for.

In his classic study, Benedict Anderson formulates a concept called 'imagined community' to analyze nationalism in which he depicts a nation as a socially constructed community, an 'imagined entity', imagined by people who perceive themselves as part of a larger group (1983: 6-7). While this is a modern concept of community and nation, there are pre-modern societies which do not have the "conception of history as an endless chain of cause and effect or of radical separations between past and present" (ibid: 23). However, they have "a conception of temporality in which cosmology and history [are] indistinguishable, the origins of the world and of men essentially identical" (ibid: 36).

Manipur presents a case in hand where there is a blurring of history and mythology in its attempt to establish a linear historical connection of events and epochs in order to present a synchronic history. In the process of the making of its construction, there is a constant traffic between expressions such as 'from time immemorial' and '33 AD', which is marked as a beginning of the Ningthouja dynasty as recorded in the royal chronicle *Cheitharol Kumpaba*. While the rich oral tradition also supplements the existing written documents, it becomes more complex for hardcore historians, who adhere only to the verifiable written documents, to partake in this strange marriage of history and mythology. In all probability, the complex politics of myth-making and 'invention of tradition' (Hobsbawn & Ranger 1983) reinforce the complexity of corroborating the claims of authenticity. But one should also

note that there are cases that obliterate such claims in contemporary academia.

Shifting this brief historical background on Manipur to a more political register, it needs to be said that the people of Manipur have experienced numerous upheavals over the centuries as a result of clashes with different cultures and powers. More specifically, there have been three major epoch-making encounters in the ups and downs of its history. The first encounter was with Hinduism. Even though signs of Manipur's contact with Hinduism can be traced to King Charairongba's reign in the 17th century, it was King Pamheiba's ascension to the throne in 1709 that saw the brutal imposition of Hinduism. The ensuing clash between the indigenous Meetei faith and the alien Hindu faith was essentially an encounter between two traditional cultures and worldviews. Thus the close of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th century marked a turning point in the history of Manipur. The year 1709 witnessed the ascension of Pamheiba to the throne after the death of his father King Charairongba (1697-1709).

Rechristening himself as Maharaja Garibniwaz, he issued a diktat pronouncing Hinduism as the state religion of Manipur in 1714 under the influence of the proselytizing Bengali Vaisnavite, Shantidas Gosai. This act evoked an upheaval with massive implications for the identity of Meetei society at large. Opposition and resistance to this autocratic move to obliterate the traditional faith and culture were brutally repressed. The king and his Bengali mentor left no stone unturned to erase traces of the indigenous faith. Places of worship were destroyed; worship of traditional and local ancestral deities, rituals and rites, including Lai Haraoba festivals, were immediately banned. Burial of the dead was replaced by cremation.

Along with the imposition of Hinduism, the manuscripts and texts in the indigenous script were confiscated and burnt in full public view. It is mainly believed that the Bengali script was imposed during this time.

The second encounter has been the one with Western civilization *vis-à-vis* the British conquest of Manipur in 1891, even though Manipur's contact with the British was established much earlier. The impact of the encounter with the British followed by the two World Wars brought about a massive change in the collective experience and consciousness reflected in terms of cultural values being rendered more open, liberal, egalitarian and humanistic. This encounter with British also brought far-reaching political changes in the wake of the swelling tide of decolonization that swept Asia, Africa and Latin America. Manipur eventually became free from British control in 1947 and remained a sovereign democratic state till its 'integration' with the newly independent State of India on 15 October 1949.

The third encounter with the Indian Union since 1949 has been turbulent and fraught with conflict and controversies over the years. Manipur was the first territory within South Asia to have a democratic legislature elected on the principle of universal adult suffrage. The Manipur Constitution Act came into force in 1947, and the position of the King of Manipur became that of a constitutional monarch. Following this, the Manipur Legislative Assembly was constituted in 1948 as an organ of self-governing representative democracy. But this Asiatic Kingdom, newly transformed into a democratic political structure, was 'merged' with the newly independent State of India on 15 October 1949 as part of the "Treaty of Accession." This crucial encounter with India has produced highly conflicting tendencies in terms of explicit moves to introduce universalised

versions of 'culture' and to impose a homogenizing framework operating at every level of existence – social, political, cultural, legal and economic. Through this process of homogenization, the people of Manipur can be said to have experienced a sense of loss, which has shaped a large chunk of the cultural memory of the people.

The Meetei Ritual Society

Early morning in the valley of Manipur, in most of the houses one sees a lady of the house bringing out a small tray with a fresh picked flower and a brass vessel of clear water. A clean spot is arranged on the porch to lay down the tray. The lady kneels down and ceremoniously lights a stick of incense and waves it skywards with a silent benediction, the smoke of the sweetly scented incense stick beautifully swirling upwards. In a gentle composure, the lady folds her hands, then prostrates her upper body on the ground with her hands touching the ground. Then she goes inside the house and performs the same prayer to the Sanamahi¹ in the western corner of the house. In the evening, the same ritual is performed to the coming night. These everyday spiritually enchanting rituals are like daily food; they nurture the soul in deeply embodied ways.

Rituals and ceremonies for the Meetei are truly an integral part of daily life. Even for the people who do not actively participate in Lai Haraoba or go to the temple, their emotions are greatly influenced by all the ritual actions that keep happening in everyday Meetei society. At an experiential level, I could sense that the ritual activities in Manipur create emotions of commonality, intimacy, belongingness, familiarity and a sense of identity

¹ Sanamahi deity holds a strong position in the Meitei Pantheon and is connected with different gods such as the guardian deities. The Sanamahi worshipped is the pre-Hindu Meitei religion which came to be known as Sanamahism.

among the Meetei participants and audiences. Or, to put it another way, one could say that the Meetei society is full of their traditional ritual ceremonies; and people are proudly aware as well as protective of this ritual society. In the course of everyday life, the corporeal expressions, physicality, the dramaturgy of emotions and rituals all become important and are interconnected with each other, operating at multiple levels.

In a performative context, these rituals and ceremonies in Meetei traditional society become a site of 'an explosion of multiple literacies' (Schechner 2002: 4) in which its practitioners are 'body literate, aurally literate, visually literate and so on' (ibid: 4), in several distinct and interrelated temporal and spatial contexts. Richard Schechner has emphasized that these multiple literacies are *performatives* (ibid: 4). The word 'performative' was introduced by J. L. Austin (1911 - 1960) in his *How to do things with words* (1962). In the context of Austin's theory of speech acts, 'performatives' are those utterances which are used to perform an act rather than to describe it. In this reading, 'constative' utterances are statements of facts, which stand in opposition to 'performative' utterances which are directly related to acts of *doing*. In the context of Meetei society, how these *performatives* get disseminated is a question that can only be fully understood, I believe, partly at an experiential level, and partly by detaching one's self from society.

However, a revealing insight into how these *performatives* work in Meetei society is the usual practice of the unannounced messenger arriving at home early morning (usually before 9 am) to hand deliver a formal printed invitation. This could be an invitation to attend *ipaan thaba* or *swasti puja* (birth rite), *luhongba* (marriage ceremony), *uusop* (feast offered to the

ancestors), *sorat* (death ceremony), or some such family cyclical ritual. This happens so frequently that every Meetei home has a system of filing these paper invitations on the wall of their veranda. These invitations are pinned directly on the wall, or hung in a stack off a wire, one on top of the other. These stacks can grow sometimes to be one to two inches thick with more than one hundred paper invitations. While every invitation may not be accepted, each and every invitation is prominently displayed for all to see and be reminded of the invitations.

A daily sight in the streets of Manipur is a caravan of vehicles packed with family members led by a truck of a marching brass band party moving to a bride's residence for a *luhongba* (marriage ceremony). Daily in the streets, one can also see a group of men dressed in white *pheijom* (dhoti) and *pungyat* (kurta) as they wait for some wedding or family ritual to begin. One also sees women wearing their finest Meetei *phanek mayek naiba* (embroidered sarong) and starched *innaphi* (fine cotton wrap around the upper part of their bodies). Nearby or somewhere in the distance, one hears the amplified sounds of conches, *pung* and *kirtan*, the usual sound of Manipuri Nata-Sankirtana, particularly during *luhongba* (marriage ceremony) and *sorat* (death ceremony). In the evening, one can also witness either a *sumang leela* (courtyard theatre) or a musical concert happening in some *lampak* (playing field) or in a courtyard. Every day it seems as if there is some ritual or traditional holiday taking place somewhere, for the Meetei calendar is packed with many such events.

Returning to the ritual actions in Manipur, one needs to highlight their performative features and dimensions which do not merely exist at the level of efficacy. This performativity transcends and elevates itself beyond

the functionality of rituals to attain the level of artistic expression. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the ritual practices of the Meetei strive for artistic and aesthetic goals; and their songs and dances blur the line of ritual and performance.

Furthermore, in studying the Meetei traditional art, religion and philosophy, there seems to be a constant reference to the idea of a balanced universe that recognizes the existence of both forces - good gods (*lai*) and evil spirits (*sharoi-ngaroi*). Unlike the dominant, simplistic Western concept of the need to defeat evil and divide the world into good and bad, the Meetei respect the existence of evil spirits and believe that one needs to deal with them, appease them, pacify them, distract them or transform them into good spirits, but one never defeats them. This is one dominant leitmotif that runs in the dramaturgy of the Meetei creation myth (as we shall observe in the study of *Laihak Leikharol* in Chapter 1), as well as in various episodes of *Lai Haraoba* and also in everyday life rituals like *Saroi Khangba* (appeasing and warding off the evil). It is believed that when an imbalance occurs and evil is stronger in the world, we must create more good things to regain the balance, and so goodness, *lai* ceremonies and religious duty to the community must all increase as a response. I think the focus on the balance of good and evil forces is connected to many aspects of Meetei life and cyclical rituals.

Having said this, it is also important to note that the conceptual understanding of 'what is good' and 'what is evil' is arbitrary at times, apart from being subject to the vagaries of temporal, spatial and historical contexts. For instance, in the prologue of the *puya* (indigenous literature) on the creation myth called *Laihak Leikharol* (The Lore of Heaven and the Nether

World), it is intriguing to read the definition of what constitutes a good people. According to this *puya*, good people are those who obey elders and ministers in the Loishangs (the palace institutions) and those who salute to the people working in the palace, respect the ministers and consider the king as the God on earth (Hemchandra 2010: 3). In a sense, the idea of good is a part of the larger rules of statecraft during the monarchical period. Today, good people are defined according to the law of the land, which will vary considerably from region to region. Today, within the perspective of the *puya*, those who maintain the law and order of the land would be considered a good people.

Conceptually, the traditional Meetei worldview rejects the binary of matter and spirit (*nung-paan*). At the conceptual level, the Meetei do not treat the two as separate. In their traditional philosophy, they do not reduce worldly existence to the mind-body dualism. Meetei cosmogony, as reflected in the *puyas* of *Leithak Leikharol* and *Anoirol*, speak of performance in the larger context of the unity of the body and spirit (*nung-paan ani tuna chatminnaba*), which highlights one's being and identity embedded in a life-world. In his study of *Chainarol* (Ways of Warfare), Bhagat Oinam (2017: 398) has also emphasized that '[the] embedded world is also an embodiment of the co-existence of opposing forces of nature – good and evil, beautiful and ugly, movement and stillness, harmony and chaos, peace and violence, and life and death.' There are many such more pairs of complementary forces, which are an integral part of nature.

Tellingly, the narration and dramaturgy of the creation myth and Lai Haraoba represent, if not embody, a continuous interplay of these binaries. There seems to be a belief in the continuous flow of one to the other, not of

circularity where one comes back to an original point but about an ever-dynamic movement from one state of being to another. One may compare this with a continuous semi-circular movement of body (in the form of a horizontally slanted figure of eight '∞') as conceived in the dramaturgy of *Anoirol* (The Art of Movement). It is in such a worldview that a meaningful engagement of 'cultural performance' is envisaged.

Theoretical Framework and Intervention

Lai Haraoba has been translated by various scholars as 'rejoicing of the gods' (Hodson, 1908), 'the pleasing of the gods' (Shakespeare, 1913), 'the merry-making of the gods and goddesses' (Nilakanta, 1982) or 'the god's rejoice' (R.K. Achoubisana, 2009). In all the above translations, the involvement of the people and community is undermined. Therefore, I prefer to translate Lai Haraoba as 'rejoicing/merry-making *with* the gods'. Let us also keep in mind that the gods are not merely actors or spectators, but spect-actors. 'Spect-actor' is a term introduced by Augusto Boal (1979) that refers to the dual role of those involved in the performance as both spectator and actor, since these individuals both observe and create dramatic meaning and action in any performance. It is in this performative framework that the present study attempts to provide a somewhat different approach to understanding the Lai Haraoba as a complex socio-cultural phenomenon with ritual elements rather than as a pure ritual.

Today, what we need to take into account is that the dynamics surrounding any ritual performance should be read not only in terms of their sacred or mythological connotations but also in terms of other variables such as modernization, urbanization, secularization, globalization, migration, national and regional politics. One main argument that I put forward in this

study is that the resurgence of Lai Haraoba is associated with the changing socio-political dynamics of contemporary Manipur where three predominant ethnic communities constituting the Meeteis, Nagas and Kukis, along with other migrants, coexist in a tense harmony. While the Meetei insurgents are against the hegemony of the Indian state, the separatist tendencies of the Nagas and Kukis for the establishment of their own territory and administration have been a threat to the existing polity and territory of the state itself.

This political development has resulted in two primary trends of the performance of Lai Haraoba today. Firstly, its resurgence on a grand and spectacular scale particularly in urban areas reaffirms the consciousness and assertion of a pre-Hindu identity in the contemporary political culture of Manipur. Secondly, there is a marked increase in the politics of identity, with an emphasis on “re-instating identity, re-identification, re-formation of identity and the formation of new identities” (Konsam, 2005: 206). Therefore, even as Lai Haraoba continues to celebrate a diversity of ritual practices with sacred significance, these practices cannot be entirely separated from the socio-political complexities and turmoil that Manipur is plagued with today. It is within this disjuncture of a continuous tradition and dislocated political economy that this dissertation is located.

The study addresses two primary concerns. First, the problematic of reading history through myths in the context of Lai Haraoba as it figures in popular as well as academic discourses. How does one read the Meetei worldview taking into account the traditional texts like *puya* and indigenous categories of thought according to which it is assumed that Lai Haraoba embodies the very essence of the Meetei worldview at a cosmological level?

Further, in the search for history within traditional texts and practices, the myths incorporated in Lai Haraoba are interpreted as embodying certain facts of historical importance. How do we read these 'facts'? It is questionable to what extent myths can be read as history and to what extent we can look for history in myths.

Second, I address the secularization of the sanctified ritual space of Lai Haraoba in the larger context of public culture. While the Lai Haraoba can be conceptualized as a sanctification of space, it is also an arena where different trajectories of local and regional interests, forces of modernity, urbanization, indigenization, and micro politics of space, intersect. With the ban on Hindi films, music and the public use of the Hindi language, the least controversial of the 'secular items', which is an important component of the Lai Haraoba, seem to be restricted to dances, ballads and performances of Shumang Lila. As early as 1998, however, Rustom Bharucha in *The Politics of Cultural Practice* had reflected on the 'secular items' in the Lai Haraoba where a young girl dressed as Madhuri Dixit regaled the audience with the item song '*choli ke piche kya hai*' while a young man's rendition of a Michael Jackson number was enough to disrupt the day's celebration. Today, perhaps, with the rise in censorship and regulation of Lai Haraoba, while Madhuri Dixit may no longer be tolerated, one can only wonder what would be the fate of Michael Jackson in his Manipuri avatar?

By intersecting the ritual performative practices of the Lai Haraoba with its contemporary interpolations, and by juxtaposing its annual event with the volatile political immediacies in Manipur today, this dissertation attempts to avoid a purely anthropological or ritual study of the Lai Haraoba

by presenting it as a microcosm in which we can read the larger dynamics and contradictions of Manipuri society today.

Literature Review

There is a substantial body of literature on Lai Haraoba. The primary sources of information for this study are royal chronicles (*Cheitharol Kumbaba*), indigenous literature (*puya*) and ancient traditional myths. The *puya* have been studied, edited and collated until the 17th century by traditional scholars called Maichou who were patronized by royal patrons. While the authorship and the dates of the *puya* are not certain, they continue to serve as sources for understanding the deeply embedded 'local knowledge' (Geertz 1983) of myth, cosmology, worldview, politics and philosophy of the Meetei.

Secondly, there are also other secondary sources for studying the Lai Haraoba like the anthropological accounts of the British ethnographers-cum-political agents like W. McCulloch (1859), T.C. Hodson (1908), J. Shakespear (1913) and Louise Lightfoot (1958).

Thirdly, there is a more contemporary body of knowledge on the Lai Haraoba in Manipuri by writers like Ngariyanbam Kulachandra (1963), Ngangbam Kumar Maibi (1988), Elam Indira (1998, 2000, 2001), Hijam Ibobi (1999), Wahengbam Lukhoi (2008), Moirangthem Macha Chaoreikanba (2008), R.K. Achoubisana (1983, 2009), Rajkumar Nabindra (2009), all of whom tend to focus on the normative aspects of Lai Haraoba. Their writings are both prescriptive and descriptive on the ritual procedure, the dances, songs and other conventions. In this literature, I observe two points - the writings focus primarily on the Kanglei Haraoba which tends to marginalize other Lai Haraobas to the periphery, and secondly, these writings tend to

codify the dance forms of Lai Haraoba within modernist dance frameworks designated by state academies which fail to differentiate between diverse dance forms and creative expressions across the representations of Lai Haraoba today.

Lastly, modern scholars writing in English like Manjusri Chaki-Sircar (1984), Saroj N. Arambam Parratt and John Parratt (1997), Kh. Ratan Kumar (2001), Nongthombam Premchand (2008), Lokendra Arambam (2005), Otojit Kshetrimayum (2014) have moved beyond a ritual analysis to concentrate on other aspects of sociological and historical significance. Manjusri Chaki Sircar, in her book *Feminism in Traditional Society: Women of the Manipur Valley* (1984) argues that Lai Haraoba represents the “traditional socio-moral world of the Meitei, a world based on a mutual partnership and respect between the sexes.” Saroj N. Parratt and John Parratt’s book *The Pleasing of the Gods: Meitei Lai Haraoba* (1997) studies the Lai Haraoba through literary and historical criticism, a phenomenology and technical analysis of dance and music. Though the work substantially illustrates the structure and sequence of the Lai Haraoba proper, it does not delve into the wider field of performativity involving the community’s participants both within and outside the ritual.

Lokendra Arambam’s writings illuminate his deeply embedded understanding of ‘local knowledge’ (Geertz 1983). However, his construction of what he calls ‘organic philosophy’ runs the risk of playing into the traps of essentialisation, traditionalism and homogenization of Meitei culture. In his intriguing article “From Mystical Ecology to Mystical Physiology” (2005), he posits an essentialist depiction of the ‘communitarian group consciousness’ and ‘group psychology’ as something ‘inherent’ to the community. In

contrast, Bijoykumar (2012) argues that Meetei culture is not something 'inherent' but "reconstructed and transformed through various means in different historical periods which may be termed as a method of controlling people" in which socio-religious institutions like Pandit Loishang, Maiba Loishang, Maibi Loishang and Pena Loishang were responsible for shaping the cultural identity and cultural consciousness of the Meetei people.

Drawing from Romila Thapar's (1984) model of historical civilization "from lineage to state" in Northern India, Kh. Ratan Kumar (2001) observes that Lai Haraoba was reconstructed and transformed from the *Apokpa Khurumba* (paying obeisance to the ancestor) after various lineage deities were elevated to the position of community deities as a means of statecraft. While Lokendra Arambam (2005) shuns this historical discourse assuming the state as an already given 'organic' and 'social collective' which was "part of the cosmic equilibrium to whose maintenance the ruler and his subjects were ritually bound", Bijoykumar (2005, 2012) makes a strong case for Meetei religion as a form of socio-political statecraft which enabled it to function and facilitate control.

Following Arnold van Gennep (1909) and Victor Turner (1977), Nongthombam Premchand (2005, 2008) studies Lai Haraoba as a theatre that elevates every member to an 'enhanced status' (Victor Turner's phrase). According to Premchand, the period of Lai Haraoba is a liminal period in which an individual or the whole of society passes through a particular process. While he initiates Turner's concept of 'life-crisis' in his study, he does not elaborate on it in great detail. Nor does he demonstrate whether van Gennep's scheme of three phases in ritual process - 'separation', 'transition' and 'incorporation' - applies to the ritual performers,

participants, observers or the deities, or to all at the same time. When Premchand emphasizes that “life is a matter of journeying endlessly like the mythical python coil”, this compels one to question whether the Lai Haraoba at any point ‘separates’ from ordinary/everyday life? Or does it extend everyday life in an enhanced state?

My specific intervention in the larger critical discourse surrounding the Lai Haraoba operates on the principle that the Lai Haraoba needs to be read within the contradictions of everyday life that operate in Manipur today. Even as it appears to celebrate a non-modern or pre-modern manifestation of archetypes and ancestor worship from another time, it is nonetheless a complex manifestation of contemporary Manipuri life. Instead of playing into the myths of timelessness and ahistoricity, I attempt to find a way of contextualizing the Lai Haraoba in ‘our times’, even as its multiple performance structures are embedded in their own ritual temporalities, energies and movements. Even as I draw on the anthropological studies of van Gennep and Victor Turner, I attempt to work against an essentialist and romantic notion of ‘*communitas*’. For Turner (1982: 45-47), ‘*communitas*’ rituals create a ‘cohesiveness in society’ by engaging individuals in a social group in an activity that unites them in a common goal, into something that is bigger than the individual, thus engaging them in an environment in which they function more or less as equals. However, in this dissertation, we will observe that there are embedded hierarchies in the Lai Haraoba which coexist alongside the ‘*communitas*’ shared amongst participants. By calling attention to these dissonances, I attempt to relate the performance of the Lai Haraoba today to the actual manifestations of social hierarchies, ethnic tensions and disparities that prevail in Manipur today.

Methodology

The first methodological principle that I deploy to investigate the Lai Haraoba is dramaturgy, a critical mode of analyzing structure and action that enables me to study the different segments of the Lai Haraoba in relation to its broader performative structure. Let me clarify that I do not use the term 'dramaturgy' as a derivative of 'dramaturg', a theatre professional whose task focuses on selecting, adapting and analyzing plays. By 'dramaturgy' I mean the entire structure and execution of words, movements, images, body and music constituting both the *mise-en-scene* and the context of performance. I am concerned with the broader questions of dramaturgy relating the textual traditions (oral and written) to the intricate dynamics of performance embedded in gesture, movement, rhythm, and sound.

I also link my examination of the Lai Haroaba's dramaturgy to the idea of 'social drama', as used by Victor Turner to map processes of transformation through states of breach and crisis. In *Schism and Continuity* (1957: 92), a monograph on the Ndembu tribe, Victor Turner outlines the concept of 'social drama' as a useful descriptive and analytical tool. He argues that 'dramas' exist as a result of the conflict that is inherent in societies. Acquiring a 'cultural form', these 'dramas' configure social disturbances and disputes taking a regular processual passage - breach, crisis, redress, reintegration or schism (1974: 32). To put it in another way, social drama is "a limited area of transparency in the otherwise opaque surface of regular, uneventful social life" (Turner 1957: 93), which enables the observer to perceive the array of social structural principles and arrangements as well as their conflicts and relative power over time (ibid: 93). In his study of the Ndembu ritual performances, Turner demonstrates

that social drama involves latent conflicts of interest and otherwise obscure kinship ties are significantly manifested (1974: 33). Following van Gennep, Turner argues that ritual involves a dialectic between 'structure' and 'anti-structure' (Turner 1969). Ritual serves social order and continuity by organizing and managing the transition of persons from one stage to another. Simultaneously, when ritualists enter the state of liminality, unexpected, dangerous or potentially creative things may occur. Turner (1969) argues that this embeddedness of ordering, disordering and reordering in the same performance process is what makes ritual so appropriate a vehicle for the making and unmaking of social dramas. This seems to be well reflected in the historical evolution of Lai Haraoba as a mechanism in curbing the tensions and conflicts among the various clans.

Another concept I found useful in my study is Kenneth Burke's (1945, 1950) idea of 'dramatism' which he defines as the analytical tool for the study of the strategies by which individuals attempt to influence by their actions the opinions or actions of others. Burke has outlined five questions in studying any cultural performances which leads to the 'five key terms of dramatism', namely - what was done (Act), when or where it was done (Scene), who did it (Agent), how he did it (Agency), and why (Purpose) (1945: xvii). I found these five questions very helpful in conducting my fieldwork, interviews and also while writing the dissertation.

Through Erving Goffman's (1959, 1974) idea of 'dramaturgy' which is a method of studying everyday interaction in society through the metaphor of theatre, I attempt to explore the structure and the ritual organization of Lai Haraoba from a contemporary perspective. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) is one of Goffman's best known works, which is centrally

concerned with the modalities, strategies and effectiveness of performances in everyday life. It is important to note Goffman's definition of performance as "all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers" (1959: 13). While this apparently very general and limited definition raises a few problems in terms of certain assumptions and biases, what is important to note is where performance is located and what makes the activity a '*performance*' and not simply 'behavior'. Also, Johann Huizinga's (1950) formative research on culturally constructed and articulated forms of playful activity is useful in analyzing the idea of 'play' in Lai Haraoba within the framework of the dramaturgical perspective mentioned above.

At an anthropological level, I do not underestimate the challenges that I faced while writing about the Lai Haraoba, which I have seen from my childhood without questioning my affinities to it. Growing up in the society and being a Meetei, there is inevitably a 'familiarity blindness' (Aihara 2016: xi) that happens in our everyday lives. Now, through an academic study, I am compelled to account for what I am seeing in a wider social and political context. What constitutes 'local knowledge'? For instance, Clifford Geertz's essential notion expressed in "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" (1973: 412-454) is that a people's culture is an ensemble of rituals which are in themselves ensembles, and these texts are what the anthropologist is trying to decipher through an essentially interpretative methodology. In contrast, what Trinh T. Minh-Ha (1991) suggests is a need for a closer dialogue between 'experience-distant' and 'experience-near' perspectives, between the 'scientist's objectivity' and the 'native's subjectivity,' between the 'outsider's input' and 'insider's output.' Having been brought up in Manipur, yet

having lived outside the state for more than a decade, I am equally an insider and an outsider whereby I try to locate my research in this interstice, as Trinh has suggested.

Keeping in mind the problems of ethnography and diverse ethnographic approaches, I make an attempt to develop a first-hand, contextualized, close-reading, hypotheses-generating, systematic orientation to the study of the Lai Haraoba's culture, history and polity. Historiography is one of the tools for my research. In this regard, I draw on the writings of Bijoykumar (2005, 2012) and Kh. Ratan Kumar (2001), which I have discussed earlier, to work against essentialist, homogenized and overly mystical readings of Manipuri cultural practices. In addition, I have attempted to generate an alternative history by engaging closely with the voices of practitioners, which are usually undermined in traditional studies of the Lai Haraoba.

I conducted my research through interviews mainly with the traditional scholars and experts in Meetei performing arts. Not only did I take their personal interviews, but I was in constant touch with them over the phone and via e-mails. It is out of this constant interaction with the practitioners in the field that my dissertation has developed. I have also participated and observed in some dance classes and workshops on Lai Haraoba at Manipur Dance College and the Jawaharlal Nehru Manipuri Dance Academy conducted by seasoned representatives of the *amaiba* (priest), *amaibi* (priestess) and *penakhongba* (*pena*² player/balladeer) communities. This participant-observation methodology has been helpful in exploring the psychophysical understanding and analysis of dance

² Traditional one-stringed fiddle.

movements. I draw here on Phillip B. Zarrilli's (1998, 2009) insights into the questions of 'bodymind', where the 'inner' and 'outer' are collapsed through deeply embedded cognitive processes linked to pre-performative principles animating 'presence', 'energy' and 'movement.' What is the relationship between 'body' and 'mind', 'inner' and 'outer' in any approach to acting? How have different modes of actor training shaped actors' experiences of acting and how they understand their work? Phillip B. Zarrilli offers insight into such questions, analysing acting as a psychophysical phenomenon and process across cultures and disciplines, and providing in-depth accounts of culturally and historically specific approaches to acting, particularly the *Kalarippayattu*, the martial art tradition of South India. His book *When the Body Becomes all Eyes* (1998) profusely illustrated interdisciplinary performance ethnography tracing how *kalarippayattu* is a mode of cultural practice through which bodies, knowledge, power, selves and identities are constantly repositioned (Zarrilli, 1998).

Drawing from phenomenologist like Merleau-Ponty, Zarrilli (2004) has emphatically rejected the mind-body dualism; instead, he reclaims the centrality of the body and embodied experience as the locus of psychophysical exploration. He emphasizes that "the body I call mine" is not *a* body, or *the* body, but rather a "process of embodying the several bodies one encounters in everyday experience as well as highly specialized modes of non-everyday or "extra-daily" bodies of practices such as acting or training in psycho-physical disciplines to act." His term "extra-daily body" for performers body is valuable for the simple reason that the performer's body is not separated from the body of everyday life but an extra-daily practice. Drawing from Drew Leder (1990), he considers the notion of embodiment as a process of encounters opening up the body not as an object

but as a means of carrying the experience to “reify what we are trying to think and understand and engage.” (cited in Zarrilli, 2004). He emphasizes that “embodiedness” is subject to change, modification and transformation.

Moving away from the research of psychophysical performance towards the deciphering of traditional texts, I must admit that the study of the ancient texts called *puyas* has proved to be a difficult task. The mass of *puyas*, which have been transliterated and translated into the contemporary Meetei language and written in Bengali script, form a substantial source material for my study. In order to understand the metaphorical and the philosophical concerns underlying these texts, I turned for help from Chanam Hemchandra, who is a well-known expert on *puya*. Apart from studying the metaphorical and the philosophical meanings of these texts, it is equally important to situate the *puyas* within their institutional mechanisms and power structures, participating in conflicts of power between various forms of social and political authority.

Keeping in mind the limits of ‘representation’ in translations, I have attempted to convey the meaning of indigenous categories as accurately as possible, while attempting to make them readable in the English language. One has to be vigilant about succumbing to literalism even as one needs to avoid the traps of exoticization and appropriation. To overcome these problems, I provide a detailed glossary for the local words at the end of the dissertation, where I explain their multiple implied meanings in a fuller contextual register.

Chapterisation

Chapter One titled *Textual and Oral Traditions of Lai Haraoba* critically analyzes Meetei textual traditions in relation to the myths and worldview of Lai Haraoba. Drawing on three main texts namely *Leithak Leikharol* (The Lore of Heaven and Nether World), *Panthoibi Khonggul* (In the Footsteps of Panthoibi) and *Anoirol* (The Art of Movements), this chapter explores the 'mind-born worlds' (David Shulman, 2012) of the Meetei dealing with the notion of imagination and to some extent with the 'imaginative praxis' developed in *puyas* (traditional literature). The purpose is not just to provide a critical paraphrase of these texts but to question their significance within the pantheon of the Meetei belief-system. Through an analysis of these *puyas*, the chapter also examines the performative aspects of these texts – sound, chant, dialogue, riddles, proverbs and narrative dance movements. At the level of dissemination, how have these texts circulated and been performed in the larger belief system of the Meetei?

Chapter Two titled *Systems of Ritual Organisation in Lai Haraoba* takes into account the earlier social stratification system of the Meetei, traditionally known as *lallup*, a general rule of 'service to the state'. Many scholars have missed out on this aspect of social stratification assuming that Meetei society is an egalitarian society thereby undermining the feudal nature of Manipuri society. The chapter shall reflect on the note that even after the abolition of *lallup* system, the feudal and hierarchical order seems to be very much embedded in Meetei society even today. For instance, Lai Haraoba is controlled by a centralized institution called *Maichou Loishang* (also known as *Pandit Loishang*), a council of traditional Meetei literati. Under their supervision there are three departments – i) *Amaiba Loishang* (Institution of

the Priests), ii) *Amaibi Loishang* (Institution of the Priestesses) and iii) *Ashei Loishang* (Institution of the *penakhongba*, the balladeers), where the three primary ritual functionaries of the Lai Haraoba (*amaiba*, *amaibi* and *penakhongba*), respectively, are trained. The chapter also critically analyses the role of these ritual functionaries within this institutional and organizational framework in addition to the local administrative bodies which are formed by different communities to successfully organize the Lai Haraoba. These local organizations function differently across the contexts of the Kanglei Haraoba, the Chakpa Haraoba and Moirang Haraoba. A section of this chapter also deals with the conflicts and tensions of multiple organizations like Lainingthou Sanamahi Temple Board, Lainingthou Sanamahi Thougai Kanglup and Umang Lai Kanna Lup, which clash over the regulation of the Lai Haraoba, especially in the case of Kanglei Haraoba.

Chapter Three titled *Multiple Dramaturgies of Lai Haraoba* attempts to map the multiple dramaturgies in three main forms of Lai Haraoba – the Kanglei Haraoba, the Moirang Haraoba and the Chakpa Haraoba. The Kanglei Haraoba takes place in the capital Imphal and adjoining areas; the Moirang Haraoba (focused solely on the worship of Thangjing deity) is performed exclusively by the Moirang clan in the Moirang district of Manipur; and the Chakpa Haraoba is performed by the Loi (autochthone/outcaste) community, including the Andro, Phāyeng, Sekmai, Khurkhul, Leimaram, who perform in villages of the same names. Though there are some significant differences among these three ritual performances, the basic principles of the Lai Haraoba seems common to all of them. The fundamental ritual sequences like *ikouba* (invocation), *konyaihunba* (tossing of coin), *khayomlakpa* (offering of *khayom*, banana leaf packet containing rice, eggs and *langthrei* buds), *laipou* (circular dance), *saroikhangba* (warding off

evil spirit), are present in all the Lai Haraoba. The chapter shall deal with the minute intra-cultural differences in the execution of the performances and ritual processes in these three Lai Haraoba that this chapter call attention to. Mapping the multiple dramaturgies of all these three performances, this chapter attempts to counter the dominant homogenized perspective of the Lai Haraoba.

Chater Four titled *Performing Identities in Lai Haraoba* discusses issues on identity around Lai Haraoba. The dominant scholars on Manipuri culture and society tend to emphasize the shared social identity of a homogenized community, undermining internal differences and disparities. I argue that one cannot rely entirely on shared features and commonalities to explain any particular culture. Ethnicity, for instance, has been a decisive force in identity formation. There are various ethnic identities like Meitei/Meetei, Nagas, Kukis, Meetei Pangal (Muslims), Bishnupriya Manipuri, etc., in Manipur. Of late, the politicization of these identities has fuelled ethno-nationalist movements. The chapter also deals with the paradoxes of the reservation categories defined by the state, namely the Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Classes (OBC) are considered important in outlining majority-minority or superiority-inferiority power politics. In the discussion of identity, the role of gender and sexual orientation cannot be ruled out in the context of Lai Haraoba. Overall, the purpose of the chapter is to explore the dynamic and fluid processes by which identities are shaped within, between and across gender and sexuality and the sorts of practices that seek to regulate their constructions.

Chapter Five titled *Staging Lai Haraoba in Contemporary Adaptations and Reinventions* critically engages with the contemporary adaptations and re-

inventions of the Lai Haraoba performance traditions in a range of proscenium productions. Many contemporary theatre practitioners like Ratan Thiyam and Heisnam Kanhailal have used the conventions, music, costume and body language of Lai Haraoba in their productions. I discuss how these directors in different ways have appropriated the forms of Lai Haraoba dances and songs to interpret contemporary political events. While Thiyam draws on a predominantly spectacular and exotic use of the Lai Haraoba, Kanhailal is more subtle in his adaptation of its psycho-physical principles. Another interesting production to study would be *Harao Segonnabi* (Divine Songs and Dances of Rejoicing, 2011), a recent production by Mayanglambam Mangangsana, which encapsulates and re-invents the entire middle sequence of the Kanglei Haraoba in a one-hour spectacle designed for the proscenium stage for a predominantly non-Manipuri audience. Inevitably, these productions will raise critical questions relating to the secularization of ritual performative idioms and the relationship between indigenous performance and its contemporary reinventions. The last section discusses the adaptation of Lai Haraoba songs and music for performance in popular music contexts. Three contemporary singers are studied in the section - Mangka Mayanglambam who popularize the *pena seisak* (the singing style of *pena*), Tapta (Loukrakpam Jayenta) and Akhu Chingngangbam, both of them incorporate Lai Haraoba songs to express social dissent.

In the **Conclusion** to this dissertation, I attempt to provide some tentative reflections on the future of Lai Haraoba in the context of a changing economy, continued political disturbances and the clash of different belief systems. It will be significant to reflect on how the Lai Haraoba has survived decades of insurgency and inter/intra-ethnic tensions in the state of

Manipur. Could it be that even insurgents honour the sacred structure and social values of the Lai Haraoba?

In terms of the larger state propaganda around 'development', Manipur is likely to see the introduction of a new railway system (under the *Look East Policy*) initiated by the Government of India, connecting eastern and north-Eastern states of India to Southeast Asia. Is this likely to have an impact on tourism? We need to keep in mind that despite the incursions of a neo-liberal economy in Manipur that there is almost no touristic marketing of the Lai Haraoba to date. Will this change in the future enabling the Lai Haraoba to be more accessible to larger audiences? Or will the Lai Haraoba continue to perform for its local audiences with the participation of Manipuri men significantly on the decline? Such are the questions that will be addressed in the course of this dissertation where I will attempt to interrelate the multiple social, political, economic and performative dimensions of the Lai Haraoba in its diverse manifestations.

Chapter One

Textual and Oral Traditions of Lai Haraoba

The first chapter will critically analyze Meetei textual traditions in relation to the myths and worldview of Lai Haraoba. The early Meetei literature is referred to as *puya*³ – literature of the academies. Three main texts namely *Leithak Leikharol* (The Lore of Heaven and the Nether World), *Panthoipi Khonggul* (In the Footsteps of Panthoipi) and *Anoirol* (The Art of Movements) will be studied in detail.

The chapter shall explore the ‘mind-born worlds’ (David Shulman 2012) of the Meetei dealing with the notion of imagination and to some extent with the ‘imaginative praxis’ developed in the *puya* (traditional literature). The purpose is not just to provide a critical paraphrase of these texts but to question their significance within the pantheon of the Meetei belief-system.

Through a close analysis of the *puya*, the chapter shall also examine the performative aspect of these texts – dialogue, riddles, proverbs and narrative dance movements. At the level of dissemination, how have these texts circulated and been performed in relation to the larger belief systems of the Meetei? On the one hand, the texts have circulated through the scholarship of *maichous* (pundits) and *amaibas* (priests), but, on the other hand, one has to keep in mind the oral transmission of these texts. It is the

³ I use the word *puya* both in the singular and plural sense. The Anglicized plural ‘*puyas*’ is misleading.

responsibility of the *amaibas*, *amaibis*⁴ (priestesses) and *penakhongbas* (*pena* players) to preserve the ‘orature’ of the Lai Haraoba to use the category of Ngugi wa Thiong’o (2007), to be discussed shortly. There are, indeed, differences in the texts being used in various Lai Haraoba, some of which are quite perceptible and significant. This is due partly to the different *lais* (gods) who are addressed, but also to local variations of ‘orature’. The preservation of orature is especially acute in those cases where “the language is so archaic that even the *amaibas* do not fully understand the meaning of the words” (Parratt & Parratt 1997: 19). These are some of the challenges that I hope to engage with in this chapter.

What needs to be kept in mind is that there is a substantial body of Meetei literature dealing with spiritual and religious themes namely *Pongthourol Thouni*, *Panthoipi Khonggul*, *Pudin*, *Leithak Leikharol* and *Mahou Yangbi*. This literature lasting until the 17th century has been said to constitute its early period. Ritual songs and hymns composed before the advent of the Meetei script form part of the corpus of the literature of this early period. In other words, there is not exactly one text of Lai Haraoba proper; rather there are references here and there in many texts to different enactments of Lai Haraoba. While no text is completely static and dogmatic, the historical exigencies sometimes bring about interesting local variations. A

⁴ The *amaiba* and *amaibi* are the traditional priest and priestess of the Meetei who perform the ritual function of the community. Saroj N. Arambam Parratt (1997) commented about *amaibi*, “Their origins are lost in obscurity but there can be little doubt that they are of genuinely Manipuri origin, or at least became assimilated into Meetei religion at a very early time. They belong to one or other of the sagei (clans), and fully integrated into Manipuri society in general, and are not a separate caste.” She also gives references to the studies by the early British writers like Higgins (1933), who made the suggestion that (a)maibi is “derived from Sanamahi is quite untenable.” She however agrees with Mc Culloch (1854) who advanced the theory that they were descended from a princess of ancient time. This presumably reflects the mythology found in *Anoirol* which make Panthoibi, in the personification of Khabi Lengnao Mombi, the primeval *amaibi*. And the different personifications of Panthoibi in different texts manifest different *Anoirol*.

good deal of valuable work has been carried out by contemporary Meetei scholars on the archaic literature (*puya*) which has been of material assistance in this study. It is important to note that there has been a gradual change in the language and therefore there are numerous archaic words and modes of addresses which are still found in *puya* but no longer in use today. Majority of the manuscripts in archaic language which are now rendered in modern Meeteilon forms a substantial source of this study. It is significant, however, that although the archaic script is claimed to be a thousand years old or more, the documentation of the performance of Lai Haraoba was never preserved in written form. However there are references to Lai Haraoba in several documents and these references are, in substance, the primary points of reference in this Chapter.

WHEN ORATURE BECOMES LITERATURE

The concern of this section is with the transformation that occurs when what is variously termed “orality,” the “oral tradition,” or “orature” is incorporated into literature in the Meetei context. Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1998) stresses a subtle distinction of meaning between “orature” and “oral literature.” Ngugi notes that “the term ‘orature’ was coined in the sixties by Pio Zirimu, the late Ugandan linguist” (Ngugi 1998: 103). Ngugi observes that although Zirimu initially used the two terms interchangeably, he later identified “orature” as the more accurate term, which indexed orality as a total system of performance linked to a very specific idea of space and time. The term “oral literature,” by contrast, incorporates and subordinates orality to the literary and disguises the nature of orality as a complete system in its own right (ibid: 103-27). For this reason, “orature” is the preferred term in this study.

The origins of the Meetei *mayek* (script) and the history of Meetei tradition of writing are obscure. Like most of the early history of the literary traditions in South Asia and South East Asia, early Meetei literature (*puya*) has no mention of the author and date of writing. It could be argued, at least in its modern nomenclature, that history is one weak spot in Meetei literature. One could say, in fact, that it is non-existent. Comparatively little has been written about the early history of Manipur in general and Meetei literature in particular, and whatever is there, is often inaccurate. The total lack of the historical sense is so characteristic, that the whole course of Meetei literature is murky, suffering from an absence of chronology.

R.K. Jhalajit (1987: 17) claims that the origin of Meetei script can be traced to the 7th century, even as, literature flourishes by the beginning of 8th century. However, T.C. Hodson (1908) asserts that Meetei begins to write books only with the introduction of paper by Chinese in the 16th century. As G. A. Grierson remarks,

According to Mr. Hodson, local tradition declares that the art of writing was acquired from the Chinese, who came to Manipur about 1540 A.D.

(1903: 21)

The historical source like *Cheitharol Kumpaba* (the Meetei chronicle) suggests that the writing of books on paper begins during the reign of King Kyampa (1467-1508) a bit earlier than Hodson's postulation. Most of the scholars now seem to agree that writing books on paper begin in Manipur around the 15th century (Ibohanbi 1997: 32). However, the history of scripts and beginning of writing, particularly on stones, remains obscure. Inevitably, texts from the oral tradition would have existed in a multiplicity of variants, which would eventually have been transcribed, and from which standard texts would eventually have been established.

Since the reign of King Khagemba (1597-1652), some of the texts have been dated but the names of authors have not been consistently ascertained. However, a text like *Leirol* (the Grammar of Flowers), mentions its author as King Charairongba (1697-1709) (Snahal, 1965: 2). Hence, it can be said that assigning the name of author in *puya* begins only in the 17th century (Ibohanbi, 1997: 28). Tracing the history of early Meetei literature has been a challenging task. Regarding the dating of *puya*, Saroj Nalini Parratt and John Parratt (2010: 30) write, "These texts are not easy to date, as all those prior to hinduisation of Manipuri in the eighteenth century are anonymous and in the very few cases where internal datation does occur it may be spurious." They continue to write,

"Some of the archaic manuscripts betray such heavy traces of Hindu influence that they must be less than two hundred years old, but others give more ground for an earlier date. Provisional dating of the parchment on which the extant manuscripts are written would tend to support this. There is evidence that there was a good deal of literary activity during the reign of king Kyamba (1462-1508), though the archaic script was in use well before his time."

(ibid: 35)

Following this formulation, we can assume that some of these texts, in their present form, cannot be particularly old. Parratt and Parratt also argues that some of the texts "have either been extensively added to and altered by later hinduising editors, or that some of them at least are simply propaganda fabrications, the aim of which was to support the brahminising tendencies which characterized the reign of Churachand (1891-1941)" (ibid: 156).

Meetei manuscripts were written on small, thin rectangular boards of the sapwood of a tree called *agaru* or *agar* (*aquilaria agallocha*). The ink used was made of lampblack and gall, and the pen was made of small pieces of

fully seasoned bamboo (Jhalajit 1965: 7). The main task of manuscript writing was done by *maichous* (traditional scholars) who were employed by the royal court. Most of the manuscripts were in the possession of kings and writing was done under their guidance and censorship. These manuscripts were preserved in such a manner that they were sandwiched between pieces of wood and sometimes wrapped in a thin piece of cloth tied firmly by a string. They were also preserved inside a *lubak* (a bamboo basket) and kept on a *lap* (a bamboo rack high above the hearth called *phungga*).

Broadly, one can say that the *puya* are encyclopedic in nature although many of them have a particular subject as the central theme. A *puya* with a central theme on creation myths may also refer to other subjects like genealogy, charms and hymns, religious philosophy, etc. The *puya* were treated as sacred texts and for this reason, they were preserved in a place where they could not be easily touched, except on auspicious days when they were brought out. Every owner of the *puya* would treat the text with great respect and fear. Most *puya* also mention that an individual who leads a dishonest and sinful life should not even touch a *puya*. Only a sincere and upright individual after a bath wearing fresh and clean clothes and burning incense lamp could read the *puya*. This superstitious belief is one of the reasons why the owners of the *puya* were not willing to part with the *puya* until they got printed. The result is that the availability of the *puya* tends to get restricted. Furthermore, the infamous *Puya Meithaba* (burning of *puya*) in 1729 during the reign of King Pamheiba created a landscape of fear thereby intensifying the constraints of studying *puya* in the public domain.

There are various kinds of *puya* available today, namely – the *puya* which are in the original Meetei *mayek* (script), the original *puya* in Meetei

mayek transliterated in Bengali script, and lastly, the mass of *puya* transliterated and then translated in contemporary Meeteirol (Meetei language) with details of reference to context. The mass of *puya*, which have been transliterated and translated into the contemporary Meetei language and written in Bengali script, form a substantial source material for my study to comprehend the social and cultural history. It is important to briefly survey these *puya* in order to understand the foundation on which this study is based.

First of all, it should be emphasized that the ancestor cult of the Meetei must have necessitated the recording of the lineage and descent of each *sagei* (clan). There has been a tradition of recording the pedigree of each *sagei* by the head of the sub-clan. For instance, *Langthaballon* and *Sanggai Phammang* are *puya* which are classified strictly within the framework of genealogy. In contrast, *Leithak Leikharol*, *Pudin* and *Mahou Yangbi* are *puya* which deal with the creation and cosmology in general as the central theme. These texts are also considered a compendium of the origin of clans in Manipur. Since the religious beliefs of the people are expressed through rituals, the Meetei perform rituals almost on all occasions when they venerate their ancestors. *Puya* such as *Thalloi Nongkhailon* and *Eerat Thounirol*, for instance, deal with various details of rituals. There are numerous *puya* which deal exclusively with a particular deity. For instance, *Sanamahi Puya* and *Pakhangba Laihui* help us to gather information on the parentage and myths associated with names by which the deity is known, the rituals to be performed for them, items of food or flowers to be offered, etc. *Panthoipi Khongkul* is another *puya* which deals with a particular deity. Since *Panthoipi* is considered as an omnipresent leader of the *amaibi* (priestess) in *Lai Haraoba*, it is important to study this *puya* in detail. Here

the life of goddess Panthoipi is narrated focusing on her transformation from an ordinary village girl to the level of deity by her association with Nongpok Ningthou (literally means 'King of the East') after which the two came to be worshipped as Nongpok-Panthoipi. We shall discuss this text in detail later.

By far the most important source for the study of Meetei history is the royal chronicle *Cheitharol Kumpapa* (henceforth referred to as *Ch.K.*). *Ch.K.* records events concerning the kings and the state until the end of the era of kingship in 1955. The chronicle traces the history back to 33 CE, though the earlier part of the 15th century is imprecise and problematic (Parratt 2005: 2). These state chronicles were recorded in Meetei *mayek* in the court by the learned *maichous* (traditional scholars). *Ch.K.* records the historical events of nearly two thousand years covering the reign of seventy eight kings from Nongda Lairen Pakhangba (33-154 A.D.) to Bodhachandra (1941-1955 A.D.). It is still a contentious issue of when exactly this chronicle began to be recorded.

While the chronicle itself mentions that King Kyamba introduced the system of *cheithaba* (counting of the years) in the year 1485 A.D. (Parratt, 2005: 42), a scholar like E Nilakanta quoting the chronicle calls attention to the event of 1780 A.D. when the then king Bhagyachandra is said to have ordered the 'recompiling' of the lost *Ch.K.*⁵ The accounts before this date are imprecise and scholars believe that these accounts must have been constructed out of available source materials. The incident of Bhagyachandra ordering the recompilation of the lost chronicle implies that the chronicle must have been already in existence before the reign of this king. Consequently, the language and style of the text have made scholars

⁵ Nilakanta, Elangbam, Preface to *Cheitharol Kumbaba* edited by L. Ibungohal and N. Khelchandra (1967), Manipur Sahitya Parishad, Imphal. p. (iii)

conclude that the chronicle must have started the recording of historical events from the 15th century onwards.⁶ The next section will deal with one of the most important texts on Meetei cosmogony called *Leithak Leikharol* (The Lore of Heaven and the Nether World).

LEITHAK LEIKHAROL: MODEL OF THE COSMOS

The Meetei have the belief system of a well-crafted kingdom of *lai* reigning over mankind. The fundamental belief is that there is one supreme *lai* above all with a descending hierarchical order of subordinate deities and below are human beings who surrender their destiny to their supreme deities. This is well-reflected in the text *Leithak Leikharol* (henceforth referred to as *LL*). The text enters into elaborate descriptions of the cosmos and its inhabitants: gods, humans, semi-divine beings, ghosts and goblins, to name a few.

The prologue of *LL* talks about the power of this book. It says that the book is deeply valuable and emphasizes that it consolidates an age-old knowledge passed down from the ancestors. While the anonymous author does not claim as the sole author of the book, he says that it is the knowledge of the forefathers which he has only served by jotting it down on paper. The prologue also lays down certain ethical norms of who shall be the appropriate person to read the book and who shall not. The author desires that only good, virtuous, learned and competent men should read this book. If wicked and incompetent men read the book, the author claims that they will be ruined. He also elaborates and defines who are wicked. And, finally, he curses, “If such a man reads this book, may he be blind! If he hears it, may he be deaf! If he understands it, may he be reborn as a maggot!” (Hemchandra 2010: 3). The author then exhorts good people to read the

⁶ Ibid, p. (iv)

book. Intriguingly, the good people are those who obey elders and the ministers in the Loishangs (the palace institutions); they salute to the people working in the palace, respect the ministers and consider the king as the God on earth (ibid: 3).

In a sense, one can observe *LL* as a text of divine right theory. The King was a divinely appointed agent and he was responsible for his actions to God alone. As the King was the deputy of God, obedience to him was held to be a religious duty and resistance a sin. To complain against the authority of the King and to characterize his actions as unjust was a sin for which there was divine punishment. This divine right theory model is *performed* in the form of the coronation ritual called *phamballon* in an intricate theatrical elaboration.⁷ This ritual theatrical exercise affirmed “the mandate to the royal power in relation to the state” (Arambam 2004: 69).

LL affirms that the concept of Taibangpanba Mapu (the Supreme Lord) represents the High God who is the soul of the universe, the guardian of the cosmos (Bhagyachandra 1991: 26). It emphatically asserts that Taibangpanba Mapu is everywhere embracing all in a boundless envelope. He is the owner of emptiness (Hemchandra 2010: 3). He is immortal, while all things – heaven and earth, all the deities and beings are subject to decadence, death and disappearance (ibid: 5). He is transcendent of the world, but nevertheless, He is immanent in all its manifestations. He is the principle of life and is seated within each being. He is represented by the supreme syllable ‘*hum*’ or ‘*hung*’ (ibid: 3). The emanation of different deities from the Supreme Lord is the beginning of the creation.

⁷ For a detailed description or procedure of this coronation rite, please see Lokendra Arambam (2004).

Atingkok Maru Sidaba (Infinite Expanse) and Amamba (Darkness) are taken to be representative of oneness in the world of manifestations. The former is the infinite expanse which embraces all within his being. The latter is the supreme infinite darkness which pervades the former. Atingkok and Amamba are always taken together as the starting point of all manifestations. In *LL*, Atingkok and Amamba are addressed as primal and eternal entities that cannot be consumed by the devastating fire.

Meetei creation philosophy is a continual recreation. The universe periodically emerges, and after having gone through a cycle of four ages - Hayi Chak, Haya Chak, Langba Chak and Konna Chak⁸, it bursts into an enormous fire and destroyed by a devastating wind at the end of Langba Chak (ibid: 5). The *LL* pronounces that when all have disappeared including the gods, there remained two primal deities - Atingkok Maru Sidaba and Amamba as the two expressions of the ultimate reality Taibangpanba Mapu. Atingkok and Amamba are the primal and eternal deities with whom Taibangpanba Mapu devised the creation anew (ibid: 7).

Performing the Creation: The Ever-new Beginning

According to *LL*, the primal beings are emanated out of the Supreme lord (Taibangpanba Mapu) following the primal sound 'hum' delivered by Him. This sound 'hum' represents the moment of realization of creating the universe anew while the sound 'aaum' represents the act of remembering (imagination)⁹ (*hum haina kanchaorakle // aaum haina mapuk ningsinglakle taibangpanpa asibu*) (ibid: 7). It is a moment of perceiving a form. Remarkably,

⁸ Somewhat parallel with Hindus four *yugas*

⁹ The phrase "*ningsinglakle mapukningda*" literally translated would be "remembering in heart/mind". In other words, it means 'imagination with concentration'.

this suggests that imagination plays an important role in the process of creation.

Elements such as *leipak* (earth), *nongthou* (heaven), *mei* (fire), *laija* (water), *nungsit* (air), *sachik* (morning star), *thaba* (evening star), *thawanmichak nongthou sidaba* (immortal stars), *numit* (the sun), *thaabi* (rounded moon), *khongchomnupi* (constellation), *apakma* (the stars and planets) are also revered as deities of importance (ibid: 9). Though they are addressed as gods, they are not considered as part of the eternal order as they are subject to decadence and disappearance. They are, however, described as superior to those in the mortal world.

To simply summarize a complex series of mythic events: Taibangpanba Mapu brought forth from himself Atiya Mapu Sidaba, and Atingkok was instructed to entrust Atiya with the work of creation. Atiya thus came to be known by the name of Asiba (from *siba* i.e., to be on an errand) (ibid: 13). Now, Atiya Sidaba, having been given the responsibility to create the earth, decided to seek the help and advice of the supreme god Atingkok, the manifestation of Taibangpanba Mapu (ibid: 13). On hearing his request, Atingkok opened his mouth and Atiya saw the whole universe resting within him. Atiya saw the sun, the moon, the pole star, air and much more. He then begged Atingkok to bring these entities out of himself. Atiya sang the Hoirou song: "*Hayi He Hoirou, Hoirou Hoirou Naketa*" (ibid: 17), and Atingkok opened his mouth generously to allow the elements to come out. This act was accompanied by another happy song: *Hoi Hoi Ha Ha Ha/ Hoi Hoi Ha Ha/ Heril Lille Herilla, Herilla/ Hayute Khulaite Heiya He Heiya He/ Ashibu Thoina Haraoba Leibane – Ta Ha Hou/ Hou He Hou Hei Naketa*¹⁰ (ibid: 19). It is

¹⁰ This song is still sung in Lai Haraoba.

significant that while enacting the creation myth during the Lai Haraoba festival the *amaibis* still utter this unintelligible cry. Only a line “*Ashibu Thoina Haraoba Leibane*” (Is there a world more joyous than this?) remain intelligible in the song today.

Among the many insects and animals which came into being in the course of the creation of the earth was a tortoise. It was on the back of this tortoise floating in the water that the earth was first created. As the earth was initially very small in size, it could not survive and turned into a cloud. The floating broken pieces of earth were collected by Atiya and he created an eel out of them. On the advice of the Supreme Lord, another earth was created. It was destroyed again. Only this time the earth turned into snow. Then Atiya created a black beetle which was sent to the Supreme Lord for further instruction. With his advice, the earth was finally created (ibid: 27).

The destructive force was also a god by the name of Haraba. When Haraba was planning the destruction of the earth for the third time, Taibang Panba Mapu realized his evil design and decided to distract him. Therefore, the goddess Nongthangleima, daughter of Taibang Panba Mapu and Leimaren Sidabi, was created as a beautiful girl to enamour Haraba (ibid: 31). Meanwhile, the creation of the earth was undertaken vigorously and with great care. The four cardinal points of the earth were now guarded by four deities viz. – Kara (East), Pisatau (West), Nongtam Khunba (North) and Kari (South) (ibid: 26). The creation of Nongthangleima and the guardian of four directions helped in preventing Haraba from destroying the newly created earth. The earth assumed its final shape at the end of this long process of construction, destruction and reconstruction (ibid: 27-35). The tireless efforts of Taibangpanba Mapu, Atingkok, Atiya Sidaba and Asiba are, therefore, proved fruitful.

After completing the creation of seven layers of *leithak* (heaven) and eight layers of *leikha* (netherworld), Atiya along with Apanba created human beings in the shape of the shadow of Taibangpanba Mapu, the Supreme Lord. Mankind was then given five principles of life, each located in a specific part of the body. The five gods who represented the five principles are Pongthalen, Koubaren Apanba, Thangjing, Marjing and Kouparu (ibid: 43-59). The *LL* mentions that many gods and goddesses helped Taibangpanba Mapu in the task of creation and these deities emerged from the body of Taibangpanba Mapu (ibid: 37-42).

How does one read and interpret a cosmogenic myth? *The New Encyclopedia Britannica* categorizes such myths into five primitive societies.¹¹ The primal myth of creation, as narrated in the *LL Puya*, conforms to the first type. According to this notion formulated by Andrew Lang,¹² the creation of the world is credited to a supreme being. Such myths are said to be found in the cultures of Africa, the Ainu of the Northern Japanese Island, the Central Australians and in several other parts of the globe.

Although the precise nature and characteristics of the supreme deity may differ from one culture to another, some common characteristics may be discerned. The world comes into being because of this supreme power. The deity exists alone prior to the creation of the world and there is a void before him. The mode of creation is deliberate, conscious, and the deity in this form is a symbolic manifestation of the sky. The presence of a destructive force is also a common feature in this cosmogenic framework.

¹¹ Robert P. Gwinn, (ed.), *The New Encyclopedia Britannica, Micropaedia, Knowledge in Depth*, Vol.17., 198, pp. 368-370.

¹² Ibid, cited in Robert P. Gwinn, op. cit., pp. 368-369

The deities mentioned above are no longer remembered in the everyday life of Meetei society since they are not associated with their immediate problems. Only on some occasions are they remembered, venerated and worshipped. In the *LL*, many deities are shown to have been manifested from the Supreme God for the purpose of the creation of the Universe. The Meetei tradition refers to the dynamic role played by the divine ensemble of nine *laibungthous* (the divine males) and seven *lainuras* (the divine females), who express devotion, self-contentment and extreme bliss in re-depicting the creation of the universe, the procreation of mankind and other creative pursuits for sustenance and development. Their dances in particular are believed to be revered in the traditional *amaibi* dance in the Lai Haraoba.

In contrast, there are many deities who are found mentioned in the *LL*, but who are lost in oblivion as they are not directly associated with the activities of common people in everyday life. In their place there are other deities – tutelary, domestic, ancestral and also public (Parratt 1980: 9). Whatever may be the situation, the religion of the Meetei carries with it a number of deities, high and low. These even include human beings who attained the order of the deities by virtue of their superior disposition, efficiency and antiquity. But all these deities are taken to be manifestations of the Supreme God to serve his own purpose.

The Construction of the Cosmic Time

The *LL* reveals a concept of cosmic time which is based on the history of mankind, or rather the history of Meetei formation. Like other puya, the text maintains four important ages (Chaks) in the development of human society – Hayi Chak, Haya Chak, Khunnung Chak and Langba Chak. Within these

four ages the patterns of the growth of human are worked out, but interestingly, these patterns are measured in terms of analogies of the physiological processes of the child's growth to manhood, or the various stages of human life. In other way, this philosophical conception of cosmic time could also be observed as dramaturgical stages of human life. The Hayi Chak, also considered as the age of truth, is regarded as the age of gods, related to the creation of this world. It is not related to human activity. Human social activity is said to start from Haya Chak. However, Hayi Chak is also conceptualized as the formative stage of human being in the mother's foetus.

The first stage of the human civilization is measured in terms of the child's emergence from the womb of the mother which is termed as *hunga laoba matam* (the time of the first cry of the child). In terms of settlements of human populations, the chief clans were conceived and the Nganba clan first emerged as leaders of village settlements in the valley. According to another puya *Leihou Naofamlon*, it was also the period when the first chieftain Ningthou Kangba ruled with his nine sons, who ruled in different regions, and merged into separate ethnic formations (cited in Arambam 1996: 177). Traditional scholars maintain that this was a comparatively peaceful period. The lifespan of the people was believed to be very long (one hundred thousand years). The country name was termed Mongpiru (ibid: 178).

The next age, which was termed as Khunnung Chak, was the period of the first feeding of solid food to the child (*chak illakpa matam*). It is believed that the leadership of the clan villages in this period was taken up by the Sarang Leishang group (ibid: 178). Citing from the *Leihou Naofamlon* puya, Arambam (ibid: 178) writes:

Four lineages were brought into prominence led by leaders called Taotang, Meltang, Shantung and Chaotang. After the Sarang Leishang, two more chieftains got into prominence. It is stated that Ningthou Tari married one Leima Kangkhal, from whom two lineages emerged – Hera and Khomma. The next settlements were organized by the Kege of the Moirang clan, bringing out three lineages led by Khapa, Tangpa and Chakot. The Khapa became merged into the Kharam (or the Burmese), while the Chakot became the Chakot tribes. During this period, the lifespan of the people was considerably reduced.

The next age was called Langba Chak. This corresponds to the time when the child is stopped from breast feeding (*khom khaiba matam*). The Nongpal or Angom group of clans in the eastern side of the valley became prominent (ibid: 179). Citing from the *Leihou Naofamlon puya*, Arambam (ibid: 179) writes:

[During this age] four lineages led by Nongtam, Nongtayang, Lintangsang and Leetangshang came into prominence. Each of the brothers moved out as separate families, the Nongtam choosing Khoipung, the Nongtayang choosing Chakshang, the Lintangshang choosing Illum and the Leetangshang choosing Khapak. The next leader of prominence is Moriya Phambalcha (the son of Ningthou Kangba) in whose reign the place came to be known as Tanthong Lemthong. The life span of the people was about 1000 years. Fire was regarded as the main source of religion and, at this time, human groups were separated from immediate relationship with the divinities. It is not clear how a father and a son could be placed in two different ages (Kangba had his first son Kongkoi, also known as Maliya Phambalcha).

The Konna Chak was the last age. It was the period of the ultimate human being. The physiological analogy is placed at the time when the child has become an adult of 15 years old (*chahi tara manga shurakpa matam*). The life span of man is now about 120 years (ibid: 179). Wind is regarded as the main source in this age. All the lineages and clans are structured into an ordered relationship. It is a time when the major tribes and ethnic denominations come to be properly recognized. Tribes like Tangkhul, Songbu (Maring), Thangal, etc. are recognized (ibid: 180). It is also the period

when Nongta Lairen Pakhangba first ruled, which local scholars place in the first century A.D (ibid: 180).

This construction of cosmic time is peculiarly related to the conceptual organization of the formation of the Meetei. While the clans and tribes residing in Manipur are claimed to be family brothers who had branched out into main ethnic groups, it is more likely to be a deviously crafted strategy to integrate all the clans and tribes into the Meetei fold. The stratification of ethnic groups in a much earlier age seems to be a marked out strategy to heighten the influence of the Ningthouja clan in Meetei society. The whole text of *LL* is, therefore, ideologically oriented, though the periodization in terms of human biological processes is extremely significant for understanding the worldview of the Meetei people.

The Appropriation of Seven Clans in LL

The *LL* displays a work of devious craftsmanship of appropriating and consolidating seven *salai* into the Ningthouja dynasty. According to the text, after the creation of human being by Ashiba, other six human beings were created and now there were seven human beings. Ashiba carried the seven human beings secretly to the four corners of the cosmos in different directions and he returned to heaven. A little child was placed at the big stone which was at the top of Koubru Ching (Koubru hill). Atiya Mapu Shidaba advised Konjil Tingthokpa, the youngest son, to be the leader of all the six human beings and further ordered him to settle at the Kanglei happily. As mention in *LL*, the source of origin for the seven *salai* (clan) are given as: Taoroinai (Pakhangba) for the Ningthouja (Mangang) clan, Pureiromba for the Angom, Khum Khum for the Leisangthem, Leiphuren Chanu Yucheng for the Moirangs, Poireiton for the Khumans, Taoren Khaba

for the Khabas, Nganba Leichik for the Nganba and Luwang Punsiba for the Luwangs (Hemchandra 2010: 129-39).

The theory of divine rights was bestowed on the Ningthouja clan. As mentioned above, this clearly shows that the *LL* is a text that asserts the divine right theory in which divine rights are specifically linked to the Ningthouja clan. At a historical level, this period witnessed the consolidation of different clan principalities through a prolonged struggle covering nearly a thousand years (Arambam 1991: 58). This consolidation of clans in turn emerged as an organized state in the fifteenth century, during the reign of Kyaamba (1467-1508 A.D.) (ibid: 58). Keeping in view with this historical process, one can safely conclude that the *LL* must have been written later only after the consolidation of different clans into Meetei led by the Ningthouja clan. Arguably, it is a well-crafted divine right theory of the Ningthouja dynasty with the politics of appropriation determining the status of the existing seven principalities.

Umanglai

The ancestral spirits, both divine and human, are designated as *umanglai*. There are various interpretations of the term *umanglai*. *Umanglai* literally means presiding deity of the grove (*umang*=grove, *lai*=god). There are other theories about the interpretation of Umang Lais. T.C. Hodson (1910) and J. Shakespear (1913a) regarded *umanglais* as “forest deities” from the actual etymology of the term (*umang*=forest, *lai*=deity/God) and many scholars blindly follow this. The lais are believed to dwell in groves which are so thick that they came to be known as *umanglai*. S.N. Parratt (1980) observes that while the etymology of the term may suggest an association of the *umanglai* with groves, they were never regarded as beings limited to the forest.

Another local interpretation is that *umang* is the derivation of the word *uram* (meaning something to be seen in the past) and *lai* means something easy. So, it refers to gods “easily seen in the past.” This interpretation is more plausible because the Meitei worship their ancestors to this day. Kh. Chandrashekhar (1980: 31) also supports this view by arguing that *umanglai* is a corrupted form of the word *uramba-lai* (from *uuba* = to see). The other interpretation based on the importance of dreams is also pertinent i.e. *umanglai* (*u*=from *uba* to see, *mang*=dream, *lai*=easy) so it means “the God seen easily in the dreams.” This explains the significance of “dreams” in Meitei society which has a tradition of “*mangtak*” (advice by ancestors in the dreams) (ibid: 31).

Like the majority of the primitive religions all over the world, the Meitei also personified the forces of nature. However, the *puya* reveal that ancestor worship lay at the base of all Meitei religious beliefs. It is important to remember that Meitei had a tradition of conferring many names for a single deity or an individual, perhaps a new name on the occasion of every significant ritual. This creates confusion for those who are not familiar with the ancient religious rituals. *Puya* such as the *Lainingthou Sanamahi Mingkheiron* and the *Sanamahi Ming*, for example, have included lists of forty-five names, and one hundred and sixty-eight names, respectively, for the deity popularly called Sanamahi (Kullachandra 1989: 24-32).

The *LL* place Taibangpanba Mapu at the top of all ancestral genealogy, both divine and human genealogies of each *salai* (clan) of the Meiteis. Taibangpanba Mapu is also known as Taibang Mapu Sidaba (Moirangcha 1988: 38), Atinga Sidaba (Bhagya 1988: 1), Ipung Loinapa Apakpa (Laimit and Iboyaima 1982: 1) and Lainingthou Asuppa (Hemchandra 2010: 3). He is omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient. The

majority of the puya begin with an obeisance to this Immortal Lord. The puya attach significance to the nine *laibungthous* (divine youths) and the seven *lainuras* (divine girls) whom Taibangpanba Mapu had brought forth from within himself in order to help him in the creation of the universe. They are credited with the task of levelling the uneven earth which was thus made habitable. The nine *laibungthous* are Laininghanba, Khamlangba, Mongba Hanba, Chakhaba, Naokan, Muwa Ningthou, Luwang Punshiba, Marjing and Koubru (Yaiphasang 1974: 41). The seven *lainuras* are Leishangthem Lairemma, Sarangthem Lairemma, Phouiobi, Thoomleima, Panthoipi, Nongthangleima and Ngaleima (ibid: 42). The nine divine youths emanated from the nine orifices of Kuru (or Guru) Sidaba's body (ibid: 43). Laininghanba sprang from the right eye, Muwa Ningthou from the left eye, Mingba Hanba from the right ear, Naokon from the left ear, Chakhaba from the right nostril, Koubaren alias Koubru from the left nostril, Khamlangba from the mouth, Luwang Punshiba from the *eshingthong* (urinary tract) and Marjing from the *penthong* (anus) (Chandrashekhar 1982: 1). The seven *Lainuras*, on the other hand, are the manifestation of Leimaren Sidabi or Ultimate Mother (Rajo 1977: 1).

There are eight gods who are distinguished from the rest by the title of *Maikei Ngakpa* i.e., guardians of directions (Shakespear 1913a: 423). They are Soraren (North), Khana Chaoba (South), Nongpok Ningthou (East), Nongchup Ariba (West), Koubru (North-West), Wangbren (South-East), Thangching (South-West) and Chingkhei Ningthou (North-East) (Chandrashekhar 1982: 34). A slightly different version of the names of the gods and the directions are given by R.K. Sanahal Singh (1970: 31), which are as follows: Nongpok Ningthou (East), Irum Ningthou (South-East), Wangbren (South), Thangjing (South-West), Khorifaba (West), Loiyarakpa

(North-West), Marjing (North-East) and Chingkhei (North). In every religious ceremony, four gods are invoked by the Maibas and Maibis to protect the ritual from evil spirits. These four deities are regarded as four incarnations of the guardians of four directions. They are Thangjing (South-West), Marjing (North-East), Wangbren (South-East) and Koubru (North-West) (Nilabir 1991: 110).

The progenitors of the seven clans that make up the entire Meetei people are collectively known by the name of *salai apokpas* or clan ancestors. The *salai apokpas* are the ancestors who are worshipped by the concerned clans. But Taibangpanba Mapu, the nine *laibungthous*, the seven *lainuras* and the *maigei ngakpa lais* (the guardian gods) are ancestors who are invoked at various public rituals, although they may also be worshipped along with the *salai apokpas* at home. This is different from the worship of the *salai apokpas* who can be evoked exclusively by the descendant of a particular *apokpa* (clan ancestor). The *lais* which the Meetei worship are nearly four hundred in number. All of them can be characterized as ancestor *lais* who encompass the entire Meetei pantheon.

In Manipur, the concept of the temple or shrine emerged much later. Archaeological findings do not support the assertion of the puya that temples were in existence from the time of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba in the first century A.D (Kunjewori 1988: 177-8). The *Cheitharol Kumpapa* records the construction of the first temple in 1617 A.D. during the reign of King Khagemba (Parratt 2005: 75). However, *umanglai* are worshipped at home as well. But, as the anthropologists like Frank Byron Jevons (1985: 188) argues community worship precedes family worship, it is possible to assume that the Meetei, in the absence of temples, worshipped the *umanglai* in the sacred

groves. There are numerous references in the royal chronicle which show that reverence of trees was very common during the pre-Khagemba period.

During the reign of Meidingu Mungyamba and Khagemba (1569 to 1665 A.D) there are no fewer than twelve references to *u-hongba* in the royal chronicle (Parratt 2005: 58-85). *U* (tree) was fit for *hongba*, which means 'initiation', 'inauguration'. However, there are no explanations as to why the tree was revered and whether the trees were dedicated to the *lais*, or any particular *lai* was associated with any particular tree. There is not enough evidence to come to any definite conclusion regarding these *u-hongba* rituals. It might have had originated as a kind of formal thanksgiving to the trees for the benefits they rendered to the people. It has also been speculated that since the trees existed from 'time immemorial' certain supernatural qualities were attributed to them, which accounts for their veneration.¹³ However, in the absence of any convincing connection between *u-hongba* and *umanglai*, the study of *umanglai* will be treated as separate from the tree-cult in Manipur in this study.

The *umanglai* were originally nine in number. To reiterate, *umanglai* are ancestral deities (Birachandra 1987: 210). According to W. Lukhoi (1989: 177-84), Meeteis today venerate as many as three hundred and seventy-eight *umanglai*. Late Pandit Ng. Kullachandra of Pandit Loisang, Royal Palace, has prepared a list of three hundred and sixty-two *umanglai* (Kullachandra 1963). A comparative study of these lists indicates that a number of *umanglai* were incorporated into the Meetei pantheon during various stages of the history of Manipur. For example, it is quite obvious that with the beginning of the

¹³ Communicated by *pena* maestro Padmashri Khagembam Mangi on July 2, 2015 at his residence in Thangmeiband.

Hindu influence in Manipur from around the 17th - 18th centuries a large number of new *lais* were added to the Meetei pantheon.

Although the name Laphupat Kalika suggests that she is a Hindu goddess of the place Laphupat, Kalika is definitely not a traditional Meetei *lai*. Similarly, the influence of Vaisnavism can be seen in the inclusion of such names as Thinungei Ramji Ningthou (Jaiswal 1981: 187-8). This is not unusual in view of the fact that Vaisnavism has always attempted to extent its influence to tribal areas.

Surajit Sinha (1966: 72-3) studying the influence of Vaishnavism on the Bhumij tribe, an eastern offshoot of the Mundas of Ranci observes that the Vaisnava *gurus* were not concerned with replacing the traditional rituals of the Bhumij. Rather, the gurus were more interested in increasing the number of their clientele. With a view to achieving this end, they were mainly interested in superimposing a few rituals of their own to make their presence as rituals specialists essential to the life of Bhumij. The Bhumij of their part did not look upon their contact with the Vaisnavas as displacing their own rituals. The association with Vaisnavas and acceptance of their ritual traits were, instead, considered by the Bhumij as conveying an element of respectability. This identification with the local faith proved to be highly effective in influencing the attitude of the people towards an alien cult. While Kh. Bijoykumar (2005), in his study of Sanamahism in Manipur, argues that the spread of Vaishnavism (or largely Hinduism) is consolidated through its focus on the local “place of essence” by establishing the Hindu gods or goddesses in the local place without disrupting the “place of essence.” The point is that the numbers of *umanglai* worshipped nowadays reflect the religious history of the Meetei people at various stages of development.

While disagreeing with the interpretation of *umanglai* as forest deities or tree deities, S.N. Parratt (1980: 9) says *umanglai* covers all categories of gods and goddesses. She classify broadly into four groups:

- a) Ancestors or deities which are believed to have had a human existence at some point of time in the past. Examples are Pakhangba, Nongpok Ningthou and Poiraiton.
- b) Important *lai* associated with one particular *salai* (clan).
- c) The domestic deities which are the possession of particular clan or family groups. They are properly called *yumjao lai*.
- d) Tutelary deities, i.e., guardian spirit connected with particular places or areas. There are various places in Manipur which are regarded as sacred. These are often hills, which are associated with a particular deity. Examples of this are Thangjing hill in Moirang, and Nongmaiching, which was formerly associated with Nongpok Ningthou and subsequently with Siva.

(Parratt 1980:9)

To this list one can add another group of *umanglai* – the Hindu gods and goddesses worshipped as *umanglais* and celebrated in Lai Haraoba accordingly.

The next section will deal with another text called *Panthoipi Khongkul* (In the Footsteps of Panthoipi) which is an important text to understand the love story of two figures Panthoipi and Nongpok Ningthou.

PANTHOIPI KHONGKUL (IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF PANTHOIPI)

The figures of Panthoipi and Nongpok Ningthou dominate so much of Meetei popular mythology.¹⁴ According to the legend, Panthoipi was a princess of the Mangang principality which is usually regarded as a proto-

¹⁴ Nongpok Ningthou has been identified as Marjing (the guardian god of the north-east) by some traditional scholars. However, Sarojj N. Parratt argues that the identification of Marjing with Nongpok Ningthou (literally ‘the king of the east’) has come about because of the association of both with the direction of the north-east (Parratt & Parratt 1997: 7). It is significant that in many songs of Lai Haraoba particularly the *yakaiba* (morning invocation) song, the identification of Nongpok Ningthou as Marjing has not yet taken place. In this song, as we now have it, Nongpok Ningthou has his abode at Selloi Langmai hill.

Meetei *salai* (clan). She was married to the King of Khaba *salai*. One day she was seen cultivating the fields by Nongpok Ningthou while he was out for hunting. They fell in love, although no words were exchanged between them. They subsequently went in search of each other and began a romantic affair. The popular love songs in Lai Haraoba contain many references to the Panthoipi-Nongpok Ningthou legend, even where they are not explicitly named. The male beloved in Panthoipi *isei* (Parratt & Parratt 1997: 119) comes from Selloi, he is looking for a bull in hunting and dressed in a colourful cloak. Panthoipi is described as “the queen of all maidens” in the song of *phibul ahabi* dance sequence (ibid: 131), and probably the “queen and goddess of the hills” in the song of *kanglei thokpa* episode (ibid: 136) and the “maiden of the east” in *loutan* song (ibid: 143).

Significantly, Panthoipi seems to be a typical love-goddess. However other liturgical lyrics point to other aspects of Panthoipi. In the *yakaiba* (morning invocation) song (ibid: 90-93), she is addressed as Ima (Mother), which may point to her as a fertility deity. As mentioned earlier, in the legend, she is also discovered engaged in rice cultivation. In the song of the *chungkhong litpa* episode, she is the “maid of the hills” and also the “goddess who makes the paddy dry even when there is no sun, and wet even when there is no rain” (ibid: 131). The Panthoipi circle in the everyday rituals of Lai Haraoba deals with agriculture but also contains love lyrics which refer explicitly to the Panthoipi legend. Panthoipi can be seen as a Meetei version of the Rice-Mother figure which is widespread in East Asia (ibid: 8).

In the book titled *Panthoipi Khongkul* (henceforth referred to as *PK*), this tradition is expanded and Panthoipi is described as multiplying the supply of rice at her own wedding. The Rice Mother figure also appears in

Meetei mythology as Phouoibi (from *phou* means “unhusked rice, paddy” and *oibi* means being with a feminine suffix *bi*). Phouoibi, whose cult is now in decline in Kanglei Haraoba, was formerly invoked for a plentiful rice harvest (Shakespear 1913a: 446-8). There are also significant connections between Panthoipi and rain, which strengthen the belief that she is an agricultural fertility goddess. Phouoibi is still honoured in the Chakpa Phāyeng Haraoba. Here she seems to be identified as Tampha (in the case of Kanglei, Tampha is identified as Panthoipi), and is associated with several other female goddesses responsible for rice production. It seems that the various rice goddesses of the different principalities or clans were subsumed into Panthoipi, who is the princess of the dominating Ningthouja clan. The text *Panthoipi Khongkul* probably is a creation in the scheme of appropriating other rice goddesses in one form called Panthoipi.

As Moirangthem Chandra (2009: xi), the editor of *PK*, in his introductory note mentions, *PK* was written by Akoijam Tonboi during the reign of king Khongtekcha of 8th century A.D. However this is a controversial claim. R.K. Jhalajit (1965: 131-2) remarks that it is reasonable to assign the writing of the *PK* to the period of Panthoipi’s popularity in the last two decades of the 17th century A.D. and the first decade of the 18th century A.D. Ch. Manihar (1984: 61) opines that the text was written during the reign of Charairongba (1697-1709) during which time the shakti cult developed in Manipur.

At a purely descriptive level, the text invokes Nongpok Ningthou as the god of universe. He has a snake tied round his neck, he wears the skin of a tiger, has matted hair plastered with water into it, uses a trident, wears iron shoes and sit on the back of a bull (Chandra 2009: 47). In its iconographic

details and general aura, the description seems to resemble the image of Shiva. In all likelihood, *PK* was composed when there was an influence of Shakti cult in Manipur and the author was an individual believer of Shakti cult (Jhalajit 1965). Loan words like *swarga*, *dwarapur*, *graha*, etc. were used under the influence of Hinduism. *Cheitharol Kumbaba* mentions that the temple of Panthoipi was built during the reign of Paikhomba in the year 1686 (Parratt 2005: 100). This does not indicate, however, that she only came to prominence at that time. In the text, *Loyumba Sinyen*, there is a reference of Panthoipi worship during the reign of Loyumba (1074-1122) when the Heichānams (Heisnam) clan took care of the goddess Panthoipi (Manikchand 2012: 6). This text could have been composed in some early period in which the translator made new additions to the original script. Or, it was composed in some period when there was an impact of Hindu culture on Meetei life.

At another level, it could be argued that *Panthoipi Khongkul* portrays impetuous love against age-old barriers of social custom and physical obstacles. The title signifies either literally following the 'trail of Panthoipi' after she had left her husband's home or a description of her distinguished and erratic traits. The writer first introduces Panthoipi to us as a maiden of unsurpassed beauty and born of the Kanglei king, passing her lonely days in the '*ningol ka*' (unmarried daughter's chamber). Many a deserving man sought her hand of which Sapaipa, a king hailing from the western part of the valley, was the first. Despite his pompous promise of constructing good roads and beautiful bridges, a spacious house and digging of fish ponds for the sake of her, the haughty princess spurns his offer as all these preparations were of no worth to her. At last she was given away in marriage to Taram Khoinucha born of Khaba Sokchrongba, King of the Khaba dynasty and the queen Manu Teknga. This time more elaborate

arrangements were made for receiving the Kanglei princess – just as the bridge was made with iron poles as its support, silver plates as the planks and gold rods as the side rails. The marriage took place with pomp and grandeur, and the bride was escorted to her new home. But strangely, Panthoipi failed to conform to the way of life expected of a married woman. Instead, like an energetic youth, she would never keep indoors, but remains wandering in the open meadows, bathing and sporting in the cool waters of the running river. During one of such escapade, she chances upon Nongpok Ningthou, the Lord of the Langmai Hills and is captivated by his handsome look and towering personality. It is love at first sight, and she promptly proposes to run away with him to live securely in his region.

However, she cannot follow up on her love because she had been married for barely five days. In the meantime the two lovers have several clandestine trysts which the writer describes without inhibition. Their trysts naturally make her in-laws suspicious of her conduct. They then hatch devices like feigning death by Khaba Sokchrongba so as to win her sympathy and make her realize her responsibility to the family. Panthoipi hears the news of the death and hastens home. Finding a pretext of being hurt by this cheap trick, she turns it to her advantage and accuses her father-in-law of even pretending to die on account of his hatred for her. Then, she manages to slip out of her husband's place and elopes with Nongpok Ningthou who comes disguised as a Tangkhul tribe. (The meeting with Nongpok Ningthou is performed as drama on the last day of Lai Haraoba as Tangkhul Nurabi.) The Khabas led by her father-in-law pursue her but to no avail. The happy union of the lovers is celebrated with dance and music, attended by divine beings subordinate to Nongpok Ningthou on the sun washed slopes of the Langmai Hills.

The rest of the text is devoted to describing the merriment of the newly-united lovers and their divine attributes. Panthoipi's father-in-law and mother-in-law too came to Langmai Hills and bow down to them begging to be forgiven. They plead that they did not know at the time of Panthoipi's sojourn with them that she was a goddess. Consequently, the Khabas worship Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoipi with dance and music which is believed to be archetypal event performed in Lai Haraoba.

It is important to highlight the political interpretation of the *PK*. Many scholars have opined that before Nongda Lairen Pakhangba who was believed to be the first king of the Ningthouja clan ruled Kangla, it was Khaba clan which reigned at Kangla. Panthoipi's father in-law, Khaba Shokchrongba himself was the king of Kangla. Later on Pakhangba conquered Khaba dynasty and seized Kangla (Pramodini 2010: 23). These incidents are testimony to the fact that Kangla has been a bone of contention among various kings and there were frequent wars for its control. Formation of allies among various rulers was also practiced or prevalent in those days (ibid: 23). Since Panthoipi's father Taoroinai, who once had ruled Kangla, was a glorious and powerful king, the Khaba family might have wanted to establish a strong relationship with him and hence Khaba wanted Panthoipi to be his daughter in-law. The formation of allies was very important in those days. For instance, when Nongda Lairen Pakhangba sought to conquer Kangla, he was helped by Luwang, Angom, etc. Shokchrongba did not want to create any animosity against the equally powerful king Taoroinai; hence, Shokchrongba tried to appease and stop Panthoipi but in vain. Later on, having no choice, the Khaba clan had to surrender to Panthoipi (ibid: 24).

Nongmaithem Pramodini (2010: 24) observes that Panthoipi leaving Khaba for Nongpok Ningthou can be seen as a political strategy of Panthoipi to weaken the Khaba clan by forming allies with its various enemies. The surrendering of the Khaba family to her power shows that they were rendered powerless. This intelligence and power demonstrated by Panthoipi to destabilize the power of Khaba clan leads to the establishment of the Ningthouja clan powerful in Kangla who in turn formed the Meitei race.

The *PK* also gives an account of Lai-Haraoba, the religious and social festival, where the Khaba community paid homage to the deity Nongpok Ningthou and his consort Panthoipi. This text is a repository of numerous songs. Significant among these Lai Haraoba songs found in *PK* are the *ougri*, *khencho* and *lairemma paosa*. *Ougri* and *khencho* are much more archaic in diction and steep in historical allusions. A part of *Anoirol* is also found in *PK* in the form of songs. In this text, numerous songs and 'orature' were incorporated to make the text lively and thus making the text a performative reading.

***ANOIROL: THE LANGUAGE OF MOVEMENT*¹⁵**

Anoirol (*Anoi*=dance, *rol/lol* = language) literally means "the language of dance" but it is more broadly understood as the "art of body movement." It is a manuscript containing a record of songs, verse and ballads describing the origin of dance, its relation to the Meitei cosmogony and the poetic depiction of dances with cultural metaphors, maxims and ethical codes of the Meitei which shape the aesthetics of the traditional Meitei community life. The date of the manuscript is controversial. As Moirangthem Chandra, the

¹⁵ This section is a rework of my MPhil dissertation titled "*Anoirol: Text and/in Performance*," submitted in JNU, 2012.

editor of *Panthoipi Khongkul*, a manuscript where a portion of “*Anoirol*” appears, claims it is written in the 8th century. However, this is not readily accepted by scholars. As there is a tradition of copying down these manuscripts from one generation to another, it is more than probable that the *Anoirol* cannot be as old as it is claimed. It is very unfortunate that scholars of Meetei Mayek (scripts) have not yet turned their attention to the dating and authenticity of these manuscripts. However, it can be speculated that the text of *Anoirol* was written sometime before the advent of Hinduism in Manipur i.e., before 17th Century.

As the *penakhongba* (traditional balladeer) sings the recurring phrase of the *Anoirol* song, “*hayi ngeida noibabu/ meina waina moiye/ tangna samna noiye*” (The movement/dance during the age of Truth, / spreads like wild fire, / the movement/dance joining the joints), the words metaphorically suggests the importance of the *noiba* (movement/dance) and its continuity. The song also imagines the utopian state of the Hayi Chak (Age of Truth). During this time everything seems to be in harmony. The verse also describes the horrifying bygone days of Hayi Chak and how it had been overcome by dancing. Some of the traditional philosophers also conceptualise the Hayi Chak as the time of conception of the “body” in the mother’s womb. I shall consider this period of the time of conception of the body as a “liminal period” which I shall discuss later.

Noiba which means “movement” in archaic Meeteilon (Meetei language) has a philosophical meaning embedded/embodied in the cultural practices and day to day lived-world of the Meetei. Coming to grasps with the embodiment is a challenging philosophical task. The movement of foetus in the womb, the “subtle-body” movement, is primarily believed to be a

source of Meetei dance. Life and body movement are inextricably connected in the Meetei worldview. It is believed that the *noiba* (movement) of the foetus in the mother's womb, the "liminal period", gives her the joyous anticipation of a new life. Likewise, the subtle-dances of the *hakchang saba* (making the body) episode in Lai Haraoba imitates the movement of the foetus in the mother's womb.

Just as the movement of the foetus within the mother's womb gives her the joyous anticipation of a new life; the Meetei believe that they are immersed in a womb-like Universe, so god and goddess are pleased when they perform dance. Therefore, body movement is life. This is believed to be the reason that *noiba* is the main component of the Lai-Haraoba festival and is inextricably an important ingredient of Meetei performance traditions.

In the Meetei worldview as found expression in *Anoirol*, the metaphysics growing out of biology is very much embedded in the organic. The creation dance by the *amaibis* with the *athuppa*¹⁶ feature imitates the slow and subtle movement of the foetus in the mother's womb. Meetei performances are known for their subtle, sensuous movements based on curvilinear principles, and dances which are more gravitational and slow in outlook and temper, despite the existence of male vigorous forms. Unlike other Indian classical music traditions sung while seated, *Nata-Sankirtana* singing is by itself a combination of singing by musicians with the delicate movements of the body and hands based on *Khuthek Anoi* (language of hand movements) form in alignment with the variety and range of complex foot-

¹⁶ 'Athuppa' means something clandestine and thus implicit. Khumanlambam Yaima says that *athuppa* is the main character of Meetei dance both in pre-Vaishnavite and Vaishnavite performances. For details, Yaima Singh, Khumanlambam (Ed.). *Meetei Jagoi: Anoirol*. Volume 1, p. 6, also on p. 47.

steps derived from *Khongthang Anoi* (language of foot-steps). By its very nature, the *athuppa* featured in Meetei performing arts recognize the performances as suggestive, rather than blatantly expressive. This *athuppa* character is embedded with the morality and ethical codes of the living tradition of the Meetei.¹⁷ As compared with other Indian classical dances, it would certainly make much less use of any codified technique and elaborate facial expressions.

Mimetic Representation of Nature

As mentioned in the *Anoirol* the Meetei compose the dances drawing on imitations of the forces of Nature, mainly the hills, rivers and animals. Probably, it is also quite possible that the nine Laibungthous and seven Lainuras, respectively, were images of the nine hills and seven rivers in Manipur (called Kangla in ancient time). As mentioned in ancient manuscripts, "*chinglon mapal tampak ama*" (nine hills, one valley) suggests evidence that the Manipur geographically imagined "nine hills and one valley." And in *Anoirol* "*yiram taretmakki yiyaida / pamel sidababu houye*" (The tree of immortal (believed to be Kangla) survives because of the seven rivers.)

The Meetei dance originally imitates various ways of movements of living beings of their lived-world. In *Anoirol*, we find references to dance imitating the movements of animals. The following extracts from *Anoirol* could be a reference point to substantiate this argument:

Konde khutchum maibana he Laikan chingta, / Noibi noitam chingta, yongmu saram chingta / Tangka nupi phuitingwak, khuiyon phuiting loubi, / Toura

¹⁷ For more details, please see Yaima Singh, Khumanlambam (Ed.). *Meetei Jagoi: Anoirol*, Volume-II, Imphal, 1975, pp.46-9

*nongtang lengbina mapal Laiga noiye // Khongsit manbal noibu noikhutlangbu
noitamye / Noina ngamdang noingeida sabi leirang masel //*

*Nu-ok paibang masel, khupi khupai masel / Kheiroi yupeng masel, tingsit
naosang masel / Huiriya Laikhotchaga, singjang wakhai yaona / Pikhit pikhang
yaona toibi tangka chanuga / Mapal Laiga noitamye //*

*Tubi khongsit aada chinglen paring tubu / He noigi noithekkhiye / Lairen
khongkap mada / Mahou Phaipok Chingpu noigi noithekkhiye //*

*Lairenpana Noibadi arembana noipadi / Noichunese Noichunese // Tubipana
Noibabu arembana Noibabu / Sabilemna noitamye // Sabiyamma tomma,
nongda chingkan yangna noitamye / Taoroinaiga noitamye // Taoroinaiga
noiringei mathanglenga noiringeidi / Marumbina ngainoknei // Marumbina
noiringeidi, maparina ngainoknei /*

*Sabi ipanlen-o! / Aningbadi ningthiye // Yaren ya-na chouye, / Ha
ngainokkhiye // Sabi ipallen-o! / Tubipa-ga noichunese noichunese / Hayingeida
Noibabu / Meina waina noiye / Tangna samna noiye //*

(Yaima 1973: 12-5)

[With Konde Khutchum *maiba* in the hills where all the treatment of diseases are done, the same hill where the first dance was learnt is the hill where the monkeys exist and dance. The maiden Tankha, Phuitingwak, Khuyon, Phuitingloubi, Toura, Nongdang, Lengbi,¹⁸ with all these names, incarnating different personifications with these names, dance with nine Gods. They learnt the dance from the maiden Tangkha's dragon/snake father Taoroinai. Learnt from her father, sliding smoothly, in rhythmic gaits, the maidens' dance in sequence astonished every creature on earth. Astounded, all the creatures came out and started to dance. All the animals and birds were all overwhelmed with excitement. All the mammals and species of beavers, the aquatic animals, aerial creatures, the haunting spirits in the forest, all of them were thrilled by the dance of Toibi Tankha Chanu, came out and danced with the nine Gods.

Lairemma Tankha Chanu and her father Lairen (dragon/snake), while learning to dance, danced together with her father Lairen who danced first and Lairemma followed, imitating his footsteps. Her gait and dance of the feet and meandering feet akin to that of the snake, the strong meandering steps crushed all the plants and flowers in the path, Mahou Phaibok Hill was the place of the enactment of this dance.

¹⁸ Probably these are names of seven *Lainuras*, the manifestations of Goddess Panthoibi (Khapi Lengnao Mompì).

The Father King Lairen Taoroinai's gentle and graceful dance was imitated perfectly by his daughter by watching each of his steps, a male beaver watching the complementary dance of the father-daughter duo started dancing like the Taoroinai. The beaver from beneath the earth came out of the burrow and leaped and twisted his body, waving eloquently danced imitating the Lairen Taoroinai. Seeing the dance of the male beaver, the female beaver laughed, she started dancing likewise. Seeing the dance of the female beaver, her son laughed and embarrassed her.

The son said laughing, "Your dance is good, but your broad teeth amuse me". Along with the beaver other animals too started dancing. "Let us dance like the dance of the nine dragon/snakes", they said and started dancing. They learned the dance of the age of truth and dance akin to the gods who first danced this particular dance. The dance of the age of truth, spread like wild fire, the dance never to be burn out.]

(translation mine)

What is the purpose or motivation of the story? It is not supported by any information or argument as such, but by a whole texture of *metaphor*, of deviant syntactic and semantic patterning. The ethical aesthetic value on which its meaning is based is signified in the story and the metaphor it uses. For example, in Meetei dance, the dancer is instructed not to open his/her mouth and show his/her teeth. It is regarded as not beautiful, consequently non-aesthetic. Such an ethical code that shaped the aesthetics of Meetei dance is rhetorically embedded in *Anoirol* poetry, through metaphors and images. The common Meetei aphorism "*sabina mama noknaba*" (a beaver ridiculing his mother) is a common usage when someone mocks or ridicules the other. The central idea is that "don't ridicule the other before looking yourself in the mirror."

As prescribed in the *Anoirol*, the *Lai-Haraoba* dance is the imitation of the above dance by nine Laibunghous and seven Lainuras. So, the dance movements in *Lai-Haraoba* are mainly derived from the movements of different animals and their surroundings.

In the case of Chakpa community¹⁹, they imitate from the movement of the skies (clouds). Here is the description of Chakpa Anoi:

*Hayingeida Noibabu sararennna noiye, / Sararennna Noibabu chakparennna urak-e
// Chakpa sawangbana sawang melongbana / Melong hameng mitna yaorou
tanda urak-e // Saji tanda khanglak-e yaorou saji tanbana / Saji kurang tanba
yaorou sajitengdubu / Laba khuman tanna yangdou saram libada / Korou
lomda tankhatle khoimom thouna noingamme / Lainingthouna noiye //*

*Sararennna noiye wahong noibu noiye, / Pungpha noibu noingamye yaipha
noibu noingamye / Korouchindagi urak-e // Korou mathakchin melong mitna
noirak-e / Hameng mitna noirak-e saji tanbana noirak-e / Kurang tanbana
noirak-e //*

*Ching-u thangba nongningthou / pakhangbana noiye, / Yoirenbana noiye
nongthourenna noiye; / Sararennna Noibabu chakparennna noitamye / Sawang
Melongbana mayum hemcheng nakta / Nungnang noibu noitamye //*

*Chakpa masaikonda cheirei sangkhanna / Phingou thakta khanna chakparennna
noiye / Hemchengbana noiye shupna chingna noiye // Chakparennna Noibadi
Hemcheng Chanuga, / Chakpa Yomloi-houna korou noibu noitamye /
Nungnang noibu noitamye Korou waina noiye // Loina houna noiye ngamdram
houna noiye / Khoiyam thougi noitamye, Noichunese sam //*

(Yaima 1973: 23-5)

[In the Hayi age, Soraren [the God of Skies] dance, / Chakpas saw the dance of Soraren. / Chakpa Sawangba the ancestral chief of the Chakpas, / Went up the sky in pursuit of the deer, his quarry. / And witness the dance of Soraren, God of the heaven, / various were the forms performed by Him. / Chakpa Sawangpa learnt and brought them down to the Earth. / In his region a white canopy was put up / And Chakpa Sawangpa too began to dance; / Then all men and women of his community joined him. / Thus this dance has been handed down through generations.

The Soraren dances akin to that of a peacock / He dances blissfully with pride / Twirling with grace was his dance / Even as he dances, the inhabitant of the skies / witnessed the merriment and contentment. The dance of the skies / Witnessed by the goat-like truth seeking eyes of Sawangpa, / His eyes, that of a hunter and that of the deer-prey, all observant / They all danced likewise.

¹⁹ They are considered to be the oldest settlers in Manipur who are now considered as Lois (outcast).

The king of the highest heaven, the god of the gods / Pakhangba, he called Chingu Yoirenba / The King of Gods, he too danced likewise / Observing the dance of the king of Gods, Soraren / The chief of the Chakpas too / Imitated the dance / The chief of the Chakpas, Sawang Melongba / Initiated and taught the dance of the Gods to his people.

In the land the Chakpas inhabit / Adorned and fenced with clothes / White, like that of the clouds in sky as the roof. / The chiefs of the Chakpas danced here / Following the Chakparen's steps / daughters and daughters-in-law danced likewise. / The dance of the Gods, as dance by Soraren, / Nuanced and etched, in Soul and body / Executed to perfection each and every sequence, / They danced.]

(translation mine)

The dance of the Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoipi are rendered in a magnificent poetry reflecting the Meetei performing arts being imitated from such renderings. The slow eloquence of Meetei dance is described resembling like a dancing elephant or a dancing peacock. The following extract from *Anoirol* can be observed:

Lainingthou Nongpokna noipati / Ning leina samu hakna / namna pakan sha kangna / Samu khuttol phanna leina lana / wahong meipungbana noikum noiye //

Panthoipina noipasung / atum atum noiye animana noiye // khongthang manna noiye / khuthek manna noiye / tikta manna saman lengka manna / animana leina lana haina humna noiye //

(Yaima 1975: 11)

[O' King of Kings, Nongpok Ningthou, the dance you have enacted, circling your waist and hips, with your bodily movement bending down and spreading out your elbows; and your fingers spread out into a movement, dancing gracefully akin to a peacock with abundant lustrous feathers.

The dance of Panthoipi, too, likewise complemented that of Nongpok Ningthou. The gait of the feet and gestures of the hands, the radiant faces, the beautiful expression and the movement of their bodies waving eloquently, they danced.]

(translation mine)

Anoirol also explores the myth, philosophy, values, lifestyles, convictions, faith, and views on the life of the Meetei and other associated beliefs relating to ecological preservation— deep nature, environment, flora and fauna; and its deep-rooted animism at the grassroots level. The subtle imagery is of the movement of the ancestor serpent-dragon, the tail-devouring serpent (the Ouroboros) and his coils of constant renewal in the figure 8, which defines the concept of *Anoirol*.

Traditional Concept of Time Embedded in Performance

The connections between time, creation and performance, including the concept of absolute time as well as cosmological time measured from the initial moment of *leishemba* (creation of the earth) is believed to be imbibed in *Anoirol* or Meetei dance. The common belief regarding the Meetei concept of time affirms that “64 *mikup* (moments) make a *pung* (hour). 8 *pung* make a *yuthak*. 8 *yuthak* make a day.”²⁰ So, there are $8 \times 8 = 64$ *pung* in a day. Consequently, 64 is a significant number in the Meetei belief system and philosophy. The performativity of this concept of time is embedded in Meetei performing arts. The relation of the concept of time and Meetei dance is intricate and inherent in Lai Haraoba performances. One needs to think deeply about the relationship between the concept of time and the Meetei performing arts. For instance, why are there 64 hand gestures which complete the *hakchang saba* (making of the body) dance sequence in Lai Haraoba? The next section will deal with some dance techniques as mentioned in *Anoirol*.

²⁰ In my personal interview with Ojha M.Macha Chaoreikanba, I was told that the Meetei “concept of time” is clearly explained in the unpublished manuscript called *Tanyeiba* (literally means “beating the rhythm”). But I could not procure this manuscript. As my purpose is to relate the time concept and dance, the information provided here serves the purpose.

Dance Culture and some Techniques

According to another manuscript *Pongthourol Thouni*, the first movement of human life is regarded as *Noiba* which is a *jagoi* (dance). When a child starts to move, the first lesson given to the new born child by the mother is the rhythm “tading-tading, ting ting” and the sound of the same sung by the mother is the first song. And then the child gradually starts to jump and the mother sings “Climb up after the sun, grow taller till the moon, o’ become bigger and taller” (*numitna karingei kahouro, thaana wanglingei wanghouro, ting ting chaoro*).²¹

As charted out by Khumanlambam Yaima (1973), the editor of *Anoirol*, the footsteps and the hand-gestures of the Meetei dance are created from the following nine techniques:

- a. The thumb and index finger joining together making a curve is called *chago*. This is believed to be the image of the first progenitor of mankind. Moving with this hand gesture is called *chago/chako saba* (making *chago*). Also, moving around, making head and tail, is also called *chago/chako saba*.
- b. Dancing with the movement of five fingers is called *anoiba*.
- c. Dancing with the movement of body parts eloquently is called *noiba*.
- d. Pointing hands, waving the hands, singing in consonance with the hand gestures is called *paosaba* or *paosa*²².
- e. Dancing of stepping in rhythm with hand gestures, clapping hands in between is called *khencho*.²³

²¹ As cited in Yaima Singh, Khumanlambam (Ed.). *Meitei Jagoi: Anoirol*, Volume-I, Imphal, 1973, p. 1.

²² The word probably comes from ‘*paokhong*’ means riddle/conundrum/enigma.

²³ This is traditionally associated with a Spring Dance known as *Thabal Chongba*.

- f. Dancing in rhythm by joining hands together, forming a circle, singing the advice of God is known as *ougri*. It is believed to be inauspicious to break one's step during the *ougri* performance. To understand the foot movements of the *ougri* dance, it is significant to understand this poetic description of *ougri anoirol khongthang*,

The high God of the gods / Traversing the wide expanse of the water /
 In a raft made rickety with waves / The raft gave way / Crumbled into
 pieces / The God leaped hither-thither / Akin to the grace of an
 elephant / Arms outreached waving to the right / bowed in effort / of
 reaching out to a drifting plank / Arms outstretched waving to the left
 / upturned torso / leaping in and out / Thrashing feet inwards /
 Stomping and gathering / Woven in gait of the feet / as in the patterns
 of the *paphal* / The dance of the feet / Patterned in such a way - / Five
 times stomping on five tree-trunk / two above the tree-trunk / One foot
 on a single tree trunk / Both feet spontaneously / Skipping twice / On
 the edge of the trunk / Stomping nine steps.

After stomping nine times / Stand-still on a tree-trunk / after leaping /
 Meandering the body to fall with both feet at once / This is the dance /
 The movements of the toes is thus - / The big toe of the right feet / is
 tied thrice a knot / The third knot / And the second knot / Tied by the
 big toe of the left feet / Thus, the toes wriggle and meander / one leaps
 and attempts / To tie up the broken raft / Gathering the big planks of
 wood / in order to make a boat / Thus the dance is called *choirik* / Then
 taking from the contact / Of the raft and the oar / It is called *choirik
 thengou*.

(Yaima 1973: 44-5, *translation mine*)

- g. Lifting the toes a little, spreading the hand and waving; waving it to the right by bending the body; waving the hand to the left by swaying the torso and hopping in rhythm, step by step, is called *choirik thengou*.²⁴

²⁴ Please refer to the above footnote (translation of *ougri Anoirol khongthang*)

- h. Dancing by lifting the slightly bent arm is called *liru/lirung jagoi*. This dance form is probably composed by Thingkol Moribicha of Moirang,²⁵ as speculated in *Anoirol (lirung sana noiye)* (Yaima 1973: 32).
- i. Dancing with the alternate four fingers of the two hands touching each other and the two thumbs crossing each other is called *lairu-saba*. This dance form is also probably composed by Thingkol Moribicha of Moirang, as speculated in *Anoirol (lairu sana noiye)*.²⁶

Some other techniques mentioned in *Anoirol*:

- j. Simple dances without symbolical meaning are called *chumsa*.
- k. Dancing together in a group led by someone, without much practice in a regular rhythm by just observing the leader, is called *leplou saba*. In Moirang *Anoirol*, this is described as *khubak khuna noiye, chako sana noiye, / leplou sana noiye, samu thinna noiye* (Dance by clapping hands / dance the *chako* / dance the *leplou* / dance rhythmically stomping like an elephant) (Yaima 1973: 31).
- l. Dancing together in circle like a meandering dragon/snake is called *tubu saba*. Again in Moirang *Anoirol*, “*maikei lakna noiye / tubu sana noiye / mathek sana noiye, / lirung sana noiye; / lairu sana noiye / noikhuthekpu noitamye*” (dance at every direction, / dance the *tubu*, / dance the gestures, / dance the *lirung*, / dance the *lairu*, / present the hand-gestures in dance form.)

According to *Anoirol*, *noiba* is not only ‘dancing’ in the proper constituted bodily and expressive sense of the word but the word needs to be categorized and grouped together with every activity or “essential work” among the household jobs and livelihood generating activities like

²⁵ Moirang is a place in the South-west of Manipur considered to be rich in tradition.

²⁶ Ibid, both *Lirung* and *Lairung saba* are initially seem to be dance forms of the Moirang clan.

cultivation, making of a house, weaving clothes, etc. As R.K. Achoubisana argues, *Anoirol* not only talks about dance but shows a vision for deriving other art forms. Human crafts and several other types of human activities including the martial arts are all parts of *Anoi*.²⁷ Such a craftsmanship requires not only creative work proper but also are the means, forms and fields of larger cognitive worldviews. In this process there is an element of aesthetics since the craft conforms not only to the laws of the functional but of the beautiful as well.

The connections between cosmology and the body in Meetei society are embodied in movement and dance form. In N. Vijaylakshmi Brara's (1998) description of the cosmology of statehood, the state is imagined as the body of a human. The concept of cosmology in the ancient Meetei faith as well as embodied in Vaishnavite tradition is wide-ranging and could encompass several studies. The cosmology of the body parts is an integral part of the Meetei faith system as also observed in *Anoirol*. Apart from the narrative in *Anoirol*, two other cosmological arrangements of the body that are found in the Meetei faith system are that of the beliefs associated with the martial arts *thang-ta* and that found in the Meetei *mayek* (Meetei scripts). The central idea of the philosophy of the Meetei *mayek* is that the letters are derived from the different parts of the body. The body cosmology of the ancient Meetei faith seems to be "an arrangement of the body parts in different areas of the universe" (Ray 2009: 138). Predominantly, the human body is a schema that is found in different cosmological domains of Meetei sacred thought—the universe, the land, the house, and later on, the altar offerings and the sacred floor design particularly through performance of

²⁷ This was told in my personal interview with R. K Achoubisana on April 12, 2012 at his residence Moirangkhom Loklaobung, Imphal, Manipur.

thengou, *ta khousaba*²⁸ and *lairen mathek jagoi* in Lai Haraoba. *Thengou* is the highest form of psycho-physical exercises in *thang-ta*.

There are beliefs and opinions regarding the nomenclature of *thengou*.

E. Nilakanta describes *thengou* in the following:

This movement pattern of the gods and goddesses is styled *thengou*, a sacred ritualistic movement which the dancer with sword or spear executes on the symbolic head of a thousand - petalled lotus or the thousand - hooded top of snake god, called Pakhangba in Meitei.

(Nilakanta, 1991: 200)

Another important interpretation of *thengou* is given in *Thengourol* (Manuals of *Thengou*). S. Devabrata (2008: 8) writes: "*Thengourol* deals with sword rituals with movements performed on intricate diagrammatic pattern of Pakhangba (the ancient serpent dragon)." *Thengourol* is interpreted by M. Ibotombi as "Lord of the Universe, without any reservation, taught his son Aseeba about the present time and future time very late and this is known as *thengkou/thengou* (called late and taught)" (as cited in Rishikesh 2008: 84). Another interpretation of *thengkou/thengou* is given by K. Biren as: "The seven scripts/figures of Lainingthou Pakhangba is called *then* (imaginary geographical patterns). The sword/spear dance is played on the serpentine turns of Lainingthou Pakhangba climbing all the seven *thens* and is called *thengou*" (as cited in Rishikesh 2008: 84).

Thengou is performed on the seven *thens*, the imaginary sacred coiled lines of the God Pakhangba. There are nine forms of *thengou*. The intricate foot movements are executed on this imaginary pattern. *Thengou* performance could be varied according to the wishes of different teachers.

²⁸ The spear dance share the same myths and symbols as that of *thengourol* whose movement patterns with sword or spear executes the serpentine movement of Pakhangba.

However, the movement should always begin from the tail and finally complete on the head of Pakhangba pattern (Kunjo 2017: 29). There are songs sung after the *thengkou* performance. The songs may be *shafa ishei* (song of capturing animals), *lanfa ishei* (song of capturing enemy), etc. The *thengkou* art is taught to those below forty years of age. It is not taught to those without manners or discipline.

The body mythology is also disseminated in the traditional architecture of Manipur which is well described in a manuscript called *Yumsarol*. The idea of *Yumsarol* is also introduced through dance performance with hand gestures in the *Laipou* cycle of Lai Haraoba. According to some scholars, the reason why “the body is female is because the home is a place of fertility, which is associated with women” (Ray 2009: 141). Soyam Lokendrajit (2009) has reflected on the embodiment of the female body in Manipuri traditional society as the “living carrier of culture and the conservatory of a way of life” (Lokendrajit 2009: 355) He has also emphasized that the Meetei house “is modelled in the likeness of the feminine body” (ibid: 355) and that it is considered “an embodiment of shelter and only a mother can provide all-encompassing shelter to the inmates” (ibid: 355).

The *Anoirol* manuscript is not a definitive text of performance as such, I should emphasize, but an inventory of the language of dance. In this language one can find point of reference for engaging today with all the changes and cultural appropriations of dance; and the emerging realities in Manipur cultural polity. It would be a mistake to read in the *Anoirol* the final word on dance practice, which is unfortunately the tendency of many scholars in the field. Likewise, it would be a mistake to reduce individual life

either to bodily functions or movement patterns. Therefore, it is necessary that the study of performing arts remains as elusive, temporal and contingent as performance itself, which should not stop us from trying to contextualize the actual history and administration by which performances are realized in the here and now. This, indeed, will be my endeavor in the chapters that follow.

Chapter Two

Systems of Ritual Organization in Lai Haraoba

The chapter shall begin tracing the evolution of the actual practice of Lai Haraoba which is inseparably linked with the evolution of Meetei society and state which can be observed through the emergence of the clan system. A crucial dimension of this chapter will attempt to take into account the earlier social stratification system of the Meetei traditionally known as *lallup*, a general rule of service to the state. Many scholars have tended to undermine this aspect of social stratification assuming that Meetei society is an egalitarian society, thereby undermining the feudal foundations of Meetei society. In today's context with the shifting of the power from monarchy to the modern state, this *lallup* system is no longer functional. However, it could be argued that a different kind of system is in place which has been influenced by *lallup* system. Though the *lallup* system was abolished on April 29, 1892, by the then British political agent, Lt. Col. H. St. P. Maxwell (Kabui 1991: 98-9), the feudal and hierarchical order seems to be very much embedded in the Meetei society till today. For instance, Lai Haraoba is controlled by the centralized institution called *Maichou Loishang* (also known as *Pandit Loishang*), a council of traditional Meetei literati. Three scholars – a) Yoirel Ahal, b) Yoirel Yaima, c) Yoirel Atomba, who are well-versed in ancient Meetei scripture and religious knowledge, supervise the *Maichou Loishang*. Under their supervision, there are three departments – *amaiba loishang* (institution of the priests), *amaibi loishang* (institution of the priestesses) and *ashei Loishang* (institution of the *penakhongba*, the balladeers).

These departments correspond to three components in Lai Haraoba – fire, water, and air respectively. The ritual performances of Lai Haraoba are conducted by the three ritual functionaries called *amaiba*, *amaibi* and *penakhongba*. The chapter shall critically analyze the role of these ritual functionaries.

Through the critical observation of the structure of the ritual organization of Lai Haraoba, the chapter shall also focus on studying and illustrating social processes in which organizational members are essentially human actors engaged in various roles and other official and unofficial performances. Every community has an administrative body which exists to ensure the successful organization of Lai Haraoba. Lai Shellungba is the administrative head, who stays near the precincts of the shrine and looks after all the assets and programmes connected to the local deity. These deities usually have some leased properties like paddy fields which are registered under the name of the Lai Haraoba committee.

The Lai Shellungba functions with the help of other officials like Lairoi, Shingloi, Leiroi and Shangsharoi who are responsible for looking after various aspects of organizing Lai Haraoba. These officials are supported by a team of volunteers recruited from the people living in the village close to the shrine. It should be noted that the organizational structure differs in local contexts within the Kanglei Haraoba and that of the Chakpa Haraoba and Moirang Haraoba. In the case of Chakpa Haraoba, the Lai Shellungba plays the role of *amaiba* (priest) and *asheiba* (balladeer), while, in Moirang Haraoba, chiefs of every *sagei* (family) of the Moirang clan play important roles in the organization of Lai Haraoba.

A section of this chapter shall also deal with the conflicts and tensions of the multiple organizations emerging to control the Lai Haraoba, especially the Kanglei Haraoba. The multiple organizations which censor and control the Lai Haraoba festival today include the Lainingthou Sanamahi Temple Board (LSTB), Lainingthou Sanamahi Thougol Kanglup (LSTK) and Umang Lai Kanba Apunba Lup (UKAL). It needs to be emphasized that Lainingthou Sanamahi Temple Board (LSTB) has been the apex body of the Lai Haraoba festival since 1977. In order to have a smooth and effective functioning of the ancient Meetei religious system, the members of the LSTB have formed a cultural committee called Umanglai Loishang or Pandit Loishang. It should also be noted that the 12 core members of LSTB are nominated by the government of Manipur. There have been tensions between the ritual functionaries and the temple-managing committee who are state nominees.

Another non-government group the Umang Lai Kanba Apunba Lup (UKAL), which literally means Collective Organisations to Preserve Umang Lai, has tried to censor and control the Lai Haraoba prescribing certain rules and regulations, supplemented by a CD demonstrating the exact procedure of dances and songs to be followed in the Lai Haraoba. Against this hegemonic control, the Manipur State Assembly has recently passed an "Amendment Bill" on July 25, 2014, empowering the Govindajee Temple Board (henceforth GTB) to control Umang Lai Haraoba festivals. Many sections of people are against this Bill saying that the authority of the GTB, which had been constituted only in the year 1967, is confined only to the exercising of power over the day-to-day management of the Govindajee Temple. It does not have the overall power to control all the Hindu festivals and ceremonies of the Meetei Vaishnavite. So there has been a struggle for power to control and manipulate customs, values, myths, symbols and

rituals associated with the Lai Haraoba in order for political organizations to assert their authority in a competitive, if not antagonistic, relationship to each other.

We will observe in this chapter that there has been a conflict of interest as reflected in the interplay of power between the state and the society in the Lai Haraoba spaces. Most of all, it reflects the transitional nature of Manipuri society in large. Fred W. Riggs (1964) has theorized such kind of transitional society from the traditional to modern as a 'prismatic society.' As he has argued, prismatic society is indeterminate, heterogeneous and contradictory; power is the value most sought (Riggs 1964).

EVOLUTION OF MEETEI SOCIETY AND LAI HARAOPA

The study of the evolution of Meetei society and other tribes in Manipur is a difficult terrain to map. Though the Meetei and other tribes in Manipur evolved from the common racial stock of the southern Mongoloid (Arambam 1996: 171), the Meetei in the valley is regarded as having undergone profound social and cultural changes historically. Meetei in the valley of Manipur has passed from the tribal phase into peasant and into socio-politico structures of the chieftainships and the state in its historical experience (ibid: 171). Drawing from Romila Thapar's (1984) model of historical civilization "from lineage to state" in Northern India, Kh. Ratan Kumar (2001) observes that Lai Haraoba was reconstructed and transformed from the *apokpa khurumba* (paying obeisance to the ancestor) after various lineage deities were elevated to the position of community deities in the larger process of state formation.

While Lokendra Arambam (2005), in his study of religion and ritual, shuns this historical discourse assuming the state as an already given 'organic' and 'social collective' which was "part of the cosmic equilibrium to whose maintenance the ruler and his subjects were ritually bound", Bijoykumar (2012: 68-70) makes a strong case for Meetei religion as a form of socio-political statecraft which enabled it to function and facilitate control. In his view, the Meetei state was so neatly crafted over the years that in 'their imagination, the human, the state and the cosmos' act under the 'same laws and principles', which were made to interrelate (Bijoykumar 2012: 70).

Though Thapar's (1984) study of the lineage-based Vedic society of the upper Sindh, Punjab and Western Ganga regions is different from the Meetei society, her observation of what constitute lineage seems relevant to Meetei society. She writes that

A lineage has been defined as a corporate group of unilineal kin with a formalized system of authority. It has rights and duties and accepts genealogical relationships as the binding factor. It can be divided into smaller groups or segments. Several unilineal descent groups go to make up a clan which traces its origin to an actual or mythical founding ancestor. The basic unit in such a system is the extended family based on a three or four generation lineage controlled by the eldest male who represents it on both ritual and political occasions.

(Thapar 1984: 10)

Borrowing from this formulation, one could say that many societies have constructed kinship groups, roles, and relationships by tracing descent exclusively through the male (patrilineal) or female (matrilineal) lineage. The resulting units can be called unilineal descent groups, either patrilineages or matrilineages according to the prevailing descent rule. In many societies, unilineal descent groups assume 'corporate' functions, to use Thapar's category, such as land ownership, political representation, mutual aid and

support. Meetei society, one should emphasize, is a patrilineal one. The clan is known as *salai* (*sa* from *sagei* means 'ancestor' and *lai* here means 'ancestor god'). The *salai* is both a political unit and kin group of the Meetei. *Sagei* basically refer to kin groups which trace their descent from a common ancestor which bears the same family name known as *yumnak* (surname). The head of the *sagei* is the 'eldest male' who is known as *piba* and thus, the Meetei society is determined by the rule of primogeniture (Parratt 1980: 2). They worship a common mythical ancestor called *salairel apokpa* (the father of *salai*), also known as *piba apokpa* (the male creator). In order to understand the lineage system in Meetei society, let us now study some of the basic categories in detail.

Rearticulating Clan (Salai and Yek) System

To reiterate, the Meetei have a social system of *salai*, each tracing their origin from a common mythical ancestor known as *salairel apokpa* or *piba apokpa*, who is also a part of the Meetei divine pantheon. The structural and functional system of *salai* can be observed as a clan, having seven patrilineal units known as *yek*. These are Mangang, Luwang, Khuman, Moirang, Angom, Khaba-nganba (an amalgamation of two *salai* – Khaba and Nganba) and Sarang-leishangthem (an amalgamation of two *salai* – Sarangthem and Leishangthem). However, T.C. Hodson claims that there were ten *salai* in "Meithei"²⁹ (Meetei) society earlier. In support of his claim, he refers to a famous Meetei mythology *Numit Kappa* (Shooting the Suns) where mention is made of the ten kings who were the kings of ten *salai* (Hodson 1908: 73). Another interesting account is of the eminent Manipur historian Gangumei Kamei who lists twenty names of the Meetei clans ruling different territories

²⁹ T.C. Hodson used the spelling 'Meithei' for Meetei in his book *The Meitheis* (1908).

in the valley (Kabui 1991: 69-70). However, it is popularly believed that there are nine clans. Nonetheless, as the popular saying goes '*yek taret salai mapan*' which means 'seven *yek* and nine *salai*', suggests that there has been a systematic reordering of the clans in the larger process of state formation.

Many writers treat *yek* and *salai* as synonymous terms having the same meaning and functions. T.C. Hodson (1908), Saroj N. Parratt (1980), Manjushri Chaki-Sircar (1984), N. Vijaylakshmi Brara (1998), to mention a few, do not differentiate *salai* and *yek* from each other, thereby undermining how these two terms 'perform' different functions in the society. In this context, it could be argued that *salai* and *yek* have different connotations in their actual articulation in society. When people address the rules relating to, for instance, marriage, it is not the *salai* but *yek* through which the selection of the marriage partner is chosen. Marriage within the same *yek* is prohibited. On the other hand, when people talk about rites and rituals relating to a particular group, they prefer to use the term *salai*. In this context, Bijoykumar (2005: 60) differentiates the two terms saying that the term *yek* has a characteristic of 'exogamy' while the term *salai* has the characteristic of 'endogamy'. However, this categorization has its lacunae because marriage between two persons of the same *salai* is no longer practiced today.

It could be noted that N. Vijaylakshmi Brara (1998: 83) classifies *salai* as 'large exogamous units.' Nevertheless, I agree with Bijoykumar that *yek* is a 'system' which was later introduced to enforce the inter-dependence among the members of different *salai*. The institution of the *yek* system can also be seen as an important craft of the state in the formation of the Meetei nation that developed later in order to curb the tensions and conflicts among the *salais* (ibid: 60). Thus, *salai* was originally an ethnic group or tribe living

in a territory with endogamous characters, speaking a language or dialect, enjoying socio-political autonomy and which later on became a clan. On the contrary, *yek* is a system which came into existence in order to enforce the rule of exogamy among the *salai*.

Each *salai* worships its ancestor called *salairrel apokpa*. The first five *salai* namely Mangang, Luwang, Khuman, Moirang and Angom are believed to have a single ancestor each, while Khaba-nganba and Sarang-leisangthem have a pair of ancestors each, namely Thongaren and Atongba (for Khaba-nganba), and Yumthangba and Ashangba (for Sarang-leisangthem), respectively. These nine groups of people having different identities in terms of their different ancestors, totems and taboos, and modes of worship are considered as *salai*. After the last four *salai* were amalgamated into pairs to make two groups – Khaba-nganba and Sarang-leishangthem (also later known as Chenglei) – making seven, the term *yek* comes into existence and are now used synonymously with *salai* or as *yek-salai*, combining both terms. However, looking more closely into their respective structures and functions, these terms have different connotations in Meetei society.

The Mangang (later known as Ningthouja) *salai* subjugated the rest of the *salai* and the king of the Mangang *salai* became the supreme ruler. The exact date when this happened is not clear, but the process of subjugation was not completed by the beginning of the 15th century A.D. (Parratt 1980: 3). The name Meetei, which originally applied to the Mangang alone, became a term applied to all the clans after the subjugation. While the conventional knowledge among many writers is that the Mangang dynasty strengthened and consolidated their power through military craft, Bijoykumar (2005) strongly argues that it was mainly through the establishment of various

socio-religious institutions that the Mangang consolidated and established their supremacy over the rest. These institutions also continuously supplied their intellectual knowledge, ideology and diverse palace services, thereby enhancing the people's loyalty to the king.

To this, I must add that not only socio-religious institutions enhance the formation of state from lineage-based societies, but there are many other factors involved in the state formation which I shall explore later on. Economic inter-dependence among the various *salai* must have been one of the major factors in the formation of the Meetei state. In this context, Romila Thapar (1984), in her study of the transformation of the lineage-based Vedic society of the upper Sindh, Punjab and Western Ganga regions, provides insights into environmental influences on settlements, the particularities of caste, the role of rituals and the interaction of ideologies. She also stresses on how ritual and myths of origin in emphasizing the political stability of the ancient state (Thapar 1984: 11). In the case of Manipur, the invention of the coronation ceremony known as *Phambal Kaba*³⁰ legitimizing only one lineage of the Mangang clan as the legitimate king enabled the Mangang dynasty to dominate and establish its supremacy.

At this point, it may be mentioned that the Mangang clan, later known as Ningthouja (literally means "sons of king"), consolidated the other *salais* through a prolonged struggle covering nearly a thousand years (Arambam 1991: 58). It emerged as an organized state in the fifteenth century, during the reign of Kyaamba (1467 - 1508) (ibid: 58). The imposition of the rule of Ningthouja was balanced by fraternal feelings crafted through the all-embracing grand genealogy of all the *salai* tracing the common parentage to

³⁰ For a detailed process of this coronation ceremony, refer to Lokendra Arambam (1991: 66-70).

Atingkok and Taoroinai (Brara 1998: 190). While the idea of putting the entire population into a common kinship frame was essential to justify the legitimacy of the rule of one *salai* over the rest (ibid: 190), this mechanism had helped in curbing the tensions and conflicts among the *salais*.

In dealing with the Chakpa community, there are some exceptions to this genealogy. The Chakpa community of Sekmai, Khurkhul and Andro villages, the community belongs to only three clans Ningthouja, Angom and Khuman; while, the Phāyeng village has only two clans - Ningthouja and Angom. In Moirang, majority of the people belong to the Moirang clan with a few belonging to Ningthouja. It can be observed that Ningthouja, the ruling clan, is one predominant clan in every community. This suggests the strong possibility that the Ningthouja clan had established the kinship bond which formed the base for the maintenance of political sovereignty and national security across Manipur.³¹

With the introduction of the exogamous system of *yek*, the endogamous grouping of the *salai* and intermarrying between cross-cousins among the same *salai* have been prohibited. Men and women belonging to the same *salai* are now called *yek-thoknaba*, and hence prevented from marrying each other. Any person marrying another within the same *yek-salai* is subjected to a practice locally called *enthokpa* (to outcast/ostracize).

Furthermore, the marriage of persons connected on the maternal side within three generations is prohibited even though they may belong to different *salai*. This prohibition is called *shairuk-tinnaba*. Formerly this restriction extended to five generations, but it was reduced to three generations only during the reign of King Chandrakriti (1850-1886)

³¹ For detail study of kinship system, see N. Vijaylakshmi Brara (1998)

(Shakespeare 1910: 60). It may be mentioned here that a marriage couple with *yek-thoknaba* or *shairuk-tinnaba* are prohibited from participation of various ritual items in the Lai Haraoba. They are even prohibited from touching any ritual objects pertaining to the *lai*.

Evolution of Lai Haraoba

The evolution of Lai Haraoba is inseparably linked with the evolution of Meetei society and state which can be observed through the emergence of the clan system. Before the formation of a centrally administered system of state in the valley, it seems that there were various ethnic groups. These ethnic groups have their own traditional belief systems. Ratan Kumar (2001: 44) sums up their historical process:

The evolution of the religion in the state was the dynamic movement of the ethnic amalgamation of various groups in the state. The traditional belief system of these ethnic groups, through a long and complex process of evolution, developed to a higher order of polytheism and finally to the still higher order of monotheism. After the monotheism was attained, the supreme God was mythified as being manifested in many forms which were of the polytheistic state.

The above observation seems to be relevant, given the pantheon of gods and goddesses in the Meetei belief system today. Different literary sources give different numbers of clans in Manipur in different period. Later, only nine clans were recognized which were then clubbed into seven, as mentioned above. This shows that there has been a dynamic movement of clan/ethnic amalgamation in the region. The different forms of Lai Haraoba also indicate that there is a 'long and complex process of evolution,' as Ratan Kumar (2001: 44) has indicated, which was developed to a higher order of polytheism and finally to the still higher order of monotheism.

As mentioned above, each *salai* worships its ancestor called *salairel apokpa*. *Apokpa khurumba* (paying obeisance to the ancestor) is one of the domestic festivals of the Meetei which is held annually in honour of the ancestors. It is believed that the *salai* ancestors reside in a heavenly abode known as *khamnung*. There were three kinds of sacrificial rites or offerings in early days – *charat*, *marat* and *karat* (Ratan 2001: 48). *Charat* refers to the kind of rites necessary for human sacrifice. Animal sacrifice was known as *karat* in which animals like cow, buffalo, pig, mithun, cat and dog are offered during worship. *Marat* is a kind of rite in which only fruits, flowers and fish are offered to the deities. Today, while the last one *marat* is practiced in case of Kanglei and Moirang, *karat* (animal sacrifice) is still practiced in Chakpa. One important *lai* which practiced *charat* (human sacrifice) in the past is the Laijing Ningthou at Thangmeiband Lairenhanjaba Leikai. Today, this *lai* has not observed Lai Haraoba for many years since the people of the locality believes that without human sacrifice the Lai Haraoba cannot be observed. Instead, they observe *pena taba* (listening to *pena phamsak*) in order to appease the *lai* every year without invoking the spirit of the *lai* as in Lai Haraoba.

Coming back to *apokpa khurumba*, the whole ritual sequence of *apokpa khurumba* is conducted by *amaiba*, *amaibi* and *penakhongba*. All the participants in the ritual performance must be members of the *sagei* (kin group) led by the *piba* (the eldest male). First of all, *eekouba* (calling up the spirit) is performed from a nearby water body (a pond or river) similar to the first day of the community Lai Haraoba celebration (See chapter 3). The members of the *sagei* led by the *piba* walk in procession with *amaiba*, *amaibi*, *penakhongba* playing the *pena*, a female member of the *sagei* carrying the *eeshaiphu* (an earthen pot with water from the water body) which is believed to contain the

spirit of the *apokpa* (the ancestor), other members carrying swords, *chung* (canopies), etc.

After the deities have been seated on the altar of the shrine, the *amaibi* delivers an oracle which is considered to be *apokpa's* message concerning the particular *sagei*. This oracle could address some misfortunes which have befallen the *sagei*, steps to be taken up to avoid such misfortunes in future and also foretelling future events. Then the *amaiba* narrates some divine stories from a *puya* of the particular *sagei* which is like a genealogical text. Thus, performing the narrative every year reinforces the lineage system. A grand feast is then served in honour of the *apokpa* and this is known as *lai chaklon katpa*. The food and fruits offered to the *apokpa* are then equally distributed among the families of the *sagei*. The presence of each and every member of the *sagei* is compulsory which reinforces a sense of unity and social solidarity among the kin members of the *sagei*.

Ratan Kumar (2001: 47-49) observes that Lai Haraoba was reconstructed and transformed from the *apokpa khurumba* (paying obeisance to the ancestor) after various lineage deities were elevated to the position of community deities as a means of statecraft. The evolution of Lai Haraoba passed from the stage of *apokpa* to Umanglai (community God). The driving forces of the evolution consolidate an ethnic amalgamation, in which the process like acculturation might also have contributed to the evolutionary process. The degree of consolidation of the ethnic groups in the larger Meetei society in the later period explains the variations in the Lai Haraoba of different localized groups in the diverse forms and contents of the festival. Yet such variation should not be taken as independent variants in the Meetei establishment. The Lai Haraoba, probably, in its own evolutionary process

attained standardization of the ritual performance after the state formation with the concept of Supreme Lord (Taibang Panba Mapu) and his manifestations. This ritual aspect shows us an organic link of the stages of evolution and Lai Haraoba and its link with *apokpa* and the Supreme Lord Taibang Panba Mapu.

THE DRAMATURGY OF ORGANISATION: *Lallup* SYSTEM

Once the Ningthouja established their supremacy, the most important military craft called *lallup* was established. *Lallup*, literally meaning 'war association' (*lal* means 'war' and *lup* means 'association') was the highest representative of the state militia. In the beginning, the institution of *lallup* consisted of six constituent parts called *lup* (association) namely *Kongchalup*, *Nongmailup*, *Angoubalup*, *Tolonghombalup*, *Lupkhubalup* and *Khaijalup* (Ibungohal & Khelchandra 1989: 8). This also helped in the assimilation of all the tribes in Meetei fold exercising to consolidate the socio-religious, economic and political power in the state; it was also further strengthened by the centralization of many other socio-religious and political institutions. This process ultimately helped the transformation of the segmentary structure of *salai* under the superstructure of kingship (Bijoykumar 2005: 66). Ultimately, the pattern of the distribution of the Meetei population transforms from their clan-wise concentration to status group based distribution within the valley. In the course of time, the *lallup* system became an administrative system of the Meetei state. Since *lallup* was the backbone as well as an important craft of the state, efficient administrative machinery was set up to enforce the system. Different works of the state were distributed among the *lup* (association). These works covered all aspects of life – social, economic, culture, religion and politics. However, the major activities of this

lallup institution were focused primarily on the socio-religious and economic aspects.

It was during the 15th century that along with the change of the department from *lup* (association) to *pana* (division) that the number of divisions was subsequently reduced to four and converted into a full military organization with the increasing invasion of Burmese and Chinese forces (Hodson 1908: 59). A strong military force was needed to defend the country from the attack of these neighboring states. Thus, the state was divided into four groups called *pana* namely Laipham, Khabam, Ahanlup and Naharup. The first two divisions, Laipham and Khabam, were called *khunja*, and the last two divisions were called *naicha*. All these four units are called *pana* which were associated with *nashin* (duty) (Ibungohal & Khelchandra 1989: 9). In order to ensure the smooth functioning of the *lallup* system, each *pana* was headed by an officer called Panalakpa who was subordinated to another officer called Lallup-chingba. These officers were appointed by the king from amongst his favorites and generally without reference to their origin (Hodson 1908: 59). The appointment of this office exempts the immediate family of such officers from the performance of any heavy duty. But no fixed allowance was bestowed on any of the officers.

The obligation of these four *panas* to the king was to supply military personnel from every household during expeditions to neighboring countries and to perform other economic services during peace time (Bijoykumar 2005: 68). The general rule of the *lallup* system was based on the assumption that it was the duty of every male between the ages of 16 to 60 years to render his service for 10 days in every 40 days at the disposal of the state. Once a person started performing *lallup* service, he was entitled to

cultivate one *paree* of land (approximately 2.5 acres) for his support, thereby subjected to the payment to the king in kind (Hodson 1908: 59). If an individual is wishing to escape his turn of the duty, he would have to either provide a substitute or pay a certain sum to hire a substitute, or the rest of the *pana* might agree to do the extra duty and receive payment. However, in case of permanent illness or disability, the person might be exempted after the concerned authorities verified the true nature of the case. Otherwise, even sick persons were liable to pay if they missed their *lallup* duties (McCulloch 1859: 12). This system of running a political organization was criticized as an extreme form of exploitation by the British. Therefore *lallup* system was abolished on April 29, 1892 by the then British political agent, Maxwell (Kabui 1991: 98-9).

Earlier times, only the Meetei were liable to perform the *lallup* services. However, at a later period, other communities, such as the different hill tribes, Lois, Pangals (Manipuri Muslims), Bamons (Brahmins) and other immigrants who were subjects of the Meetei king, were also incorporated into the fold of the *lallup* service. The Bamon became cooks for the king; the Tangkhul tribe rendered services like gardening, digging ponds and ditches; the Loi population mainly manufactured silk, salt, earthen vessels and distilled brew. And those tribes in the more distant hills like the Mao and Maram, instead of attending to the palace and other civil service, used to provide a kind of taxation in kind (Dun 1886: 27 & 36). However, there were no fixed and permanent rules for these duties and obligations. The Mao and Maram tribes, for example, had to work on the construction of the Kohima road, build rest houses and carry loads for touring officers. The Maring tribe used to supply the bamboo, cane baskets and collected leaves, which could be used for dyeing purpose for the king's family and other officials. Later on,

when the king adopted Hinduism, two more *pana* – Hidakphanba (those who attend to the hookah and tobacco) and Potshangba (the watchmen) were constituted for the Loi and Tangkhul tribes respectively (Brara 1998: 101).

The development of the *lallup* system was the manifestation of the emergence of feudalism in the social, administrative and political structure of the state. The location of six *lups* in the past indicates that the state formation started in and around Kangla. The division of four administrative units – Khwai, Yaiskul, Khurai and Wangkhei – shows the confinement of the jurisdiction of the state and power to the Imphal valley only. The change in structure and function as well as the number of *lup/pana* was an effort of the state to accommodate other social groups from the periphery, which was further proved by adding two more *pana* of Hidakphanba and Potsangba. Thus, the development of the institution of *lallup* was very significant in the process of the centralization of the power of the state. It also helped the state to reduce the autonomy of the segmented social and ethnic groups ruled by different chiefs. It is through these means that the king was able to exercise an effective control over his subjects and at the same time helped to defend the country from the external forces of Burma and China (Bijoykumar 2005). Thus, despite the importance of the *lallup* as an institution of defense from the external aggression, it is also an important institution for controlling the subjects of the state.

Taken into consideration the institutions of *lallup*, the general rule of the service to the state can be divided into different classes. Under the *lallup* system various services were assigned to differently skilled persons, and in turn, the services assigned to them according to their skill determined in turn

the status and class of the people. According to K.B. Singh (1978: 62), there was no caste system during the pre-Hindu period, yet there was class hierarchy. Different scholars have given different numbers of classes. K.B. Singh (1978) gives three classes – the nobility, commoners and slaves. While Ranjit Kumar Saha (1994: 86-112) also gives three classes – the nobility, commoners and *loi*, W. Ibohal Singh (1986: 344) gives only two classes – the nobility and commoners. However, Bijoykumar (2005: 74-76) gives a detailed systematic division of classes in Meetei society. He classifies the early Meetei population into four categories according to the services provided by the individuals to the administration of the state – *phamnaiba* (noble or aristocrat), *meecham* (commoner), *hanthaba mee* (degraded people) and *meenai* (slave).

INSTITUTIONS OF RELIGION

In the traditional Meetei state, the king used to adopt different policies towards the centralization of religion. In order to destabilize the socio-political power and autonomy of the *salais*, the king constituted numerous institutions known as *loishangs* (councils), all attached to the royal palace; each one in charge of a specific area of administration, for instance, revenue collection, religious matters and recruitment of free labour. Central to these institutions was the Maichou Loishang, later known as Pandit Loishang,³² a central socio-religious council. It was supervised by traditional scholars called *maichous*, later known as *pandit*, well versed in ancient Meetei scriptures and ritual procedures. Bijoykumar (2005: 83) argues that this

³² The Meetei literaties were known as Maichou before the advent of Hinduism. However, after the Meeteis followed Hinduism these traditional literati were replaced by the persons who knew Sanskrit and other Hindu texts and they came to be known as Pandits. Since this council exists as Pandit Loishang today at Palace Compound, I will prefer the term as Pandit Loishang.

council helped the king strengthen his position by writing the clan genealogy having a common origin of all the *salais* from common ancestors of Taibangpanba Mapu (the Supreme Lord).

Accordingly, one can observe the practice of 'divine right theory' in the way in which this institution was functioning. Bijoykumar (ibid: 83) further emphasizes that it is Pandit Loishang that introduced the belief and practice of Umanglai and propagated this culture among the masses. He also highlights that the Pandit Loishang introduced the *yek* system, an exogamous rule of marriage among the *salais* (ibid: 83). In order to strengthen the integrity of the Meetei state, the Pandit Loishang, under the royal patronage, worked to destabilize the autonomy of the different socio-religious groups of different *salais*, particularly the autonomy of *salairrel apokpa* (ancestors of *salai*) deities. Not only being the repository of *puyas*, the Pandit Loishang also began to write the clan genealogy of every *salai* tracing their origin from a supreme common ancestor Taibangpanba Mapu (the Supreme Lord). Because of this craft, all Meeteis trace their lineages to a common ancestor till today.

Later, the office of the Pandit Loishang functioned as a custodian of convention and customs with the spread of Hinduism in the 18th century. It was in charge of the organization of the traditional *lai* worship and their rituals. Pandit Loishang resolved religious dispute and dealt with legal questions concerning religious doctrines and philosophy. They also judged cases related to traditional family law. The *maichous* or *maibas* who constituted this office were placed in a hierarchy. At the top was Pandit Achouba (Head Pandit), who was responsible for the Lai Haraoba in the Kangla palace, below him was four *maiba hanjabas* and the lowest in the

hierarchy was the *hidang hanjaba*. In spite of the overwhelming spread of Hinduism by the 18th century, the Pandit Loishang remained a strong institution in Meetei society. The Pandit Loishang had three divisions: *amaiba loishang* (council of traditional priests), *amaibi loishang* (council of traditional priestesses) and *pena loishang* (council of *pena* balladeers). Furthermore the *amaibi loishang* is divided into three groups – *shanglen*, *nongmai* and *phura* according to the duties and functions of *amaibis*. The three departments of the Pandit Loishang constitute the body of three ritual functionaries responsible for the Lai Haraoba.

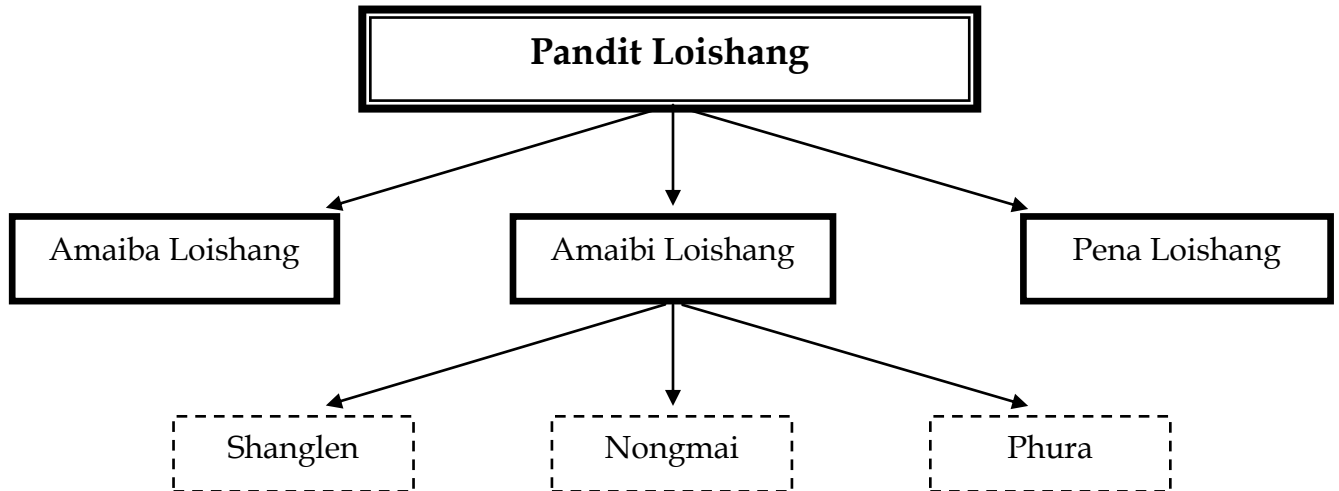


Figure 2. 1: Structure of Pandit Loishang

Prior permission for the performance of a Lai Haraoba festival in a particular village or locality was sought from Pandit Loishang. It is a body of three ritual functionaries responsible for the annual Lai Haraoba festival taking place in every village community. The three functionaries are in charge of the initiation of the female priestesses, and the appointments of *amaibas* and *penakhongbas* to different villages for officiating Lai Haraoba. The Pandit Loishang is also responsible for the selection of *piba*, the head of the lineage in villages.

Anomalies of the Pandit Loishang

The Pandit Loishang lost much of its authority in religious sphere, with the disintegration of the monarchical power since 15th October, 1949, when Manipur was annexed to the Indian Union. After the abolition of “privy purses”³³ by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1972, the king withdrew all financial support to the Pandit Loishang, which now began to disintegrate. Nowadays, the prior permission of Pandit Loishang is no more considered essential for the observance of a Lai Haraoba. With the shift of power in the state, there has been a tremendous change in the ritual organization of Lai Haraoba. Significantly, the control of Pandit Loishang over the matters of Umanglais and Lai Haraoba has been deteriorating. This is evident in the increasing number of Lai Haraoba in Manipur without prior permissions from the Pandit Loishang.

In this regard, Oinam Bhogeshore (1983: 72) has commented that there were originally only 364 Umanglais which were deviously controlled by Pandit Loishang³⁴; but nowadays, every house, every *leikai* (locality) has taken the liberty of constructing a shrine of its own and the result is the substantial increase in the number of Umanglai. For instance, Ibuthou Pakhangba of Nagamapal and Ibudhou Salang Ningthou of Sagolband have recently developed shrines for Lai Haraoba. People have even gone to the extent of performing Lai Haraoba for deities like Lai Angoubi of Lai Sagang and Thongak Lairembi whose observance of Lai Haraoba was unheard of in

³³ After India’s independence, out of 565 princely states of the Indian Union, 102 were getting privy purses of more than 1 lakh rupees and 11 states were getting privy purses of more than 2 lakhs. Manipur was getting 3 lakhs per annum. But these privy purses were abolished by 26th Constitutional Amendment of 1971, dated 28 December 1971 by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

³⁴ Probably, the number of Umanglai as 364 has to do with Meetei astrology by which the calculation of time (364 days constitute a year) makes a complete circle.

the past (Bhogeshore 1983: 73). According to Wahengbam Lukhoi (1989) and M. Kirti Singh (1988), there are more than 400 Umanglais in Manipur today.

The dwindling control of Pandit Loishang over Umanglais can be vividly observed from the following developments. In 1972, a group of *amaiba*, *amaibi* and *penakhongba* proposed to register a group titled All Manipur Umanglai Haraoba Committee (AMUHC) to the Registrar of Cooperative Societies, Manipur. On 16th March 1972, Pandit Iboyaima Singh, the Pandit Achouba (Head Pandit) of Pandit Loishang filed an objection petition to the Registrar of Cooperative Societies, Manipur. The petition sought to restrain registration of any organization concerning with Umanglais, in case no prior recommendation and approvals have been granted by the Loishang and the Maharaj of Manipur (Chandrashekhar 1980a).

Following this, on 18th April 1972, the Registrar passed an order for the hearing of the petition and informed the President, Vice President and General Secretary of the proposed AMUHC to appear in the court of the Registrar, Cooperative Societies, Manipur in person on 24th April 1972 (Chandrashekhar 1980a). Later, the court gave the judgment in favour of the AMUHC. On 21st May 1972, the Registrar informed the Secretary, AMUHC to deposit a sum of Rs. 200 with the Manipur State Cooperative Bank Ltd. as a fixed deposit for the period of at least six months before registering the proposed AMUHC (Chandrashekhar 1980a). Scholars interested in the Meetei script and lore has identified themselves with this day. AMUHC projects its works through the observance of Maichou Day (Day of Scholars) and the publications of a quarterly journal namely *Umanglai Khunda* (Settlement of Umanglai). The publications focused on the affairs of Lai

Haraoba and Umanglais thereby claiming to promote awareness about the heritage of Manipur (Kirti 1988).

While the assertion of AMUHC shows discontentment over the functioning of the Pandit Loishang under the royal patronage, we can also observe that the affairs of Umanglais are no longer at the disposal of the Pandit Loishang. However, the Pandit Loishang is still consulted in matters relating to Umanglai disputes. Even in extreme cases, there are cases in which Pandit Loishang manipulates its decisions leading to clashes between groups or *leikais* (localities). One interesting case to highlight in this regard is that of Langpok Ningthou. Langpok is a village in Bishnupur district of Manipur. It consists of two *leikais* - Langpok Mamang Leikai and Langpok Maning Leikai. The village deity is known as Langpok Ningthou.

Till the early nineties, the Lai Haraoba of this deity, Langpok Ningthou, was observed collectively by these two *leikais* and a neighboring village called Kakyai. But due to a conflict on financial matters, Kakyai withdrew from being a part of the organizing committee. Then the Lai Haraoba continued to be organized by the two *leikais*. But the tension between the two *leikais* developed on the issue of forming the women's association Nishaband (anti-intoxicants association). The two *leikais* could not form a consensus on this matter. There were incidents of the people of one *leikai* being caught drunk and they were subjected to fine by the Nishaband of the other *leikai*. This issue was one of the major factors for the clash between the two *leikais*.

Another incident which led to the fight between the two *leikais* was regarding the digging of a pond near the shrine of the deity. Following this incident, the people of Langpok Mamang Leikai also called Kakyai Langpok

claimed that they were part of Kakyai village and not Langpok. They changed the name of their *leikai* as Kakyai Awang Leikai and registered it in the Revenue Department. The shrine of Langpok Ningthou is located in Langpok Mamang Leikai. They also asserted that the name of the deity Langpok Ningthou was earlier known as Lanbung Ningthou, thereby alleging that the deity belonged to them and not to Langpok Maning Leikai. They wrote an application to Pandit Loishang to find out any other possible name of the deity, Langpok Ningthou. On 27th March 1996, the Pandit Loishang gave an order stating that the original name of the deity is Lanbung Ningthou and not Langpok Ningthou (Pandit Loishang 1996).

The conflict between the two *leikais* intensified even to the extent of violent clashes leading to casualties. The tension could not be controlled even with police intervention. Despite the clash, the Lai Haraoba of the deity was observed. It was only in the year 2005 that the Lai Haraoba could not be observed due to the imposition of Cr. P. C. 144 around the shrine of the deity. The people of Langpok Maning Leikai made an appeal to the Pandit Loishang to show evidence that the Langpok Ningthou was originally known as Lanbung Ningthou as it had claimed. As the Pandit Loishang could not bring out the *Umanglai Khunda* (Settlement of Umanglai) *puya*, the people of Langpok Maning Leikai filed a petition against the Pandit Loishang in the session court.

On 19th January 2005, the Pandit Loishang issued an order mentioning that the name of the deity would remain as Langpok Ningthou until the *puya Umanglai Khunda* is traced. It also mentioned that if the *Umanglai Khunda* could not be traced within the month of *Thawan* (around August) of

2005, then the name Langpok Ningthou would be maintained forever (Pandit Loishang 2005).

Thus, from this case, we can establish the incongruous role played by the Pandit Loishang in resolving disputes. The Loishang, instead of resolving the disputes, has contributed towards greater animosity between the two *leikais*. This has made one question the two primary functions of the Pandit Loishang as the authority of Umanglais and Lai Haraoba. But it also indicates that the organization of the Lai Haraoba, at ritual and administrative levels, is deeply imbricated in a political process of negotiating apparently sanctified and time-tested rules and regulations. This context is absolutely essential to keep in mind while attempting to understand the performative dimensions of the Lai Haraoba which will be examined in the next chapter.

Confrontation of Ritual Organizations

Earlier, the king looked after and controlled Umanglai and Lai Haraoba including other numerous institutions, all attached to the royal palace, each one in charge of a specific area of administration. After the advent of Hinduism, lately the king assisted by the Hindu Mahasabha³⁵, founded in 1934, began to give importance to the Govindajee temple and worked as the head in advocating the Hindu religion. After the abolition of the “privy purses” in 1972 during the time of Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the Manipur state government entrusted the management affairs of Sri Govindajee and the Loishangs to an apex body GTB, under the Govindajee Temple Act, 1972. The Govindajee Temple Act - 1972 removed the

³⁵ The Hindu Mahasabha, also known as Nikhil Manipuri Hindu Mahasabha was founded in 1934 with Maharaja Churachand Singh (1886-1941) as the President. The Hindu Mahasabha declared that they would try to popularize Bengal school of Vaishnavism.

management of the Shri Govindajee Temple from the control of the then titular king Okendrajit. By putting the Temple Board was put under the chairmanship of the Chief Minister (during Chief Minister Mohammed Alimuddin), the management affairs of Sri Govindajee and the Loishangs were solely entrusted to the state. The titular king Okendrajit was not given any honorable position under this act. Against this hegemonic control over the Govindajee temple, the king Okendrajit joined the Sanamahi movement (The Sangai Express January 11-17, 2015).

The transition between monarchy and the new democratic system was not smooth. There were legal disputes and negotiations in order to save the situation as it was. To ensure progress, it was necessary to cooperate with the general public at some level. Later, the Govindajee Temple Amendment Act in 1976 has been so enacted as to control the Meetei traditional customs and laws under the constitution of India. The deities of the Meetei were officially recognized and some of the ruling royal deities received rent free lands for their maintenance and were as honored as the Hindu gods (Kirti 1988). The members of the Board are nominated by the Government. The following institutions namely, Brahma Sabha, Pandit Loishang, Cuhon Loishang, Garod Loishang, Moibung Loishang, Pala Loishang, Pujari Loishang, Maiba Loishang, Pena Loishang, Jagoi Loishang and other minor Loishangs are all included in Section 17 of the Principal Act under Clause - 1 of the Amendment of Section 22 of the GTB, Manipur published in Manipur Gazette vide No. 215 (B) dated March 20, 1976. Its jurisdiction covers the worship of important Hindu gods and primitive Meetei deities to which the followers of Apokpa Marup and Manipur State Meetei Marup have protested vigorously through demonstrations, petitions and legal proceedings.

Alongside the above mentioned developments, there is yet another apex body called Lainingthou Sanamahi Temple Board (henceforth LSTB), created by some concerned *amaiba*, *amaibi*, *penakhongba* and cultural activists in order to look after the indigenous Meetei religion which came to be known as Sanamahi religion.³⁶ As a part of the response of the state towards the Sanamahi movement, the government of Manipur also made various changes in the policies of religion and culture in 1970s. It may be also noted that, with public pressure, the government passed the Lainingthou Sanamahi Temple Bill of 1976 and its subsequent Amendment Bill of 1977 for the management of the LSTB. The government took back the idol of Sanamahi which was under the care of a Brahmin named Laihaothabam Suryamani Sharma in Keishamthong, Imphal.

The idol was brought back at Tolong Yumpham (now situated inside First Manipur Rifles compound, Imphal) which was believed to be the original abode of the idol on 12th October 1977 (ibid: 57). A temple was then built for the idol. The management is entrusted to the LSTB, consisting of experts in local laws and believers of Sanamahi cult. It could be noted that the 12 core members of LSTB are nominated by the government of Manipur. All the administrative works are entrusted to these nominated members who are not necessarily followers of the Sanamahi faith. There have been tensions between the ritual functionaries and the temple managing committee who are state nominees. The situation also tends to create conflict between the members of the Pandit Loishang and the members of the Temple Committee.

³⁶ Sanamahi movement began in 1930 under the leadership of Naoria Phulo (1888-1941) in Cachar. He established a socio-religious organization known as Apokpa Marup in 1930. The aim of the organization was to establish the 'true identity' of the Meeteis, their religion, culture and script. After the death of Naoria Phullo on June 30, 1941, some Meeteis in Manipur namely Takhellambam Bokul, Pukhrambam Surchand, Pukhrambam Ibomcha, Angom Nungsirei, Angom Lilasingh, Lukram Iboton and Toijam Yaima founded an organization known as Manipur State Meetei Marup on May 14, 1945.

The objectives of the Bill of 1976 and Amendment Bill of 1977 of Lainingthou Sanamahi are not intended to conserve traditional customs and laws, which are not yet modified in a legal sense. They have been kept under the Purview of Sri Govindajee Temple Amendment Act, 1976. Thus, we can observe that there has been an introduction of a bureaucratic administration into the affairs of the Umanglai. This has given a new dimension to the ideas of secular rationality in terms of an administrative approach to the religious activities of Umanglai – an important fact that needs to be kept in mind when dealing with the apparently all-sacred nature of the Lai Haraoba. As we are in the process of examining in this chapter, the sacred dimensions of ritual performance cannot be separated from the secular dimensions of state and civic bureaucracy that facilitate its organization.

In the process of this bureaucratization, the reality is that the ruling pre-Hindu deities are being neglected to the core. This has had an adverse impact on every member of Apokpa Marup³⁷ and different branches of revivalist groups (Kirti 1988: 52-53). They claim that the institutions namely – Pandit Loishang, Maiba Loishang, Pena Loishang, Garod Loishang and Tanjei Loishang are not related with the service of the Shri Govindajee and are also contrary to the service of Shri Shri Govindajee according to the prevailing customary practice of the Meetei. They also demand that these five institutions should be placed under the jurisdiction of the Lainingthou Sanamahi Temple Board (Huiyen Lanpao 1985).

³⁷ Apokpa Marup (Organisation for Ancestor Worship), as mentioned in the previous footnote, is an organisation formed in 1930 at Cachar (now in Assam) under the leadership of Naoria Phullo who initiated the revivalist movement of the Meetei indigenous faith called Sanamahi movement. Later in 1945, the group changed its name to Manipur State Meetei Marup with the office of the organization established at Thambalkhong in Imphal.

According to Ahanthem Nilamani, President of the Lainingthou Sanamahi Temple Board, the Board is the embodiment of Meetei/Sanamahi religion as well as of all the Umanglais or sylvan deities of Manipur (ibid: 1985). Such being the case, all religious rites and ceremonies concerning these Umanglais are/ought to be performed within the stipulated times, following the specific manner as prescribed and designed by the Umanglai Loishang Committee of LSTB to ensure uniformity, regularity and orderliness in the ritual practices. The Lainingthou Sanamahi Temple Board made a press release to hire *amaiba*, *amaibi* and *penakhongba* only from the Board for the Lai Haraoba and other Meetei rituals (ibid 1985).

Significantly, we can observe that there is a confrontation between the two Boards - Govindajee Temple Board (GTB) and Lainingthou Sanamahi Temple Board (LSTB) on matters regarding the management and administration of Lai Haraoba. On 25th July, 2014, the Manipur Legislative Assembly tabled and passed a Bill namely Shri Shri Govindajee Temple (Third Amendment) Bill 2014 for bringing the Umanglais (sylvan deities) of Manipur under the purview of the Temple Board (The Sangai Express 2015). On 1st August, 2014, the Royal Council, Sana Konung and Sana Konung Legal Cell have termed the passage of the Bill as unfortunate. On 17th August 2014, another organization Umanglai Kanba Apunba Lup (UKAL) has demanded annulment of the Shri Shri Govindajee Temple (Third Amendment) Bill 2014 (ibid 2015). The Government of Manipur is not able to bring an amicable solution.

The Functioning of LSTB

In order to have a smooth and effective functioning of the indigenous Meetei religious system, the members of the LSTB formed a cultural committee

called Umanglai Loishang. Three scholars supervise it – Yoirel Ahal, Yoirel Yaima and Yoirel Atomba who are well versed in Meetei scripture and religious life. Under their supervision, there are three main departments – Amaiba Loishang, Amaibi Loishang and Ashei/Pena Loishang, the councils of three ritual functionaries responsible for Lai Haraoba. The three departments are divided into sub-departments responsible for the functionaries of rituals and ceremonies.

The Amaibi Loishang is the department of the priestesses known as *amaibi* who are responsible for performing any Meetei rites and rituals. This department has one head priestess known as Amaibi Asuppi. Under her supervision there are three sub-departments – Sanglen, Nongmai and Phura headed by Sanglen Sanglakpi, Nongmai Sanglakpi and Phura Sanglakpi respectively. Amaibis from all these three sub-departments take part in all the Lai Haraoba.

The Amaiba Loishang is the department of the traditional scholars who are well versed in Meetei scripture. They do not only deal with the Meetei socio-religious philosophy but also supervise the Amaibi Loishang in the performance of the Lai Haraoba rituals and other rituals related to Meetei religion. This department consists of two functionaries – *Erat Langba* (who prepares ritual elements) and *Lai Sanglakpa* (caretaker of the temple and deity). And the Ashei Loishang is the department of the *pena* balladeers and musicians. It consists of two groups – *penakhongba* (*pena* players) and *esei hanba* (the choral singers).

The Ashei Loishang and the Amaibi Loishang work together in performing any ritual performance through their songs and music. In a sense, the Amaiba Loishang can be considered as the department of

scriptwriters and directors whereas Amaibi Loishang and Ashei Loishang are departments of performers and musicians. What needs to be stressed, however, is the power structure that these departments share. While all the three ritual functionaries of the three departments are equally responsible for the Lai Haraoba, the *amaiba* enjoys the higher status in terms of crafting the performance, supervising the festival and deciding the roles to be played in the Lai Haraoba.

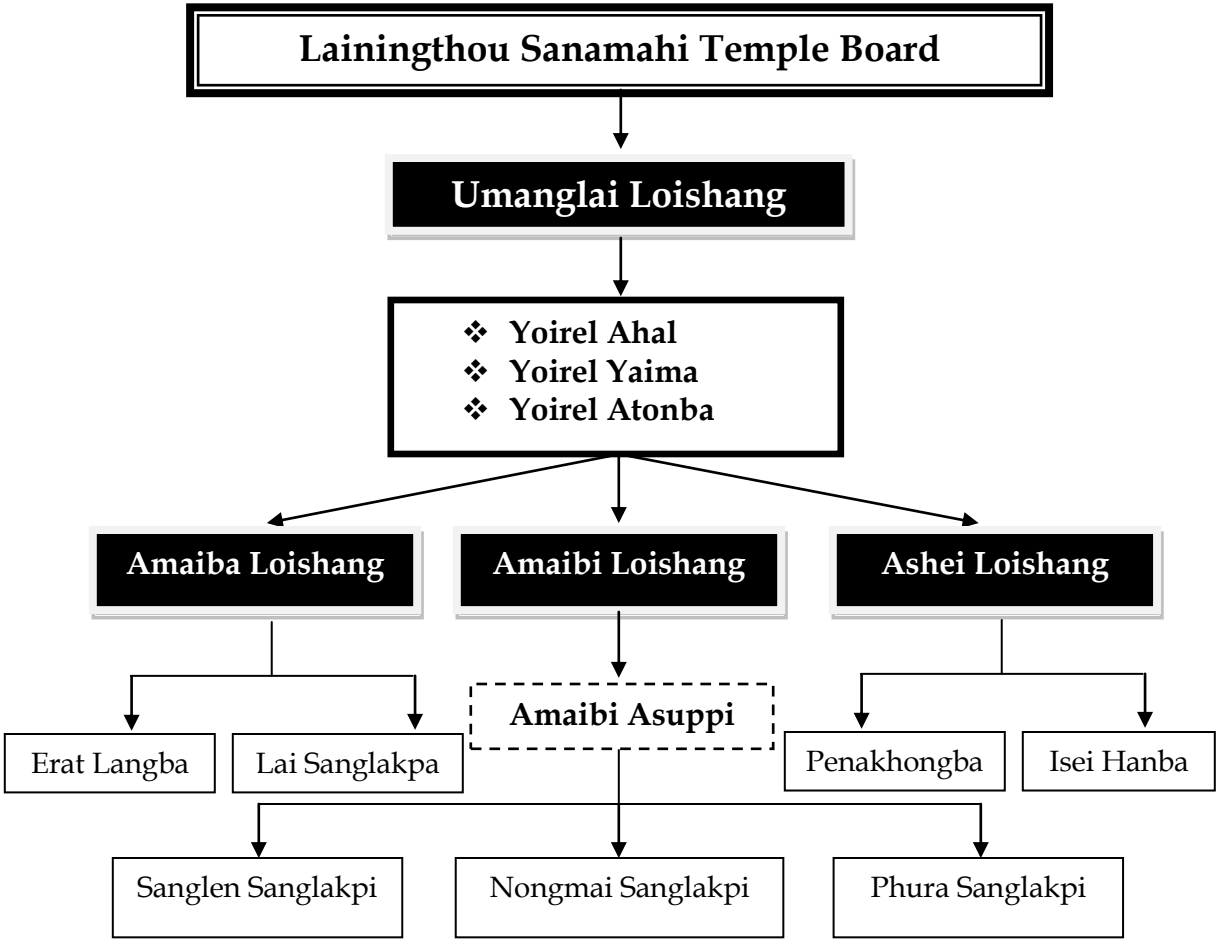


Figure 2.2: Structure of Lainingthou Sanamahi Temple Board (LSTB)

The Three Ritual Functionaries

The main rituals of the Lai Haraoba are performed or led by the *amaiba* ('priest'), *amaibi* ('priestess') and *penakhongba* (the player of the *pena*). The male *amaibas* and female *amaibis* are the 'traditional priests and priestess' of the Meetei religion. Their origins are lost in obscurity, but it is believed that at least they became assimilated into Meetei religion at a very early time (Parratt & Parratt 1997: 32). In earlier times there were *amaibas*, *amaibis* and *penakhongbas* attached to the royal court, under the auspices of the Pandit Loishang. It should be noted that while these institutions still continues, it is no longer under the royal patronage. *Amaibi* has no exact equivalent in English. They are at the same time priestesses, invoking the *lais* and making offerings to them; spirit mediums, receiving oracles from the *lais* and giving them out to the people; and, as expert singers and dancers, they are the preservers of the orature and religious traditions.

It is important to note that the female *amaibi* is more important than her male counterpart. She plays a more prominent role in the festivals and, according to Shakespear (1913: 429), the *lais* are thought to take more pleasure in the women than in men. Women are also far more likely to become possessed. When a male *amaiba* does become possessed by the *lai*, he traditionally wears the female apparel of the *amaibi*, and is spoken of as a 'male *amaibi*' (*nupa amaibi*). This practice seems today to be uncommon, and there is an increasing tendency at the present time for male *amaibas* to take over the functions of the *amaibi* without cross-dressing. This seems to imply a move towards male control over the Lai Haraoba.

However, if we look closely, there are differences within the *amaibi* community. *Amaibas* and *amaibis* who have priestly and ritual functions are distinct from those who are simply traditional physicians and herbalists.

While the latter may know the appropriate incantations, they do not dress in the distinctive white clothing of the 'priestly' *amaibas* and *amaibis*. Besides their ritual functions *amaibis* may also act as fortune-tellers, for which they use two sets of coins. Here I briefly want to mention that the *amaibis* adopt this act by throwing coins on the floor, then observe the coins carefully, signs are read and then they tell fortunes. Sometimes they throw *tulasi* leaves on some presiding deities and gave predictions. In early days, it is said that the fortunes of the state and war were predicted (Kirti 2017: 140). There are subdivisions within the *amaibi* community according to the *yeks* for whom they serve. The Sanglen *amaibas* and *amaibis* officiate for the Ningthouja *yek*, the Phura for the Khuman and Kha-Nganba *yeks*, and the Nongmai for the remainder.

Moreover, a woman could become an *amaibi* either by being chosen at the Lai Haraoba (see the next Chapter on *lai nupi thiba*) or by being directly possessed by the *lai*. There are cases that a young girl becomes possessed at an early age, even as young as seven years and these are regarded as making the best *amaibis*. Such possession often manifests itself in symptoms of illness or abnormality, sometimes in hysterical behavior. The initiate *amaibi* would then undergo a period of training under a senior *amaibi*, in which she would be taught the sacred lore. The ability to fall into trance then becomes ritualized, and this is especially apparent at the Lai Haraoba festival. While it is believed that *amaibis* may be possessed by a variety of *lais*, but more often by one of the main gods, such as the guardians of the directions, they may also be possessed by a goddess, such as Panthoibi, but it is more often the male *amaiba* who becomes possessed by the female (Parratt & Parratt 1997: 34).

Here it is necessary to point out that the married life of the *amaibi* is complicated by her relationship to the *lai* by whom she is possessed; usually she sleeps on the left side (outside) of the bed, the position normally occupied by the husband (ibid: 34). It is believed that the *lai* visits the *amaibi* by night, on particular nights of the month when she has to sleep alone. On such occasions it is assumed that the *lai* may approach her in either human or animal form (ibid: 34). At this point I briefly want to mention about the costume of the *amaibi*. One can witness in the Lai Haraoba that the dress of the *amaibi* is distinctive. They wear *phanek* (ankle-length skirt) and *inaphi* (shawl) of pure white. There is also an additional waist-wrapper, also white and half length, worn on top of the *phanek*. Often, they also wear a long-sleeved white blouse, and almost all the time, the hair is decorated with flowers. The *amaiba* dresses similarly, with a long white shirt and a white sash around the waist. A white turban, tied in traditional Manipuri fashion, is also worn. This dress, however, does not show the classic characteristics of shamanistic clothing, such as the use of animal skins and decorations, and masks. Nor do they act as 'masters of the spirits', or exorcise. Thus it seems to us better to avoid the term shamanism in connection with the *amaiba* and *amaibis*.

Another important ritual functionary in Lai Haraoba as well as in Meetei society is the *penakhongba* (the traditional balladeer). In early days, the *penakhongba* (or *asheiba*) of the royal office, called Ashei Loishang, had a number of duties apart from the ritual functions performed at the annual Lai Haraoba festival (Mangangsana 2007: 18). At the birth of a king, his marriage, death or coronation, the services of the *penakhongba* were required, and at any royal excursion or hunting expedition the *penakhongba* accompanied the king and entertained the royal ensemble with his

performance. Today it should be noted that the services of *penakhongba* are no longer required at the birth, marriage, death or coronation of the king.

It may also be noted that the number of regular *penakhongba* in the Ashei Loishang today are very few and they cannot meet the requirements of the common people. In order to meet the needs of the common people, there are several lists of *penakhongba* in the Loishang who are enrolled as members. There are hundreds of them and they offer their services at all the functions associated with the life cycle of an individual, as well as at other functions. Earlier, it is believed that there were *penakhongba* in every village and playing *pena* was an important source of livelihood (ibid: 19). Significantly, there was no formal institute for learning *pena*. One had to go to the house of the expert or professional to learn it. It is traditionally known as *Oja Khanba*, very much like the *guru-sishya-parampara* in other parts of India. While this tradition is still in vogue even today, there are a few institutes like JN Manipuri Dance Academy and Manipur Dance College, as well as other private institutes like Laihui, Performing Arts Centre, that provide a more formal pedagogy in learning traditional art forms relating to song, music and dance.

In the profession of *penakhongba*, one has to obtain the recognition or cognizance of the experts from the Ashei/Pena Loishang, for which one needs an introduction to the *pena* experts by a member of the Loishang. With the approval of the Loishang, the entrant has to offer three white fish, preferably *sareng* (a local fish), and three loin cloths to the deities Nongsaba, Yumjao Lairembi and Pakhangba. The members of the Pena Loishang hold different positions or ranks depending on age, experience and seniority. The lowest rank of the *penakhongba* in the Loishang is known as Pena Tomba. The rank above this in the ascending order is Pena Hidang, followed by Pena Hanjaba, Pana Sanglakpa, Lupa Leikham Sanglakpa and Sana Leikham

Sanglakpa. Sana Leikham Sanglakpa is the head of the Pena Loishang. For each rise of rank from the lower to the next higher one, one has to offer a grand dinner to all the members of the royal offices of *amaiba*, *amaibi* and *penakhongba*. One of the major activities of the members of the Pena Loishang is to attend to the duties associated with the annual ritual festival of Lai Haraoba. It must be noted that the services of the *penakhongba* from the royal office are not required at the annual Lai Haraoba held in the villages of Chakpa. The Chakpa community has its own *penakhongba* who perform in their villages even today.

The Local Lai Haraoba Committee

Let us move on to the peoples' committees of Lai Haraoba at the local level. At present, different *leikais* (localities) have their own local management committees to organize the Lai Haraoba. Each Lai Haraoba temple has a committee including a Lai Mapu or Lai Selungba (caretaker). The committee oversees the temple fund, which comes from an annual collection and from the sales of paddy grown on the fields owned by the temple, if any. Currently, there is a trend of young educated men replacing the older group of the Lai Haraoba Committee. This committee is formed with elected members between the age of twenty five and forty years, including both married and unmarried men. The membership of the previous committee was composed only of married men above the age of forty five years and as old as eighty years. While the majority of the members of the present committees are literate with the advent of modern education, the older members were all illiterate (Chaki-Sirkar 1984). Today, there are women *lup* (organization) also in the overall organizational committee of Lai Haraoba.

The committee of Lai Haraoba consists of many groups occupying different positions responsible for the successful organization of Lai Haraoba every year in their respective localities. Every temple is supervised by an elderly male known as Lai Selungba, who has knowledge of local religions, practices and customs. His role is to take care of the temple and other properties of the temple. Under his supervision, there is the Secretary of the Committee. The Secretary is again assisted by secretaries of the Lupleng who are the representatives of the *leikais* (localities). The number of the secretaries of the Lupleng varies from *leikai* to *leikai* depending upon the size of the *leikai*. For instance, the Naothingkhong Pakhangba of Thangmeiband has five Lupleng since the deity is owned by five *leikais* - Lairenhanjaba, Hijam, Meisnam, Yumnam and Sinam.

Every Lai Haraoba committee has different means of generating funds for the management of the temple and the observance of Lai Haraoba. Some of the important deities have *Lai-lou* (the paddy field of *lai*) owned by the committee. Incomes are generated from selling paddy grown in the paddy field. The committee also generates income from the contribution of villagers. In the hinterland villages, like the one in Chakpa Phāyeng, every household in the village makes their contribution equally just after harvesting to contribute towards the funds of the temple. However, in urban areas like Imphal the contributions are made on the basis of their individual and familial convenience. Apart from contributions, the fund includes public donations and offerings to the temple. Political aspirants for elections, both at local and assembly level, make huge donations. Particularly the Lord Thangjing Haraoba of Moirang generates a lot of money during its Lai Haraoba festival which last for almost a month.

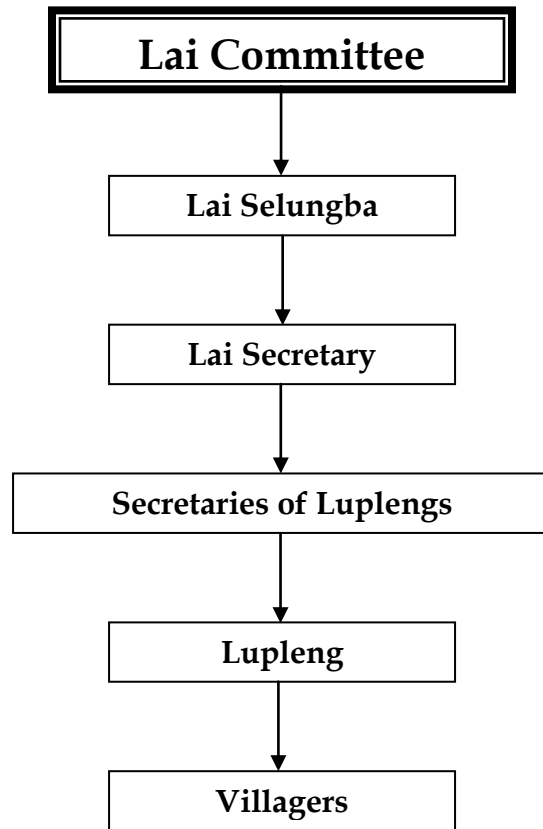


Figure 2.3: Structure of Lai Haraoba Committee

At present, once the local Lai committee decides the days for Lai Haraoba, it has to inform either the Umanglai Loishang at Lainingthou Sanamahi Temple Board or Pandit Loishang under the control of Govindajee Temple at the palace compound. Conflict of interest is reflected in the interplay of power relations. While we see there is a contestation in the centralization of religion, one can also observe that there is a split in the Meetei society itself. But this split has harmoniously existed. Whether one gets permission from the Umanglai Loishang or the Pandit Loishang, is the choice of the locality. The Loishang, then, appoints the required functionaries of the Lai Haraoba. The number of *amaibas*, *amaibis* and *penakhongba* vary

according to the funds, which the committee arranges for the festival. Each of the functionaries is paid a required fee specified by the Loishang. In some cases, the fee is on the agreement between the functionaries and the local Lai committee. The fee differs according to the status of the persons based on their seniority in the Loishang and also the reputation of the functionary in the professional field. In a sense we can say that their fees are determined by their status as well as their artistic potentialities.

Currently, many more organizations are emerging in the name of promoting Meetei socio-religious life, particularly Lai Haraoba. Significantly, the multiplicity of the socio-religious organizations at various levels and varieties are more to be found in the urban areas than the rural areas. One such organization which has gained popularity in the urban Imphal areas is the Umanglai Kanba Apunba Lup (UKAL), literally means Organization to Preserve Umang Lai. Recently, the organization has tried to censor and control the Lai Haraoba, prescribing certain rules and regulations, supplemented by a CD with the exact procedure of dances and songs to be followed in the Lai Haraoba.

Intrusion of modern-day politics has been ostensibly witnessed in the organization and arrangement of Lai Haraoba. The committee members owe their allegiance to different political parties. Due to the influence of local political party leaders, tensions begin to build up amongst the members of the committee over some petty reasons such as the misuse of funds and the members begin to quarrel which leads to the factional divides within the committee. For example, at Moirang, there were two factions in the Lai Haraoba committee, whose members quarreled over the right of taking care of the Thangjing Haraoba. In 1992, at Moirang there was an incident in

which the state government had to intervene and impose 144 CRPC in and around the precincts of the shrine of the Lord Thangjing when the warring two factions of Lai Haraoba committee came to blows (Ratan 2001: 131). A similar incident happens recently in May 2016 during the Lord Khamlangba Haraoba of Kakching.

Most of the conflicts related to Lai Haraoba are between the groups of *sagei* (family) and *khun* (village). The main provocation relates to the property of the deity like paddy fields and money received as donation during the ritual days. But most of the deities worshipped by *sagei* do not have much property as compared to the ones worshipped by the *khun*. Some of the conflicts that occurred due to the fight for the management of the property of the deities were Konthoujam Lairembi of Konthoujam, and Tharoijam Lairembi of Tharoijam. These cases are interesting to explore the development of contestation and contradiction of the traditional local organizing system with the new emergence of the modern democratic state apparatus. Through an examination of such contestations and contradictions, one can witness public spaces which are neither representative of the modern state apparatus nor the traditional model in a true sense.

Another incident of the conflict between the Lai committee of Moirang Thangjing Haraoba and the office of the Registrar of Societies, Bishnupur on the management of the affairs of deity in 2002 (Kshetrimayum 2014: 129-32) reflects how the judiciary has not been able to dispense justice at the right time to the aggrieved individuals or groups. It also points to the fact that Lai Haraoba is a public space where the rules and norms of modern state apparatus have not carried out its functions fully. There has been a conflict of

interest as reflected in the interplay of power between the state and the society.

Thus, in this chapter, through a study of the administration of the ritual organization of Lai Haraoba, we can observe that Meetei society in particular and Manipuri society in general is a transitional society with several, complex, layers and overlaps of traditional and modern factors. At no level can one look upon this society as cohesive and unitary in its structure and priorities. Rather, it is indeterminate, heterogeneous and contradictory, seeming to accommodate its differences but not without a considerable negotiation of power at ritual, social and political levels. Indeed, there is a constant tussle of power among various organizations and stakeholders, as this chapter has attempted to demonstrate.

Through the study of the ritual organization of Lai Haraoba, we learn how Meetei society is characterized by increasing insecurity and inequality, heterogeneity of ideas, practices and beliefs, and an inevitable thrust towards arbitrating differences through diverse forces and institutions of modernization. This context needs to be kept in mind as we turn to the next chapter where the focus will be on the actual ritual and performative enactment of different Lai Haraobas, which seem to inhabit a different time and space, far removed from the contemporary immediacies of the real world. However, it should not be forgotten that this ritual enactment is made possible, at concrete levels, through all kinds of administrative negotiations, which provide as much of a foundation to an understanding of the Lai Haraoba as its sacred and ritual principles and practices.

Chapter Three

Multiple Dramaturgies of Lai Haraoba

The previous chapter ended on the note that Meetei society in particular and Manipuri society in general is a transitional society with several, complex, layers and overlaps of traditional and modern factors. While the ritual enactment of Lai Haraoba is made possible through all kinds of administrative negotiations at concrete levels, this cannot allow us to undermine the importance of the religious dimensions of the Lai Haraoba, which is a complex phenomenon with many factors coming into play. There is a common idea that religious practice is something that involves going to temple, church or some other religious centre, reading and reflecting on certain sacred texts, believing and having faith, performing certain ritual practices and living one's life in a certain way.

While religious practice often involves some or all of these things, we also need to recognize that it involves many more factors that are elusive and enigmatic. The simple fact is that religious practices are specific things that humans do, and so their study should primarily be concerned with people and cultures. Keeping in mind the axiomatic principles that religious practices will always be influenced by their cultural context and location, the present chapter intends to explore the multiple dramaturgies of different Lai Haraoba in Manipur. This involves a focus on practices of the Meetei religion through Lai Haraoba which includes meditation, prayer, hymns, dance, music and performance. In a sense, the chapter focuses on

‘religioning’ which Malory Nye (2015: 8) describes as ‘doing a religious practice.’

The Lai Haraoba mainly exists in three main forms – the Kanglei Haraoba, the Moirang Haraoba and the Chakpa Haraoba. The Kanglei Haraoba takes place in the capital Imphal and adjoining areas; the Moirang Haraoba (focused solely on the worship of Thangjing deity) is performed exclusively by the Moirang clan in the Moirang district of Manipur; and the Chakpa Haraoba is performed by the Loi (autochthone/outcaste) communities of Andro, Phāyeng, Sekmai, Khurkhul, Leimaram villages. Though there are some significant differences among these three ritual performances, the basic principles of the Lai Haraoba appear to be common to all of them. The fundamental ritual sequences like *eeakoubā* (invocation), *laipou* (circular dance), *saroikhangba* (warding off evil spirit), *lai lam thokpa* (outing of *lai*), *lairoi* (the final or closing ceremony) are present in all the Lai Haraobas with local variations.

However, there are minute intra-cultural differences in the execution of the performances and ritual processes in these three Lai Haraoba that this chapter will call attention to. It shall do so through a mapping of multiple dramaturgies in all these three performances, thereby countering the dominant homogenized perspective of a singular Lai Haraoba. Within the three forms, except for Moirang, there are also local variations determined by distinctive social, cultural and environmental features of the areas or regions concerned.

As a result, I focus my study on specific areas namely Naothingkhong Pakhangba Haraoba and Kunthoknganbi Haraoba of Imphal for Kanglei Haraoba, Thangjing Haraoba for Moirang (which has no variations), and

Phāyeng Haraoba for the Chakpa Haraoba. One can observe some of the intra-cultural differences in all these Lai Haraoba relating to costumes, musical instruments like the *pena* which is made and played differently, temporalities of different enactments, use of props and palanquins, and even the formation of serpentine movements.

Construing Lai Haraoba

Interpretation of the festival depends to some extent on the translation of the phrase Lai Haraoba. Lai Haraoba has been translated by various scholars as 'rejoicing of the gods' (Hodson, 1908), 'the pleasing of the gods' (Shakespeare, 1913), 'the merry-making of the gods and goddesses' (Nilakanta, 1982) or 'the god's rejoice' (R.K. Achoubisana, 2009). Following Shakespeare, Saroj N. Parratt and John Parratt also wrote a book on Lai Haraoba titled *The Pleasing of the Gods: Meitei Lai Haraoba* (1997). In this sense the ritual is understood as an act of worshipping on the part of the human participants which is meant to render the gods propitiously.

A number of Meitei scholars, however, have argued that the verb '*haraoba*' should be translated in an active rather than a passive sense, as 'the merrymaking of the gods and goddesses' (Nilakanta, 1982). According to this view it is the *lais* themselves who are the performers of the festival. The human functionaries simply play the role of the gods, reenacting and imitating their merrymaking at the beginning of time. This approach is similar to William Sax's suggestion (1995:4) that in Hindu *lila* the gods temporarily inhabit the bodies of the actor who play their roles.

In all these translations of Lai Haraoba, the involvement of the people and community is undermined. Literally, the word *lai* stands for god or deity, and Meitei use the word to mean all pre-Hindu gods or deities,

including the primary gods of Hindu pantheon today. However in the context of Lai Haraoba, the word signifies only the pre-Hindu gods or deities. The word *haraoba* literally means 'to be happy', 'to rejoice', 'to be pleased' and not exactly 'pleasing.' The Meetei word for 'pleasing' would be *haraohanba* and not *haraoba*. Another point of consideration is the phrase "*harao saksem tamba thoudok kummeinaba*" used by *amaiba*, *amaibi* and the community to describe the Lai Haraoba. '*Harao saksem tamba*' is the joyous mimesis, '*thoudok*' means event, and '*kummeinaba*' is to make it a celebration. So, to make the event an intense celebration is what the community has in mind.

Parenthetically, these meanings entail an idea of celebration, observance and performance as well. It is also important to note that Lai Haraoba is about summoning the spirit, playing or rejoicing together and sending off the spirit to their natural abode. Furthermore, if we see the everyday performance structure of Lai Haraoba, it is about bringing out the spirit of *lai* from the shrine to the *laibung* (the premise of *lai*), dancing together with the *lai*, playing with the *lai*; and then request to retire and rest for the day. At the same time, it is believed that Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi led the *amaiba* and *amaibi* respectively in their performances. Let us also keep in mind that the *lai* are life presences in the entire performance of the Lai Haraoba. The gods are not merely actors or spectators, but spect-actors. Therefore, I would prefer to translate Lai Haraoba as 'rejoicing/merry-making *with* the gods'. It is in this performative framework that the present study shall attempt to provide a somewhat different approach to understanding the Lai Haraoba as a complex socio-cultural phenomenon with ritual elements rather than as a pure ritual.

On the experiential note, let me narrate a story which I encountered during my school days. In 1998, the pompous arrangement for the 1999 National Games in Manipur was going on with the construction of the Khuman Lampak Sporting Complex and Langol Game village. At that time, my locality was celebrating Lai Haraoba of Naothingkhong Pakhangba in Thangmeiband, Imphal, which is one of the many ritual festivals affiliated to the Kanglei Haraoba. One evening when the daily ritual was about to start, a symbol of a dragon snake (Pakhangba) in blood-red colour appeared on the floor of the *laibung* (the premise of *lai*). The *lai sellungba* (the village elder who cares for the *lai*) and some spectators around the *laibung* saw the image first. The *lai sellungba* suddenly went into trance, speaking some unintelligible words. People started to say, "Pakhangba has appeared." I was also standing nearby. I saw people gathering at the spot, bowing down and praying. Taking off my slippers, I entered the *laibung* and saw the image.



Picture 3.1 The image of dragon-snake (believed to be Pakhangba) appeared on the floor of the *laibung* of Ibuthou Naothingkhong Pakhangba, Thangmeiband, Imphal in 1998.

At first sight, I could not make out if the image looked like Pakhangba. When someone told me to watch it from a different angle, I remember it took a little time for me to identify the image as Pakhangba. Once it became Pakhangba in my eyes, or rather I was bound to imagine it as Pakhangba, the image gradually became captivating, mysterious, magnificent as well as terrifying thereby arousing certain multiple emotions. The *laibung* space was filled with intense emotions. These emotions are multifarious, nuanced, mixed and full of overlapping sensations that cannot be clearly identified; at a broad level, one could say that they are connected with the faith of the Meetei in the *lai* which contributes towards the formation of identity. It illustrates essential insights into the very existence of Meetei. These emotions are culturally shaped and bound.

I shared my experience of this image with my mother who was looking at it from a distance. My uncle whispered to my mother, "People are praying to the image of blood that has fallen from a leech." Shortly before the image was seen, a cow came running in wildly inside the *laibung*. The volunteers tried chasing her out but she repeatedly and madly continued to run inside the *laibung* as if she wanted to enter into the shrine. A leech fell down from her body somewhere around the spot where the image of the dragon snake appeared. My uncle removed it holding its wriggling body with two sticks and threw it away. My uncle, who was a post-graduate philosophy student at Manipur University and believed to be an atheist, was shocked on listening to an oracle of an *amaibi*, who arrived at the *laibung* after the incident and went into trance saying, "How dare you call me the blood of a leech? I shall show my power and presence." A series of events followed. Ministers and bureaucrats came. In the evening, some army men patrolling on the nearby road also came to the *laibung* on seeing the crowd gathered

there. A non-Manipuri Indian army officer skeptically looked up at the roof of the *laibung* presuming that a mirror was suspended there casting a reflection on the ground. Later on not finding any such thing, he took off his leather shoes, leather belt and gun and then prostrated himself on the ground in order to pray.

Early next morning, a middle-aged woman from border regions of Manipur, came to the Lai Haraoba venue. She narrated that an image appeared in her dream the previous night which had asked her to carry some rice to the Lai Haraoba venue in Thangmeiband. She was told in her dream to place the rice near the image Pakhangba who would appear on the surface of the rice. She did what was told in her dream. It seemed that the image did appear on the surface of the rice. Then, on listening to her the people of our locality started offering rice near the image.

One oracle of an *amaibi* said that the Pakhangba residing at the Khuman Lampak was disturbed by the construction of the Khuman Lampak Sporting complex for the National Games the following year. The spirit had come in search of a peaceful place near the shrine, which could serve as a shelter. The cow was the carrier of the spirit. A few days earlier to the appearance of the dragon snake, a wall of the hockey stadium in the sporting complex got cracked. People said that the image formed by the cracked wall corresponded to the image of the Pakhangba. In this manner, people constructed stories around this series of events. Oracles in the Lai Haraoba also revolved around these stories. Looking back on these events, how do we understand the dramaturgy of their sequence and profound emotional affects? The stories and oracles, in a sense, are inscribed within the realm of

possibilities and *make-believe*. These dynamic stories revolved around their own condition and imaginary possibilities, elisions and transformations.

At the time of these events, what had perplexed me was the question, “how the *lai* moved from one place to another?” As a schoolboy studying in a missionary school, we learned in Moral Science textbook, “God is everywhere”. As a young boy, I questioned that if ‘God is everywhere’ then why did the *lai* come to the *laibung* from Khuman Lampak? Why do we have shrines, temples, churches and mosques? Why is the *lai* invoked, pleased and then send off again to the celestial realm in the process of Lai Haraoba? In retrospect, I realize that god is everywhere in the Meetei worldview as well. God is in the grove, in the water bodies, in the house, in the courtyard, in the backyard of the house, everywhere. My grandfather would caution me not to go near a pond in the hot daytime saying, “*laina louni*” (God will take you). When someone dies drowning, it is believed that s/he has been taken by god (*laina loukhre*). Various scholars have classified *lai* in various categories (Saroj N. Parratt 1980, Rajkumar 1989) which we have discussed in Chapter 1. To reiterate, there are deities which are believed to have had a human existence, deities associated with one particular *salai*, domestic deities (*yumjao lai*), tutelary deities and guardian deities (*maikey ngakpa lai*). So, there are many forms of *lai* in the Meetei pantheon. In the present day, there are also Hindu gods who are venerated as *lai* in the celebration of the Lai Haraoba.

If god is everywhere and omnipresent, then why do we celebrate Lai Haraoba? The structure of the Lai Haraoba suggests that Lai Haraoba is a social gathering where the community invites particular *lais* of the community with whom they rejoice together. It is important here to note that Lai Haraoba does not only embrace the physical abode (*laibung*) of the *lai*

(deity), but also the entire village or locality where the deity is located. Subsequently, there are rules of dos and don'ts within the village during the period of Lai Haraoba. It does not mean that Lai Haraoba is meant only for the residents but devotees from other places can also come and worship the deity. In some village there is a very rigid rules that its Lai Haraoba is not allowed to be seen by residents of other villages. So it is a closed door affair. One such Lai Haraoba is the Panam Ningthou Haraoba of Chakpa Andro (Ratan 2001: 99). In a sense, during the Panam Ningthou Haraoba the whole village becomes the abode of the deity and sacred in that it is the taboo for outsiders. Once it is over the normal relationships are resumed between the people of the village and the outsiders. In order to understand this, let us study the various forms of Lai Haraoba in Manipur. I shall begin with the most celebrated form of Lai Haraoba called Kanglei Haraoba.

I

KANGLEI HARAOPA

Kanglei Haraoba is the most popular and vastly celebrated form of Lai Haraoba in the valley of Manipur. This form of Haraoba seems to be more precise and well-structured. It can be broadly divided into three major structural divisions - *lai eekoubā* (invocation of the *lai* from water), *laipou* (main dance sequences) and *lairoi* (the final ceremony).

Lai Eekoubā

Literally, *lai eekoubā* means the invocation of the *lai* from the water. This introductory ritual which is performed one day before the commencement of the main daily rituals marks the beginning of Lai Haraoba. The important purposes of this preliminary ritual are the calling up of the spirit of the

deities from the water, and the infusion of life to the structures or devices representing the deities (*lai*) placed in the shrine with the spirit of the deities.

In Kanglei Haraoba, the ritual of *eekoubā* is performed in the afternoon (usually between two and four o'clock) with a procession of participants moving in two lines, one for the male god and the other for the female. Before the procession leaves, the amaibi dances *laihou jagoi* (initiation dance) accompanied by the *pena*. This is believed to be a very archaic dance with *chumsa khuthek* (the simple hand gesture) as mentioned in Chapter 1. She then faces the shrine and performed *jagoi okpa* (welcoming dance). Two male members called *pibas*, bearing the earthen pots hanging down from their necks with the help of white cloths, must also face the shrine, with each foot placed on a banana leaf, on which two coins made of bell-metal (called *khunet-sel*) are also placed. During the dance the *amaibi* turns away from the shrine towards the path leading to the water body. She is followed by the entire procession of ritual participants. The procession leaves the *laibung* (the *lai* site) and proceeds to a water body (a river or a pond) on the eastern side of the shrine. A strict order is observed. The procession will be led by an elderly woman having a proper marriage and whose first child is a son. She carries on her head a ceremonial earthen pitcher called *ishaifu*. Two young bachelors carrying swords will follow her and they, in turn, will be followed by two maidens carrying brass-plates called *shemkha*. They will again be followed by two other maidens, one carrying a fan and the other carrying a ceremonial brass-container call *kaoshel*. Two male *lai puba* (bearers of the *lais*) carrying earthen pots will follow them. These earthen pots called *ihaiifu* will be used for the purpose of carrying the spirits of the deities to be invoked from the water. Behind them two young boys walk with two large white umbrellas (called *chong*) with pattern fringes held above the two *lai puba*. An

amaibi rings her hand bell gently and the *penakhongba* plays the tune *lamyin*³⁸ (making the path). The procession now arrives at the pond from where the *lais* will be called up. They halt at the *thonga* (the embarkation place of the pond). Here the two lines of the procession face the water. Their position is important. The members of the Lai committee of the Haraoba must be to the south of the *amaiba* and *amaibi*, and they must face east, the direction where the sun rises.

The ritual at the water body is initiated by *leirai yukhangba*, the offering of the rice brew *yuu*. This rite is believed to be an offering to appease the evil spirits (*saroi*) rather than a gift to the *lais* themselves. Next, in the order of ritual practice, *yam* (rice flour), *kabok* (parched rice), *hei-lei* (fruits and flowers) and *heibimana singju* (a chopped leaf of the *heibi* fruit are mixed with *ngari* (fermented fish), chilli and salt). This is said to represent some of the traditional Meetei food, which is scattered on the water by an *amaibi* or *amaiba*. A *heiruk* (fruit offering consisting of banana, sugarcane, *kabok* and flowers) is also offered by the *amaibi* at the embarkation site of the *pukhri* (pond). The *amaiba* offers prayer to the guardian gods of the four directions – Marjing, Thangjing, Wangbaren and Koubru – asking to accept the offerings. After this prayer, the *amaiba* offers a silver coin and a gold coin³⁹, placed in the palm of each *lai puba* carrying the *ihaihus*, in the water. This is called *konyai hunba* (throwing of coins). Then, the *amaibi* invokes the name of the community *lai* saying, “Come, your people will celebrate your Haraoba.” She then chants *kontharol*, the lyrics for *konyai hunba*. The chanting is primarily a request to the divine god and goddess to come up through the string of the *hiri* (threads attached to the *ihaihus*).

³⁸ *Lamyin* meaning making the path; from *lam* – place, *yanba* – to lead.

³⁹ The silver coin is for the male *lai*; and the gold coin is for the female *lai*.

Then and there follows the ritual of the offerings of *khayom*⁴⁰ in the waters, called *khayom lakpa*. The *lais* are believed to be present in embryo in the *khayoms*; these are offered so that the *lais* may emerge out of the waters through the *hiri*. The *amaibi* then offers the two *khayoms* – one for the male *lai* held in the right hand and that for the female *lai* in the left. After a chanting they are immersed in water; if they are sucked down suddenly it is regarded as an auspicious sign, if they float it is bad omen. The *amaibi* then now perform *laithemgatpa*, the coaxing of the *lais* from the water. She takes the two *ihaihus* from the two *lai puba* (bearers of the *lais*), the male *lai*'s pot in her right hand and the female's in her left hand, and touches the water with them. In a more traditional dancing form, she may also take a little water into the pots.

Following this, a dance called *chukpharol jagoi* is performed near the water body. The Meetei worldview has immense associations with the symbolic significance of water, which is connected with fertility, vegetation and life. The *amaibi* stands near the water site and dances holding two *ihaihu* (earthen pot symbolizes the two deities – male and female) in her two hands. So this dance is called *Ihaiphu Jagoi* or *Chaphu Jagoi* or commonly *Chukpharol Jagoi*. The dance is performed facing the four respective directions representing the guardian deities – Thangjing, Marjing, Wangbren and Koubru for the south-west, north-east, south-east and north-west respectively. The dance starts facing the direction of Thangjing and then moves to the other deities in the remaining directions. The dance is performed with a minimum of foot movements but with graceful hand gestures. She then returns the *ihaihus* back to the *lai* bearers.

⁴⁰ Banana leaf packet containing eggs, rice and *langthrei* buds, tied with bamboo strips



Picture 3.2 An *amaibi* dancing the *chukpharol* dance holding two *ihai fu* (earthen pot symbolizing the two deities – male and female) in her two hands with the accompaniment of the *pena* music by the *penakhongba*.

The *amaibi* now removes the *leiyoms*⁴¹ from their pots and unwinds the threads (*hiri*) by tying the *leiyoms* to two wooden spindles (*hirichei*) three times. The *hiris* must not touch the ground, and are therefore passed over the *amaibi*'s shoulder. Then, the *amaibi* covers her face and head with her *inaphi* (shawl) and crouches beside the water with her knees bent in front of her. Holding the hand bell in one of her hand together with the end of her shawl, she takes the *leiyoms* in her right hand and immerses them in the water. As the *amaibi* agitates the *leiyoms* in the water, she chants the creation hymn *leihourol*. *Leihourol* is an initiation chant for *amaibi* asking the *lai* to be seated on her in order to get possess and give oracle. The *amaibi* then gets possess; and with a frenzied shaking body, she delivers oracle. The *penakhongba* plays the *pena* in a fast paced rhythm in tune with the shaking body of the *amaibi*.

⁴¹ Banana leaf packet containing *langthrei* buds.



Picture 3.3 The *amaibi* (sitting on the ground) in trance after chanting the *leihourol* hymn, in a state of possession after delivering the oracle.

The Laipou Sequence: The Weave of Performance

The *laipou* sequence comprises the main body of performance in the Lai Haraoba. From the second day of the Lai Haraoba, the dance called *thougal jagoi* (dance of serving the *lai*) is performed in the afternoon. After this performance, the *amaiba* performs *hoi laoba* in which he shouts “Hou ho hoi ha ha ha, hoi ha ha ha, hayillo ho haya he, ho haya he”. He then sings a song narrating the story of how human beings came into existence. Following this song, the *amaibi* performs *laipoula*⁴² *thaba* in which a white cotton cloth is folded thrice and placed on top of three layers of plantain leaves. The *amaibi* then places *langthrei*⁴³ shoots in honour of the presiding deities. The dance symbolically implies the drawing out of the souls in the space to witness and

⁴² Literally, *la* means plantain leaf and so it means plantain leaf for *laipou*. *Laipoula thaba* literally means placing plantain leaf of offerings for *laipou* dance.

⁴³ plant with narrow pointed leaves: the buds are not flowers but bud-like new shoots

dance together with the ritual functionaries and community members. The souls of the deities are believed to be in the midst of the community participants. Thus, the space between the *laipoula* and the shrine is considered sacred due to the presence of the deities and it is inauspicious to trespass between these areas. The *amaibi* stands facing the shrine holding the *laipoula* and makes offering to the deities representing the four directions. Returning to the shrine, the *amaibi* then offers the *laipoula* at the shrine, and then placing it on the ground in the centre of the *laibung*⁴⁴. Taking out four *langthrei* buds from the *laipoula*, each of the *amaibi* places these buds between the middle finger, the index and ring finger on both the hands. Then in a group they perform *laiching jagoi*, a movement symbolizing drawing out of the *lais* from the shrine.

In this dance, the body sways mildly, the torso bent slightly and the hands symbolically picking the soul, the *laiching jagoi* begins gently with the hypnotic music of the *pena*. The foot movement of the *laiching jagoi* dance starts with the right leg. The toe of the right leg touches the ground gently, rises slightly, followed by bringing it back to the ground, while the left leg repeats the same movement developing the rhythm in a slow pace. The right hand stretches out in front and is slightly twisted with the thumb inserted in between the middle finger and the ring finger, brought back to the navel. Then the left hand repeats the same movement with an increasing tempo of the *pena* music. In this manner the dance gradually increases its tempo.

⁴⁴ The space or the courtyard where the performance takes place.



Picture 3.4 A scene of *laiching jagoi*. (Kanglei Lai Haraoba at Jawaharlal Nehru Manipuri Dance Academi, 2014).

This is followed by *leipek jagoi*. In this dance, the standing position is held in such a manner that the two big toes are kept at a distance with the heels touching one another thereby making an angle of 45° approximately.⁴⁵ Spreading the two hands sideways, the body is lowered down almost to a halfway sitting position. The two hands are slowly brought together in front to form the hand gesture of *khayom*, a blossoming lotus. The *khayom* is then brought up with the body standing up slowly until it reaches the initial position. The *khayom* hand is brought near the eyes, and then lowered down to the breasts. The tips of the fingers bent to touch the palm whereupon immediately the wrists move in a twisting motion to be brought back in the

⁴⁵ These dance steps and hand gestures are demonstrated and explained in detail by Ojha Dr. M. Macha Chaoreikanba during my interview with him on April 16, 2012 at his residence in Manipur University.

initial hand position. Then it is suddenly followed by *khubak jagoi* (clapping dance). This dance is closely linked to what is described as *khencho* in *Anoirol* (please refer to Chapter 1).

The *amaibi* also performs *leitai nungdai*⁴⁶ dance, which relates to the evolution of the world and the creation of the human beings. The *leitai nungdai* dance, thus, seeks to connect the inner world (*nung*) to the outer physical world (*paan*) represented by Nature. This is extensively suggested in my description of *Anoirol* also (See Chapter 1). As mentioned in this Chapter 1, the philosophy of “*nung-paan ani tuna chatminnaba*”, the retention of a balance of inner feelings and outer physical world is the main psycho-physical component of the dance. In this dance, the body is positioned in sitting posture after the *khubak jagoi* with the body twisting gently from left to right punctuated by the sound of clapping hands.

After the *leitai nungdai* dance, the main body of the Lai Haraoba called the *laipou* dance cycle begins. In this cycle, the *amaibi* reenacts the whole process of the life on earth, starting from the mystery of sexual union to the routine of everyday existence lived by men and women. An important ritual act called *hoirou laoba* is enacted in the beginning of the *laipou* dance to the accompaniment of *pena* music. The lyrics of *hoirou laoba* are as follows:

*O hoirou O nage hoirou*⁴⁷ *hoirou nage*⁴⁸
Hoirou Hoirouye Nageda Laiyingthou.
O Hoirou ne she shum.
Ho Haya aa..., hay haya aa..., haya he...

O hoirou! Let us have intercourse.
 Let us have intercourse
 It is Progenitor's *hoirou*
Ho Haya aa..., hay haya aa, haya he

⁴⁶ Lei = earth/world, tai = connection/relation, nung = inner idea/voice or conscience, dai = tai = connection/relation

⁴⁷ This is difficult to translate. Some traditional scholars say *Hoirou* could mean “the beginning,” “the first/man,” “the first life.” It is also being interpreted as the sexual organs of the male and the female *Lai*.

⁴⁸ *Nage* means “let us penetrate”

This song is sung with great enthusiasm in such an evocative manner that all performers share in the experience enacted. The *amaibis* hold their palms and fingers together on the navel. Then with a gentle movement, the right hand mimes the receiving of the seed of life and bringing the hand back to the navel – a gestural movement which is repeated with the left hand ending at the navel. This rhythmic movement of the dance is performed with ecstasy evoking sexual intercourse in a clandestine mood. This type of dance is referred to as *athuppa jagoi* (Yaima 1973: 6).

After three circles of movement, the *penakhongba* starts singing the *anoirol* song which describes the origin of dance. Simultaneously, the *amaibi* performs the dance of *hakchang saba* depicting the creation of the human body limb by limb through the reenactment of as many as 64 hand gestures. A good translation of the song is provided by Saroj N. Parratt and John Parratt in their book *The Pleasing of the Gods* (1997: 102-111). *Anoirol*, which is sung simultaneously with *hakchang saba*, combines in the first stanza the idea of the creative cosmic dance with that of procreation. The enigmatic ‘invitation to drink rice wine’ by the primeval *amaibi* to the Python deity is perhaps a reference to marriage ceremony. In any case, it is clearly associated with fecundity. The punishment for failure to entertain the ancestor properly was the curse of leprosy, and the subsequent lifting of the curse led to ‘many births taking place again and again.’ The function of the female figure ‘Toibi of Tangkha’ is to stimulate intercourse with the *amaibis*. Thus the cosmic dance is the dance of the lovers, male and female and the stanza ends by celebrating the birth of the child with plump and pleasingly. Stanza two of *anoirol* is mainly concerned with the sky god and describes him as ‘god of the rain’ as well, which must be an allusion to agricultural productivity. The

final stanza expands the concept of fertility in the figure of the goddess Panthoibi.



Picture 3.5 A scene of the beginning of the *laipou* dance cycle while the *penakhongba* sings the *hoirou laoba* song. (Kanglei Lai Haraoba at Jawaharlal Nehru Manipuri Dance Academi, 2014).

In the *laipou* dance, the *amaibis* mime and imitate the building of the body and growth of the child with the hand gestures. While singing the above *Anoirol* song by *penakhongba*, *amaibis* perform the *hakchang saba* (sculpturing of the human body) dance in a sequence of 64 gestures. The 64 gestures visualize the growth of individual parts of the body, showing (1) *khoidou* (navel), (2) *lawai* (roof of the head), (3) *chira* (front part of the head), (4) *kokchi* (two sides of the head), (5) *Laibak* (forehead), (6) *pishum* (eyebrows), (7) *mitchi* (corners of the eyes), (8) *mit* (eyes), (9) *nakhang* (bridge of the nose), (10) *naton* (nose), (11) *nakchi* (nostrils), (12) *khajai leng-on* (cheeks), (13) *naton sumang* (literally the courtyard of nose, it is the space between nostrils and

the upper lip where the moustache grow), (14) *chimbai* (lips), (15) *ya* (teeth), (16) *khadang* (chin), (17) *nakong* (ears), (18) *nakong chakra* (ear holes), (19) *lukham* (back of the head), (20) *khouri tongdam* (neck and throat), (21) *lengjum* (shoulder), (22) *lengdon* (back of the shoulder), (23) *lengpak* (entire shoulder), (24) *pambom* (arms), (25) *khuning* (elbows), (26) *khutki khubom* (inner forearms), (27) *khujeng* (wrists), (28) *khutnam* (tops of the palms), (29) *khubak* (palms), (30) *khutpi-khutnao* (fingers), (31) *khujin* (nails), (32) *khutpak mayi* (lines of palms), (33) *khudon gi mayi* (lines on the tips of the fingers), (34) *yang* (spine), (35) *thabak mihunpham* (the ribs where the heart will pulsate), (36) *thabak* (breasts), (37) *nganpham* (place where the breasts will shine), (38) *thajin* (breast plate), (39) *laka* (heart), (40) *chaning yapham* (abdomen), (41) *khwang* (waist), (42) *ningjon* (buttocks), (43) *leinung thonglon* (anus), (44) *mipok lambi* (vagina/path of the womb), (45) *kamya* (groin), (46) *pheigan* (thighs), (47) *pheiru* (hips), (48) *pheibom* (upper thighs), (49) *khuk-u* (knees), (50) *khurai* (shin), (51) *khubom* (calf), (52) *khongjeng* (ankle), (53) *khongmit* (arch of the ankle), (54) *khongning* (heel), (55) *khongnam* (top of the foot), (56) *khongpak* (foot), (57) *khongdon* (tips of the big toe), (58) *khongsa* (toes), (59) *khujin* (toenails), (60) *khongsa mayi* (lines under the toes), (61) *khonya thambal* (arches of the feet), (62) *hakchang langbumba* (integrating the whole body), (63) *atiya sidabada thawai niba* (asking for soul from Atiya Sidaba, the sky father), (64) *thawai happa* (breathing in the soul to the body) (Chaoreikanba 2008: 113-9).

The footstep for the *hakchang saba*⁴⁹ involves the raising of the tip of the right foot, beating on the ground near the middle of the left leg, then bringing outward and stepping in front. The movement is repeated with the left feet to the right in a similar fashion, and continues with the gesture of the

⁴⁹ These dance steps and hand gestures are demonstrated and explained by Ojha Dr. M. Macha Chaoreikanba during my interview with him on April 16, 2012 at his residence in Manipur University.

dance. The rhythm is the basic rhythm like that of “tading-ting, tading-ting” which is mentioned as the first rhythm in *Anoirol*.⁵⁰ The *chumsa sathek* (*chumsa* movement), a spinning hand gestures in the form making the horizontal 8-figure, i.e. ∞ , this symbol is considered as the simplest form of *paphal*, intertwined pattern of the dragon-snake. It is the image of dragon-snake god Pakhangba. The *chumsa sathek* is inserted after every hand gestures mentioned above of sculpturing the human body parts. The *chumsa sathek* is used by the *amaibis* to invoke and please the deities (Kumar 1988). Whereas in the case of *hakchang saba*, it seems to be a mark of complement to the deities.

However, M. Macha Chaoreikanba observed that the insertion of *chumsa sathek* after every step of *hakchang saba* presenting the continuity of movement of dance shows the work-in-process of sculpturing/making the body or one can say that it is the making of nerves which connects the body parts.⁵¹ He continues that the study of dance only through the hand gestures is incomplete. After the *hakchang saba* sequence, the lesson about a child’s birth and care for the growth of the child is depicted in a sequence called *nungnao jagoi* through the mime dance movement with a minimal dialogue of instruction.

⁵⁰ As cited in Yaima Singh, Khumanlambam (Ed.). *Meitei Jagoi: Anoirol*, Volume-I, Imphal, 1973, p. 1

⁵¹ Told during my interview with him on April 16, 2012 at his residence in Manipur University



Picture 3.6 A scene of caring for the child in the *nungnao jagoi*. (Kanglei Lai Haraoba at Khunthok Hanbi, Thangmeiband, Imphal 2014).

The instruction in tune with the dance movement and hand gestures continue with the building of the house, *yumsarol*.⁵² The dance is followed by another dance sequence called *Panthoibi jagoi*. It is a mild and slow dance performed in the accompaniment of the *pena* and the singing of the song *Panthoibi seisak*⁵³. The song expresses the intense love of Panthoibi and Nongpok Ningthou in rich metaphor and riddles. The song and the dance are in praise of the four guardian deities – Koubru (north-west), Thangjing (south-west), Wangbaren (south-east) and Marjing (north-east). Finally, this sequence also depicts the final ecstasy of the union of Panthoibi and Nongpok Ningthou. The song also talks about the conservation of forest and natural resources.

⁵² The language of building a house

⁵³ For the lyrics of the song in English translation, please refer to Saroj N. Arambam Parratt and John Parratt, *The Pleasing of the Gods: Meitei Lai Haraoba*, Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, pp.119-120.

Then, the process of cultivation is performed in a dance sequence called *pamyarrol*⁵⁴. The dance in detail instructs the process of the production of cotton from planting to weaving. The *amaibis* instruct through minimal dialogue and dance the process of making fire from two pieces of bamboo to clear the ground by burning it; this is followed by the digging and planting of the cotton till the cotton is grown and then picked in a basket, dried and cleaned and then spun ready to be woven. The process of weaving and the making of the clothes are performed in a dance sequence called *phisarol jagoi*.

These dance sequences with the hand gestures are performed in circular form around the perimeter of the courtyard. In between all these dance sequences *chumsa sathek* is always performed to show the break between hand gestures. As mentioned above, the whole activities in the *laipou* cycle is said to be symbolically completed in 364 hand gestures. However, the numbers of hand gestures in various dances of the *laipou* cycle are contentious from one dance practitioner/scholar to another though the 64 hand gestures of the *hakchang-saba* and the total number remain the same. This generates a discourse that such a codification/sophistication is an attempt of institutionalizing the Lai Haraoba dance. Such a numbering is not found reference in earlier text like *Anoirol*.

The Lai Haraoba festival as well as the performance evolves into various forms of stages with the passage of time in relation to the civilization of Meetei. The evolution of the Meetei and its religion was the dynamic movement of the ethnic clan amalgamation. The traditional belief system of these ethnic groups, through a long and complex process of evolution, developed to a higher order of polytheism and finally to the still higher order

⁵⁴ The language of the process of cultivation

of monotheism (Ratan 2001: 44). On the performative aspect, with all the other ritual before and after *laipou* dance, the *hakchangsaba* performance is the main performance which we find in every type of Lai Haraoba.

The last part of the *laipou* dance cycle is the *longkhonba*⁵⁵ episode. Here, the act of *long khonba* has a dual meaning. At a visual level, the action of the *amaibis* signifies the act of fishing by *long* (fishing basket); however, at a symbolic level, it shows the gathering of the spirits of the *lais* (*thawai mi konba*). The *amaibis* mime the gathering of the spirits on the *laipoula*, the plantain leaf which is placed in the centre at the beginning of the *laipou* cycle. It is believed that the *lais* have been participating in the Haraoba. This episode is probably meant to bring back the excited and ecstatic soul of the *lais* who have been rejoicing. It is of critical consideration to note that they should be made to return to the shrine calmly and to take rest for the day. In essence, this act confirms the belief that the *lais* were participating in the Haraoba. As a result, my above translation of Lai Haraoba as 'rejoicing/merry-making *with* the gods' becomes more appropriate.

It is also important to note that in the Meetei's day-to-day life, the traditional Meetei *amaiba* performs *thawai mi konba* (*thawai* literally means 'spirit/soul', *mi* means 'shadow' and *konba* means 'to embrace/collect/gather'); this is performed in everyday life after the birth of a baby, on the spot of an accident, to deal with bad dreams, in short, whenever the soul is not calm. *Thawai mi konba* is meant to keep in place the five spirits and the shadow (*mi*). The Meeteis believe in the 'multiplicity of souls.' Besides the five souls formed by the five basic elements (ether, wind, water, earth and fire), they have a sixth one in the form of *mi*

⁵⁵ "*long*" here means fishing basket and "*khon*" coming from the verb "*khonba*" means to gather.

(shadow/reflection). As we have observed in the study of *Anoirol* in Chapter 1, body movement signifies life, and in this context, the shadow is believed to provide evidence of life. Whenever the body moves, the shadow follows. The shadow is inseparable from the body. In a sense, it is one of the souls of the body.

Immediately after the *longkhonba* (fishing) episode, an exciting episode full of playful elements begins with a mock race between the god and the goddess. Accompanied by three men (for the God) and three women (for the Goddess), the *amaibi* run backwards and forwards between the shrine and the rear of the courtyard; the men and the women race each other to reach the shrine first shouting, "Has the Sovereign God won or has the Sovereign Goddess won?" This playful dramatic exchange of dialogue takes place between the *amaibi* and the other participants.

Amaibi: Ho, you servants of the Sovereign God and Sovereign Goddess!

People: Hoi (Yes).

Amaibi: Servants of the Sovereign God, as you fished with the basket, in which lake did you fish? What kind of fish did you catch?

Another *amaibi* representing the male group: We fished in the southern lake and caught *uukabi* (a carp).

Amaibi: Servants of the Sovereign Goddess, as you fished with the basket, in which lake did you fish? What kind of fish did you catch?

Other *amaibi* representing the female group: We fished in the lake of the *lai* and caught *ngamu* (a trout).

Amaibi: Keep the fish carefully so that it may be used when the Haraoba is complete and when all that is due to the *lai* has been performed.

People: Yes.

The sexual symbol of the fish is significant here – the *uukabi* (a flat fish) represents the female genitalia and the *ngamu* (a long fish), the male organ. The choral responses are made in short staccato style with passion. There is a

playful rhythm and a mood of rejoicing pervades the choral responses. It is important to note here that Lokendra Arambam (2005: 10) has commented that the declamatory style of dramatic exchange with a 'slight elongation or stress of the words in poetic form' in this episode becomes a predominant mode of dialogue delivery in Manipuri theatre. He has also commented that this heightened speech later developed into quick prose repartee in the tradition of clowns (ibid: 10).

The episode of *longkhonba* is followed by an interesting sequence called *lai sanaba* (which literally means "playing Gods"). Also called *phibul ahabi* (*phibul* is a cloth ball containing *langthrei* buds; there is one ball each for the male and female *lai*), two *amaibis*, each holding a *phibul* - symbolically one playing the role of the male principle and the other playing the role of the female principle - play out a narrative of romance and sexual play. The two *amaibis* dance with a sliding motion of their feet while swaying their hips. The element of play, which also occurs elsewhere in the Haraoba, is most prominent in this episode, and attracts large audiences on account of its impressive rhythmic dance. One *amaibi* takes her position to the south of the *phijang* (canopy) and a second *amaibi* to the north. They face each other. The *amaibi* in the southern position cries "Hoi, the Sovereign God claps, the Sovereign Goddess dances, *ya, ya ho ya*" in a very celebratory tune, rhythm and tempo. At these words, the *amaibis* clap twice and make a circular movement with their arms three times. The *amaibi* on the southern side of the *phijang* then takes the *phibul*, placed on the canopy, believed to be the male *lai*, while the *amaibi* to the north takes the *phibul* of the female, and they dance together. The intense playful exchange of hide and seek, winking of eyes, eyebrows flashing in a playful manner, smiles, inhibition, intimacy, fun, romance, all these arouse excitement in the audience. In a way, this

episode is not so much about “pleasing the god or playing the god” but pleasing the audience, arousing their emotions and feelings through an energetic and sexually charged performance. The spontaneity, flexibility, reflexivity and their mutual play make the audience enjoy the episode.

The performance of *lai sanaba* has the dramaturgical elements of fixity as well as fluidity. Interestingly, in this dance, the two *amaibis* make snake-like movements which create an intricate pattern of movements on the floor. While these movements follow a fixed pattern, they are also improvised. This brings into question the ability of the *amaibis* to recognize, repeat and refine patterns. It could also be suggested that ritual performances are dramaturgically pre-designed by ritual specialists for their cultural efficacy. While there is already a dramatic structure and plot in which *amaibis* engage aesthetically through music, dance and dramatic gesture, there are also elements of fluidity in terms of the personal improvisation of gestures, facial expressions and playful movements of the *amaibis*. The *amaibis'* subjective performance and experience are objectified in a common performance which is shared not necessarily with a consensual result but through timely improvisations of both the *amaibis*. The gestures and facial expressions, texts, visual symbols, rhythms, the touch of sacred objects (*phibul* can be touched by only the *amaibi* and *amaiba*), all of these elements are synchronized in an aesthetic appeal to all senses which, to me, are at once contextual and experiential. In sum, I think an aesthetic and reflexive process is involved particularly in this episode related to the impulsive and expressive modes of the ritual performance and its efficacy.

The *longkhonba* dance cycle is followed by the *maibi paton* and *lairen mathek* (also called *paphal*). It is danced around the *laipoula* (plantain leaf) placed in the middle of the performance space. The legs move creeping on

the ground and meandering around the *laipoula*, in a way that a little snake moves, to the accompaniment of the *pena*. The *amaibis* dance with very quick steps, sliding their feet to the rhythm of the *pena*. The feet move slowly and lightly, almost touching the ground, while the hands move in the pattern of *chumsa sathek*. Tenderly and rhythmically, the right hand turns upwards while the left ankle twists slowly and the left hand reciprocates the act in the same manner. This pattern of movement continues repeatedly with the same timing in coordination with the leg movement and hand gestures. Overall, this dance involves a simultaneous rhythmic movement of neck, eyes, shoulders, waist, thighs, toes, soles and heels with energy pulses of the body.

In this ritual dance, the *amaibis* have to follow a fixed pattern (See Figure 3.1) in which the dances of *maibi paton* and *lairen mathek* move around the four corners of the *laipoula*. The mild and rhythmic swaying of the waist makes the movement look like that of a snake. Every time that the *amaibis* approach the four corners of the performance space, they prostrate themselves before the directional gods – Thangjing, Koubru, Wangbren and Marjing - thereby signifying their devotion to the gods. The aesthetic beauty of this performance is stunning in its cumulative effect whereby the *amaibis* dance in a long continuous line meandering like a snake across the four corners of the performance space. This way of meandering like a snake in a long line is described as *tubu sana noiba*, as mentioned in *Anoirol* (Yaima 1973: 5).

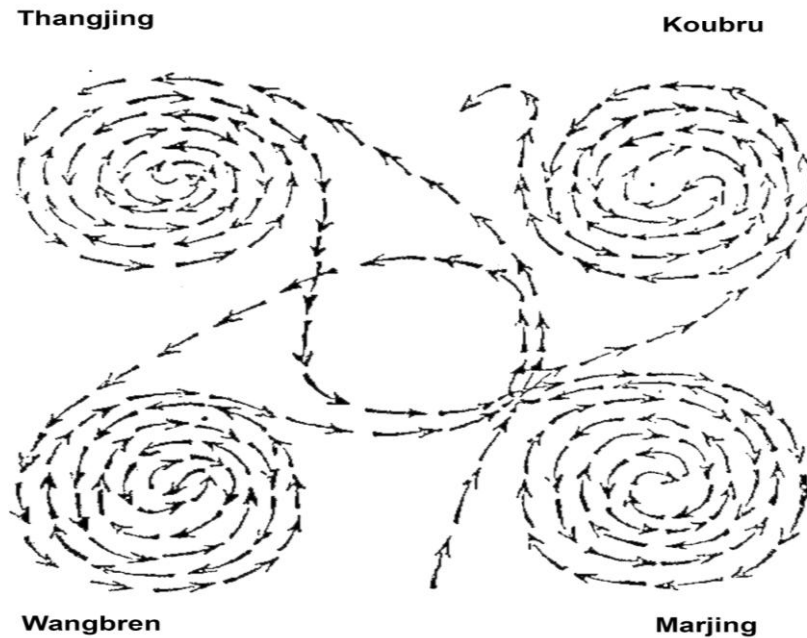


Figure 3.1: The movement pattern of the *paton* or *lairen mathek* dance.

Kanglei Thokpa: Impersonation of Khoriphaba

In addition to the daily items there are two more important ritual sequences which are not performed every day but performed on certain prescribed days of Lai Haraoba. The first one is called *kanglei thokpa* performed once either on the 5th, 7th, 9th or 11th day of the Lai Haraoba; and the second is called *lam thokpa* (outing) generally performed on the day before *lairoi* or on the concluding day. In the ritual item of *kanglei thokpa*, an *amaibi* plays the role of Khoriphaba and mime the action of Khoriphaba as a polo player and a wrestler.

While traditional scholars like Ngariyanbam Kullachandra (1963), Ngangbam Kumar Maibi (1988) and Wahengbam Lukhoi (2008) illuminate

that *Kanglei thokpa* is an enactment of a mythical story⁵⁶ of a mythical hero Khoriphaba on seeing the performance what comes through is that the performance embodies the self-transformation of the *amaibi*, the process of which can be observed as a journey to the mythical world. Richard Schechner (2013: 190) states that in strict theatrical terms, “performing rituals is not ‘acting’,” because “most rituals involve no impersonation.” However, if we look at the performance of *kanglei thokpa*, does not the *amaibi* playing the role of Khoriphaba involve impersonation? *Kanglei thokpa*, in a ritual context, bears the strong imprint of “codified acting” which Schechner defines as “performing according to a semiotically constructed score of movements, gestures, songs, costumes, and makeup. This score is rooted in tradition and passed down from teachers to students by means of rigorous training” (2013: 183). In case of the tradition of *amaibi*, the relationship between *guru amaibi* and younger (student) *amaibi* is a completely different scenario. On the other hand if the *amaibi* is recognized as possessed by Khoriphaba, then Schechner is correct in pointing out that “those performing rituals are not impersonating others. The ritualist is enacting a designated ritual role” (2013: 191). But then in the case of *kanglei thokpa*, what needs to be emphasized is that the *amaibi* seems to perform a “codified acting” since she performs with certain prescribed movements, gestures and songs, yet with some improvisation.

Kanglei thokpa is generally performed before the *laipou*. Soon after the performance of *hoi laoba*, the *amaibis* dance in the *laibung* and abruptly one of them gets possessed. Her body shakes and shivers uncontrollably, and

⁵⁶ The story is about a mythical hero Khoriphaba, an expert in *sagol kangjei* (polo) and *mukna* (wrestling). He was not allowed to take part in a Lai Haraoba performed by the *lais* because he was still a young bachelor. Thus, Khoriphaba had to look for a bride. In the course of his search for a suitable bride he had to challenge a very powerful mythical character called Loyarakpa. Khoriphaba and Loyarakpa had to compete in polo and wrestling, and after that Khoriphaba could get his bride.

within a few seconds she claims that Khoriphaba has come to join Lai Haraoba. She then delivers oracle. She becomes the medium through whom Khoriphaba says that he will wrestle and play polo with Loyarakpa. At this stage the other *amaibis* veil the upper part of her body with a piece of transparent white cloth (called *innaphi*). In this way, the face of the *amaibi* is slightly hidden under a veil and through a process of depersonalization the shaking and shivering body under the white cloth becomes a character representing Khoriphaba.



Picture 3.7 A scene of *Kanglei thokpa*, the *amaibi* veiled with an *innaphi* impersonating Lord Khoriphaba (Kanglei Lai Haraoba, Imphal 2014).

The depersonalized *amaibi* moves with masculine gestures by way of miming Khoriphaba's wrestling and polo-playing with Loyarakpa. When she proclaims that she will play *sagol kangjei*, the other *amaibis* give her a polo-stick and a ball. Thus, after a series of gestures, vigorous physical movement and production of wild noises, acts and enactments representing the activities of Khoriphaba, the exhausted *amaibi* takes rhythmical steps of dance and through a body language communicates the idea of a victorious hero. One can observe that the act of impersonation in *kanglei thokpa* involves

a journey from the 'self' to the 'other' (deity). The deity is clearly characterized in visual form, and hence be seen as impersonation of an 'other.' The *amaibi* will now look at the distance for his bride and sing a romantic song describing where his beloved has gone and what she must be doing:

You, goddess of hills, my beloved,
The Jewel, whom I can't forget.
On such a day I follow your trails.
I failed to find you...sweet one,
have you gone to another village?
Or, have you gone to fetch fire from your neighbor?
Or, have you gone to wash your hair in the river?
Or, are you combing your beautiful hair in your father's house?
Perhaps you have gone for a *kang*⁵⁷ game.
And seated between two village brothers,
As a graceful presence radiating ... perhaps,
With a cloth wrapped around your shoulder
And with a piece tied around your slender waist,
you are pounding rice.
My friend, I have not seen my beloved for a long time.
Please tell me where she is.

In the meanwhile, the other *amaibis* give her seven short sticks. She throws the sticks on the ground and looks at the one farthest from her. She runs towards the direction indicated by the stick and touches or hooks another *amaibi* with the polo stick. Thus she becomes the chosen bride. This episode is also called *lai nupi thiba* (looking a bride for the *lai*). It must be noted that it was originally enacted as finding of a wife for the *lai* who is usually a *leishabi* (a virgin of marriageable age), chosen from the audience. After public complaints, the Pundit Loishang (Institution of pundits) in its resolution

⁵⁷ It is an indigenous game of Manipur. *Kang* literally means, a round object, hence pushing or throwing it, is called *Kang Shanaba* (playing *kang*). *Kang* is the seed of a creeper, which was the original object of play, which was later substituted by a *kang* made of lac.

adopted on the 5th May 1958 has banned this practice because it disturbs the private life of the chosen lady (Kullachandra 1963: 136). There was a strong taboo that she, being a wife of *lai*, cannot marry in her life and also feared of becoming *amaibi* afterwards. Thus, the Pandit Loishang under the head of Moirangthem Chandra decided that a professional *amaibi* plays the role of the chosen bride. At this point, one can point that there is a room for changes in ritual dramaturgy. From time to time, it also compromises with the people's consensus.



Picture 3.8 A scene of *lai lam thokpa* (Kanglei Lai Haraoba, Imphal 2014).

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* (palanquin) and carried to a selected place away from the main area of performance for a ritual procession. This is called *lai lam thokpa* (outing of the *lai*) which is some kind of an outing or a trip for sight-seeing. Carrying the

dolai the people will go in a long procession resembling the procession of *EEKOUBĀ*, to the selected spot. On this spot, the *amaibas*, *amaibis* and all the people in the procession perform dances in front of the deities, demonstrate their skills in traditional martial arts, wrestle among themselves, shout and sing in rejoice. In some cases, the *laipou* cycle is performed on the spot, but usually the *laipou* cycle is performed at the *laibung* after returning from the outing.

Lairoi

Lairoi is the final ritual performance of Lai Haraoba. On the last day of the whole ritual sequences, the daily items of performance will also be carried out. But on this last day some important sequences like *louyanba*, *ougri*, *hijan hirao*, etc. are added. These sequences are performed after the *laipou* has been successfully completed.

a) Louyanba

Louyanba (hoeing the paddy) is one of the most sophisticated ritual dramas included in the Kanglei Haraoba. It is also commonly known as Tangkhul⁵⁸ *saba* (impersonating Tangkhul) or also called Tangkhul Nurābi. It is indeed an interesting ritual drama enacting the mythical story of the meeting of two mythical lovers Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi. While it is believed that Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi is omnipresent in Lai Haraoba, it is in this episode that Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi get impersonated and assume a visual form. In this ritual drama, the two mythical lovers meet in the guise of Tangkhul Saram Pakhang (or simply called Tangkhul) and Nurābi. In sharp contrast to what Richard Schechner (2013: 190) claims that

⁵⁸ Tangkhul is a tribe (Naga) living in the Indo-Burma border area occupying the Ukhrul district in Manipur, India.

“performing rituals is not ‘acting’,” because “most rituals involve no impersonation”, one can observe specifically that the performance of Tangkhul and Nurābi is purely impersonation of mythical characters and it is ‘acting’.

One must also note that there are actors who are good in the role of Tangkhul *saba* and they are hired especially for this performance on the last day of the Lai Haraoba. The *amaibi* playing the role of Nurābi and the *penakhongba*, playing the role of Tangkhul wear the traditional dress and ornaments of Tangkhul. In the beginning the *amaibi* and the *penakhongba* in the guise of Nurābi and Tangkhul exchange folk songs. The *amaibi* playing the role of Nurābi is generally assisted by the choral songs of other *amaibis*. The exchange of folk songs which are based on riddle, sexual pranks and romantic descriptions of each other’s physical beauties contributes towards an interesting aspect of the dramatic interplay between the two characters.

Then the *amaibis* come out with six other women selected from among the members of the community. Nurābi has a sling-basket (called *sām*) containing a *tumbā* (hollowed hardened shell of gourd which is used for carrying water and local brew) and some cooked rice wrapped in a plantain leaf on her back. The six women, holding poles of reed, with Nurābi, holding a dagger in her right hand, improvise the act of hoeing. This improvised act is accompanied by farming or cultivating song called *loutārol ishei*. The beauty of the song lies in its simplicity of the lyrics and sung in the work rhythm of hoeing the paddy which draws the community to sing altogether. The lyric is as follows:

It’s father’s paddy field, hoe it.
Let’s hoe it.
It’s grandfather’s paddy field, hoe it.

Let's hoe it.
This paddy field brings peace to the community, hoe it.
Let's hoe it.
The paddy field brings growth and prosperity.
Hoe it.
Let's hoe it.

While this song is still sung in Kanglei Haraoba particularly in Imphal, the paradox is that most of the people in Imphal are no more practicing farming. At this point, Tangkhul is seen standing in the northeastern corner of the *laibung*. He carries a bow, arrow and a spear. Tangkhul then enters the area performing a spear dance called *khousābā*. He then mimes hunting by shooting of arrows in all directions. Running around, he sees Nurābi and her company hoeing the paddy field which, according to him belongs to his father. He asks to stop hoeing at once. But Nurābi and her company go on hoeing saying that the paddy field belongs to her father. Then, Tangkhul and Nurābi exchange a fast-paced dialogue with action and situational humour through songs. After some altercation Tangkhul chases Nurābi and her company away from the field. While chasing them, Tangkhul exhibits some action of sexual pranks and passes erotic jokes in a clownish manner provoking thunderous laughter from the audience.

Tangkhul declares that he has come to the valley to meet the Meetei people. Nurābi in a romantic gesture requests him to bring some fine cotton thread and a beautiful finger ring for her. Tangkhul agrees to it and goes away warning the women not to hoe the field. Dancing his way to the valley the Tangkhul meets the Meetei *khunpuba* (village chief) played by an *amaiba*. The *khunpuba* asks the Tangkhul to clean seven channels, repair the roads and open the doors of life and death and make all the dirt wash away towards the south, thereby bringing prosperity to the whole community. Tangkhul agrees to it and mimes all the actions through a dance

accompanied by drum-beating and *pena* music. The *khunpuba* gives him *taret-senja* (money coins) and he happily returns back. On his way back, he visits a market and buys cotton threads and a ring for Nurābi. For a second time, reaching the field he finds Nurābi and her company hoeing again. Soon they get into the old argument about who owns the field. However, a Meetei *lambuba* (Meetei trekker) played again by the *amaiba* arrives on the spot. He brings about an agreement and harmony through negotiation. Thus, the paddy field will be jointly possessed by the Tangkhul and Nurābi, and they start living as man and wife.



Picture 3.9 A scene from *Tangkhul Nurabi* in an action of sexual pranks (Kanglei Lai Haraoba, Imphal 2014).

At this time, Nurābi takes out the cooked rice from the *sam* (slinged basket). Tangkhul and Nurābi eat it together. The Tangkhul drinks *yuu* (the local brew) from the *tumba* and becomes inebriated. In a drunken state, he runs after Nurābi and her friends. He mimes sexual acts. Soon after this, Tangkhul and Nurabi become friendly and start hoeing together. In this way,

using a series of gestures, body movements and miming acts the whole process of Nongpok Ningthou in the guise of Tangkhul looking for a bride, meeting her, wooing and winning of the bride have been enacted with pleasure and effectiveness. The entire enactment evokes the potential of theatre inherent in the ritual performance of *louyanba*, on the last day of Lai Haraoba. After the hoeing, seeds are sown, seedlings are transplanted and the crop is harvested. Then the paddy is offered to the deities, and thus, the ritual episode comes to an end.

b) *Ougri hangel chongba*

One important ritual episode which has been included in the structure of the performances on the last day of Lai Haraoba is the *ougri hangel chongba*. This particular sequence enacts the mythical story of the way in which seven *lainuras* (female deities) growing out of the system of Leimarel protected the newly created earth by Aseeba from being destroyed by his younger brother Haraba (Premchand 2005: 85). Some male and female participants will make a circle and mime the mythical act of protecting the earth. It is believed that this ritual performance is the origin of the collective and communal dance called *thabal chongba* which is performed by the Meetei young men and women annually in the spring season.

c) *the lai nongaba* cycle (return of the *lai* to heaven)

Following the *ougri hangel chongba*, the time has come for the *lais* to return to their place in the heavens. As they came from the waters (at *lai eekoubā*), they must return to water. For this a boat is required. *Uyānrol* (the song for the tree) song is sung. The song describes the felling of the tree from which a boat is made.

Then the next ritual episode called *hijan hirao* is performed by participants of the Lai Haraoba with the *amaiba* and *amaibi*. The participants are the same participants on the first day of *EEKOUBĀ*. The two lines of the procession are formed in the exact position like they were in the beginning of the Haraoba (*EEKOUBĀ*). This ritual item is an enactment of the mythical story of the making of boat, which is vital means of transportation. The *amaiba*, *amaibi* and other participants use gestures, body movements, songs and sounds to depict dramatically the way in which a tree has been felled. A boat is made out of the tree, pulled out of the temple and is rowed with Lainingthou (the divine god) and Lairembi (the divine goddess) as the chief commuters of the boat.

To describe this more graphically, one needs to imagine everyone holding in their hands the bamboo canes which were placed before the shrine. These are held horizontally, the ends touching each other, and represent the sides of the boat for the *lais*. The bamboos are moved in unison, symbolizing the bringing out of the boat from the shrine. The two *laipubas* (bearers of the *lai* during *EEKOUBĀ*), coming out from the shrine; take their places in the boat. During the singing of *UYĀNROL* by *amaiba*, no one should move their feet and hands.

The lyrics of the *UYĀNROL* fall in four main sections. The first and the last are invocations to the *lais*, while the second section expresses the wish of the *lais* to perform the boat race. The long third section of *UYĀNROL* is believed to be part of the Luwang clan tradition, and the place names contained in the myths are associated with the Iwangli (i.e. Luwang) river. It describes in graphically the process of appeasing and chopping down the tree to make the boat for the *lais*. The fourth part is a prayer for the prosperity of the

village and the country. Once the amaiba finishes singing *uyānrol*, the *amaibi* then exclaims, “O you servants of the sovereign god and sovereign goddess, let us row the boat in the courtyard of the gods and in the Kangla for the prosperity of the village and the country.” Then, the bamboos are then held slant-wise as oars and participants mime the rowing of the boat back to heaven.

Finally, the last ritual item is the *nongkarol* (returning to the heavens). People gather around the porch of the temple and the *amaiba* and *amaibi* go inside the temple of which the interior is made dark. The *amaibi* will ring the hand bell, chant a hymn and sing a melodious song called *nongkarol* which is a plea or persuasion for all the presiding deities and other assembled gods and goddess to go to their natural abode.

II

MOIRANG HARAIBA

When we fly to Imphal, just before landing the Bir Tikendrajit International Airport (formerly known as Imphal Tulihal Airport), we see the flight takes a U-turn above a beautiful fresh water lake. This is the largest fresh water lake in Northeast India known as Loktak Lake. This iconic lake is located in the south Manipur valley called Moirang, Bishnupur district, 53 kilometers away from Imphal on the Tiddim road, also known as Airport road (Churachandpur State Highway). Loktak Lake is known for its circular floating swamps called *phumdi*⁵⁹ in local language. Resembling miniature islands, these *phumdis* are found in numerous forms floating on the lake.

⁵⁹ *phumdi* refers to the collection of decomposed heterogeneous masses of vegetation, soils and other organic matters.

With an area of almost 300 square kilometers, Loktak Lake is a lifeline for many people living on the *phumdis* as well as around the lake particularly Moirang.

Today, other than being the source of income for many fishermen who largely depend on the lake, the Loktak Lake also serves as a source for hydropower generation, irrigation and drinking water supply in the region. In the west of Moirang, there is a range of hills known as Thangjing hill. Thangjing Koirel is believed to be the founder and protector of Moirang principality. It is believed that he was a historical king who was later deified and worshipped as the divine progenitor of the Moirangs (Kabui 2003). He was supposed to have descended from the heavens and made the range of hills west of Moirang, the Thangjing hills his abode. The kingdom surrounded by hills on one side and the Loktak Lake on the other is his realm where he presides as the deity.

Earlier, Moirang was an independent principality which has its own kingdom. Moirang was lately subjugated by Ningthouja clan in the 15th century (Arambam 1991: 58). Today, Moirang has been regarded as the 'the cultural centre of the Meeteis' (Imokanta, 2005). The reference of Moirang as the cultural epicentre of the state is not new; one can assume that it originated during the process of consolidation of the Meetei Kingdom. Hence symbols of religious and ritualistic importance are so closely connected to the entire Meetei, in fact so closely connected that it has been chosen as the authentic epicentre of the Meetei culture through a slow, subtle and successful subjugation.

At present, the structure of Moirang Haraoba has many similarities with the Kanglei. This is probably because of the 'centralization of religion'

that has been in place for at least five centuries. However, there are intra-cultural differences that distinguish the Moirang and Kanglei ritual enactments, and it is on the specific differences represented by the structure of the Moirang Haraoba that I would like to focus on in this section. The daily rituals of the Kanglei Haraoba and Moirang Haraoba are almost similar, except that the chants and hymns address various deities in different ways. Like the Kanglei, the Moirang Haraoba can also be divided into three major structural divisions – *lai eekoubā* (invocation of the *lai* from water), *laipou* (main dance sequences) and *lairoi* (the final ceremony). In the case of Moirang Haraoba, the *lai eekoubā* is popularly known as *lai itābā*.

The Moirangs worship Thangjing Koirel as their great grandfather and creator of Moirang as well. Thus, the Moirang Haraoba is also commonly known as Thangjing Haraoba. Koirel Leima is the consort of Thangjing and in the Lai Haraoba she sits on the left side of him. Besides Lord Thangjing, sixteen other deities representing different *sageis* (families) are worshipped which are worshipped in sixteen *leikais* (localities). These *sageis* or *leikais* (localities) deities are considered as nine *laibunghous* (divine gods) and seven *lainuras*⁶⁰ (divine goddesses) which are found in the creation myth. Significantly, Moirang is divided into sixteen *leikais* (localities) in order to worship the nine *laibunghous* and seven *lainuras* which took part in the creation of the earth. This may indicate that the administration of the Moirang kingdom, probably, was derived from the creation myth.

⁶⁰ The nine *laibunghous* are Nongshaba of Leishangthem Leikai, Maharaba of Kumabam Leikai, Soraren of Kongjengbam Leikai, Khanachaoba of Laikhrakpam Leikai, Khoriphaba of Philem Leikai, Thongnangningthou of Thongam Leikai, Leikoi of Mairembam Leikai, Sanamahi of Ahanthem Leikai and Uithongnang of Kiyam Leikai. The seven *lainuras* are Ayangleima Kabokchaibi of Khoiyangbam Leikai, Ayangleima Kabokchaibi (youngest) of Moirangthem Leikai, Pithrai of Khoirom Moirangthem Leikai, Khongdaibi of Khoirom Moirangthem Leikai (the same *leikai* worships two *lainuras*), Loklao Leima of Phairembam Leikai, Waikhu Leima of Thingujam Leikai and Khundinbi of Ahongbam Leikai.

Beyond the Ritual Landscape

In the study of Moirang Haraoba, it is important to note the importance of the physical landscapes of Thangjing Hill and Loktak Lake which are represented as sacred through oral and textual narratives. Soibam Haripriya (2017) has argued that the two sacred sites correspond to notion of the divine body. While the aspect of the divine body vis-à-vis the physical element is significant in imagining the idea of divinity of the king Thangjing Koirel and his body, the physical elements that comprise the landscape - earth, water and so on - are also thought to be elements that comprise the human body and mirror each other (Haripriya 2017).

It is also important to note that what constitute livelihood and sustaining worldview in Moirang depends upon the everyday negotiations that take place between the communities and the landscape comprising of the hill and the lake. Together human beings and nature reshape their existence by rendering and re-rendering the past and the present. In this case, the landscape performs beyond static renderings in sacred rituals, but more as a fluid space where new meanings are made possible. The combination of the hill and the lake as a pair, not only form a spatial centre but also a space where a sense of community is being created and generated. Apart from these landscapes, today the newly developed Moirang Keithel (market) in the town of Moirang has also created and generated a new economy and worldview.

It is also of critical consideration to note that Loktak Lake and Thangjing hill as specificities cease to represent themselves. It can only be understood as manifestation of the sacred, the sanctity of which is reinforced by certain oral and textual traditions (ibid: 43). To look at the connection

between physical landscapes, sacredness, human and divine body one needs to look at the narratives within which the ritual framework of Loktak Lake is created. Water bodies as sacred have been reflected in various mythologies but they are further localized in the imageries of the specific context of the creation myth, as it exists in Meetei cosmology. The chronicles of the Moirang kings, *Moirāng Ningthourol Lambubā* has the following invocation:

Prayer to thee O Thāngching, Lord of the
Universe and Creator of the Moirāng clan.
Thou art the source of all living beings, the
fount of time, the presiding god of heaven,
the defender of the region standing like
an iron rail, the protector of all animals
both domestic and wild, the vanquisher
of enemies and the Lord who is omnipresent
both in the sky and on the earth. Thou canst also
make thine abode in the tender care of a
lotus to remain ever fresh and charming and
issue forth from the azure sky most probably
from inside the transparent moon. As a child
Thou wert ever dauntless, grew up healthy as
a luxuriant oak plant ... I pay obeisance
to Thee and Thine consort, Thāngching Koirel
Leimā, pure as the white cotton and also the
repository of all souls.

(Manihar 1996: 75-6)

The prayer refers to Lord Thangjing as Thangching, a variation of the name (*ching* meaning hill). Thus the invocation collapses the divine king and the hill which is his abode. The invocation also contains an effusion of words that describes the landscape of the region. Lord Thangjing with his abode in the hill is paired with his consort in the sky, Thāngching Koirel Leimā with the sky described as 'pure as white cotton'. Loktak Lake reflects the sky and the hill in its waters and is visually and metaphorically seen as the site of union of the sacred deities. One can emphasize that this figuratively enhances

the idea of the lake reproducing fertility as well as reproducing community. The point is not that the supernatural inscribes meanings on the landscape; rather, the landscape itself inscribes the supernatural and the divine.

Another song of Moirang Haraoba, is the Yakaiba, (*yakaiba* means 'to awake') as the name suggest is a song sung in the early hours of dawn to wake up the deity. Here is the opening lines of the song:

The day breaks in the region of Moirang
When *uthum*, the water cock
Sweetly sings, 'Tum Tum'
In the thick bush by the lake.
And that was the bird
Transformed into by the soul of a woman
Who happened to be an unfortunate stepwife.
Thus the people of Moirang did perceive the awakening of dawn.
And on the side of Senbi (Burma)
The little bird that heralds morning
Is no other than the beautiful parrot
Which was transformed into by a lovely girl
Who used to protect her parent's field from wild birds.

(Manihar 1996: 18)

This beautiful song, rendered to the accompaniment of *pena*, expresses a captivating view of how the day breaks in the region and also alludes to regional legends. The song is marked by simple diction, balanced arrangement of rhythm and tempo. The lake in its beauty is figuratively captured wherein the lake becomes the landscape that connects with the life and legends which has a commonality of meaning for the people whose lives are integrally a part of the very landscape. It should be noted how the neighbouring country Burma (known as Senbi to Moirang) is interspersed with the regional legends. While the song metaphorically alludes to the beautiful parrot on the side of Burma who protect her parent's paddy field, it

also call for the same responsibility of the Moirang people in order to protect their paddy fields for the prosperity of the society.

It is interesting to observe here the previous study of the ritual space. Since Arnold Van Gennep (1960 [1909]) studied the connectedness of spatial or geographical movement with the ritual motif of cultural 'passages,' many other scholars have developed the idea of 'ritual space' in numerous ways. Victor Turner (1975: 69) precisely discussed the creation of 'ritualized space' focusing on the ritual dynamics of demarcating a 'controlled environment.' Further, he also suggest the role of ritualized space in generating the temporal realities of the ritual calendar itself. In this sense, the above song functions beyond the performing space of Lai Haraoba (*laibung*) but even encompass the physical landscape of Moirang. A focus on such ritual act illuminates that there is a critical circularity to the body's interaction with this environment. Such ritual act generates the physical space and in turn physical space is molded by it. By virtue of this circularity, the society keeps on redefining space and time in a complex 'socially instinctive automatism' (Bell 1992: 99) of the body and the cosmos.

The Moirang Epic Ballad: the Love Story of Khamba-Thoibi

Another important aspect of Moirang Haraoba is the celebration of the love legend of Khamba and Thoibi through a popularly known dance called Khamba Thoibi dance and the ballad sung by *penakhongba*. The orature of Khamba-Thoibi is rich with traditional plays like Moirang Parva and Kao Phaba (an episode of the epic) and singing tradition called Moirang Sai, mainly performed by women. The region of Moirang is believed to be the birth place of many a lover, of whom the story of Khamba-Thoibi, divinely ordained, stands out most visibly. The hero Khamba represents the paragon

of great manly strength and Thoibi is projected as feminine beauty. After a long course of unusual travails, the two are at last united, but destined to have only a short life. As it is mostly presented by ballad singers with the accompanying instrument *pena*, the story is still kept alive with the resonance of the diction, strong characterization, description of nature and use of striking similes.

A Manipuri poet Hijam Anganghal (1986) penned the tradition of this ballad of Khamba and Thoibi love story in an epic poetry called *Khamba Thoibi Seireng*, of forty-three cantos having about 36,000 lines in 1986. He acknowledged his debt to *pena* singers specially one named Chungkham Manik. He mentioned that the poem was only reproducing of what they sang (Anganghal 1986: iii-iv). But if it was not his poetic genius, the poem could not have gained magnificent height. The main characters were painted as extraordinarily gifted. The similes which he used are really appropriate to the characters, and they are mostly drawn from natural objects and phenomena.

While the main theme of this epic ballad is the eternal yearning of love and beauty, the song itself is sung in vibrant, yet melancholic rhymes. It is a story-telling of a high order reflecting the rich tradition of Moirang. The days of the epic were those of independent kingdoms existing side by side and in keen rivalry. The principal locale was the Kingdom of Moirang, in and around the exquisite Loktak Lake. As described in the ballad, this lake cradled a distinctive culture of love and beauty – a fertile soil for the growth of this epic ballad. In reality, the oral tradition, finding fulfilment in *Khamba Thoibi Sheireng*, began as the song of Loktak Lake. As the ballad flowered, its horizon embraced the whole of Manipur which emerged after the

amalgamation of all the independent kingdoms. The human concerns of the ballad transcended the bounds of Moirang. After the amalgamation of the Salais, the ballad of Khamba-Thoibi could win national acceptance of Manipur.

Moirang and Khuman were neighbouring kingdoms, cradled and nourished by Loktak Lake. Unable to bear family intrigues, a nobleman from Khuman migrated to Moirang. He married a woman of Moirang and Puremba was born to them. Puremba in his turn rose to be a famous courtier of Moirang, peerless in strength and influence. Once while he was attending the King on a hunting expedition, he saved the King from the attack of seven tigers by catching them all alive. Extremely pleased with his feat, the King gave him in marriage his youngest wife Ngangkhaleima. In fact, before she became one of the wives of the King, Ngangkhaleima was the lady love of Puremba. When the King married her to Puremba she was with child already. Khamnu the elder sister of Khamba and one of the central characters of the epic was thus born. Although born in Puremba's house, she was of the royal blood.

After her, Khamba, the hero of the epic was born of Puremba and Ngangkhaleima. Soon after Khamba was born, both the parents passed away in a tragic manner. Khamba and his elder sister Khamnu were thus left orphans. Although their father was once a mighty nobleman, after his death there were none to look after them. Besides, Khamba being the son of a renowned courtier (a member of the Khuman salai) there were every reason to fear intrigues against his life. Motivated by this fear, the elder sister Khamnu took her younger brother to the shelter of Kabui Salang Maiba, a chieftain of the Kabui tribe, who was a friend to Puremba. It was only when

Khamba was on the threshold of manhood and thus capable of looking after himself that he and his elder sister returned to their parental home at Moirang.

Then, the lyrical love of Khamba and Thoibi unfolded in the epic song immortalized by bards of Manipur. Khamba loves Thoibi, the princess of Moirang and daughter of Chingkhuba, younger brother to the King of Moirang. His love is like a fire burning within a snow-capped mountain, subdued but eternal and firm. Thoibi is the embodiment of beauty. Of her peerless beauty, the bards used to sing; "Beauty herself is no match of Thoibi in beauty." Her love for Khamba is an all consuming passion that illumines and gives life to everything coming in its way. Standing in between the two lovers as a counterforce was Nongban, a nobleman of Moirang. His yearning for Thoibi was boundless – an eternal yearning for love and beauty. The epic narrative centres on the three characters; the forces and counterforces they represent.

The texture of the ballad is full of subtle and tantalizing details; the canvas is wide, embracing nature and forms of life in their variegated moods. The epic song celebrates love, beauty, truth and good – expressing a rich way of life, the people, their culture, customs, religion, aesthetics and other finer sensibilities. The intoxication of first love and its coronation in avowal of eternal fidelity to mutual love are depicted in the episodes of *Shan Shenba* (Tending the Cows), *Kang Sannaba* (the Game of Kang), *Een Chingba* (netting the fish). The physical prowess of the epic hero, Khamba is exhibited in *Kangjei* (the Game of Foot-polo). Celebration of love and beauty as constituting the substance of religion is elegantly visualized in *Lei-Langba* (Flower Offering) and *Leirol* (Song of Flowers) cantos of the epic. Khamba's

strength and courage are once again demonstrated when he overpowers and tames the great bull in the Canto on the Kao (the Bull). The penultimate test of the epic hero's love for Thoibi, however, is given in *Shamu Khongyetpa* canto. Chingkhuba wished that Thoibi marry Nongban, in stark opposition to her love for Khamba. When she firmly refused, Chingkhuba and Nongban conspired to remove Thoibi's love, Khamba, out of the way.

On a dark night, Nongban and his men waylaid Khamba, beat him almost to death. He was brought before Chingkhuba waiting with the royal elephant at an appointed place of Moirang Khori Keithel. Hijam Angahal, the poet laureate of Manipur who committed the epic to writing for the first time, describes the encounter thus. Khamba was about to be tied to the elephant and dragged along the rugged road strewn with sharp pebbles till death. Chingkhuba creates this moment with vivid dramatic intensity:

My daughter, I never promised you
Your vain words, I will not relish
An obstacle you are in my daughter's way.
Disown now, don't wait for her words.
"This day I forsake - She is yours now"
Say thee, surrender her to Nongban
Else my sword will do the rest.
Now is time to make amends, Khamba.

(Lokendrajit 2017: 288)

The irony is that Khamba was unmoved. Chingkhuba's words did not deterred him rather it made him blissfully oblivious of the pains he had suffered. Khamba replied:

Let this body of mine called Khamba
Be transformed into fiery embers
Let my elder sister Khamnu sow
Seeds of Thoiding on my lonely grave.
And when seeds grow into more seeds

Let your noble daughter collect all
To press the oil lending fragrance to her hair
To her alone I owe my life
What I owe I give up for her only.
Fulfill your wish, ere the dawn breaks.

(Lokendrajit 2017: 288)

In the finest warrior tradition, it is this momentous decision at the threshold of life and death which makes Khamba, who takes destiny in hand, a hero to the mind of the people of Manipur. Poised before life and death, a hero shines like a star beyond the grave which distinguishes the heroic life from the ordinary ones. The ballad portrayed Khamba loves Thoibi the way an epic hero does. Khamba's character presents paradoxes for us. One as having less of internally generated movement and energy, and the other as something that seeks attention to the epic to grow. The elements that go into the making of the epic heroes are also present particularly in the reader as well as in all human subjects. The craft that creates the ordinary men with noble elements also fashions the heroes. In their destined suffering and conflict, human destiny is shaped. Man is given a rightful place in the universe. Hence, our love for the song of epic heroes. And the tradition ever grows.

In the final analysis, Khamba the hero suffered, survived and proved himself an epic hero. Thoibi in her love for Khamba defied her father and chose exile to Kabaw valley rather than marry Nongban. In the grand finale, we are given a trial through an encounter with the tiger. Khamba and Nongban are to face the wild ferocious tiger at large in the forest all alone. Whosoever wins, will have the glorious honour to Thoibi's love and beauty. Nongban was given the first privilege of encounter with the tiger. He gave a heroic fight ending this earthly life in the encounter. So great was his

yearning for Thoibi, the embodiment of love and beauty that it continues beyond the grave. The bards used to sing that Nongban's yearning transmigrates into the Immortal Bird Pithadoi singing "Thadoi, 'Thadoi." Khamba could kill the tiger and thus takes place the classic union of the hero and the beauty.

The Moirang Ritual Processions

It is important to highlight that what makes Moirang Haraoba starkly different from other Lai Haraoba is that, unlike Kanglei, there are three kinds of Moirang Thangjing Haraoba in accordance to the three kinds of observance of the ritual processions (or rather excursions) of *lai lamthokpa* (outing of the *lais*). These are Khongchingba, Lamthokpa and Yumphamba. While the one day *lai lamthokpa* (outing of the *lais*) in Kanglei Haraoba is observed every year, Moirang Haraoba observe these three kinds of Haraoba are performed every year in rotation. However, the daily rituals are almost similar with the Kanglei Haraoba.

The act of walking is an integral part of the Lai Haraoba rituals, whose primary purposes is to carry us to a timeless place. In other words, walking provides the ground as it were for gathering and communion. In the dramaturgy of Moirang Lai Haraoba, we observe that the point of walking systematically is to encounter people walking towards a common destination, or at least partially shared. The elements of rhythm and repetition make the act of walking a ritual. In such religious practices of circumambulations around the landscape of Moirang involving certain rites, the movement of walking seems to be created as a means to invoke a collective.

a) *Khongchingba*

In the year of the observance of *Khongchingba*, the palanquins of the sixteen *sageis* with the palanquin of the principal *lai*, *Thangjing*, are all tied with a long rope one after another in sequence. The palanquin of *Sanamahi* leads the sequence, followed by the palanquins of seven *lainura*, eight *laibungthous* and *Nongsaba*. The *Thangjing lai* palanquin is in the last in sequence guarding all the *sagei* deities. In front of each palanquin the people of concerned *sagei* stand in line, bearing all the required ritual items. They sing and dance playing *langde pung-sel* (traditional drums and percussions) during the procession. While the ceremonial procession is taken out with grand pompous manner, *amaiba* sings the *ougr⁶¹* (ingathering/unison) song and people respond in choral unison. A translation of the song is as follows:

Gather in the rope.
Gather in towards the centre, the navel of the earth.
Gather in the day, the noon-day, and the setting of the sun.
Gather in *Thangjing*, the shining one.
Gather in unison.
Gather in the dry land.
Gather all the waters.
Gather in the last born, the golden one.
Gather in the days, the months and the seasons!
Gather in the *lais*,
Gather in, *Nongshaba*, with the maidens of the east
Gather in the navel of the earth and the banks of the rivers.
Gather in, the daughters of the king.
Gather in, the descendants of the fathers, and those yet to be born.
Gather in, all mothers, all who bring up children.
Gather in, all the females of the elder brother's house.
Gather in females of the day, of the earth.
All who live, gather them all in!
Gather in all that is good, beginning from *Kangla*, the navel of the earth!
Gather in the changing of the days and the changing of the shadows.

⁶¹ A lyric sung for the prosperity of the land and the village. It implies the "gathering in" of the cosmos and all within it. The term '*ougr⁶¹*' is of uncertain origin, but is most likely a corruption (or earlier form) of *ouri*, a rope.

Gather in the months and the seasons in their scattered palanquins
Gather in all the people, those who are at the sides, the front and rear.
Gather in the tall mountains and hills.
Gather in sun and moon, let them return again!
Gather in the *hayi* age!
Gather in those who have been since the beginning of the earth!
Gather in all those who have been since the beginning of the creation!
Gather in the youngest and the most stubborn!
Gather in the months which have yet to be,
The months of sowing beans, the months of tilling the soil!
Gather in the rope and the sword!
Gather up the strand of both ends of the rope,
Gather them in circle, coil it that it does not open!
Gather! Gather! Coil! Coil!

(translation mine)



Picture 3.10 A scene of *khongchingba* ritual procession (Moirang Lai Haraoba, 2017).

The procession proceeds towards the Moirang main market. In a sense, the ritual processions function as symbolic means of re-shaping and re-defining the urban space, the street. Some participants sing and dance while proceeding to the designated destination. Once the possession reaches the designated space, the palanquins are brought down and arranged in a semi-

circle. Then the *amaibi* dances the *laihou jagoi* which marks the beginning of the offerings of dances (*jagoi katpa*)⁶² to the deities. Then the *phamnaibas* (the heads of *sageis*) performs *phamdou ningthou jagoi*, followed by the dances of the *phamnaibis* (wives of the *phamnaibas*). Then the *laipou* sequence as described earlier in the Kanglei Haraoba is performed. After completing the complete daily rituals at the designated space, the procession returns to the shrine. While returning to the shrine, the *amaiba* will sing the *chingu khumkumlon* (the song of the origin of Moirang) and *mingkheiol* (the song of praising the heroes of Moirang) and the *amaibi* dances to the accompaniment of the pompous music and song. Once they reach the *laibung* (courtyard of Thangjing), the procession circumambulates the *laibung* three times.

In such religious processions, it is of critical consideration to note that at least three distinct moments of time coincide - the past, when the participants devote their worship to the ancestral *lai*; the present—the current procession; and a larger timelessness which is evoked in the act of the procession returning to the *laibung* (the premise of *lai*). The shared destination is always there perhaps because it determines the trajectory of the procession itself. Ritual processions can be regarded as rhythmic collaborations that involve the merging of people, deities, time and space, through a specific trajectory of movement. Whether this involves a rite of passage, or whether its character is celebratory, artistic or devotional, to me the ritual processions in Lai Haraoba become an allegorical journey. In this journey, the momentum of each step becomes more than just a step but a participatory element in a dynamic communion, where the self gets dissolved in a gradual progression of collective identity.

⁶² It is interesting to note that in Moirang tradition as well as Meetei as a whole, dance itself is a kind of flowering. Offering dance to God is flower offering.



Picture 3.11 Young ladies holding the rope during the *khongchingba* ritual procession (Moirang Lai Haraoba, 2017).

b) *Lamthokpa*

In the consecutive year of *Khongchingba*, the ritual procession called *Lamthokpa* (literally means 'going out') is performed. It is observed on an auspicious day, two or three days before the *lairoi* (the final ceremony). Like in *Khongchingba*, all the seventeen palanquins are arranged in sequence. However, in *Lamthokpa* the palanquins are not tied with rope. Unlike in *Khongchingba*, the *ougri* song is not sung in the ceremonial procession. Other ritual procedures remain the same.



Picture 3.12 *Lamthokpa* ritual procession (Moirang Lai Haraoba, 2016).

c) *Yumphamba*

Yumphamba (literally *yum* means house and *phamba* means sitting) is observed in the consecutive year of *Lamthokpa*. In the year of *Yumphamba*, there is no *lai lamthokpa* (outing of *lais*), even as all the ritual ceremonies are conducted in the *laibung*.

As mentioned earlier, the daily rituals of the *Kanglei Haraoba* and *Moirang Haraoba* are almost similar, except that the chants and hymns address various deities in different ways. Like the *Kanglei Haraoba*, it can also be divided into three major structural divisions – *lai eekoubā* (invocation of the *lai* from water), *laipou* (main dance sequences) and *lairoi* (the final ceremony). It is the three forms of ritual procession that makes *Moirang Haraoba* a distinctive one. The next section will deal with the *Chakpa Haraoba* of *Phāyeng* village.

III

CHAKPA HARAOPA

Chakpa Phāyeng village is one of the Chakpa villages, 15 km away from Imphal in the western side of the state. Most of the people in the village depend primarily on agriculture. It is believed that Phouoibi (the rice goddess) with six of her companions spend a night (*phairamba*) at Phāyeng and hence the name. The Lai Haraoba space occupies a small corner of the village in a foothill, quite secluded from the village. Three/four months before the Lai Haraoba, an auspicious day is chosen during the lunar month of Phairen (Feb-March). In earlier times, the Lai Haraoba was held during the month of Mera (October). Once the days of the Lai Haraoba are decided, the village Nambor (messenger) runs through the village informing the Khullakpa (village chief), Luplakpa, Phamnaiba (nobles), Lai Manga Saba⁶³ (the five honored elders) as well as the general public about the Haraoba. From a nearby forest, enough firewood which would last for 13-14 days of the celebration is collected.

The main deities celebrated for the Lai Haraoba at the village are Koubru and his consort Kounu; and their son Loyalakpa and his consort Nungthen Leima. Other deities includes Nongthou Soraren (the Sky father), Nongpok Ningthou - Panthoibi, Ima Leimaren and Keithel Lairembi. The spaces for all the deities are designated in the premise of the Lai Haraoba courtyard. A separate shrine for Ima Lairembi is constructed to the north of the main shrine which is dominated by the presence of Lord Koubru and Loyalakpa with their consorts. In the centre of the courtyard, a mound of

⁶³ Five eldest males above 60 years is honored, elevating them to the position of *lai* and they are called *lai manga saba* (five *lai* impersonators).

earth is prepared for Nongthou Soraren. A big long bamboo decorated with white cloth on the top of the bamboo is installed on the mound. At all these places offerings of parched rice, flowers and fruits are made.

For Nongpok Ningthou - Panthoibi, a sacred space is designated near a banyan tree to the east of the main shrine. Every day during the Haraoba, the community offers fruits (including a hand of bananas which has an odd-number of fingers), parched rice, other fruits and a white hen to Nongpok Ningthou - Panthoibi. The blood of the white hen is offered as a sacrifice; the meat is cooked and lunch is offered every day during the Haraoba to the five eldest males of the village. The meat of a white hen is cooked especially for them every day with an ample amount of fruits and salads. Interestingly, they are also called five *lai* or *lai saba* (imitating *lai*/impersonators of *lai*).

Here, the word *saba* (imitating/impersonator) is significant in the sense that it expressed the concept of play in language. They are elevated to the status of *lai*. In a sense, they are the living *lai* in the village. This brings into question the meaning of *lai*. I would argue that the translation of *lai* into 'god' is problematic. It would be more appropriate to translate it as 'deity' since the pre-Hindu Meetei predominantly worshipped ancestors, domestic deities (*yumjao lai*), guardian deities connected with particular places or areas (*maikei lai*).

Preliminaries

Fifteen days before the celebration begins, paddy is taken out from the community's common granary kept at the Khullakpa's house in two newly-made baskets carefully covered. It is then offered by the Khullakpa, Luplakpa, Phamnaiba, Phamnaibi, Lai Manga Saba, Laigi Loinabi and Phuchru at the shrine (*laimaang*) and the village *amaiba* prays to Koubru,

Kounu, Loyalakpa and Nungthenleima to make the grains of rice sprout. After the offering is made, the grains are brought back to the Khullakpa's house and soaked in water for three days. It is then brought to the *laimaang* and kept separately for Koubru and Loyalakpa. No mixing or sharing is allowed.

One day before the actual festival of Chakpa Phāyeng Haraoba begins, the villagers come to the *laibung* (the premise of the *lai*) for the arrangement of the Haraoba. While it is assumed that the Lai Haraoba starts the next day once the *lai eekoubā* (invoking the spirit) is done, I feel that the arrangement of the Haraoba one day before is also important in the sense that it is as much ceremonious as the other days of the Haraoba. For the reason that on this day songs are sung with the accompaniment of musical instruments, the *amaibi* go into trance, the sacred and profane are well demarcated, and spaces are sanctified. All these elements demonstrate the ritual dimensions of the Haraoba have already activated. More, the presence of *lai* is palpable as reflected in their activities even before *lai eekoubā* is enacted. Specifically, I would emphasize that these preliminaries differentiates Chakpa Haraoba from the other Haraobas.

In the Chakpa Phāyeng Haraoba, people of different ages have their own respective duties. The distribution of work is well stratified among the villagers according to their age. The elderly men who are above 60 years but younger than the five *lai* chosen to be honored are categorized as *phuchru*. They prepare *paya* (bamboo canes), *polang* (bamboo baskets), bamboo mats and bamboo replicas of human skeleton forms which are used as icons of *lai*. The *phamnaibis* (village female elders), wives of *phuchrus*, wash the clothes of the deities. The women of the village prepare *yuu* (rice brew) for the *lai*

which will be served to the community during the Lai Haraoba lasting 11 days.



Picture 3.13 An elderly man (*phuchru*) making bamboo basket. (Chakpa Phāyeng Haraoba, 2016).

Two drummers beat traditional drums called *langde pung*, while two men play the *sen* (a kind of cymbal) and four *penakhongba* play the *pena*. They are surrounded by men, women and children in the courtyard where the village women prepares the sprouted unhusked rice (soaked fifteen days before) and other ingredients for the preparation of *yuu*. Four wooden mortars and four *phouras*⁶⁴ (two each for Koubru-Kounu and two each for Loyalakpa-Nungthen Leima) are placed in parallel. On each mortar, two women, each holding a long wooden pestles on their hand, pound the unhusked rice almost in rhythmic with the beat of the *langde pung*.

⁶⁴ A huge round basket



Picture 3.14 The musicians (Chakpa Phāyeng Haraoba, 2016).

While the women start pounding the unhusked rice, the *phousu* song (song of pounding unhusked rice) of the *amaibi* with *sarik* (bell) in their hand energizes the space. A translation of the song is as follows:

The father-son duo of Wanglen (Time) beat the drum
 Bless with ten times paddy rice!
 The rhythm shall bless ten times [the production of] paddy rice, *hei ha hei*.

Broad faced wooden mortar, for putting the goddess rice.
 The pointed wooden pestle with slim waist *hei ha hei*
 We shall winnow together with black *yanggok*⁶⁵
 Sifting the grain *hei ha hei*
 You are the *hao*⁶⁶ when residing in hills.
 You are the *lai* when residing in valley.

Your back slightly hunch,
 With flowers on your ears,
*Kaidoi*⁶⁷ on your wrist,

⁶⁵ Round winnowing basket made of bamboo canes

⁶⁶ Hill tribes were commonly known as *hao*. Today they are classified as Naga and Kuki. Now the term *hao* has become derogatory.

Black clothes on your head,
 The waist tied properly.
 With the clothes of *lai*;
*Haosam*⁶⁸ on the back, *hei ha hei*.
 She is Naphou⁶⁹ Chanu, daughter of Songbu
 The damsel shall plant *chanan - chayin*⁷⁰ on the other side of the hill
 On one hill, *phouren-phouchao*⁷¹ shall be sown
 On another hill, *laphu-latang*⁷² shall be sown, *hei ha hei*.

(translation mine)

While this *phousu* song is sung and women pounding the rice, one of the *amaibi* dances in a wild manner and fall into trance, during which state she utters unintelligible sounds. She then pronounce oracle. She is followed by other *amaibi* who also falls into trance and pronounces oracle. Whenever an *amaibi* starts pronouncing an oracle, the women stop pounding rice and the musicians stop playing their respective musical instruments except for an *amaibi* who keeps playing the *sarik*, all of them listening attentively. These oracles are mainly addressed to the village. One oracle pronounces that the younger generation is not concerned with the village deities. The oracle says, "Even though I shall come and rejoice with you, I am not pleased that young generation has not come out to participate." The villagers respond, "Forgive us. What shall we offer you to deliver us from evil?" The oracle demands the village to offer a white hen on the third day of the Haraoba for the prosperity of the village and to please the deities.

⁶⁷ This is probably a kind of bangles used in early days.

⁶⁸ A basket carried on the back for carrying seeds, rice, vegetables, woods etc. on the hills.

⁶⁹ The word 'Naphou' could mean "daughter of rice" [na = son/daughter; phou = unhusked rice]

⁷⁰ These words are archaic words. No one knows the exact meanings of these words. As the village amaiba Angom Hera Chakpa explained to me that it could refer to spices like garlic (*chanam*).

⁷¹ Varieties of rice seeds

⁷² Varieties of banana plants.



Picture 3.15 Village women pounding the unhusked rice and the *amaibis* with the bells on their hands sings the *phousu* song (Chakpa Phāyeng Haraoba, 2016).

In a shed near the shrine, two pots on two hearths lie side by side – one for the Lord Koubru and the other for Loyalakpa are arranged for cooking *yuu*. Two young girls among the few *arangbi* (female arrangers/volunteers) are given responsibility to cook the *yuu*. The older girl prepares the brew assigned for the father Koubru and the younger one cooks the brew assigned for Koubru’s son Loyalakpa. In the process of cooking the *yuu*, the two girls should place the firewood simultaneously in a rigorous manner following specific codes. The girls are prohibited to place the firewood by themselves. They have to work together and the firewood should not be touched by their feet. The girls are not even supposed to fart during the cooking process. If one happens to fart, she should be sanctified by sprinkling water with *tai ren*⁷³ leaves by the *amaiba*. The myth is that if one farts or touches the

⁷³ A plant of the *cedrela toona* genus which is used for purification in Meetei rites and rituals. A bunch of *tai ren* leaves is kept in a mud pot with water near the shrine. The sprinkling of water with

firewood by their feet and one does not sanctify oneself, then the pot in which the brew is being cooked will never boil. The villagers affirm this belief with utmost faith. Even if they claim that a pot can never boil for hours when a girl farts during the process and doesn't disclose it, I found that they could not provide the exact years or name of any person who have experienced this event. All they could say was, "it happens." While preparing the *yuu*, the *yuu ota isei* (song of stirring *yuu*) is sung with the accompaniment of *pena*, *langde pung*, *sen* and *sarik* like while singing the *phousu isei* above. The song is:

Stir till the surface of the pitcher of *pukyuu*.⁷⁴
Fire the firewood.
Bless with the best brew.
The father-son duo of Wanglen (Time) beat the drum
Stir the *pukyuu* well.
The pitcher helps to form *paphal*⁷⁵
The spoon shall forcefully stir well.
*Yangli*⁷⁶ shall be well-grinded.
*Hangli*⁷⁷ shall be seasoned.
You are the *hao* when residing in hills.
You are the *lai* when residing in valley.

(translation mine)

While the *yuu* is being brewed in a shed near the shrine, a pit is dug near the shed in which firewood is kept burning until the last day of the Haraoba. Throughout the dramaturgical ritual event of the Lai Haraoba, one will witness the local brew *yuu* as an important prop. The *yuu* is kept stored

these *tai ren* leaves is considered to purify the people and objects. It is even sprinkled on the *amaibas* and *amaibis* to restore them to a state of normalcy after he/she goes into trance.

⁷⁴ The sediment settles below while cooking the brew (*yuu*) is called *pukyuu*.

⁷⁵ Here, *paphal* is metaphor of completion or complete circle.

⁷⁶ A tree bark used as an ingredient for making *yuu*.

⁷⁷ A kind of malt; a cereal grain that is kiln-dried after having been germinated by soaking in water; used especially in brewing and distilling.

in a clean space of the *loishang*⁷⁸. Some young men starts staying in the *laibung* (the premise of *lai*) as volunteers a day before the actual festival begins to look after the properties arranged for the Haraoba.



Picture 3.16 Two young girls cooking *yuu* (the rice brew) (Chakpa Phäyeng Haraoba, 2016).

The Next Day: *Lai* Dress Up

The next morning is supposed to be the first day of the Haraoba. In the morning I see people moving around, making arrangements for the start of festival. Most of the arrangements are done by males who are between 25-49 years old. They are called *thoumi* (functionaries) and *arangba* (arrangers). In the afternoon around 2:00 pm, *lai gi saktam saba* (making the image of *lai*) and *lai phi shetpa* (dressing of *lai*) take place. The basket skeletons of the *lai* which

⁷⁸ *Loishang* means institution. In the southwest gate of the *laibung* (the premise of *lai*), a house is built in which a big *khul pungjao* (village drum) is hung. It also serves as a dormitory for males and also a place to keep musical instruments and other important properties.

were made the previous day and the clothes of the *lai* are brought out in front of the shrine and kept on a bamboo mat (which is also used as a gate to close the shrine).



Picture 3.17 Two basket skeletons of the *lais* (Chakpa Phäyeng Haraoba, 2016).

The *phuchru* (male above 60 years) and *phamnaibis* (wives of *phuchru* or female of this age) come together in the process of making the *lai*. Among them, the more elderly people dress the father Koubru and his consort, while the younger ones dress the son Loyalakpa and his consort. Males make the male deities and females the female deities. The dresses and ornaments are offerings from the villagers. The clothes and ornaments for Koubru-Kounu and Loyalakpa-Nungthen are kept separately in two baskets.

First some clothes are stuffed into the respective basket skeletons before dressing the idols. Once the basket is filled with clothes, it is knitted carefully so that the idols can stand properly. Then, the dressing of the *lai*

begins. It is interesting to note that the process of making the *lai* involves a multifarious play instinct as indicated from the expressions and conversations of the people involved in the task, particularly the females. Among the females, there is a competition within the group who are making Kounu (Lord Koubru's consort) and her daughter-in-law Nungthen Leima. This reminds one of childhood days when kids play with the making of *laidibi* (dolls).



Picture 3.18 Making the *lais*; stuffing clothes to the basket skeletons of the *lais* (Chakpa Phäyeng Haraoba, 2016).

While in case of the Kanglei and Moirang Haraoba, one witnesses the fixed brass metal idol in the shrine, the making and dressing of the *lai* in case of the Chakpa is exceptional. Not only *lai*, but the necessities like the bamboo baskets and other materials are also made by the villagers. While in the case of Kanglei and Moirang, everything is bought from the market, today in Imphal and other urban areas one hardly sees the playing of *laidibi* (dolls) also. In this sense, Chakpa is different in so far as it reflects how different

modes of activity reflect the history of a specific community with its specific mode of expressivity and life.



Picture 3.19 The well-dressed *lais* - Koubru-Kounu and Loyalakpa-Nunghen (Chakpa Phäyeng Haraoba, 2016).

After the dressing of the deities is over, they are taken inside the shrine and placed on their respective seats. It is captivating to observe that once the *lai* is placed in the shrine, the community starts bowing and worshipping them. Money (mainly 10 rupees note) is offered. The images (dolls) suddenly and seamlessly become *lai*. In a sense, it is the community which makes them *lai*. All of a sudden, the space is transformed into a sacred space by the community.

Lai Eekoubā

Later in the evening, the ritual of *lai eekoubā* (calling up the spirit) is performed. Certain differences can be noticed in this regard between Kanglei Haraoba and Chakpa Haraoba. For instance, in the case of the Kanglei, the *lai*

eekoubā is performed at a single site. In the Chakpa Haraoba at Phāyeng, *lai eekoubā* is performed simultaneously at two sites – one for Koubru at a nearby pond behind the shrine and another for Loyalakpa from a river in the east of the shrine. For Lord Koubru, Khullakpa (village chief) is the *lai*-bearer. The *amaiba* performs the rituals of *lai eekoubā*. All the ritual items are carried by males only. While for Loyalakpa, Luplakpa (the village manager) is the *lai*-bearer. The principal *amaibi* performs the *lai eekoubā* rituals. All the ritual items are carried by *arangbi* (arrangers who are young unmarried girls) only. While going for *eekoubā* and coming back the *lai eekoubā* song is sung in chorus by the *arangbi*.

Ha O' Lord he
 The midnight husband crosses the mountain
 Walking elegantly like an elephant
Ha aa thumping...

The stream of the goddess *ee ee*
 From the golden earth
Ha aa come up...
 We shall clap...*he*
 Striking the wrists.
Ha aa come up...

The youth have no life...*he*
 Shall play the pena *luru luru*
 Vibrating *pena-samei*⁷⁹
Ha aa coming up...
 The youth have no life...*he*
 Ringing the *sarik...khing khing*
 The sound rhythm of Wanglen (Time)
Ha aa coming up...
 The goddess stream *ee ee*.

Tampha⁸⁰ from underneath the water
 Shining, *Ha aa* coming up...
 Daughter Tampha Nongleima *he*

⁷⁹ *Samei* is the string made of horse hairs.

⁸⁰ Tampha is another name for Panthoipi.

The earth declares war.
Ha aa came.
The youth have no life...*he*
Holding the *hiri tongga*⁸¹
Ha aa coming up...

The Northern Sun Nongleima – *he*
From the confluence of nine layers⁸²
Ha aa kindly come down...*de*
The youth have no life...*he*
Kindly arrange guards...*he*
Give us the path of knowledge.
Ha aa coming...*de*

Ha prays the Lord Smoke...*he*
By burning the *khoiju*⁸³,
Ha aa coming up...*de*
The youth have no life...*he*
Holding the *huidri nungcheng*⁸⁴
Ha aa coming up...*de*

Ha O' Lord he
Making the shrine this season
Ha aa it's a revelation...*de*
Tied *paya*⁸⁵ correctly
Ha aa come and see...*oo*

Ha O' Lord he
On the *chamlou laa*⁸⁶
Placing the round plantain leaf
Ha aa plantain leaf...*de*
Made *kabok latang*.⁸⁷

⁸¹ A kind of thread which is also considered a 'living thread' used in the *lai eekoubā* process of calling up the spirit from the water body.

⁸² Nine layers probably refer to the layers of Universe as mentioned in the Creation myth (*Leithak Leikharol*)

⁸³ Dried leaves of an herb called *khoiju-leikham* or *khoiju-lamkha* (biological name is *inula*) which is specially used by Meetei for keeping the evil spirits away from a house or community.

⁸⁴ *Huidri nungcheng/nachi* is a stick used for measuring land in early days.

⁸⁵ Bamboo fibre/straw used for baskets, hats and mats. It is also used to tie bamboo pillars and beam in the construction of huts.

⁸⁶ Plantain/Banana leaf (*chamlou* is archaic word for banana leaf while *laa* is the modern word). Often in songs, performances and rituals, the combination of archaic and modern words of the same thing is commonly used. For instance, *lajja ising* (*lajja* is archaic and *ising* modern for water), *lemlei nga* (*lemlei* is archaic and *nga* modern for fish), etc.

Ha aa descend...de

Ha O' Lord he
Sit in the courtyard...*he*
No one plays in the premise.
Ha aa let's play...de

Ha O' Lord Mistress he
No one plays with the golden stone in the verandah.
In the premise, *ha aa* come, let's play...*de*

(translation mine)



Picture 3.20 Returning from the *eekoubā* (Chakpa Phāyeng Haraoba, 2016).

The ritual procession of *eekoubā* is received with ritual fire and the burning of dried *khoiju-leikham* leaves. The Koubru group reaches the shrine before the Loyalakpa group since the site of *eekoubā* for Koubru is nearer. While waiting for the Loyalakpa group, the village elder group called *phuchru* continue to sing in *Chakparol* (the language of Chakpa). This song is unintelligible to me

⁸⁷ *Kabok* (puffed rice), *latang* (a plate/bowl made of banana leaf). *Kabok latang* is a puffed-rice well-served in a plate/bowl made of banana leaf.

since it is not in the contemporary Meeteilon, but an archaic language of Chakpa. Once both the groups reach the *laibung* (the *lai* premise), one man from the *arangba* (arrangers) pours water on the feet of *lai*-bearers (Khullakpa and Luplakpa) and this is known as *lai khong hamba* (washing the feet of *lai*). Then, the infusing of the divine spirit in the images of the deities is carried out by the *amaibis*. Then the *lai* are offered flowers.

Around 11:00 pm, the *lai thong hangba* (opening the gate of the *lai*) ritual for the commencement of the festival is performed on the western corner of the shrine by sacrificing a black dog. An elaborate ritual of offering rice, duck egg, *langthrei* buds, white *yu* (prepared the previous day) and flowers to Koubru, Kounu, the nine *laibungthous* (gods) and seven *lainuras* (goddesses) is performed by the *amaiba*. A dog is brought in and hit on the head by a *thoumi* (a male functionary). *Thoumis* then prepare the dog meat and cook it. Rice is cooked.

In the meanwhile, after the *lai thong hangba*, a long bamboo is installed in the site of the Nongthou Soraren (the Sky father) in the centre of the courtyard where a ritual is made with the offerings of banana bud, flowers and *yu*; a pig is also sacrificed. In addition, a white duck and a white pigeon are also sacrificed. Yet another pig is sacrificed for Lord Koubru. Later, around 2:00 am, the villagers who are staying in the *laibung* (the *lai* premise) have a feast with the cooked dog meat. The sitting arrangement is organized in such a manner that the Khullakpa and elders lead according to seniority. A young villager cannot presume to disturb the prescribed order.

The next morning, while some villagers are busy preparing the pork meat of the two pigs sacrificed the previous night, some of them prepared rice and other dishes for a community feast in the afternoon.

Lai Lam Thokpa (Outing of the Deities)

In Phāyeng Haraoba, there are three kinds of ritual processions of *lai lam thokpa*, namely, *lai thenjao kaba* (outing to the grove for collecting firewood), *lou kumba* (outing to the paddy field) and *lai keithel kaba* (outing to the market). Almost the ritual items and procedure of these are the same; each of these is observed in different sites and different days. Unlike Kanglei Haraoba and Moirang Haraoba, the ritual processions of Phāyeng Haraoba do not pass through the village or any urban space but around the foothill, near the *laibung* (the premise of the *lai*), quite secluded from the village. In a sense, the ritual processions in Chakpa Phāyeng Haraoba are more of a ‘pure ritual,’ unlike the ritual processions of Kanglei Haraoba and Moirang Haraoba which act as a symbolic means of re-shaping and re-defining the urban space.

a. *Lai Thenjao Kaba (Outing to the Grove for Collecting Firewood)*

In the afternoon after the feast with pork meat mentioned above, the first outing of *lai* known as *lai thenjao kaba* is observed. The site of *lai thenjao kaba* is on a foothill in a grove on the western side of the shrine. The space has already been cleaned before the *Lai Haraoba* starts. Two palanquins, one for Lord Koubru and another for Loyalakpa, are arranged. During the ritual procession, the villagers (mainly the *arangbi*, the female arrangers) sing the *thenjao kaba isei* (the song of *thenjao kaba*). Here is the translation of the song:

O' the eldest son of Koubren
The sentinel of God in the hills
Let us converse in golden words
Ha! Be there on the spot
Let us play together.
O' Lord Koubru Asuppa,
Among the range of hills and mountains

The pinnacle Lord.
We shall meet on time.
The guardian god, be there on the spot.
O' Goddess Tampha⁸⁸
In the place near the foothill
Let us play together.
The flowering by the sons of peasants
Is never abundant.
Is the firewood scarce?
Is never abundant, not enough.
How does Lord Soraren (the Sky God) dance?
Adorned and fenced with white clothes,
He dances.
Leishangba, the son of Soraren,
Brave and courageous,
He also dances with Soraren.

(translation mine)



Picture 3.21 Arriving at the spot of *thenjao* (Chakpa Phäyeng Haraoba, 2016).

⁸⁸ Tampha is addressed to Goddess Panthoipi

Arriving at the spot, a spear dance (*khou saba*) is performed by the *arangba* before the palanquins are taken down. Then one *amaiba* with a group of elders (*phuchrus*) perform *saroi khangba* (warding off the evil spirits) ritual by offering of fruits and flowers in all the four directions. The Khullakpa and Luplakpa perform the ritual offering the flowers and fruits for Lord Koubru and Loyalakpa, respectively. Then a group of young girls (*arangbi*) and bachelors (*arangba*) perform *thougal jagoi* (serving the god and goddess dance). Then the *amaibis* perform the ritual dance known as *laiching jagoi* (pulling out the *lai* dance) accompanied by *hoi laoba* (shouting of *hoi*) by the *penakhongbas*. This is followed by rituals of *laibou chongba* (the birth cycle dance) to the accompaniment of the *anoirol* song sung by the *penakhongba*. In case of the Chakpa, the *laibou chongba* comprises of only one circle line whereas in Kanglei and Moirang there are two circle lines. A farcical play called Tangkhul saba (playing the role of Tangkhul) is then performed. The whole procession of *lai thenjao kaba* then returns to the shrine. Arriving at the shrine, four persons receive the procession with a spear dance (*khou saba*) which is performed in front of the shrine. Then the deities are taken down from the palanquins and seated in their respective places.

b. Lou Kumba (outing to the paddy field)

Next day, the ritual outing known as *lou kumba* takes place worshipping the direction God Thangjing (south-west). During this ritual procession, a song called *lai loukum isei* is sung. The song is almost similar to the above song *thenjao kaba isei* (the song of *thenjao kaba*). The whole process of *lou kumba* is similar to *lai thenjao kaba* mentioned above except that the site is different. It is on a foothill on the south-western side of the shrine. Interestingly, the site is not a paddy field. But it is a foothill, which is little

elevated. From this site one can see the vast paddy field on the western side. However, the outing is a ritual drama of collecting rice from the paddy field. Symbolically, a basket of unhusked rice is kept on the destined spot beforehand. After all the rituals of *thougal jagoi*, *laiching jagoi*, *hoi laoba* and *laibou chongba* dances at the spot of *lou kumba*, a woman carries back the basket of unhusked rice to the *laibung* (premise of the *lai*).



Picture 3.22 The ritual procession of *lou kumba* (Chakpa Phāyeng Haraoba, 2016).

c. *Lai Keithel Kaba* (outing to the market)

On the next day of *lou kumba*, *lai keithel kaba* is performed. The ritual process is similar to *lai thenjao kaba* and *lou kumba*. The site is an open field at Phāyeng on the south-western side of the shrine. Reaching the spot, the *amaiba* offers flowers and fruits to the Keithel Lairembi (Goddess of Market). Two hundred and ninety-four flowers in frontal side, one

hundred and twenty-six flowers in the rear side and forty-two flowers each on either left and right to the deity are offered. Fourteen bunches of bananas, parched rice and other fruits are also offered to the deity. The village women bring out vegetables and fruits which are grown in their kitchen gardens and imitate selling those. The *amaiba*, *amaibi* and attendants pick up the vegetables and fruits of their choice, imitating the buying of vegetables for the *lai*.

Other Daily Rituals

a. *Laimang Phamba*

In Chakpa Phāyeng Haraoba, the *yakeiba* (awakening of the *lais*) is omitted, unlike Kanglei and Moirang. Each morning, all the old offerings are first removed and replaced with new offerings of flowers and fruits. The offerings are accompanied by the chanting of the *amaibi* and *amaiba*. The *amaibi* then performs *laimang phamba* (sitting before the *lai* to receive the oracle). This usually takes place at around 9 a.m. in the morning. Usually three or five *amaibi* perform *laimang phamba* one by one. The *laimang phamba* begins with an invocation song to the accompaniment of *pena*. While the *amaibi* sings the song waiting the *lai* to sit upon her, she becomes possessed and delivers oracles both for the village and also for those individuals who have brought offerings (and even occasionally for some who may have not done so). The oracles have different functions in the community. I believe one function is a stabilizing factor for the family and community, and a means of restoring inharmonious relationships. These oracles sometimes address national crisis in addition to predictions of success or warnings of calamities. The oracle may end in the form of *katchouhei* (give an offering), specifying offerings are required to prevent misfortune.

b. *Laibou Chongba* (the dance of birth cycle)

The main body of the Lai Haraoba (apart from other ritual performance) is the *laipou* dance cycle in which the *amaibi* reenact the enter process of life on earth, starting from the mystery of sexual union to the routine of monotonous existence of men and women. An important ritual act called *hoirou laoba* is enacted just before the *laipou* dance. The *amaiba* or *penakhongba* sing some evocative lines to the accompaniment of *pena* music. This song is sung flagrantly with great zest in such an evocative manner that the entire performers share in the experience enacted. The *amaibis* hold their palms and fingers together is kept on the navel. The lyrics are as follows:

O it is *hoirou*! Let us have sex
Let's have sex
The *hoirou* made by progenitor.
Haya-ne-he let us intercourse
It is the womb of the universe.
Dance in the age of *Hayi*⁸⁹
Dance in the age of *Haya*⁹⁰
the dance spreads like wild fire
Connecting the joints

(translation mine)

Then, the *amaibis* with a gentle movement raise an open hand at the height of their breasts. This signifies the mother receiving the germs of life from the father. The rhythmic movement of dance is to the accompaniment of the *pena* by *penakhongba*. From this point the *penakhongba* starts stepping rhythm on their feet and continues to sing:

In the *hayi* age, Soraren dance,
Chakpas saw the dance of Soraren.
Chakpa Sawangba the ancestral chief of the Chakpas,
Went up the sky in pursuit of the deer, his quarry.
And witness the dance of Soraren, God of the heaven,

⁸⁹ *Hayi* is considered as the age of truth, i.e. the age of gods

⁹⁰ *Haya* is the age of human beings

various were the forms performed by Him.
Chakpa Sawangpa learnt and brought them down to the Earth.

In his region a white canopy was put up
And Chakpa Sawangpa too began to dance;
Then all men and women of his community joined him.
Thus this dance had been handed down through generations.
The Soraren dances akin to that of a peacock
He dances blissfully with pride
Twirling with grace was his dance
Even as he dances, the inhabitant of the skies
Witnessed the merriment and contentment.
The dance of the skies
Witnessed by the goat-like truth seeking eyes of Sawangpa,
His eyes, that of a hunter and that of the deer-prey, all observant
They all danced likewise.

The king of the highest heaven, the god of the gods
Pakhangba, he called Chingu Yoirenba
The King of Gods, he too danced likewise
Observing the dance of the king of Gods, Soraren
The chief of the Chakpas too
Imitated the dance

The chief of the Chakpas, Sawang Melongba
Initiated and taught the dance of the Gods to his people.
In the land the Chakpas inhabit
Adorned and fenced with white clothes
White, like that of the clouds in sky as the roof.
The chiefs of the Chakpas danced here
Following the Chakparen's steps
daughters and daughters-in-law danced likewise.
The dance of the Gods, as danced by Soraren,
Executed to perfection each and every sequence,
They danced.

(translation mine)

While the *penakhongba* sings the above song, the *amaibi* dances out the *anoirol leishem jagoi* (the dance of creation) making the Sun, the earth, the human body, the birth of human and the making of house. After the completion of the making of a house, the *amaibi* mimes gifting it to Khullakpa and Luplakpa for the father Koubru and his son Loyalakpa to stay in this newly

made house. Then, they continue to dance *Panthoibi jagoi*, beginning with the *pamyatlanon* (agricultural activities), sowing cotton seeds, plucking cotton, and then the process of making threads then clothes. They wear beautiful clothes, then begin the Haraoba rejoicing with a shout “*Ho ya ya ho ya, ho ya ya ya ya ya.*” The village girls, women, boys and men dance together following the *amaibi*. The *penakhongba* continues to sing praising the village deities one by one till the *laibou* is completed.

Lai Phagi Tounaba

The ritual performance of *lai phagi tounaba* (playing farce with *lai*) apart from daily rituals of *laibou chongba* is observed every day till the last day. The ritual is performed late in the night. It is performed by about twenty males dressed in hill tribes’ attire and performs all kinds of activities to make the audience laugh while the daily ritual of *laibou chongba* dance is performed by the community. It is also of critical consideration to note that why the farce is *Lai Haraoba* is always played in the attires and costumes of hill tribes. While some Meetei scholars project it as a long historical relationship of valley dwellers and hill settlers, it is also important to question the sociopolitical attitudes of the Meetei in the larger context of the contemporary political tensions afflicting their communities. We shall reflect on this matter in the next chapter where we will deal specifically with the issue of the politics of ethnic identities.

Last Day

On the last day of Phāyeng Haraoba, during the ritual of *lai sairen chanba*, another pig is sacrificed. Then in the afternoon, there are games and sports such as running races, *mukna* (wrestling), etc. In the evening the festival concludes with the ritual of closing of the door called *lai thong thingba*. The

ritual process is similar to the *lai thong hangba* as discussed above in Kanglei Haraoba Haraoba except for differences in the hymns of the *amaiba* through the alteration of a few words.

IV

REINTERPRETING LAI HARAOPA

As observed in the previous chapter, the Lai Haraoba is a composite creation which has grown over a fairly long period of time, and it seems to have shared and incorporated various traditions from different *salais*. This would indicate that there is no one single meaning that can be attributed to the festival. In these concluding pages we shall try to explore a number of possible interpretations. It was also suggested earlier that a proper appreciation of the Lai Haraoba can only be reached by regarding it not simply as 'performance' but as an act of worship, and that its ultimate rationale is that it is a means of addressing the interrelationship between gods, humans and the cosmos. Given all the uniqueness and complexities one sees in the Lai Haraoba, one is always unsure of how it all began. What could be the primal forms which it assumed such variegated structures and characteristics? While there are many unanswered questions, we can discuss some of the issues in an attempt to interpret Lai Haraoba.

Ritual Kingship

Let me offer a somewhat different approach to interpreting the *lais* in terms of ancestors, and to regard the Lai Haraoba as basically an ancestral festival. We have noted above that the category of *lai* is a fluid one, closer to 'deity' than to 'god', so an interpretation of 'divine ancestors' cannot be ruled out. Some *lais* certainly seem to have a connection with individual *yeks* (clans). For instance, there is a clear evidence that Thangjing is the *lai* of the Moirang,

Pureiromba associates with the Angoms (or Chakpas) and Okmaren with the Khumans (Parrat 1980:14). What is not so clear is whether or not these *lais* were ever thought of as having lived a human life before being regarded as gods. Or are they *yek* gods rather than ancestors?

The only *lais* who are explicitly believed to have enjoyed both a human and a divine existence is Pakhangba (the founder and deity of the Ningthouja *yek*), Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoipi. Here, however, the case is rather more complex. Traditional scholars believe Pakhangba as a *lai* who manifests himself in several ‘incarnations’ – not indeed in the Hindu sense of *avatar*, but rather as appearing in the human rulers of his line who reflect his power. Pakhangba thus becomes more of a dynastic title and Meetei proto-history speaks of several Pakhangbas. There are, however, reasons for doubting whether the references to Pakhangba represent the earliest tradition of the oral text or not. In the liturgical prayers, the god addressed is very clearly a sky god. In *khayom lakpa* he is invoked as ‘he who dwells in the heavens’ (Parratt & Parratt 1997: 76) and in *yakaiba* as ‘he who descends from the northern heavens’ (ibid: 90). He is represented by the silver pieces which, as *uyanrol* (the song of cutting down trees) puts it ‘is the silver sky’ (ibid: 162). Now Pakhangba (despite the epithet Nongda) is not originally a sky deity. It may be doubtful, therefore, whether in the earliest text it was Pakhangba who was addressed. The alternative version of *nongkarol* song begins, ‘Soraren (not Pakhangba) has declared that he wishes to return to the sky’ (ibid: 166).

Moreover in the second stanza of the *anoirol* song, which must belong to the earliest strata of the Meetei version of the Lai Haraoba, a number of sky gods are mentioned, including Soraren and Nongshaba (the Moirang sky deity). While Pakhangba is mentioned too in *anoirol*, he is not here associated

with the skies. It is clear from Meetei mythology that in earlier times Soraren had a much greater importance and that he was subsequently relegated to a subsidiary role. If, as we have seen above, Soraren was a Chakpa god, it may be that when the Ningthoujas attained supremacy over the Chakpas, Pakhangba replaced Soraren as chief of the pantheon. It is also significant that Leimaren is scarcely mentioned by the name of 'goddess of the waters.' It seems likely then that the oral text of the earliest strata of the Lai Haraoba underwent a recession in the interests of Ningthouja domination which is probably a later development.

The possibility, alluded to above, that the text of the Lai Haraoba has been revised in the interests of Ningthouja dominance raises the question of the extent to which it has been influenced by concepts of kingship in Manipur. It is fairly clear that as the ritual of kingship developed elements of it were incorporated into the festival and applied to the worship of *lais*.

According to the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, the use of multi-leveled umbrellas, banners and elaborate processions were probably introduced into Manipur from south-east Asia during the reign of Khagemba (Parratt & Parratt 1997: 180). It seems reasonable to suppose that the ritual of the Lai Haraoba was embellished as kingship in Manipur became more elaborate and ceremonial. On the other hand, it may also be that the rituals applied in the first instance to the *lais* began to be appropriated also by Kings as they sought to enhance their status. Thus, *yakeiba* began to be used to awaken kings, and *penakhongbas* played *lamyin* during royal journeys. This does not, of course, demonstrate any inherent connection between the Lai Haraoba and rituals of kingship in Manipur, merely that rituals and embellishments were transferred from the king to the *lais* and vice versa.

Pleasing by Offerings

Accompanying these prayers were the offerings. While there is clear enough evidence that these originally included blood sacrifices, the bulk of the offerings now consist of fruit and flowers. These are certainly original to the Lai Haraoba, and there is no evidence that they were introduced as a substitute for blood offerings. Nor is there convincing proof that any of these sacrifices (animals offering included) were intended to be expiatory. The sins of the people are not mentioned in the accompanying prayers, and indeed Meetei religion has a separate rite, the New Year festival of Cheiraoba, which is both an atonement for the past year's shortcomings of the people and a means of averting the calamities of the coming year.

In this ritual, an individual (called the *cheithaba*) acts as a kind of scapegoat and bears the misfortunes of the nation (Parratt 1980: 47-50). Nor again are the offerings made before the shrine at Lai Haraoba connected either with cleansing or warding off evil. Rites of this kind do take place, but they are quite distinct from the main offerings. The sacrifices, both animal and bloodless, are simply offerings to please the *lais*. The place of flowers in religious symbolism has been discussed at length by Jack Goody (1993). While most of his material is taken from Europe, his brief examination of India and China does have some relevance for the Lai Haraoba, for most of the offerings in the festival reflect the flower culture of the East Asia. Goody's contention that sexuality is at the root of flower symbolism (1993:3-4) and that it points to happiness, longevity and fertility (1993: 370) is also significant. Happiness is reflected in the rationale of the Lai Haraoba ('pleasing' the gods, rejoicing by men and women), longevity in the prayers for welfare and long life, and the fertility in the sexual imagery.

The role played by the *langthrei* plant, which the *amaibi* uses in *laipou laa thaba* sequence, is especially interesting. This rather unattractive shrub is a small evergreen, growing to about a foot in height and cultivated in gardens. It does not flower, has no identifiable culinary, medicinal or hallucinatory properties, and seems to be largely confined to Manipur. Unlike *leisang*, which is used in addition to it in the Moirang Haraoba, no mythology is associated with it. Yet *langthrei* buds – the incipient new shoots – symbolize the *lais* at almost every stage in the festival. They are contained in the *khayom* packets, which are offered in the waters to the deities at the very beginning, and they are an important constituent in the *leiyoms* which are immersed into the waters to entice the *lais* to come up along the *hiri* (thread) string into the *ihai fu* pots. These same *leiyoms*, with their *langthrei* buds are then laid out before the *lais*. One each for the male and female *lais* is tied into the scarves which are placed around the necks of the *laipubas* (*lai* bearers), symbolically indicating the presence of the *laipoula*, the folded cloth containing the buds, which is placed in the courtyard to mark the most sacred area. The *langthrei* buds are also contained in the *phibuns*, the cloth balls, which are manipulated by the *amaibis* in the canopy (*Phijang* cycle). And in the *laipou* cycle they are placed between the fingers of the *amaibis* while they dance. All these seem to suggest that the buds of the evergreen *langthrei* plant symbolize the incipient life of the *lais*, the principle of creativity, of a life which is ever fresh and ever renewed.

Element of Dance

Intimately intertwined with both the offerings and ‘orature’ in *Lai Haraoba* is dance. *Jagoi* (or, the more original Manipuri word *noiba*) is an integral part of the *Lai Haraoba*, both for the religious specialists and for the participating community. I have suggested above that the primary forms of the dance are

curvilinear, spiral or circular. These forms dominate not only the general choreography but also the individual body, hand and foot movements which constitute the individual parts of the dances. The dominance of the curve can hardly be merely aesthetic (though it is aesthetically beautiful). Its deeper symbolism lies in that it is the most primitive shape in the creation and thus became a powerful image for the spiritual nature of the cosmos. The dance patterns of the Lai Haraoba are therefore meant to reflect the creation of the cosmos. This understanding fits well with the *lairen mathek*, the 'dance of Pakhangba', which is generally interpreted as a dance of the creation of the world. It also accords with the dances of the Phijang cycle. Here the 'posts' (the four men holing up the *phijang*, canopy) almost certainly represent the pillars of the universe, and the canopy itself the "vault of the heavens beneath which the creation of the world takes place" (Arambam: 2005). These dances consist of a complex of spirals and curves.

It is Anoirol, however, which throws most light on the concept of dance among the Meeteis. Anoirol has been discussed above in several contexts. Here we are concerned with it only for the light that it throws on the connection between dance and creation. Anoirol is derived from *noiba*. *Noiba* here is more than merely dance movements. It is an action of the gods and the first semi-divine humans, and its function is to bring about creation. Furthermore, *noiba* has distinctly sexual connotations and sexual imagery abounds in the lyrics accompanying the dances. Cosmic power and human fertility are seen as one. *Noiba* may be regarded as creative dance which releases the sacred energy of the *lais* to bring about cosmic and human creation. It is a ritual re-enactment of creation at the beginning of time. This concept has, indeed, a similarity with *sakti*, but it is one which is widespread in primal religions generally.

Elements of Play

Though 'ritual' cannot be reduced to 'play,' many qualities of ritual are also qualities of play. The realms of play and ritual more than complement each other they overlap (Handelman 1977). Whether Lai Haraoba is translated as the "pleasing of the gods" or "rejoicing with the god", both constructions entail the idea of 'play'. Entire episodes of Lai Haraoba envisage playing with god. Almost all the episodes of Lai Haraoba have elements of play. The making of the human body (*hakchang saba*), the building of house (*yumsaba*), the Panthoibi cycle, *paosa* (exchange of news in the form of riddles), cultivation (*pam yanba*), the gathering of soul (*long khonba*), the *phijang* (canopy) cycle, all these episodes unfold with the play elements. Victor Turner demonstrates that the work in ritual "is not work,...but has in both its dimensions, sacred and profane, an element of 'play'" (Turner 1982: 31). Turner calls play 'liminal' because it occupies a threshold between reality and unreality (Turner 1969).

The main function of the communitarian dance in Lai Haraoba is not so much cosmic as simple enjoyment. As such the dances represent an element of 'play' on the part of the participants. Huizinga's pioneering *Homo Ludens* (1955) seems to have been the first work to draw attention to the importance of the play element in religion, and this concept provides a useful key for understanding certain parts of the Lai Haraoba. Huizinga's thesis, taking its cue from Plato's comment 'the gods enjoy a joke', argues that 'play consecrated to the deity is the highest goal of man's endeavor' (Huizinga 1955:27). This does not, of course, rule out the element of holiness and mystery. However, in Huizinga's view, the ritual act, or an important part of it, will always remain in the 'play category' (ibid: 27). If we exclude the liturgical prayers, the theme of play runs like a thread through the Lai

Haraoba. Beside the folk dances, we have clear remnants of (children's) play at a number of different points. The simulated foot-race to the shrine between three male and three female participants after *longkhonba*, and the *khencho* dance are probably the most explicit examples of this.

Several episodes in the *Phijang* cycle also reflect children's games. The manipulation of the cloth balls (*phibun*) in *phibul ahabi* is an imitation of the game of 'catch' as the lyric confirms:

Where the sovereign god throws it (i.e. the *phibun*)
The hill where the maiden goddess catches it,
Where the seven goddesses throw it,
The hill where the nine gods catch it.

(Parratt & Parratt 1997: 129)

While *chungkhong yetpa* is an imitation of hide-and-seek, both *chungkhong litpa* and the striking together of the *phibun* which represents *lais* look like an imitation of a game. While this does not exclude a deeper significance for these episodes, it suggests that their origin may have been in exuberant child-like play in rejoicing with gods.

In the *Kanglei thokpa*, Marjing comes with a polo stick over his shoulder, and the selection of the wife of the *lai* at *Nupi thiba* makes use of the imagery of the hockey game. In Meetei mythology, it was the *lais* themselves who, at the beginning of creation, played seven-a-side polo, and there is probably in these incidents the idea that play is itself cosmically creative. Some of the dance patterns may have been founded on Meetei martial arts, and in *Thang jagoi* it is evident that protection against evil from without is effected by the sword-dance of the *amaibi*. In traditional Lai Haraobas, furthermore, the end of the festival was marked by several days of sports, played between competing *panas* (divisions of the village). It may be noted that this competitiveness is also present in the boat-symbolism of *hijan hirao*

and there is mention of a race between the boats of the *lais*. The line “the male and female gods have decided to race their boats” runs in the final lyrics of the *hijan hirao* song. In Meetei culture, the racing of heavy rowing boats was ritualized (see Parratt 1980:45-6). Perhaps, the most striking evidence of the play element in the Lai Haraoba is the interlude *loutaba*, which consists largely of extempore play-acting of robust humour.

Huizinga also regarded riddles as an integral element of play in religious literature (1955:133-5). In the oral text of the Lai Haraoba, riddles play a significant role. These are often of an implicit sexual nature (e.g. *hoi laoba*) or draw attention to developing sexuality (as in many of the *Paosha* songs and some of the Panthoibi texts). Indeed, the very term ‘play’ became in some cultures a euphemism for sexual congress (Sax 1995: 14). This point deserves more attention, for it may indicate (as some Meetei scholars have argued) that the Lai Haraoba is a ritual which is meant to celebrate, and perhaps enhance, human and agricultural fertility. Nonetheless, we are compelled to question whether the existing evidence confirms that it can be regarded unequivocally as a fertility festival.

The Fertility Aspect

It is significant that the Lai Haraoba takes place during spring at the onset of rains, and rain imagery features prominently in the songs. Furthermore male/female symbolism pervades both the rituals and the lyrics accompanying them. Each *lainingthou* (male deity) has his corresponding *lairemma* (female deity) from whom (in the words of Yakeiba) ‘he is never parted’ (Parratt & Parratt 1997: 90). There must be two masks in the shrine, and two sets of offerings. There are also two lines of dancers bearing pairs of sacred objects (*ihaifu*, *leiyoms*, *khudeisel* and other ritual accessories), one each

for the male and female *lai*, respectively. The male/female dualism also pervades many of the lyrics. The liturgical prayers - Leihouron, Yakeiba, Naosum, Uyarol - are addressed to both the male and female *lais* equally. This is sometimes expressed in Mother/Father symbolism. In the beginning of the first day, in *konyai hunba*, coins are offered to both the god and goddess equally as they are invoked to come up from the waters; at *khayom lakpa*, Pakhangba 'who dwells in the heavens' has as his spouse the goddess of the deep waters, and at *leihouron*, the Great Father-Ancestor is invoked alongside the Mother goddess. This imagery is reinforced by the symbolism of the *pena* 'which is the Mother' and the *cheijing* (bow) 'which is the Father.' While the sexual symbolism in the liturgical prayers is restrained, it clearly reflects the coming together of the male principle (the heavens) and the female (the waters) as representing the creative power of the cosmos in their union.

In the *laibou* cycle, sexuality is more overt. *Hackchang saba*, the sequence describing the building of the human body, is prefaced by the call for sexual congress, and the riddles are full of sexual imagery. *Hakchang saba* describes the birth and growth of the child and the subsequent processes of agriculture and house construction, symbolizing the offering of Meetei civilization and culture to the *lais*. But the source of these activities lie in human procreation as described in the antiphonal singing at the beginning of *laibou* called *anoirol* song.

It is important to note that the fertility of nature is also quite explicit in the Phijang cycle. This is most easily interpreted as a celebration of the cosmic creation; the 'posts' are the pillars of the universe and the canopy the vault of the heavens. It may have originally been a ritual re-enactment of creation meant to stimulate the seasonal agricultural output. The winding snake movements of the dance of *chungkhon yetpa* are very similar to the

Pakhangba dance *lairen mathek* which follows it, and both must be interpreted as dances of creation. The bringing together of the two cloth balls (*phibuns*), also symbolizes sexual intercourse.

The lyrics which accompany the *phijang* cycle, obscure though they are at many points, include songs which make use of the Panthoibi tradition and which celebrate her as the maiden goddess of rainfall and agricultural fertility:

She is known as the *lai*
Who makes the paddy become dry even when there is no sun
Who makes the eves wet even when there is no rain.

(Parratt & Parratt 1997: 131)

The Panthoibi corpus as a whole falls within the category of love poetry, and employs nature imagery (especially that of fruits and flowers) to express human sexuality. The Paosha songs are in the same tradition. One of the aspects of Panthoibi was that of the Meetei rice goddess (ibid: 8). Agricultural productivity is a feature of a number of the songs. *Pam yanba* is concerned with the planting and harvesting of cotton. The imitation of fishing in *longkhonba* may also originally have been a rite for the increase of food supply (at the end of the lyric the fish are kept for the *lais*, presumably as offerings to be eaten).

Lai Haraoba as it now exists is a massive complex of diverse, yet complementary, religious and performance elements. Incorporating traditions from different *yeks* and groups, it has grown in structure over a long period of time. Worship of national and local gods and goddesses, reverence for the mythical founders of the various groups which today make up the Meeteis, the re-enactment of the cosmic dance of creation, prayers and rituals for human and agricultural fertility, welfare and protection – these are

the elements which have contributed to the formation of the festival. It is a massive incorporation of oral tradition, prayer and poetry, dance, song and music into a ritual of great beauty. However, as we shall examine in the next chapter, this sheer affirmation of ritual celebration at multiple levels also has a political substructure that is determined by diverse identities. Let us turn then to Chapter Four to examine the performance of multiple identities in the Lai Haraoba.

Chapter Four

Performing Identities in Lai Haraoba

Any consideration of identity is dependent on the dynamics of place, gender, history, nationality, sexual orientation, religious beliefs and ethnicity. The dominant scholars on Manipuri culture and society tend to emphasize the shared social identity of a homogenized community, undermining internal differences and disparities. I would argue that one cannot rely entirely on shared features and commonalities to explain any particular culture. Contemporary social and cultural history of Northeast India in general and Manipur in particular has marked a tense and contested terrain of political claims and counterclaims with multiple cultural overtones. Ethnicity, for instance, has been a decisive force in identity formation in Northeast India in general and Manipur in particular. There are various ethnic identities like Meetei, Nagas, Kukis, Meetei Pangal (Muslims), Bishnupriya Manipuri, etc., in Manipur. Of late, the politicization of these identities has fuelled ethno-nationalist movements.

At the national level, the paradoxes of 'minority' defined by the state namely the Scheduled Castes (SC), Schedule Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Classes (OBC) are considered important in outlining majority-minority or superiority-inferiority power politics. Even though one witnesses the process of *detrribalization* (Abner Cohen, 1969) through the conversion of Christianity, particularly of the Nagas and Kukis, there has also been a simultaneous process of *retribalization* (Abner Cohen, 1969) by communities in order to

benefit from the social and economic opportunities available to scheduled tribes.

These problems of official categorization in Manipur pertain in particular to the Loi (autochthones/outcasts) communities (of Chakpa villages) who have been placed in the scheduled caste category, even though there has been no caste system as such in Manipur. In the context of these constructions and transformations of identity, this chapter shall try to locate Lai Haraoba as a contested site of clashing identities, which get performed in multiple ways. The two prominent identities of the Hindu Meetei and the non-Hindu Meetei claim their 'distinctiveness of the Meetei cultural identity' (Konsam, 2005) in the performance of the Lai Haraoba. Thus, the construction of myths around these identities becomes contentious in their own right. Some of the Hindu Meetei, for instance, equate the myth of Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoipi with that of Shiva and Uma, respectively.

In the discussion of identity, the role of gender and sexual orientation cannot be ruled out in the context of Lai Haraoba. The role of *amaibi* is larger and more prominent than that of the *amaiba* and *penakhongba* in the Lai Haraoba. This is not to suggest that the *amaibi* is superior to the male functionaries; rather, she reflects the larger social and cultural history of the Meetei in a more concentrated and auspicious way. While some young *amaibi* speak of themselves as possessing a non-sexual body with no desire for marriage or having children, there are also male *amaibi* who are married to women and have children. This raises perplexing questions of gender identity in the context of Lai Haraoba. Overall, the purpose of the chapter is to explore the dynamic and fluid processes by which identities are shaped

within, between and across gender and sexuality and the sorts of practices that seek to regulate their constructions.

ETHNICITY, REVIVALISM AND RESURGENCE OF LAI HARAOPA

Before we begin discussing the dramaturgy of ethnicity in Lai Haraoba, let us discuss some theoretical considerations on ethnicity. Ethnicity as a sense of ethnic identity is essentially a phenomenon founded on certain primordial characteristics like common descent, language, religion, culture, geographical territory and so on. In other words, as Steve Fenton (2003: 3) argues, “ethnicity is about ‘descent and culture’ and ethnic groups can be thought of as ‘descent and culture communities’”. However, Fredrik Barth (1996: 75) articulates, “ethnic groups are categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves” and hence they are not permanently fixed as given entities. Barth’s argument is that the social processes of identification and differentiation which produce and reproduce boundaries between ethnic collectivities define the group and “not the cultural stuff that it encloses” (ibid: 75). Barth emphasizes:

We can assume no simple one-to-one relationship between ethnic units and cultural similarities and differences. The features that are taken into account are not the sum of ‘objective’ differences, but only those which the actors themselves regard as significant... [S]ome cultural features are used by the actors as signal and emblems of differences, others are ignored, and in some relationships radical differences are played down and denied.

(Barth 1996:78)

What then is the dramaturgical context and dynamics out of which ethnic identities are produced? The process of ethnic identity formation and transformation over time has consequences for the study of the ethnic group in question.

Moreover, Paul Brass (1991: 8) argues that ethnicity in a modern centralizing state is created and transformed by the elites who draw from the group, at times misrepresenting in order to benefit from the centralizing state. He (1991: 8) further emphasizes that elites “sometimes fabricate materials from the cultures of the groups they wish to represent in order to protect their well-being or existence or to gain political and economic advantage for their groups as well as for themselves.” According to this perspective, elite competition constitutes the dynamics which precipitate the ethnic group’s formation; conflict under specific conditions arises from the broader political and economic environment rather than the cultural values of the groups. That is to say, the competition of elites and inter-elites for control over material and symbolic resources within the ethnic group and also among different ethnic groups for rights, privileges, and available resources shapes the larger discourse around ethnicity. At the same time, Brass (ibid: 8) argues that the pattern of alliances of these elites with the elites of the centralizing state, who are the critical participants shapes the nature of ethnic group formation and subsequent conflict, as well as the mode of political mobilization and demobilization.

Thus, ethnicity can become politicized when ethnic groups are in conflict within themselves because of uneven and disorderly development or because of the competition for resources between the dominant and subordinate groups. It is also important to note that conflict with the political elites over such issues as the use of limited resources or allocation of benefits are other factors that lead to the rise of ethnicity. Joseph Rothschild (1981: 2) observes that in modern and transitional societies, politicized ethnicity becomes the crucial principle of political legitimation and de-legitimation of systems, states, regimes and governments. At the same time, it has become

an effective instrument for pressing mundane interests in society's competition for power, status and wealth from the state. The phenomenon of ethnicity and its relationship to the state is more complicated than this simple outline would indicate.

From the perspective of the state, by and large, ethnicity is seen as a disruptive form of national awakening, and appears to rival the nation, which is viewed as a legitimate entity (Rothschild 1981: 3). Ethnicity, in whatever form, competes with the nation-state, which conceptually is an integral part of modernity. Thus, the emergence of ethnicity is seen as a reflection of the failure of national integration; it appears as a disintegrative factor and an obstacle or a hindrance to be overcome by the politics of assimilation, integration or incorporation into an existing body politic. Such politics of ethnicity is reinforced by our perception of development and the relationship of ethnicity to it. However, the emergence and reassertion of ethnicity may be seen as a reaffirmation of long existing ethnic identities in the process of seeking positive development as an integral part of development where the state (or at least aspects of it), not ethnicity, is an obstacle to development (Ronen 1986: 1-6).

In the case of the Northeast India in general and Manipur in particular, the emergence and growth of ethnic consciousness based on ethnic identity has manifested itself through ethnic political mobilization and ethnic movements. In fact, ethnic issues have decisively influenced the political agenda of all the northeastern states – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. All these states have experienced ethnic conflicts and its resultant ethnic violence. In fact, ethnic issues and inter-ethnic relations affect state-formation and integrative

process in India. In Northeast India, in particular, much of the conflicts seem to be originating from the ethnic identity formation or ethnic consolidation involving marginalized 'nationalities.' An understanding of the grassroots reality of the Northeast problem and numerous social and political movements in the region requires conceptual insight and discernment of diverse ethnic nationalities.

Newmai (2016: 4) argues that modernization instead of assimilation and integration of the ethnic groups recreates primordial identities and divergences and promotes a wider measure of conflicts in Northeast India. In fact, post-independence modernization and developmental projects have left unresolved many of the colonial problems. With the emergence of Independence, local elites started affirming their distinct claims of nationality, on the basis of primordial affinities and ethnic identities. No state system remains stagnant and the peripheral states in Northeast India have also undergone rapid economic and political transformation. In the process, a number of crises have loosened the bond of unity and cohesion assumed by the colonial state structure.

Ethnicity, an amalgam of race and culture, language, religion and the tribal way of life, came to define "us" and "them". Located at the crossways of international frontiers, burdened with historical memories and kin-group loyalties, the effort by these border peoples to resist "national integration" through differentiation appears separatist or secessionist to "others or us" while plausibly offering such an option to "them" (Verghese 1996: 4).

As the nation-state consolidates its nation-building or rather state-building process through the creation of ethnic states and subsequent state-sponsored development, the power and resources wielded by the state have

become irresistible for the ethnic groups. For instance, as Sanjib Baruah (2005: 4) argues, the creation of Nagaland and Mizoram was effected as a “hurried exercise in political engineering.” He further argues that it was an “attempt to manage the independent rebellions among the Nagas and the Mizos and to nip in the bud as well as pre-empt, radical political mobilizations among the other discontented ethnic groups” (ibid: 4).

However, the creation of such ethnic states as a counter-insurgency measure to pacify some tribal groups left people from the same ethnic groups of the Mizos and the Nagas caught between different states in North East India. The competition for the state resources among the ethnic groups under different states leads to a process of self-evaluation of the feasibility of their own ethnic identities based on the perception of gains or loss. And this process seems to have led to both the centripetal and centrifugal tendencies to be operating simultaneously even within and among the same ethnic group. It is in this broad and complex phenomenon of ethnic identity politics in this region that the revivalism and resurgence of Lai Haraoba in Manipur needs to be located.

Revivalism and Lai Haraoba

The Lai Haraoba can be analyzed stressing the integrative force of its ritual, and the way in which it embodies and reflects, upholds and reinforces, deeply rooted, widely held popular values. At the same time, the same ritual can be seen, not as expressing a publicly articulated expression of consensus, but as embodying the ruling elite consolidating its ideological or political dominance. David Kertzer (1988: 77-101) demonstrates that ritual has always been and will continue to be an essential part of political life, used to symbolize, simplify and enhance political messages. Kertzer (1988: 77-101)

also shows how ritual helps build political organizations, how it is employed to create political legitimacy, how it fosters solidarity in the absence of political consensus, and how effective it can be in both defusing and inciting political conflict.

Moreover, Eric Hobsbawm (1983: 4) has suggested that ceremonial occasions cannot be interpreted merely in terms of their internal structure. On a similar note, Quentin Skinner (1978: xiii-xiv) emphasizes that, “[T]o study the context is not merely to gain additional information; it is also to equip ourselves with a way of gaining a greater insight into its meaning than we can ever hope to achieve simply from reading the text itself.” Thus, from this position, we can arrive at the axiomatic premise that in order to rediscover the meaning of Lai Haraoba during the contemporary period, it is necessary to relate it to specific social, political, economic and cultural circumstances within which it is actually performed.

Furthermore, David Cannadine (1983: 105) observes that “even if the text of a repeated ritual like a coronation remains unaltered over time,” the meaning of the ritual may change significantly with the change of the context. Then again, Eric Hobsbawm (1983: 1) remarks that “there are traditions which appear or claim to be old but are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented”. With all these diverse and contradictory features in the setting, we will now examine how the Lai Haraoba of Manipur is rejuvenating itself in the present day with diverse social and political variables.

Though revivalism in Manipur is very apparent today, this process had already started during the reign of King Garibniwaz (1709-48) when most of the Meetei culture and tradition had been destroyed and substituted

by Hindu culture. Many people opposed the policy of the king. But the movement took a significant development in the 1930s. It was around 1930 that some Meeteis started discarding Vaishnavism and started re-worshipping their ancient gods and practicing their traditional religion, which is called "Meeteism" or "Sanamahi religion" (Kamei 2015: 191). This movement was first started by a young Meetei from Cachar (now in Assam) named Naoria Phullo (1888-1941). In order to investigate the ancient religion and culture of the Meetei, he founded a political group called Apokpa Marup (Association in the name of a Meetei ancestor deity) in Cachar in 1930 (ibid: 191). He gathered around himself a few of his friends to spread the idea of Meetei religion (ibid: 192). His activism was not welcomed by orthodox Hindu Meeteis of Cachar and thus he was ostracized from his village. It should also be noted that the Nikhil Manipuri Hindu Mahasabha was founded in 1934 with Maharaja Churachand Singh himself as the President in order to counter the rise of Meeteism (ibid: 192).

After Phullo's death, his followers in the Manipur valley initiated a movement called Sanamahi (named after a Meetei household deity) movement with the foundation of an organization called Manipur State Meetei Marup on May 14, 1945. It consisted of 18 members. Takhellambam Bokul and Ngasepam Manik Chand were appointed as President and Secretary of the organization. Some of the important resolutions of the organization were as follows:

- 1) to revive the cultural heritage of the Meeteis
- 2) to do research in the ancient history and other literatures of the Meeteis
- 3) to revive the Meetei scripts
- 4) to worship and chant religious hymns in the mother tongue (Manipuri/Meeteilon)
- 5) to strengthen the unity between the hill and plain people and to live together as brothers

- 6) to strengthen the bond of unity among the Meeteis who are living inside and outside the territory of Manipur; and
- 7) to let the world know that a community known as Meetei has been in existence with their old distinct cultural and religious identity in the North-Eastern part of India.

(Kabui 1974: 102)

The objective of the movement was to revive the Sanamahi cult, the indigenous religion of the Meeteis. Its practitioners believe in Atiya Mapu Sidaba, Pakhangba, Leimaren, Sanamahi and the Umanglai. However, the sentiment of the movement tended to prioritize politics rather than a regeneration of Meetei religious beliefs. One should also emphasize that several educated Meeteis have also denied calling the Sanamahi movement 'revivalist' (Kabui 1974: 91). They believe that Manipur has upheld a culture of religious syncretism where the Brahmins and the Meeteis worship Meetei and Hindu gods simultaneously. The two religious systems always co-exist. On the other hand, the Sanamahi followers assert that they have stopped all Hindu customs and follow a purely Meetei system of belief (Kabui 1974: 92).

Returning to the earlier movement, one can say that it was geared towards an extremist attempt to de-Sanskritize Meetei culture and to revive Meetei heritage. The movement strongly opposed the linkage of Meetei identity to the Kshatriya caste and denied the concocted history of linking with the Indo-Aryan heritage claimed by the early promoters of Hinduism. It tried to revive and practice what was considered a purely indigenous Meetei religion, culture, custom and the way of life. The proponents of the movement wanted the *amaiba* and *amaibi* to perform all their rituals and the other socio-religious functions in the Meetei language. The movement leaders asserted that they were neither anti-Hindu nor against any religious community. Indeed, in the propagation of the movement, there was not a

single instance of communal violence or hatred against the other groups. The movement also aimed to bring unity among the Meeteis and a closer relationship with the Nagas and the Kukis (the hill tribes of Manipur). The branches of the movement scattered all over the valley were actively involved in reviving and popularizing Meetei scripts, religion, language, and other cultural activities (Kabui 1991).

More recently, the most profound impact of the revivalist movement is on the cultural sphere of the Meeteis and the general awakening of their identity. This first trend of revivalism in Manipur can be seen in the restoration of Lainingthou Sanamahi at Haying Khongbal. Even the government of Manipur has recognized the necessity of reviving Meetei culture, religion and tradition. The Lainingthou Sanamahi Temple Board published a brochure on the occasion of “Mera Chaorel Houba”, which fell on 29th September 1981. Irengbam Tompok, the then Deputy Chief Minister of Manipur, sent a message referring to the need for revivalism (LSTB 1981).

While the Meeteis had neglected the worshipping of Panthoipi after Hinduism came to Manipur, we find that in the last two decades they have started establishing Panthoipi Temples and worshipping her. In the early 1990s, the number of Panthoipi worshippers and the temporary Panthoipi worshipping places during the Durga Puja festival have increased considerably.⁹¹ It is of critical consideration to note that today *Panthoipi Irat Thouni* (literally *irat* means ‘worship’ and *thouni* means ‘seeking blessing’) festival is observed during the same time as the Durga Puja festival. While Durga Puja in Manipur is celebrated for five days, the *Panthoipi Irat Thouni* is

⁹¹ The celebration of Durga Puja festival shot into prominence in Manipur during the reign of King Bhagyachandra (1775–1787 CE). For details, refer to G.P. Singh (2012: 23).

celebrated for ten days starting five days ahead of Durga Puja and ending on the same day.

While one can observe this as a competing factor to mainstream Hinduism in order to gain public attention for Meetei Sanamahism, it can also be observed that revivalism produces a similar structure and system of Hinduism in the process of countering Meetei Hinduism. Revivalism of Meetei culture and religion can also be seen in the effort of the Meetei to worship the shrine of Mongba-Hanba in the form of the Hanuman image in the Mongba-Hanba forest, which is also known as Mahabali forest. The Meeteis claim that the term “Mahabali” and the “Temple of Hanuman” were brought into practice only during the time of king Garibniwaz. Before this the Meeteis called this place as “Mongba-Hanba Umang”. Mongba-Hanba is one of the nine *laibunghous* (divine gods) (Kshetrimayum 2014: 100).

Another trend of Meetei revivalism was seen around the year 1980, when the Hindu gods and goddesses’ shrines at Nongmaiching hill were substituted by Meetei gods and goddesses. Before Hinduism came to Manipur, Meeteis had an early practice of climbing the Nongmaiching hill, known as “Chingoi Iruppa”, which was observed on the 28th Lamda (name of a Manipuri month, around February) to worship Nongpok Ningthou (ibid: 100). It was during the time of king Garibniwaz that this festival was renamed “Baruni Snan” and all the worshipping places on this hill, which were known by Meetei names, were converted into Hindu names. However, in 1980, the Meetei National Front made a strong effort to re-indigenize ancestral traditional sites and succeeded in reviving the past tradition. In that year, names like “Mahadeva Shrine” came to be known as “Nongpok Ningthou Chingu Panganba Shrine”. The pond “Saraswati Kunda” came to

be known by its non-Hindu previous name “Shileima Ikon” (ibid: 101). The local newspaper *Janata* in its editorial column reviewed the situation:

It is seen that in most of the temples, shrines and worshipping places of Manipur, Meeteism and Meetei form of worshipping have revived. The Meetei religion, which was about to disappear, is showing its identity clearly.

(Janata, 18th March 1980)

Performative Impact of Revivalism on Lai Haraoba

We will now try to locate the impact of revivalism on the actual performance of Lai Haraoba. In the Lai Haraoba festival, certain programs related with other religions have been dropped. Some years back, even scenes from Ramayana and Mahabharata were performed in front of the Umanglais during the Lai Haraoba festivals. Previously, there were a few Umanglai shrines in different parts of Manipur. The number of local deities, which the Meeteis believe are guardians of protection from supernatural evil forces, was also limited. Now almost every locality seems to have either an Umanglai or a local deity. In the late 1980s a new wave emerged in Manipur. Almost every day one could hear the sound of Lai Haraoba in every nook and corner of Manipur. Such interest shown by the Meeteis in their ancient gods and goddesses indicate their affirmation of cultural and religious revivalism (Kshetrimayum 2014: 101).

Here it is necessary to point out how the ‘secular items’ in the Lai Haraoba have changed, reflecting the larger media and consumer culture that has impacted on everyday life in Manipur. As far back as 1998, Rustom Bharucha (1998: 167-80) reflected on one such performance of the ‘secular items’ in the Lai Haroaba where a young girl dressed as Madhuri Dixit regaled the audience with the item song ‘*choli ke piche kya hai*’ while a young

man's rendition of a Michael Jackson number was enough to disrupt the day's celebration. Today, perhaps, with the rise in censorship and regulation of Lai Haraoba, while Madhuri Dixit may no longer be tolerated, one can only wonder what would be the fate of Michael Jackson in his Manipuri avatar?

With the ban on Hindi films, music and the public use of the Hindi language in September 2000,⁹² the least controversial of the 'secular items', which is an important component of the Lai Haraoba, seems to be restricted to traditional dances, ballads and performances of Shumang Lila. This has implications on the Lai Haraoba as a public space. Along with the disappearance of the Hindu thematic performances and dance dramas like Ramayana and Mahabharata, the popular 'cassette dance' to Hindi songs can no longer be performed as a secular/entertainment item in the space of Lai Haraoba today.

It is of critical consideration to note that the development of Hinduism as a cultural influence and Hindi as a language are thus constituted outside the sphere of Lai Haraoba. While this also reflects the present day cultural politics wherein the space of Lai Haraoba has become an important arena of resisting the cultural 'other' (Konsam 2015: 167), it is also important to acknowledge that there are Hindu elements in terms of values and customs which continue to be performed in the Lai Haraoba as well as in everyday life. An obvious instance would be the use of *chandan* as make-up on the

⁹² In September 2000, the insurgent group Revolutionary Peoples Front (RPF), fighting for independence for Manipur from Indian rule, issued a notice banning the use of Hindi following the killing of one of its cadres in Indian Army custody. The Revolutionary Peoples Front also called a 36-hour general strike on October 16, 2000, the "anti-merger day" to protest the merger of Manipur with India on that day in 1949. On this day, volunteers of RPF confiscated several thousand videocassettes of Hindi films and music, and burnt them as a protest against the "Indianization" of Manipur.

nose and forehead, a sign of Hindu Vaishnavism, which is increasingly visible in the appearance of Lai Haraoba participants today.

While the revivalist movement has brought to the fore an awareness of the “pre-Hindu” culture in all its complexities, the space occupied by the Lai Haraoba continues to assume political significance in the reinstating of a pre-Hindu identity. Its recent resurgence on a much grander and stylized scale assumes more than a cultural or religious revival, but a reawakening of Meetei ethnicity. This may not have much to do with a growing religiosity towards the indigenous faith but reflects perhaps a consciousness of going back to re-establish cultural rootedness in a large struggle against the cultural homogenization associated with pan-Indianism, which continues to be seen as threatening to the interests of regional and local cultures.

A Dramaturgy of Identity: Lai Haraoba Projected as a Unifying Mechanism

Let us now focus on an issue of how Lai Haraoba which has been instrumentally projected as a unifying mechanism of the ethnic diversities. While some scholars (Tombi 1972; Kshetrimayum 2014) view that there is historical evidence to support the close links between the Meeteis and the hill people, today the stark reality is that the hill tribes and Meetei are antagonistic towards each other. It is also projected that the Meetei king and queen wore Naga dress and ornaments during coronation ceremonies. Some scholars also assert that the ritual of Lai Haraoba also shows the relationship between the hills and the plains. God, the creator, comes down in Naga dress and meets his lover, who is a girl living in the valley (Tombi, 1972). They cite numerous instances where the Meetei kings married women from the hill tribes and even quote an account of Manipur chronicle, *Poireiton Khunthoklon*, which records that the first king of Manipur Nongda Lairen

Pakhangba married a tribal girl called Laisana. However, this projection seems to be somewhat contrived today.

In the belief system, most of the narratives of the hills and the valley share a legacy of commonality. It is a commonly held belief that non-Christian tribes are animists; the forefathers of the Meetei were also animistic in the ancient past. There are gods and goddesses that are commonly recognized both by the hill people and the valley Meeteis. Most hill tribes also worship Sanamahi, Leimarel and Soraren (the sky God), who are believed to be gods and goddesses of Meetei. The offerings to these gods consist of meat, fish and wine, which are similar to the practices of the Meeteis in the past. The valley and hills also share the same food habits. Today, however, the valley folk to some extent are no longer meat eaters.

It is commonly believed that the process of Hinduization has brought about a divide (Brara 1998: 109). Hinduised Meeteis tend to categorize all tribes as untouchables, who, according to them, lead lowly lives, take meat, drink alcohols and offer the same to their gods, which the Meeteis had practiced earlier. These two groups have been further alienated when the hill people adopted Christianity in the early part of the 19th century (Brara 1998: 113).

To the orthodox Meetei Hindus, the hill tribes are considered like the untouchables of upper caste brahminical Hindu India, who were not allowed to enter inside the house of the Meetei Hindus. But the concept of purity and pollution is not entirely reciprocal. The social distance between the Meetei Hindus and hill tribes of Manipur has remained unbridgeable to a certain extent even today. There has also been rise of tribal political movements like the Naga movement for the integration of all Naga-inhabited areas of the

Northeast India into a single political unit which includes the four hill districts of Manipur. In addition, there is the Kuki movement demanding a Kuki homeland comprising the Kuki inhabited areas of Manipur. Thus, the Meetei believes that there is a need to remind and revive the close affinities of the people across the hills and valley.

Let us now examine how the Meetei tend to project the Lai Haraoba as a strong example of the close relationship between the hills and plains people. In this context, it would be useful to call attention to the performance of Tangkhul *saba* (impersonating Tangkhul) episode, which is an interesting ritual drama enacting the mythical story of the meeting of two mythical lovers Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoipi (see Chapter 3 for details). In this ritual drama, the two mythical lovers meet in the guise of Tangkhul Saram Pakhang (or simply called Tangkhul) and Nurabi.

The *amaiba* and *amaibi* playing the roles of Tangkhul and Nurabi have to appear in Tangkhul costume and act in the Tangkhul way of talking and gesture. It is considered that this ritual performance of Lai Haraoba can act as one of the mechanisms for reviving the age-old brotherhood bonds between the hills and the plains people. In an attempt to revisit the closer ties between the Meeteis and the Tangkhul (Naga) represented in the Lai Haraoba, arrangements have been made for the Tangkhul community to witness Lai Haraoba. One such event was organized in 2011 and widely covered by the media.

In what could be the first time in the history of Umanglai Haraoba of the Meetei community, a large contingent of the Tangkhul community from Ukhrul district witnessed traditional Umanglai Haraoba particularly of the Tangkhul Saba episode. Altogether 65 people belonging to the Tangkhul community comprising of men, women and children

witnessed Tangkhul Saba of the Lai Haraoba at Wangoo Tampha
Lairembi Haraoba at Wangoo.

(Imphal Free Press: May 18, 2011)

While Lai Haraoba has been projected to play the role of a unifying mechanism, the present Manipur society is plagued with many social problems like ethnic tensions, regionalism, strikes, protests, economic blockades, unemployment, poverty, insurgency, corruption, etc. The secular forces represented by the government machinery also fail to provide a suitable solution to these tribulations. In this condition, people think that one of the ways to escape the ills of modern society is to revive past traditions with faith and hope, so that the past can provide a solution to today's problems. They also believe that the intervention of ancestral spirits can alleviate their anxieties.

Lai Haraoba and the Demands for ST Status: a Paradox

The episode of Tangkhul *saba* in Lai Haraoba has been claimed by Meeteis as an evidence of close cultural affinities and solidarity between the Meeteis and the hill tribes in general and Tangkhuls in particular. This has been one of the reasons put forward for demanding that Meeteis should be included in the scheduled tribe (ST) status. The other reason is that they still practice animism in their rites and rituals, mainly referring to Lai Haraoba as an example (Laba 2016). The motion moved by the opposition leader in the Manipur State Assembly in February 2014 to consider the demand of Meeteis for scheduled tribe status is a new socio-political development. In fact, the Meeteis' demand for scheduled tribe status began with the Scheduled Tribes Demand Committee of Manipur (hereafter STDCM) submitting a memorandum on 30th November, 2012 to the Governor of Manipur. The committee further met the Chief Minister on 18th December, 2012, and on 10th

July, 2013, the committee along with the Inner Manipur constituency Member of Parliament, met the Indian Prime Minister.

While the demand for ST status of Meetei who have been placed in the General/OBC category can be studied as a process of *retribalisation* (Abner Cohen 1969), it is also imperative to observe what André Béteille (2008) argues, “Politics in India is coming to be driven increasingly by the competition for backwardness.” This statement was made in the larger context of the demand for ST status by the Gujjars of Rajasthan who belong to the OBC group. Recently, Meeteis have begun to enjoy the benefits of inclusion among the OBCs; however, they have been agitating to be reclassified as scheduled tribes.

Scholars representing the tribal community oppose the move expressing their apprehension that the Meetei who have hitherto been the dominating community could usurp the opportunities available to the hill tribes. L Lam Khan Piang (2014) writes,

Given the level of socio-economic development of the majority Meetei community and their political domination of the state of Manipur, their demand to be classified as a scheduled tribe is absurd. It is inconsistent with the very idea of scheduling of tribes as envisaged in the constitution and the principle of positive discrimination.

(Piang 2014)

Highlighting the Lai Haraoba as their primary evidence, the STDCM in their memorandum to the governor argued that the Meetei, even though having converted to Hinduism, have not entirely given up animistic practices. However, Piang (2014) argues that religion was never a criterion for inclusion in the Constitution’s scheduled tribes list. The 1901 census classified people as ‘tribal’ if they practiced “animism.” But this was no

longer a criterion for successive censuses. All communities specified as tribes by the colonial administration were considered for inclusion in the list of scheduled tribes according to the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950 issued by the president. The Meeteis were not included in this list.

According to the First Backward Class Commission (1953), “Scheduled Tribes may belong to any religion.” Religion, therefore, is no longer considered to be a criterion for inclusion in the Constitution’s scheduled tribes list in independent India. Tribal communities may practice animism, but this is not a valid ground for inclusion in the list; rather it is just a criterion that the government has adopted from time to time.

The tribal status has also been claimed on the ground that the Meetei are also part of the same Mongoloid linguistic as well as racial group to which hill tribes belong. This, indeed, is a fact that they do belong to the same stock as the hill tribes – racially as well as linguistically. However, race and language alone are not valid grounds for inclusion in the scheduled tribes list. In fact, the Meetei language has a well-developed script (*mayek*) and has been included in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.

Other features pointed out by STDCM to claim the scheduled tribe status include food habits (non-vegetarianism) and observance of certain practices belonging to their old religion. However, they have nothing to do with the criteria adopted by the government of India since the First Backward Classes Commission (1953). In principle, Piang (2014) points out that “the demand is inconsistent with the idea of compensatory discrimination.” The scheduling of tribes has been basically done so that the state can improve the economic and social opportunities of the backward

classes or weaker sections within the population by adopting preferential discrimination.

On the contrary, Piang (2014) argues that this demand by the “forward classes” is not likely to promote harmony and bring about integration between the hill and the valley people, as the STDCM suggests. Rather, it would further aggravate the already existing tensions between them. In fact, if Meetei become ST without much consideration of the social inequalities among the different communities in Manipur, the hill tribes would be further marginalized in their own territory.

Keeping aside the rivalries among Nagas, Kukis and Meeteis, can the claims of the Meeteis, or any community for that matter, to be designated as a scheduled tribe be judged any longer on merit, or on their ritual practices? Is Lai Haraoba still an animistic practice in its true sense in Manipur? The problem is not simply that the subject itself is replete with ambiguity, but even the scholar and expert’s opinion on such subjects is manipulated to conform to the prevailing political demands.

What is so striking about the claims and counterclaims made recently over the designation of the Meeteis as a scheduled tribe, is the absence of any serious discussion of what the term ‘tribe’ actually means. Does a tribe have any specific features as a social formation, or can any social formation be designated as a tribe because it once had, or is presumed to have had, the characteristics of a tribe even though its social composition and organization have in the meantime changed substantially?

Having discussed the historical nuances of ethnicity politics, revivalism and resurgence of Lai Haraoba in contemporary time, let us

explore the complex gender issues that affect the Lai Haraoba in the larger context of Meetei.

GENDER IDENTITY IN LAI HARAOPA

The impression created by the vital presence of Meetei women in every sphere – socio-economic, political and religious – of Meetei society has often deceived onlookers. The self-reliant appearance of the women and the autonomy which they seem to have in their collective solidarity, often in the form of traditional institutions, have invariably compelled observers to believe that Meetei women are highly emancipated. While it would be facile to judge the status of women based exclusively on their appearance and social behavior, the convoluted social systems of Meetei society demand a multilayered enquiry and critical observation to unravel the complex position of Meetei women.

Manjusri Chaki-Sircar (1984), in her attempt to study the status of women, examines the social, economic, political and religious aspects of Manipur. She recognizes a vital presence of female power in every sphere of society which she thinks can be described as a kind of feminism. She believes that the Meetei women of Manipur have been liberated from the clutches of patriarchy. She asserts that feminism in Manipur does not exist as a subculture or an anti-male attitude, but exists to support men morally as an integral part of the social system (Chaki-Sircar 1984: 38-57).

However, what needs to be emphasized here is that the patriarchal politics of Meetei society works in a complex intricate way by giving enough space to the women's traditional institutions, yet not allowing feminism to emerge as a sub-culture. Arguably, these traditional institutions of women have enjoyed a certain autonomy so much so that women have never felt the

need to fight for their political rights. This could be a major reason why, unlike western feminist movements, there have never been revolts for women's rights in Manipur. While Chaki-Sircar (1984) considers the traditional institutions of women in socio-economic sphere as an important societal apparatus containing an ethos of feminism, I would argue that the role of women has been negligible in the larger political decision-making process of Manipur.

The Idea of the Ideal Woman and her Role in Lai Haraoba

In the traditional religious realm, particularly of the Lai Haraoba, Chaki-Sircar maintains that there are two opposing models of women. On the one hand, there is the model of an "ideal woman" – the woman as daughter, wife and mother. On the other hand, there is the priestess *amaibi* who is stubborn and untamable. Once a woman is ordained as the priestess *amaibi*, Chaki-Sircar observes, "she achieves a ritual status outside the expected norms of the society, and her ritual immunity allows her a most liberated lifestyle unthinkable for an ordinary woman" (1984: 214). An *amaibi* considers herself as her own master, having only the *god* (the *lai*) as her guardian. She is considered a chosen woman, a vehicle of supernatural power, and she communicates "on behalf of earthly people with the divine world" (ibid: 214). Conventionally, a priestess *amaibi* should be addressed as mother *Ima*, evoking respect from all (ibid: 214). As this dissertation has described in many sections, the priestess *amaibi* has a significant role to play in the Lai Haraoba. While the ritual of the Lai Haraoba primarily revolves around the creation myth, it also constantly emphasizes the society's dream of an ideal society based on a mutual partnership and respect between the sexes (ibid: 214).

Like Chaki-Sircar, Vijaylaxmi Brara (2008: 225) also shares the same viewpoint that women play a great role in the religious sphere. Her view is solely based on the *amaibi*'s contribution in the Lai Haraoba and the *amaibi*'s elevated status in society. However, larger number of women participants in the festival cannot be a determining factor of women's elevated position in society. While Chaki-Sircar (1984) present an essentialist reading of *amaibi*, many other scholars like Kh. Bijoykumar (2005) and Kh. Ratan Kumar (2001), in contrast, argue that the whole process of the ritual is crafted by the literati *maichous* of *Maichou Loishang* or *Pandit Loishang* (the institution of the literati) and the priests (*amaibas*) being the arrangers of the whole process of the Lai Haraoba, the priestesses (*amaibis*) and balladeers (*penakhongba*) are reduced to mere performers.

Here it becomes necessary to point out the ambivalent attitude of the society towards *amaibi*. Chaki-Sircar writes,

Meitei society has an ambivalent attitude towards *amaibi*. A family always tries to suppress her symptoms with the help of an *amaiba* until it becomes inevitable that they must adjust to her new lifestyle.

(ibid: 179)

Chaki-Sircar (ibid: 179) also emphasizes that an *amaibi* is no longer bound by household duties or family responsibilities. None can domesticate her, since only god is above her. *Amaibis* are "deviants who do not conform to the standard Meitei social roles" (ibid: 168). If an *amaibi* has a husband, then he has to conform to her rules. Generally Meetei men do not prefer to marry an *amaibi* but if she marries, she cannot marry by the rites of the proper *luhongba* (marriage) system but by the *keinakatpa* system of marriage. This is indicative of the belief that *amaibi* is essentially the wife of god, and consequently, the institution of marriage, in the secular sense of the word, is not acceptable. I should add that the *keinakatpa* marriage system has certain elements of

shaming the couple for either immorality or disgraceful behavior. Her husband has to offer bride-wealth to the Lai, who is the guardian of the *amaibi*. She sleeps on the right side of the bed, which, in Meitei society, is normally used by the husband. She also has special days when she must abstain from sexual intercourse with her husband (ibid: 176).

While an *amaibi* is regarded as the blessed one having an elevated status of goddess in the society, which extends to all temporal and spatial contexts only in the case of ritual functions, yet she also suffers being a victim of social isolation. The moment she becomes the wife of god, her parents, her children and her husband can no longer continue to live with her. There is also a belief that her children have the possibility of becoming an *amaibi*, so she needs to be isolated from them. Ironically, nobody wants the blessed life of an *amaibi* today. After the death of an *amaibi*, her family performs a special funeral ceremony called *Chukshaba*, so that no other is born in the future generations of the family (ibid: 180).

In fact, it could be argued that the series of rituals in Lai Haraoba promote patriarchal values, ethos and norms. While rituals of Lai Haraoba do not reflect the male dominance or female inferiority, the structure of Lai Haraoba proclaims dominant features of patriarchy. As I have hinted earlier in the study of ritual organization of Lai Haraoba in Chapter 2, the *amaiba* enjoys the higher status in terms of crafting the performance, supervising the festival and deciding the roles to be played in the Lai Haraoba. To reiterate, I have pointed out that the *amaiba loishang* can be considered as the department of scriptwriters and directors whereas *amaibi loishang* and *ashei loishang* are departments of performers and musicians. What needs to be stressed here is the power structure of these departments replicates the hierarchies of the patriarchal system.

It is also of critical consideration to note that *apokpa khurumba* (paying obeisance to the ancestor), which is believed to be the origin of Lai Haraoba (See Chapter 2), traces descent exclusively through the male (patrilineal) lineage. However, one must also note that the recognition of and emphasis on the female role as observed in Lai Haraoba is rather unexpected in a patriarchal society. To my mind, the ritual recognizes the dichotomy of the two sexes, who need to fulfill their prescribed obligations in their respective domains, which respecting their mutual dependency and co-operation to ensure their social and ritual obligations.

As far as women's participation in Lai Haraoba is concerned, the most prominent is the dance of women called *thougal jagoi* (dance of dedication/presentation) in which large numbers of women dance together. While this is not part of the regular routine of Lai Haraoba, whenever the women of the community want to present the *thougal jagoi*, it always predominates the ritual sequence of *laipou* dance. During my childhood, I had seen this dance performed by both male and female. Today, most of the time, it is performed exclusively by women. In case of Moirang, even today while men also perform this dance together with women, there is also *thougal jagoi* exclusively performed by men.

More significantly, the first day ritual of the Lai Haraoba known as *lai eekoubā* (the invocation of the *lai* from the water) is very important in dealing with the gender roles and issues. In the *lai eekoubā* procession, which has been described in detail in Chapter 3, the presence of the village head as a clan leader and his wife signifies the primary principles of patriarchy. Both of them must conform to the clan rules of the ideal man and woman. While the male *chong* (umbrella) bearers, the *lai* bearers and the *thang* men (sword

bearers) represent the male status as well as signify their responsibility as warriors and protectors, the young maidens and wives delineate their roles of providing nourishment and nurture. Ahead of them all, an elderly woman carrying *ishai fu* (a ceremonial earthen pitcher) on her head symbolizes the mother of all and giver of the life-sustaining force. It is important to note that the woman should have a proper marriage in the Meetei traditional system and that her first child should be a son. In a sense, she represents the 'ideal woman' to strengthen the patrilineal inheritance. Therefore, the Lai Haraoba reflects a crystallized moral community, predominantly a patriarchal one, transmitted from one generation to the next.

Within this framework of a crystallized moral community, Lai Haraoba can also be observed as a celebration of women's sexuality and fertility. In the core ritual of *hakchang saba* (making of the body), the detailed description of the anatomy of the human body, labour, pain, the role of the midwife, the appearance of the baby, the birth of the baby and the cutting of the umbilical cord, as well as reference to amniotic fluid as waves through the dance movements, all these movements indicate the celebration of women's sexuality and fertility. The entire presentation has a dramatic and mystical aura that transcends the fact of mere biological truth. At the existential reality, the breast milk, the life-giving energy is provided by the mother to the child, but the lineage identity is provided by the father. At another level, the celebration of women's sexuality and fertility can be observed as a way of controlling women's sexuality. Here it is also important to remember what Shreema Ningombam (2015: 132-3) argues that the advent of Hinduism exacerbates the already existing patriarchal system. She writes,

The construction of an ideal woman in terms of Hindu world view, association of women with pollution and purity, certain practices of ostracism of women, exclusion of women in rituals, the division between

those embracing Hinduism and those who refused to accept the new faith, banning of eating meat, consumption of liquor, the practice of burial substituted by cremation are some of the practices that had seeped into the polity of Manipur after the advent of Hinduism in Manipur.

(ibid: 133)

Brara (1998: 163) also argues that with the advent of Hinduism the already existing patriarchal system has been strengthened, referring to the change in the marriage rituals. She argues that the bride circumambulating the groom in the marriage ceremony and then the bride offering flowers with folded hands to the groom implicates that the groom is considered as a god by the bride. Tellingly, the act of a woman touching her husband's feet is not visible in the plethora of art, literature or folklore of the Meetei until Hinduism came to Manipur. This act is legitimated by its mark of respect to the husband.

However, the real meaning operating behind this act is to show that women are subservient and subordinate to their husbands; otherwise, men would not refrain from doing the same act to their wives. Arguably, the act of men touching their mother's feet is a different matter since women as mother figures are desexualized. The mother being elevated to the status of goddess is regarded as sexless. The phenomenon of women eating after their husband and other male family members not only relegates them to a secondary position but also denies them their right to eat whenever they are hungry. Ningombam (ibid: 135) critically observes that such acts have been stylized and ingrained in the minds of women through the process of socialization "to be feminine."

Woman's Economic and Political Space

Chaki-Sircar (1984) has observed that Meetei society provides an economic space for women in the society, especially in the weaving industry and trade.

She also emphasizes that almost every woman of Manipur weaves traditional clothes like *inafi* which are exported to other neighboring states like Assam, Nagaland and Bengal. While she observes that young girls of traditional Meetei society start learning to weave at the age of nine or ten, today it is a different scenario. The money which they earn is mostly saved for their marriage and sometimes used for household maintenance. Chaki-Sircar also recognizes that the women's market (locally known as Ima Keithel) is an exclusive place for economic transactions of buying and selling of traditional handloom clothes, vegetables, fish and various other local products, thereby contributing to the economy of the society.

Working against the grain of this idealization of women in Manipuri society, I would argue that there are many socio-cultural dimensions which relegate women to a secondary position. At this point, I must add that a man buying vegetables, fish or any kitchen items is considered taboo. He is regarded as effeminate (*adhamora*) doing a women's job. Though this taboo is almost disappearing today, one can hardly find men selling vegetables in the market since selling and buying vegetables is assumed to be a traditional role belonging to women. I would uphold the view that the traditional Meetei society demarcates the professions of men and women sharply.

However, Chaki-Sircar affirms, "[D]espite the socio structural superiority of the male, Meetei ideology does not undermine the female role. There is no *polarity of the sexes*" [emphasis mine] (ibid: 8). But the irony is that Chaki-Sircar herself undermines the 'polarity of the sexes' in Meetei society. I should strongly argue that the demarcation of professions itself is an indication of the 'polarity of the sexes'. In a cryptic way, the patriarchal Meetei society relegates women's role to a secondary position by providing an autonomous economic sphere, yet stereotyping women's professions.

Since the role of women are predetermined with least choice, whether they do their professions willingly or they are obliged to do so, is a matter of critical analysis.

Chaki-Sircar, in her case studies, arrives at the conclusion that women's contributions to Manipuri society are comparatively greater than that of their male counterparts. Apart from the weaving industry and local trade, women also work in the paddy fields as hired labourers called *khulangs* (ibid: 39). Chaki-Sircar illustrates that women usually outnumber men in *khulang*; however, the fact remains that the wages of women labourers are comparatively less in relation to the wages of men. She also indicates that men's labour, like ploughing and threshing, is referred to as 'hard job', and women's labour, like transplanting, weeding and winnowing, is called a 'soft job' (ibid: 39). Clearly, this compels one to question her affirmation that there is no 'polarity of the sexes' in Meetei society. Today, while many feminist and women activists have expressed their demand for equal wages taking recourse to law, in an agrarian society, people have less knowledge of their legal rights and, hence, are not in a position to fight for their rights. In addition, women seem to have internalized their work as a 'soft job', thereby failing to question the imbalance of wages. In other words, they have internalized as well as accepted their subjugated status.

When Chaki-Sircar refers to the political organization of pre-colonial Manipur, she observes that there were no particular legal rights accorded to women. However, their collective voice did not go unheard. The death penalty of a criminal declared by the king could also be changed if women collectively protested against it. Political organizations of the state, however, excluded the participation of women. According to Chaki-Sircar, a separate political organization for women namely *paja* existed which functioned like a

court. She marked, "This court dealt with matters like adultery, divorce, wife-beating, assault and other cases where women were involved. The *paja* decided the form of punishment" (ibid: 29). However, she does not provide the necessary information regarding whether this court executed the punishment or not. Later, the *paja* ceased to function with the British rule.

During the colonial period, the women's movement (Nupi Lan) of 1904 and 1939, marked the political-economic consciousness of women. Women, by organizing themselves into groups played an important role in fighting against the social evils. Apart from these women's movement (Nupi Lan) of 1904 and 1939, the women's movement of 1975 which came to be known as women torch bearers' (Meira-Paibi) movement is worth mentioning. Chaki-Sircar writes, "In 1975, women in several urban localities organized protests against liquor sale, drinking being a major social vice which had affected the lives of a large number of Meetei males" (ibid: 36). Every locality, till today, has an organization of Meira-Paibi whose function is to check the consumption of drugs, liquor, adultery and other women related crimes.

Drawing from Jennifer Schirmer, Diana Naorem (2015: 144) describes the women's movements in Manipur as 'motherist' movement for the women came out as mothers rather than as independent, freethinking women in their own right. In her opinion, these mothers fought against repression by mobilizing themselves through a particular kind of protest that transformed women's language of motherhood into a kind of political expression. Naorem observes that the movement of Meira-Paibi can also be categorized as 'motherist', because the women in this struggles are united by the common thread of being a 'mother' (ibid: 144).

At a political level, Chaki-Sircar observes that women of traditional Meetei society are able to assert their status in the political sphere (ibid: 25-37). Saroj N. Arambam Parratt and John Parratt in their essay "The Second 'Women's War' and the Emergence of Democratic Government in Manipur" (Oct 2001: 905-19) also express a parallel view about the political consciousness of Meetei women in society. However, this perspective of the women's political position in Manipur is based on an overly valorized collective spirit of women rather than on any rigorous examination of individual rights.

At the individual level, women had relatively no rights to change the dominant political order or economy. Since the political organizations excluded women, the final political decisions were left in the hands of dominant male rulers. Ningthoujam Irina (2008: 94) rightly points out, "collective solidarity functions as social capital among the Meetei women in promoting civic actions and social reforms. However, the aggregate of the actual or potential resources of the Meetei women do not necessarily translate into gender-sensitive power sharing."

As we come to the end of this chapter, it becomes obvious that there are complex identity issues surrounding Lai Haraoba which cannot be separated from the larger contradictions of Meetei society in relation to ethnicity, social harmony, and gender-related issues. These complex issues are manifestations of the larger socio-political, cultural and historical developments in Manipur. Now that we have addressed the politics of identity in the performance of Lai Haraoba, we can now proceed to address the techniques and modalities of contemporary adaptations and re-inventions of Lai Haraoba performance in the next chapter.

Chapter Five

Staging Lai Haraoba in Contemporary Adaptations and Reinventions

This chapter critically engages with contemporary adaptations and reinventions of the Lai Haraoba performance tradition in a range of proscenium productions. Many contemporary theatre practitioners like Ratan Thiyam and Heisnam Kanhailal have used the conventions, music, costume and psycho-physical traditions of Lai Haraoba in their productions. I shall discuss how these directors in different ways have appropriated the dances and songs in Lai Haraoba to interpret contemporary political events. While Thiyam draws on a predominantly spectacular and exotic use of the Lai Haraoba, Kanhailal is more subtle in his adaptation of its psycho-physical principles. Another interesting production to study would be *Harao Segonnabi* (Divine Songs and Dances of Rejoicing, 2011), a recent production by Mayanglambam Mangangsana, which encapsulates and re-invents the entire middle sequence of the Kanglei Haraoba in a one-hour spectacle designed for the proscenium stage for a predominantly non-Manipuri audience. Inevitably, this production raises critical questions relating to the secularization of ritual performative idioms and the relationship between indigenous performance and its contemporary reinventions.

The last section discusses the adaptation of Lai Haraoba songs and music for performance in popular music contexts. Three contemporary singers are studied in the section – Mangka Mayanglambam who popularize

the *pena seisak* (the singing style of *pena*), Tapta (Loukrakpam Jayenta) and Akhu Chingngangbam, both of them incorporate Lai Haraoba songs to express social dissent.

REINVENTION OF LAI HARAOPA IN VAISHNAVITE TRADITION

Before we begin with the contemporary adaptations and reinventions of Lai Haraoba, let us begin by indicating that Ras-Leela is arguably a reinvention of the Lai Haraoba in the Vaisnavite tradition. Historically, Lai Haraoba suffered several obstacles especially when Hinduism came to Manipur in the beginning of 18th century, when the successive kings and generations gradually got enamored by the grandeur of Hindu religious ceremonies. In this regard, Nongthombam Premchand has remarked:

Hinduism in Manipur assumed a new form with strands of local tradition and sensibilities intertwined with it. The Lai Haraoba became a major source of inspiration for many of the Hindu religious ceremonies and performances. The formalistic structure of Lai Haraoba continued to be a frame of reference for many Kings and courtiers in their creative experiment to introduce a new Hindu religious theatre.

(2005: 129)

Historically, the Lai Haraoba developed gradually during the reign of Naothingkhong (663-763 CE) and continued until the reign of Khagemba (1597-1652 CE). During his time, the songs, hymns and various texts of the Lai Haraoba were written down (Parratt 2010: 67). Lai Haraoba suffered the severest blow in the first half of the eighteenth century when the Meetei King Pamheiba alias Garibniwaz (1709-1748 CE) issued a dictate pronouncing Hinduism as the state religion of Manipur in 1714 under the influence of the proselytizing Bengali Vaisnavite, Shantidas Gosai. Consequently, Lai Haraoba was banned. It was again revived by Pamheiba's grandson King

Chingthangkomba *alias* Bhagyachandra (1775–1787 CE). During the time of King Bhagyachandra, the *maichous* (traditional scholars) recognized five kinds of Lai Haraoba associated with five distinctive *laipou jagoi* dance forms – Khunthok Haraoba, Khunung Haraoba, Kanglei Haraoba, Chakpa Haraoba and Moirang Haraoba (Yaima 1977: 47). It is claimed that the five *bhangi pareng* in Manipuri Ras-Leela were composed based on these five forms of *laipou* dance (ibid: 47).

Khumanlambam Yaima has observed the differences of the *laipou* dances between Lai Haraoba and Ras-Leela in both contemporary performance practices. He believes that the dance forms in the earlier days seemed to be more limited in their techniques and movement patterns while the contemporary forms are more intricate and organic producing many other forms. However, the traditional *athuppa* quality connoted by its implicit ‘hidden features,’ has been retained (ibid: 48). By its very nature, the *athuppa* dimensions in Lai Haraoba, Ras-Leela and Nata-Sankirtana ensure that the performances are suggestive rather than blatantly expressive. It is possible to read this *athuppa* quality as deeply related to the morality and ethical codes of the living traditions of the Meetei. As compared with other Indian classical dances, it made much less use of any codified technique and elaborate facial expressions.

The close affinity in matters of form and structure between Lai Haraoba and Ras-Leela has been observed by many dance scholars. According to R.K. Achoubisana (2000), King Bhagyachandra had banned the Lai Haraoba for three years (1776-1779 C.E.) following which the performance of the Lai Haraoba was allowed in the year 1779 C.E. in the public domain. During these three years, for almost fifteen months, the

amaibas, *amaibis*, *penakhongba* and other traditional scholars were ordered to write books on Lai Haraoba consisting of songs, hymns, music and dances. Other than the Meetei *amaibas* and *amaibis*, some of the prominent Hindu scholars who participated in the dramaturgical research with the Hindu thematic text were Sidhyahasta Bachaspati Bhaskar Sharma, Shree Roopramanand Thakur and Shree Swarupanand Thakur (Premchand 2005: 90). The Hindu texts which serves as a thematic source for the creation of Ras Lila were the five chapters particularly chapters xxix, xxx, xxxi, xxxii and xxxiii of the tenth Canto of the *Shrimad Bhagavatam*, which constitute a popular section known as *Rasa Panchadhyaya* (ibid: 119).

Among the Meeteis, the scholar Kabo Khumbongba Chandramani was also a prominent participant. Here it needs to be kept in mind that the non-Meetei scholars were not artists but religious preachers. In collaboration with these scholars, it is believed that King Bhagyachandra composed the Ras Leela. It could be speculated that while the religious thematic content of the Ras Leela was provided by these Hindu scholars, the actual forms of the dance were choreographed by the *amaibas*, *amaibis* and *penakhongba* along with musical composition (Achoubisana 2010). The responsibility of choreographing the dance and structuring its form was completely handed over to the dance expert of the time, Kabo Khumbongba (Ibochouba 2009: 30). Premchand (2005: 129) has observed that this form of dance gained its legitimacy in Meetei society because of certain similarities linking the love story of Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi with that of Krishna and Radha. In both cases, the female protagonists love their male counterparts even as they are married to other man. However, they continue to love their male lovers throughout their lives. This erotic element is one of the reasons why other forms of Hinduism belonging to the earlier Nimandi and Ramanadi

cults failed to gain popularity while Chaitanya Vaishnavism of Bengal gained legitimacy in Manipur over the years.

The dance compositions used in the structuring of the Ras-Leela have a close affinity with the dance patterns of the Lai Haraoba. The dance sequences like *laiching jagoi* and *yumsharol jagoi* are said to have deep influences in the dance compositions of the Ras-Leela (Premchand 2005: 129). In the *laipoula thaba* episode of Lai Haraoba, the *lai* is drawn out of the temple by the *amaibi* in the performance space through a dance sequence to witness the rituals performed by the ritual functionaries and community members. Following the trend, unlike in the other Indian Ras-Leela performance, the Ras-Leela in Manipur brings out the idols of Krishna and Radha out of the temple and places them at the centre of the performance space.

Following the movement of the *laipou* procession in the Lai Haraoba, the *gopis* move around the idols and dance, sing and talk to them. This idea of the animated souls of the deities believed to be in the midst of community participants, performing together with the souls of the deities, is conceptually based on that of the Lai Haraoba. As in the case of the *hoirou laoba* enacted before the *laipou* dances in the Lai Haraoba, Ras-Leela also begins with the usual *purvaranga* section of the Nata-Sankirtana. Just as the *hoirou laoba* is performed by male *pena* players, the *purvaranga* section of the Nata-Sankirtana is also performed by male singers. When the *purvaranga* ends, the *nata* singers leave the performance space and the Ras-Leela dance by female dancers begins immediately just as the *laipou* dance by the *amaibi* in the Lai Haraoba begins immediately after the *hoirou laoba*.

Another point of comparison concerns the *bhangi pareng achouba* in Maha Ras which also represents the formation of the human body in the

mother's womb. This sequence closely resembles the *hakchangsaba* in the Lai Haraoba. As mentioned above, Khumanlambam Yaima has strongly pointed out that the five *bhangi pareng* in Ras-Leela have been adapted from five types of *laipou* dance which were practiced during the time of King Bhagyachandra. It is also relevant here to remember what Faubion Bowers has said:

Bhangi [of Ras-Leela] derives originally from its counterpart in the Lai Haraoba. Its dance movements indicate the connection with the formation and awareness of the body as an instrument of pleasure shown in the Lai Haraobas. On Ras-Leela's plane of transport and ecstasy, the body is treated as an agent for adoration and worship through playful disport and through the duality of enticement and rejection.

(Bowers 1953: 139-40)

From such close observations, it becomes possible to speculate that almost all the sequences of the Lai Haraoba and Ras-Leela are similar and parallel, although their religious contexts are different. Commenting on the Ras-Leela innovated by King Bhagyachandra, Ibohal Singh (1963: 112) writes that the Ras-Leela is based on "the existing Lai Haraoba dance making improvement in technique or rhythmic movements to suit his [Bhagyachandra's] religious beliefs and to some extent in costume." Apart from all these structural similarities, as R.K. Achoubisana (2000) has explained, the costumes of Ras-Leela can also be regarded as the result of the process of stylization of the dresses of the *amaibi* in the Lai Haraoba. There are also resemblances to be found in the *gopis' potloi* (circular skirts) and *poshwan* (a thin cloth decorating the upper portion of *potloi*) with that of the *amaibi's phanek* (sarong); the *thabakyet* (cloth covering breast), *khwangyet* (waist-band) and *maikhum* (veil) are similar in both the dance traditions.

In order to fully appreciate the aesthetics of Ras-Leela, one has to engage with the Nata-Sankirtana, which is a significant constituent of the overall structure of Ras-Leela. Nata-Sankirtana is a musical ensemble of singers holding *kartal*⁹³ accompanied by *pungyeiba* (percussionists). The Nata-Sankirtana singers use their voices with operatic virtuosity having high, vibrant and falsetto tonalities. The Nata-Sankirtana performs as a *purvaranga* (prologue) before the dance performance of Ras-Leela and resumes again at the end of the performance when it functions as *antaranga* (epilogue).

It should be noted that some form of performance resembling the Nata-Sankirtana without its Hindu religious connotations was in existence in Manipur before the advent of Hinduism. *Anoirol* (Yaima 1973: 5) refers to the existence of a tradition of dancing accompanied by instrumental music as the blowing of conch, striking of cymbals called *taret senphang* and the beating of drum called *langden*.⁹⁴ It is important to note that another *puya* called *Thaloi Nongkhailon* has referred to the practice of congregational singing accompanied by instrumental music like that of the beating of cymbals called *taret senphang*.⁹⁵ Such a performance was identified as *hongba hongnemba* (Yaima 1973: 5) in the *puyas*; they were performed in death ceremonies, marriages, feasts and other social occasions. It is possible to speculate that *hongba hongnemba* has been replaced by Nata-Sankirtana, which has grown out of the interaction and synthesis of some indigenous art-forms represented in the Lai Haraoba like *pena phamsak* (a singing style with *pena*)

⁹³ A pair of copper cymbal percussion by holding in both the hands and clanging them in rhythm.

⁹⁴ *taret senphang* is a peculiar set of cymbals made out of bronze or copper coin-like materials. *Langden* is the traditional drum of the Meetei, also used in Lai Haraoba. Now *taret senphang* has been replaced by the *kartal*. Mention may also be made that the *kartal* in Manipur is made differently and has produced different soundscape and aesthetics having their own codified art of playing the instrument.

⁹⁵ Cited in Premchand, Nongthombam, *Rituals and Performances: Studies in Traditional Theatres of Manipur*, Imphal: Cultural Research Centre, 2005, p. 97.

and *khulang isei* (a popular form of folk song) having the same high, vibrant and falsetto tonalities.

The *purvaranga* in Ras-Leela performance starts with *raga achouba* (major raga) with the beating of the Meetei drum called *poong* with the sound “*ten ten tat ta tang*” repeated three times. Then the clanging of the *kartal* and the blowing of conches begin. The beating of drum and the pattern of rhythmic sounds constitute a language of art that symbolizes the entire process of building up the body which seems to emulate the construction of the human body within the larger sequence of *hakchangsaba* in the Lai Haraoba. The initial beats (a) *ten ten / ten ten ten / ten tak tadang*, (b) *khit ta / tak gin / khinta tak* (c) *khra khra / ten tak tat tan / tat tat tang*, each of which is repeated three times are supposed to build the figure of Lord Krishna in the middle of the performance space. After these drum beats, the *nata* singers begin to make very slow movements with their bodies, bowing their heads towards the centre where Lord Krishna is imagined to be sculpted with the *poong* beats. They then start singing with the rhythm “*ta ri ta / na ri / ta na ta na*”, which is repeated three times. Each syllable and sound accompanying the rhythmic beats refers to the different parts of the body: *ta* - chest, *ri* - navel, *ta* - waist, *na* - legs, *ri* - arms, *ta* - head, *na* - eyes and ears, *ta* - nose and finally *na* - face (Premchand 2005: 111). This intimate correspondence between these rhythmic beats and the building of the human is closely connected with the Lai Haraoba philosophy of *hakchangsaba* (making of the body).

The *puya Anoirol* also refers to a performance of dance and music which is located at a canopied place surrounded by white curtains and with a white cloth serving as a ceiling - *phingou setna noiye / phingou khanna noiye*

(dancing, wearing white dress / dancing, with white curtains around) (Yaima 1973: 21). It is hard to say whether Nata-Sankirtana and Ras-Leela are directly drawing on these words, but the reality is that they use white curtains in the *mise-en-scene* of the performance. Just as in Lai Haraoba, the four directions of the performance space of Ras-Leela are guarded by four Hindu gods. Ganesha is stationed at the north-eastern corner of the performance space, Keshava at the south-western corner, Ananta at the north-western corner, Maheswara at the south-eastern corner (Premchand 2005: 108).

An important point to be noted is that Bhagyachandra divided a day into eight sections, which correspond to various functions in the daily routine of Krishna. This sequence of eight divisions of the day with specified functions attached to it is known as *astakal*. Probably, this division may have some links with the Meetei time concept as discussed in Chapter 1, where I pointed out that a day is divided into 8 *yuthak*.⁹⁶ In order to look after the duties and functions attached to the eight divisions of a day, the king instituted more than ten departments called *loishangs*.

Unlike Natyashastra, the Nata-Sankirtana introduced by Bhagyachandra found its most beautiful and effective expressions when King Chandrakirti (1850-1886 A.D.) created and introduced Meetei's 64 *rasas*.⁹⁷ This is counter to the Indian Natyashastric tradition and aesthetics philosophy where it is commonly assumed that there are eight *rasas* designated in the Natyashastra to which the ninth *rasa* was added by Abhinavagupta (950 - 1016). Interestingly, if we look closely at King

⁹⁶ *Yuthak* is a unit of measuring time in Meetei tradition. 1 day = 8 *yuthak*; 1 *yuthak* = 8 *pung*; So, 1 day = 8×8=64 *pung*.

⁹⁷ The 64 *rasas* (the singing styles) is explained in detailed by Sougajam Thanil in his book *Rasa Humphumari Seisak* (The Songs of Sixty-four Rasas)

Chandrakirti's 64 *rasas*, they refer to distinctive styles of singing in Meetei traditions. This is potentially a misleading terminology because the aesthetic category of *rasa* has a different connotation in Sanskrit traditions.

According to A. V. Pandit (1954), Ras-Leela has a purer character than the other classical schools of dancing; he also claims that the form seems to be totally devoid of any foreign influence. Elaborating on his view, he emphasizes that the Ras-Leela exudes a lyrical quality which was directly inspired by the Vaishnava religion. Likewise, Angana Jhaveri in one of her article "*Ras-Leela: The Sacred Circle*" (1989: 42) calls attention to the inherent continuity of the 'sacred circle' in all the performance traditions like Lai Haraoba, Nata-Sankirtana, the diverse Ras-Leelas, *thabal chongba* (traditional folk dance) and *thang-ta* (martial art/sword dance), based on the formation of circular patterns.

REINVENTION OF LAI HARAOPA IN MODERN THEATRE

Having drawn on earlier forms of re-inventing the Lai Haraoba, where the process is organic and almost imperceptible, we now shift the narrative into the modern period where the techniques and effects of 'reinvention' are decidedly more emphatic.

The Theatre of Spectacle: Ratan Thiyam

Ratan Thiyam is one of the directors belonging to the proscenium-bound spectacle of the 'theatre of roots' agenda, which started in late 1970s. Suresh Awasthi (1918–2004), the then general secretary of the Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA) (1965-1975) and former chair of National School of Drama (NSD) (1984-1986) coined the term "theatre of roots", which was advocated

as a 'tradition-inspired', 'authentically Indian' theatre movement against the Western-inspired modern theatre movement in India (Awasthi 1985). Somewhat arbitrarily, he claimed that established artists like Habib Tanvir, B.V. Karanth, Ratan Thiyam and K.N. Pannikar were all practicing the 'Theatre of Roots' regardless of their individual styles and traditions.

Over the years, the category of the 'Theatre of Roots' has become some kind of a monolithic construct, which tends to be either loosely classified under a pan-Indian conception of 'Modern Indian Drama' or placed all too restrictively within the 'traditionalist' context ascribed to it by Awasthi. Such classifications are misleading, given that contemporary Indian theatre is extremely complex in its relations to modernity as well as to tradition, encompassing a wide variety, multiplicity and diversity of theatrical forms and practices that manifest the modern Indian nation's cultural heterogeneity rather than homogeneity.

Erin B. Mee (2008) offers a detailed, and, at times, persuasive argument, on the Theatre of Roots, which basically accepts Awasthi's premise that this movement's *raison d'être* is best understood against the hegemony of Western-inspired modern theatre in India. She argues for the use of traditional forms as a major step toward the decolonization of contemporary Indian theatre, but she ultimately falls short in articulating the complexities of any decolonizing process, which cannot be separated from economic and social forces, increasingly controlled by neo-colonial and neo-liberal forces within the larger context of globalization. At best, Mee acknowledges some of the problems of the modern Indian nation-state, especially in her discussion of the Sangeet Natak Akademi and other state institutions, but, at the same time, she maintains that the Theatre of Roots

movement has represented the single most significant attempt toward a decolonization of the Indian stage.

In a consistently non-critical register, Mee claims that this movement “challenged colonial culture by reclaiming the aesthetics of performance and by addressing the politics of aesthetics” (Mee 2008: 5). This would seem to imply that there have been no earlier experiments, as in the political theatre tradition of India, where aesthetics and politics have been dialectically linked. Assuming an anti-modernist stance, she argues that modern theatre not only was “developed as part of the colonial enterprise” (ibid: 2), but also initiated the commercial character of Indian performance, “turning theatre into a commodity rather than a community” (ibid: 2). If she could have followed the thrust of this argument, it would have been more appropriate for Mee to point out that the Theatre of Roots agenda has played into a larger neocolonial enterprise.

In studying the theatre of Ratan Thiyam, Mee observes that Thiyam’s “articulation and celebration of Meitei performance can be seen as a challenge to the SNA’s promotion of the theatre of roots as national culture” (ibid: 224). However, she fails to question the idioms of performance used by Thiyam which are predominantly Hindu Vaisnavite in their aesthetic thrust. In his early productions like *Karnabharam* (1979), *Urubhangam* (1981), *Chakravyuha* (1984) and *Uttar Priyadarshi* (1996), Thiyam primarily used Vaisnavite performative idioms, incorporating decorative elements, songs and music of the Vaisnavite Meitei. In an undeniably impressive way, Thiyam continues to fascinate audiences, both in India and worldwide, with the grace and style of his spectacular idiom. One could speculate that the use of Hindu Vaishnavite idioms supports the larger politics of “unity in

diversity” which makes government organizations like SNA (Sangeet Natal Academi) and ICCR (Indian Council for Cultural Research) foster work designed specifically for “cultural tourism” at national and international festivals. In this regard, Mee emphasizes an important point that “audiences in Delhi and New York assume that his political statement speaks more clearly to audiences in Imphal, while artists in Imphal claim that Thiyam does not speak to them and that his work is directed at audiences abroad” (ibid: 225). This phenomenon needs a critical analysis, which Mee singularly fails to provide. She needs to question why Thiyam’s staging, while being widely appreciated and admired by audiences abroad, fails to register at a more directly political level? Is it the mere ‘spectacular illusion’ which makes his staging so seductive, appreciated and admired? While there is much to admire in Thiyam’s craftsmanship, I would argue that his works lack the content which critically accentuates the pain, turmoil and contradictions of his own habitus. This is the criticism that he has faced by the theatre fraternity of Manipur as well as from other parts of India.

To complicate the argument, let us examine more recent political developments in Manipur, to which Thiyam seems to have adopted a more critical approach than his earlier experiments. In 2001, in an attempt to grapple with the crisis of insurgency, the central National Democratic Alliance (NDA)⁹⁸ government extended the territorial limits of the ceasefire which was negotiated between the Indian Army and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah) (henceforth NSCN (IM)). The people of Manipur were not happy with the decision of the Centre. While there have

⁹⁸ The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) is a centre-right coalition of political parties in India. At the time of its formation in 1998, it was led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and had thirteen constituent parties. Its honorary chairman is former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The coalition was in power from 1998 to 2004.

been numerous insurgencies in India's Northeast states, why was the ceasefire extended only in agreement with the NSCN (I-M)? Large parts of the Northeast, particularly Manipur, were rocked by violent protests against the Centre's decision. Manipuri people in particular were furious because they viewed the decision as a means of legitimizing the NSCN's demand for a 'Greater Nagalim' (or Greater Nagaland) comprising large parts of present-day Manipur's territory. There was a huge spontaneous protest from the people of Manipur on 18 June 2001, during which 18 people were killed in the Central Reserved Police Force (CRPF) firing. In response to this brutal incident, Thiyam relinquished the Padma Shri which had been conferred on him by the Government of India as a gesture of protest.

In the aftermath of this incident, Thiyam produced three plays in a series called the Manipur Trilogy - *Wahoudok* (Prologue), *Chinglon Mapal Tampak Ama* (Nine Hills, One Valley) and *Hey Nungshibi Prithivi* (My Earth, My Love). In all these plays, he predominantly adapted the idioms of the pre-Vaishnavite tradition, particularly Lai Haraoba. In 2006, just after the premiere of the play *Chinglon Mapal Tampak Ama* (Nine Hills, One Valley), I heard many audience members saying; "*Ratan hallakle*" (Ratan has come back). While this statement can be interpreted to mean that he has started doing plays on real issues afflicting Manipur, one needs to critically examine this phenomenon of 'coming back'. To my mind, we cannot simply say that he has 'come back' based merely on the basis of the stylization or sculpturesque quality of the traditional forms, particularly of the Lai Haraoba represented in the Trilogy. One needs to examine how traditional motifs and archetypes are being used to enhance the content of the play. In my reading, this use of pre-Vaishnavite performative elements amounted to another form of decorativism; the use of images was not adequately critical

in terms representing the tensions, turmoil and contradictions that Manipur has been plagued with in recent times.

The play *Nine Hills One Valley*, for instance, is simply an essentialization of certain Meetei myths whose relevance and construction are not even questioned. The play begins in darkness with the meditative sound of the *pena*. When the stage lights up, many broken *chhatras*⁹⁹ (traditional decorated flag poles) seen lying scattered on the floor. From the left, seven old women enter one after another. They bring along the ritual objects of *saroi khangba*¹⁰⁰ (a Lai Haraoba ritual performed to appease the evil spirits) and place these objects in order, as stipulated in the ritual, on a spotlight marked on the stage. Then, the women start chanting. In the tradition of Lai Haraoba, the chant refers to the guardianship of the four respective directions represented by the Gods – Thangjing, Marjing, Wangbren and Koubru representing the south-west, the north-east, the south-east and the north-west, respectively.

The chant also provides references to the nine *laibungthou* (gods) and seven *lainura* (goddesses), who are believed to have created the *anoi* dance in the creation of the earth which I have discussed in Chapter 1. It also refers to other evil supernatural beings to whom delicacies are offered by these women. Through this offering, the seven old women try to propitiate the evil supernatural beings to leave their land. After completing their ritual duty, the old women shout triumphantly and make an offering of a dance recital. They leave the stage dancing all the while with the lights fading out. Thus,

⁹⁹ *Chhatras* are traditional decorated flag poles erected at the *laibung* (the Meetei temple courtyard).

¹⁰⁰ *Saroi khangba* is an elaborate ritual performed to appease and ward of evil spirits. This ritual is also a part of Lai Haraoba.

the play begins with the reconstruction of a ritual episode of Lai Haraoba called *saroi khangba* with a powerful acoustic musical sounds and an effective lighting design.

In the next scene, four mothers run helter-skelter in different parts of the stage to call for their sons, while their sons are seen to be running to save their lives. The four mothers scream, “*eechasa, imagi ithanungda younanaba chellak-uu lao*” (Come running my sons to reach my bosom, run faster). They advise their sons to be cautious about their lives and to struggle against all odds. The children walk with unsteady steps supported by their mothers. The mothers pray to the supreme Ibuthou¹⁰¹ (Taibang Panba Mapu) and call upon the seven *maichous*¹⁰² (wise men) who have faded into oblivion. The hapless mothers wail and plead to the *maichous*, beseeching them to save their children amidst chaos. The mothers and their children then leave the stage.

In the next scene, the *maichous* are seen sleeping on stage. They wake up gradually, disturbed by a worrying dream and bad omen. They wake up to interpret the dreams and recognize the crisis that haunts the land, but then they go to sleep again. In their dream, they see many *gopis*¹⁰³ performing the *bhangi* sequence (circular pattern) of the Ras-Leela. The demon called Matam (Time) amputates the hands of the *gopis* performing the intricate dance movements at the wrists and throws them away. Then the amputated hands start dancing. This is achieved effectively through the visualization of the amputated hands with red threads symbolizing blood. The frightened

¹⁰¹ *Ibuthou* means forebear, often refers to the supreme God Taibang Panba Mapu.

¹⁰² The seven *maichous* (wise men) are Lourembam Khongnangthaba, Gonok Thengra, Langol Lukhoi, Moirang Lalhanba, Debi Pa, Kharam Thadoi and Shamouou Chikhong. The mythical beliefs among the Meetei is that these wise men, who are the pillars of knowledge, will be reborn again and heal all the problems of the state.

¹⁰³ Companions and devotees of Lord Krishna.

Matam starts laughing in astonishment. The *gopis*, with their amputated hands, continue to dance. Symbolically, the story of the fall of the country is presented effectively in this scene. While it reveals the rich repertoire of rhythms, postures and gestures, the rude and brutal disruption by Matam, appearing as a demon that slashes the dancing wrists, symbolizes the destruction of art and culture.

In the next scene, the seven *maichous* wake up again to see their dreams turning to a horrible reality. The wise men are disheartened to find that their beloved land has been transformed so ruthlessly while they had been asleep. Time has almost devoured their children along with all their cultural traditions. The *maichous* move around holding sticks adorned with the serpent-dragon Pakhangba's symbols on their right hands and the rolled reed mats (which they were sleeping on) in their left hands. One *maichou* asserts that the footsteps of *bhangis* are borrowed from seven *thengous* of *thangta* and the hand movements are derived from the Lai Haraoba dance like *champra okpi*, *champra khaibi*, *lashing kappi* and *khujeng leibi*. They emphasize that this derivation was under the leadership of King Chingthangkomba alias Bhagyachandra with the consultation of wise men. It has been named Ras, a combination of many *rasas*.

The *maichous* then reminisce of the beautiful verses like *yakairol*, *naheiol*, *mingkheiol* and *leigi leirol* sung to the accompaniment of the *pena*. They lament the disappearance of beautiful orchids and flowers which were used for embellishments. They also lament the shrinking spaces of traditional art forms like Khongjom Parva, Lairik Haiba Thiba, Waree Liba, Khutlang Isei, Bashok and Moirang Sai. Following this choric lament, the *maichous* leave riding on horses.

What follow is a contemporary dramaturgical intervention of modern people dressed in suits and caps, four of them, slowly entering the stage from the left wing and walking towards the right. The *maichous* are once again seen to be seated on the stage. These four individuals read aloud from newspapers - the news of genocide, political instability, venality, unemployment and extortion by unlawful elements around the world. Crying in unison on hearing terrible news, the *maichous* then come forward to protect and save people from their misery.

In the next scene, the *maichous* call upon the celestial nymphs and the mothers to help them write a new book of knowledge drawing upon the ancient scholars, ancestors and *ojhas* (preceptors/mentors), who had been the pillars of wisdom. As they complete their book that contains the wisdom of freedom, peace, religion, politics, economics, human rights and duties for the present times, a deity emerges from the water in the form of a *hiyang hiren* (the traditional dragon boat) and carries away the seven *maichous* who leave behind the book of knowledge for the younger generation.

In the epilogue, mothers relate to their children their past history and the undesirable changes that have taken place in the present. They sing a lullaby to console their children and plead with the *maichous* to return. Lamps are lit on the hill tops and in the valley to enlighten and remind people of their past glory to bring back the peaceful days once again.



Picture 5.1 The last scene of *Nine Hills One Valley* in which the mothers sing a lullaby to console their children. (Credit – Chorus Repertory Theatre, Imphal).

As it is only too evident from this play, the overall narrative is highly simplistic in its predominantly moralistic reading of an essentially hopeless situation. In this play, Thiyam with his mesmerizing theatrical idiom uses costumes of pre-Vaishnavite Meetei, particularly from the Lai Haraoba. While writer Tayenjam Bijoykumar (2016) writes that Thiyam has shown his mastery over the archaic Meeteilon through his Manipur Trilogy, one needs to question the relevance and validity of representing archaic Meeteilon in the context of contemporary reality. We cannot simply turn to an ‘archaic’ language because of its beautiful diction or appropriate its elements to create stylized effects; we need to question its political relevance and possibilities of (mis)interpretation.

One vivid image from Lai Haraoba that Thiyam has spectacularly designed is the riding of the *hiyang hiren* boat by the seven *maichous*, which is

led by an image of Pakhangba. This spectacle visualizes the *hijan hirao* sequence of Lai Haraoba. The seven *maichous* carry sticks with the icons of Pakhangba on the top of the sticks and reed mats which were used as their props throughout the play. In this sequence, the sticks of the seven *maichou* become oars and an actor wearing the head-gear of Pakhangba becomes the frontal view of the boat. This can be regarded as a visual innovation and reconstruction of *hijan hirao*. In the context of the Lai Haraoba, *Hijan hirao* is a ritual poem, animating the performative act of *hiyang tannaba* (royal boat race) with the intense core beliefs in the fertility of the earth and the cosmos. In contrast, the *maichous* in the play leave riding the traditional dragon boat *hiyang hiren* leaving behind some knowledge for the prosperity and peaceful existence of society.

While watching the play, I was left hungering for content, for some link to our immediate realities that emphasizes the tensions, turmoil and contradictions that we live in, particularly the political tensions between communities belonging to the hills and the valley. Today, categories like 'hill' and 'valley' have become more than geographical or administrative categories. These categories have evolved to define specific ethnic and tribal identities. Thiyam's play, although named as *Nine Hills One Valley*, fails to address these issues of burning political reality. Rather, he emphasizes the existing territorial boundary of Manipur, mainly upheld by the Meetei, without much concern for other communities' political assertions. In the entire play, the present crisis is blamed upon the demon, which is Time (Matam).

However, there is no indication, either through the allegorical or symbolical representation of the real demons afflicting Manipur today,

which would include the imperiousness of the Indian state in the form of the act like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), armed conflicts, ethnic tensions, the unseen omnipotent might of the Indian state or the deteriorating politics of the civil society or the corrupt politicians and bureaucrats. To simply assume that it is 'Time' which brings all the sufferings in the land is a simplistic reading of a complex political crisis in the state.

Therefore what we see in *Nine Hills One Valley* is a spectacle of a pristine geography in which the visual impact of nine hills are presented using the exotic long reed mats symbolizing nine hills. This is a mere decoration which does little in questioning the political contradictions of the territorial contestations among various ethnic communities in Manipur. In a way, the play resonates with what Bharucha (1993: 208) has rightly pointed out while criticizing his earlier production of *Chakravyuha* where "grief is so beautifully modulated." This is the problem in *Nine Hills One Valley* where the political critique is numbed by these trappings and the invocation of an 'authentic past', which simply fails to convince within the urgency of contemporary needs and realities. What resonates in the final analysis is Thiyam's craftsmanship of the proscenium with the trappings of ethnicity and myths surrounding Lai Haraoba.

Coming back to the reinventions of Lai Haraoba as examined in this section, we observed that Thiyam draws on a predominantly spectacular and exotic use of the Lai Haraoba. He dramatizes the episodes of Lai Haraoba like *saroi khangba* and *hijan hirao* in an essentially decorative manner, combining sophisticated craftsmanship with acoustic musical sounds to mesmerize audiences, both at home and abroad. In the next section, we shall

provide a different use of Lai Haraoba elements by director Heisnam Kanhailal. Kanhailal's adaptation is more focused on the psycho-physical principles of Lai Haraoba, which I would like to demonstrate through productions like *Pebet* (1975), *Memoirs of Africa* (1985) and *Dakhgar* (2006).

Psycho-physical Principles of Lai Haraoba: Heisnam Kanhailal

In this section, I attempt to explore the reinvention of psycho-physical principles of Lai Haraoba in the plays of Heisnam Kanhailal (1941-2016). Kanhailal does not advertise his ethnicity through the creation of exotic spectacles in the tradition of 'theatre of roots'. Instead, Kanhailal asserts his culture differently without commodifying folk and rural performance traditions. At this point it would be useful to examine how Kanhailal's theatre has emerged from the cultural resources of his world. Significantly, the instinctive and almost dreamlike quality of his acting method and training (Bharucha 1992: 21) are outcomes of those organic principles of life so perceptible in Lai Haraoba and other performative traditions of Manipur. The actions and gestures of his theatre are mainly shaped by the rhythms of a predominantly agricultural society.

Moreover, there is a strong emphasis placed on *noiba* (movement), a concept predominant in Lai Haraoba, which I have extensively discussed in Chapter 1, in his theatre training and rehearsal process.¹⁰⁴ Apart from these daily rituals which have entered the training process of his actors, Kanhailal stresses the fluidity of movement and a sense of continuity. He suggests that just as ripple of waves continue, movements can never stop. Even when they

¹⁰⁴ I was closely associated with Heisnam Kanhailal for almost eight years (2008-2016). During this time, I had come across Kanhailal using the word *noiba* in daily practice and rehearsal. By *noiba*, he meant to suggest an animated subtle body movement or the fluidity of movement like the ripple of waves.

are broken, the inner pulse of movement continues.¹⁰⁵ Given such a pre-performative assumption, it is not surprising that Kanhailal's actors display organic movements and gestures in their performance.

The training of Kanhailal's actors has emerged to a large degree from the physical culture of Manipur. As it is perceptible in his theatre practice, Kanhailal acknowledges:

Taking the premise of the psycho-physical exercises we learnt from Badal Sircar, we have continued to evolve new exercises – physical, vocal and mental. As renowned authorities in their respective disciplines, we are bound to acknowledge the guidance of Guru Gourakishore Sharma and Guru Ebotombi Singh (Thang-ta); Ema Yumshang Maibi, Guru Achoubisana and Pundit Kullachandra (Maibi ritual performance and Lai Haraoba); Oja Achou and Oja Manglem (Moirang Parva – folk operatic theatre); Prof. Nilakanta (Manipuri art and culture); Oja K. C. Tensuba (Vipasana meditation); as well as other scholars and practitioners who have given us the opportunity to interact and communicate with them, over the years.

(Kanhailal 2016: 37)

Apart from learning all these traditional arts, the everyday physical disciplines of the practitioners (predominantly Meetei) also contribute to the theatre of Kanhailal. This extends to the body decorum that is to be found in the codes and rituals of everyday life. For instance, it is common that younger people prostrate themselves in front of their elders thereby demonstrating a respect for social hierarchy through such gestures. Prostration is also a spiritual discipline in Meetei tradition. The act has often traditionally been an important part of civil, religious and traditional rituals

¹⁰⁵ In most of Kanhailal's actor's exercises of rhythm, movement and voice, I have noticed that the exercises do not end abruptly, but slow down till it continues to get absorbed inside the body. He always recommended, to use his own phrase, "take it inside the body" (*hakchang manungda pusillo*).

and ceremonies. One can see three major forms of prostration in Meetei society – full prostration, half prostration and slight bend.

In the full prostration, the whole body is stretched out on the ground. The spinal column and breathing play an important role in stretching out the body. In this prostration, the descending and ascending movements of the body are almost like a wave flowing. In the half prostration, the knee kneels down and the upper part of the body above the knee prostrates with the hands touching the ground. This is a common practice in the daily ritual worship at home, once early morning and once in the evening. The last type of prostration in which the body slightly bends and walks is a common practice in any social gathering of the Meeteis. One can observe that the walking in this posture is automatically rhythmic. Kanhailal extensively uses this walking style creatively in many of his plays – for instance, in the three *ojha* (teachers) walking rhythmically in *Tamnalai* and the three soldiers walking in the play *Draupadi* in the ‘combing operation’¹⁰⁶ scene. These can be regarded as reinventions or physical elaborations of a traditional walking style.

In many of his psycho-physical training exercises, Kanhailal focused on an awareness of differing body weights – for instance, the heaviness and lightness of the body while walking. One of its richest manifestations is to be found in the martial arts tradition of Thang-ta, which has served as a source of inspiration for many of Kanhailal's exercises. Kanhailal always advised his actors, “Try to see with your ears. Try to hear with your eyes”. This central principle of Thang-ta has inspired Kanhailal's actors to develop a

¹⁰⁶ Combing operation or combined operation is a joint operation done by allies of paramilitary force for cleansing an area. It is understood as a low intensity warfare.

'simultaneity of perceptions' (Bharucha 1992: 25) and to focus on acquiring total balance and developing the fullest awareness of one's reflexes.

In a different context of the South Indian martial art of *kalarippayattu*, Phillip B. Zarrilli uses the phrase "when the body becomes all eyes" in order to signify the state of mind/being of the martial practitioner at the moment he wields his sword to kill (Zarrilli 1998: 201). Zarrilli asserts that the existential moment of striking the sword is the moment when the practitioner should "ideally be 'doubtless,' have mental courage, possess 'mental power' and thus attain a state of transformative fury" (ibid: 201-2). While this is what the martial artists aspire as they practice to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state, Kanhailal stresses the importance of 'perceptions' in actors. This also comes through in the concept of *nung pan phaonaba* (which literally means the communication between inner and outer) - the organic flow of energy between the outer and inner self of the body - which Kanhailal constantly used to call attention to in his interaction with actors during the pre-performative exercises.

In order to understand some psycho-physical aspects of Kanhailal, let us examine the play *Memoirs of Africa* (1985). In the first scene of the play, *Mee* (literally means "human", as enacted by Sabitri) is "crouched on the floor centre-stage like a seed, waiting to flower" (Bharucha 1992: 80). The two Nupi (women) enter with flowing and sensuous movements with sliding motions of their feet and a slight sway of their hips. With their hands flowing, they sing "he ui iiiii iiiiii/ he ui i i i i i / he ee u iiiii ii i." On the first syllable of the song - *he* - the Nupi jerk their shoulders to accentuate the rhythm. On the last vibrations of the song they draw their hands to the navel. This first episode of the play has many psycho-physical elements borrowed

from the Lai Haraoba traditions. Firstly, the song is sung in a style inspired by the *thawai mi kouba*, which is a chant sung by the *amaibas* (priests) during Lai Haraoba rituals and other occasions. The *amaibas* pulsate with sound energies that attempt to call back the soul, and thereby restore order and peace in a person's being.

Aesthetically, the song carries hypnotic powers of mimesis associated with various myths in the Meetei worldview. To reiterate, the Meeteis believe in the 'multiplicity of souls.' Besides the five souls formed by the five basic elements (ether, wind, water, earth and fire), they include a sixth one in the form of *mi* (shadow/reflection). Among the Meeteis, *mi* is regarded as the most loyal companion of a person mostly because it never deserts the body until death. So an *amaiba* performs *thawai mi kouba* (to invoke *thawai* [soul] not to leave the body) on various occasions – for instance – after the birth of a baby, on the spot of an accident, when a person is ill, bad dreams, etc. When an *amaiba* performs the *thawai mi kouba* ritual, he prays for the five souls and the *mi* to take its proper place inside the body. In a different mode, this ritual is used in Kanhailal's adaptation of Tagore's *Dakghar* to reawaken the spirit of Amal in the play.

Returning to the opening sequence of *Memoirs of Africa*, it should be pointed out that an important element in rendering this song is the jerk of the shoulders of the Nupi on the first syllable of the song. This jerk is inspired by Meetei concept of *ehool* which can be translated as 'heartbeat' or 'impulse'; it appears to mimic the jerk of the *penakhongba's* (*pena* player) shoulders while playing *pena*. *Ehool* contains both a beat and an added off-beat. In rhythmic terms, it is akin to the sound of a beating heart. This can be counted as, 'One-and-two,' or as 'One-two-three and four.' In metaphoric

terms, it can be interpreted as a 'moment of release.' When a water droplet falls from the tip of a wet leaf, it falls exactly the same way as the impulse of *ehool*. The use of *ehool* in producing sounds can also be observed in Sabitri's cries of 'te ... tu' in the play *Pebet* and 'ma...ho' in *Draupadi*. In Kanhailal's acting technique, the principles of *ehool* are integral in the execution of body movement and the use of sound from different resonators of the body.



Picture 5.2 A scene representing the execution of intricate *ehool* in chorus from the play *Pebet* (1975) directed by Heisnam Kanhailal (Credit - Kalakshetra Manipur Archives, Imphal).

Let us examine a pre-performative voice exercise of his theatre called 'an infant's cry' in order to understand how sounds are produced from different resonators of the body. In this exercise, the actors lie on the floor on their back in a comfortable position, relaxing their body. They take a deep breath and learn to produce the sound 'ha' from their *chaning* (lower abdomen). Then, 'ah' sound from their *thabak* (chest), 'ang' from their *nakhang*

(nasal ridge) and 'anh' from their *lawai lemphu* (top of the head). They start at a slow pace and later speed up, increasing the pace bit by bit along with the breath and *ehool* (impulse).

After they learn to produce all four sounds separately, they practice saying them together as one. Thus, *ha + ah + ang + anh = hang-ngah* (the sound of an infant's cry). Then they gradually slow down to come to normalcy. Then they take another deep breath and exhale it to complete the exercise. They take care that the breathing process and the *ehool* (impulse) of the muscles are in rhythm. However, Heisnam Tomba¹⁰⁷ always instructs the actors in the beginning of this exercise, "Voice cannot be produced just from the abdomen or the top of your head or any other place. But with the power of your *indri* (body strength/energy) and mind, you learn to feel it from the body parts."

In the next episode of the play *Memoirs of Africa*, Sabitri (Mee) begins to dance out the *hakchangsaba* (making of the body) dance. Rustom Bharucha has described this episode as a process of 'self-awareness' as Mee enters a "process of consciousness as she becomes aware of the various parts of her body" (ibid: 80). However, one can recognize this dance as a reinvention of the *hakchangsaba* dance. Sabitri doesn't dance the whole episode of *hakchangsaba* in the play. She symbolically identifies only the major body parts and not the sixty-four body parts in the actual *hakchangsaba* sequence as described in Chapter 3. In the play, this dance is used to create Mee (human), but, at the same time, it can be read as a process of consciousness

¹⁰⁷ Heisnam Tomba is a son of Heisnam Kanhailal. He has been a collaborator with his father-mentor Heisnam Kanhailal in developing an actor's training methodology involving exercises for breath, body, voice and mind. He had also assisted Heisnam Kanhailal in conducting various theatre workshops across India and abroad.

and self-awareness. After this dance, while Mee stands fully conscious and ready to grow, the Nupi who keep chanting the same song from the beginning of the play, change their tune. They begin to sing with more energy and a slightly faster tempo. While encircling Mee, they sing “*ri e ri e ri e re/ri e ri e ri e ri/ri e ri e ri e re/ri e ri.*” This song is another reinvention of the vibratory sounds of the *pena* which haunts the Lai Haraoba tradition. The sound has an almost primordial effect which evokes the act of creation.

Another psycho-physical element borrowed from Lai Haraoba in the play *Memoirs of Africa* is the trance of Mee in the last scene after Mee has been subjected to the oppression of Mimanu.¹⁰⁸ In the play, when the Nupi call from off-stage *ha-hoi/ha-hoi*, Mee jerks her body with violent gestures. In one spot she begins to dance with strong, convulsive gestures and stamping feet. She stretches her hand abruptly, shaking her entire body in tune to her chant *ha ha ha ha ho ei ee ha ha ha ha*. This technique of vibrating the entire body can also be seen in exercises created by Kanhailal. One can see this shaking of body in the trance-like states of possession experienced by the *amaibi* dancing in a wild manner in Lai Haraoba, during which state she also voices oracular predictions. In the play, Kanhailal uses this psycho-physical act to convey Mee’s convulsive rage following the renewal of Mee’s energy and assertion of total freedom. Then, at a climactic moment, Mee becomes exultant, oblivious of oppression and pain. The important point of this vibratory movement is its source of energy, which is derived from the contact of the toes (the heels up) with the earth.

We have, thus, observed that Kanhailal uses psycho-physical elements from Lai Haraoba and other performance traditions in order to create

¹⁰⁸ Characters in the play who are personifications of evil. Mimanu are those who cannot be destroyed but are capable of destroying.

different dramaturgies. He has perfected over the years a non-verbal dramaturgy in order to assert his concepts and political ideas. While acknowledging his artistry skills, it is also important to question for whom he creates his plays. While his earlier plays were performed primarily in Manipur, his later plays after *Pebet* have been staged mostly outside Manipur. After Kanhailal became a national figure in the theatre fraternity, he hardly staged his plays in Manipur.

While, on the other hand, the pre-expressive principles in his actor-training process are predominantly derived from the physical culture and performance tradition of Manipur, I have observed that his pre-performative exercises do not always appear to work for actors from other parts of the world, unlike their palpable effect on Manipuri actors, and, to some extent, the Rabhas of Assam and Tripuri actors of Tripura. This is not to deny the artistic power in his theatre production. No doubt, Kanhailal works in his own physical culture to create his own theatre idioms. However, one must also acknowledge that Kanhailal, unlike Ratan Thiyam, never duplicates the movement pattern from Lai Haraoba, *natasankirtana* or *thang-ta*. Rather, he transforms these patterns into his own physical language creating a new dramaturgy. Kanhailal (2016: 29) himself has asserted, “We do not become blind and romantic when exposed to the exotic and spectacular forms of our tradition. Instead, we become conscious of the continuity of tradition which lies in its spirit and not in its form.” This statement can be regarded as an appropriate testimony of his aesthetics and performance practice.

Harao Segonnabi: Staging Lai Haraoba

In recent times, the dances of Lai Haraoba have been staged for audiences outside Manipur. It was in the 1970s that the Government Dance College and

Jawaharlal Nehru Manipuri Dance Akademi in Manipur which initiated the creation of staged performances of Lai Haraoba. This movement was inspired by the contractual agreement between the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi that a certain number of recitals needed to be presented each season in order to demonstrate the academic achievement of the students. From the 1950s through the 1970s, innovative stage productions and new forms of Manipuri ballet were created. The initial success of these productions is generally attributed to the guidance of inspired individuals, including the famous dancer and choreographer Rajkumar Priyogopalsana and art connoisseur and writer Maharaj Kumari Binodini Devi. These popular cultural programs, which were mostly eclectic assemblage of different items like *leima jagoi*, *khamba thoibi jagoi*, *pung cholom*, *thang-ta*, *ras leela*, etc. reached their peak in the mid-1970s when academy troupes traveled throughout India and also abroad to Australia, Europe, Japan, the United States and America. These were some of the first occasions in which Lai Haraoba dances and music were seen and heard outside of their actual ritual setting in Manipur.

Such staged and college recital performances contain no rituals and are performed purely for the entertainment value. One of the most interesting contradictions is that the staged performances are technically refined for entertainment purposes in order to meet the standards of professional theatre. This is because the academies and colleges have the expert advice and demonstration of the learned *ojas* who are not always available to guide local communities in their rural village setting. What must be recognized is that both types of dances in the ritual context and staged performances of Lai Haraoba have their own significance. It is important to stress that the experiments in staging the Lai Haraoba are very much part of

the sponsorship of Sangeet Natak Akademi and Jawaharlal Nehru Manipuri Dance Akademi. While most of these productions can be regarded as reproductions of the Lai Haraoba, *Harao Segonnabi* (Divine Songs and Dances of Rejoicing, 2011), a ballet choreographed and directed by Mayanglambam Mangangsana¹⁰⁹ encapsulates and re-invents the myth of Kanglei Haraoba in a one-hour spectacle designed for the proscenium stage for a predominantly non-Manipuri audience.

This performance was first staged at Bheigyachandra Open Air Theatre (BOAT) during the Manipur Sangai Festival in the year 2011 as an opening event. Later, it was performed in various cities of India and abroad. Interestingly, this production re-interprets Lai Haraoba as a celebration of love. It is an artistic creation based on a popular myth adopted from the Kanglei Haraoba. While in the actual Haraoba, Nongpok-Ningthou and Panthoipi are assumed to be omnipresent in the midst of the Haraoba, in *Harao Segonnabi*, the story of Nongpok Ningthou-Panthoipi is enacted on stage incorporating songs and dances of Lai Haraoba.

In the actual Lai Haraoba, there is one episode on the last day of the Haraoba called Tangkhul Nurabi, which has been described in detail in Chapter 3. It is indeed an interesting ritual drama enacting the mythical story of the meeting of two mythical lovers Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi. While it is believed that Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi are omnipresent in Lai Haraoba, it is in this episode that Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi have been impersonated and came into a visual form through

¹⁰⁹ Mayanglambam Mangangsana is a well-known *penakhongba*. He is the artistic director of a performing art group called LAIHUI which has been promoting the art of *pena* in the region. He is also a recipient of Sangeet Natak Akademi.

characterizations. However, *Harao Segonnabi* is not a recreation of this particular episode of Tangkhul Nurabi as discussed in chapter 3.

In fact, *Harao Segonnabi*, by using the songs of Lai Haraoba and recreating the dances, brings out a different interpretation of Lai Haraoba through an enactment of the Nongpok-Ningthou and Panthoipi's love story as described in detail in Chapter 1, when we discussed the text *Panthoipi Khongul*. This performance has all the aspects of an enactment of play including dialogue, songs, music, acting and dances.

In the *mise-en-scene* of the performance, certain conventions of traditional operas or musical dramas like that of Moirang Kangleirol (also known as Moirang Parva) are evident in the performance. The use of songs, dance and mime along with brief passages in highly stylized speech are the dominant features of this production. Dance movements are used during dialogue or song passages as a conventionalized gesture language. Dance and mime are also freely used as a visual segment of the story itself. Musical instruments consisting of the *pena*, *langde*, *sembung* (cymbal) and *wakton-tharo* (side-blown flute) are used as the accompanying orchestra. Humour and wit are also present in the performance executed through songs and mime. Romance and other secular aspects of Meetei life are freely incorporated in this performance. The stage design is simple divested of heavy props and dominated by a ramp on the rear end of the stage where the musicians are seated.



Picture 5.3 A scene of *Harao Segonnabi* (2011) directed by Mayanglambam Mangangsana (Credit - LAIHUI, Imphal).

The performance starts with a chorus of twelve female performers dancing slowly with their hands flowing and singing “*ri ra ri ri/ri ra ra ri ri/ri ra ra ri ri/ri ra ri ri ri*” to the accompaniment of the *pena*. Then they began to dance faster with the drum beat of *langde* (traditional drum) and *pena*. Unlike in the actual Lai Haraoba, the *chumsa jagoi* is presented here in different way with the jerks of the hands and shoulders punctuating the *ehool* (impulse) of the *pena*. Dancing together, the twelve female dancers pair themselves into groups of six and continue to dance simulating the act of love-making.

It is interesting to note that even if the dance is a reinvention of the *amaibi* dance in *laipou jagoi*, the dramaturgy here gives a new meaning to the act of love-making. The play through gestures, smiles, and dramatic movement between the partners while dancing is evident. It is this play of gestures which transforms the dance into a dramatic form. The arm gestures

and facial expressions of the dancers accompanying twists and turns of the body are erotic. The *pena* music ranging from mildly sensual melodies to highly erotic ones punctuated by the drum beats of *langde* are equally titillating. The dancers dance playfully to the rhythm. Then they slow down their pace gently.

While they prostrate themselves on the ground, Nurabi (Panthoipi in disguise) played by Mangka Mayanglambam,¹¹⁰ enters the stage and prostrates herself directly in front of the audience. She then sings the invocation song to the presiding deity and his consort to endow prosperity to the community and to ensure that no calamity shall afflict the hill tribes and valley dwellers. She asks the hill tribes and valley dwellers to plough the field together. Then they sing the *loutarol* (invocation of rice spirit) and the *louyan isei* (song of cultivation) - "it is father's field, they should hoe it; it is grandfather's field, they should hoe it" - and dance to the rhythm.

While they are at work, Nongpok-Ningthou, played by Amaibi Tondon, enters the stage singing and miming the search for Panthoipi. Then Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoipi sing the *paosa* love song in the form of riddles. The exchange riddles, sexual pranks and romantic descriptions of each other's physical beauty, thereby highlighting the dramatic interplay between the two characters. The speech pattern is in a resonant falsetto, imitating the typical traditional way of dialogue delivery, with an attempt at versification and refined declamatory qualities.

Nongpok Ningthou asks where he can find Panthoipi. To which Panthoipi responds playfully, "Do not go to the north-west, it is ruled by

¹¹⁰ Mangka Mayanglambam (21 years old) is a popular singer of Manipur in the tradition of *pena* singing style. She is the daughter of Mangangsana Mayanglambam.

Koubru; do not go to the south-east, it is the land of Wangbren; do not go to north-east, it is the land ruled by Marjing; nor should you go to the south-west, it is the land of Thangjing. Come straight in the middle. Let us meet in the centre. We shall eat and dine together and tie the love-knot.” Then Panthoipi sings with her chorus friends merrily to the news that Nongpok Ningthou is coming in search of her. The song also describes the beauty of *sorarel* (the sky) which is an indication of good news.

Nongpok Ningthou then enacts the struggle on the way to find Panthoipi. He enacts the act of taming a horse and then riding it. The real source of theatrical pleasure is accentuated by the enactment of this act. The tempo of the drumming and dancing from slow and delicate to quick and vigorous movements accentuates the theatricality of the performance. The intense gestures of *mukna* (wrestling) steps employed in the dramatization of taming a horse intensify the theatricality. Later, Nongpok Ningthou expresses the agony of not finding Panthoipi. Then he goes offstage in search of Panthoipi. Subsequently, Panthoipi and her friends sing the *Panthoipi seisak* describing the sunset. While they are singing, Nongpok Ningthou joins them dancing. Panthoipi sings that it is too late and that he should return to his abode. Then they sing the *paosa* song (exchange of love riddles), dancing and miming. While Panthoipi urges Nongpok Ningthou to go back, Nongpok Ningthou retorts he shall never go back alone. Then they decide to elope. Finally, they elope and live together happily. The tale ends with a brief denouement which suggests that ‘henceforth they lived together’, by which we may surmise that marriage as an important function of civilization has been deployed.

Thus, the final episode is completed by worshipping the pair – Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoipi, followed by the entire chorus dancing, miming the planting of seeds, the transplantation of seedlings, nurturing the paddy and harvesting (*loutarol*), making of the house (*yumsarol*), grabbing/calling of soul (*longkhon jagoi*), driving away the bad spirits (*thang katpa*), accompanied by respective songs drawn from the Kanglei Haraoba. Then the paddy harvest is offered to the presiding deity. The entire rite is then rounded off with a rapturous dance to please the deity. The dance incorporates other facets of the vigorous life of the Meeteis such as *mukna* (wrestling), *kangjei* (hockey) and races. In this latter part, the looseness of the structure of the play, its lack of stylization in form and the non-formal quality of dances suggests the evocation of antiquity in the play.

Harao Segonnabi is a creative presentation of Kanglei Haraoba in terms of an attempt to narrate the dramaturgy underlying the Haraoba. While *Harao Segonnabi* is an aesthetically spectacular performance, one is compelled to question the social and political implications of this evocation of antiquity. Such increasing of the staging of Lai Haraoba could be read as an impact of Meetei revivalism. One can also read this performance as showcasing identity. Today it seems that people of Manipur prefer to watch more Lai Haraoba items than the Vaishnavite performances. This brings into question the changing perception of Meetei worldview.

While some of these productions can be discussed in terms of how the “mindless simplification of forms” (Bharucha 1990: 208) leads to the “decontextualization of tradition” (ibid: 208) in the modern theatre practice today, the reinventions of the Lai Haraoba can also be studied in relation to three inter-related techniques - packaging, showcasing and sanitization –

which are part of the decontextualization process. These three techniques are aimed at making the reinvented productions palatable and attractive for their prospective consumers who may not be acquainted with or interested in the ritual contexts of the Lai Haraoba. In its context-sensitive form, the performances of Lai Haraoba may have rough edges which need to be smoothed out for entertainment purposes in the professional theatre tradition; ritual performance traditions are not determined entirely by the priorities of entertainment. Again, the content of the Lai Haraoba may be so embedded in its original context that it may not be 'translatable' for an outside viewer and demands to be viewed within its own contextuality reality; a re-invention of the Lai Haraoba, on the other hand, assumes a certain notion of 'translatability' which may not be accountable at the levels of context and ritual practice.

While these reinventions are geared towards building new audiences and exploring new performative environments, they also stimulate the process of commodification. Commodification is vigorously debated by those that welcome it as a necessary contribution towards the enhancement of artists' livelihood, and by those who critique it as a destructive process that succeeds in cosmeticizing the past. This chapter examines the process of commodification in terms of exploitation, fetishization as well as the possible benefits of educating larger audiences through the Lai Haraoba. However, a number of ethical questions remain to be answered as to who owns the cultural property surrounding Lai Haraoba and who are the beneficiaries of the profits gained from its emergent market value in the global performance circuit. The next section will deal with the adaptation of Lai Haraoba songs and music in contemporary popular music.

LAI HARAoba IN POPULAR MUSIC

This section discusses the adaptation of Lai Haraoba songs and music for performance in popular music contexts. This fusion has created a performance forum that has become part of a new folk music revival, which has become a trend recently. It also embraces the use of modern instrumentation and music technology in performance, playing to the taste of festival audiences in Manipur and other parts of India. In the context of folk music combined with popular music, I observe that there are certain continuity that exists in the new popular music even though it is linked to mainstream styles, and that it consequently attracts larger audiences while retaining its identity. To demonstrate aspects of variation in the amalgamation of folk music and popular music, I shall discuss different performance contexts, including the adaptation of folk songs for folk-rock performance. Variation, as well as selection, is also demonstrated by the reinterpretation of folk song texts that are altered to make them pertinent to modern audiences, while retaining their original message.

In this context, Mangka Mayanglambam (21 years old), a flourishing folk singer with *pena* as a major musical instrument, can be mentioned. From her very tender age, Mangka acquired the elementary knowledge of folk songs from her father Mayanglambam Mangangsana, a well-known traditional *pena* player and singer, who also composed most of her songs. Mangka also started learning *Moirang Sai* and *Basok*, which are only performed by women, from Oja Pukhrambam Ongbi Thoinu Devi, popularly known as Langathel Thoinu. Mangka grew up learning *pena*, songs and dances by being part of the institution called Laihui, which is presently led by her father Mangangsana. Laihui has been active in conducting workshops

of traditional performing arts involving traditional performers. They have also been collecting folk songs, going to rural villages, mostly the Chakpa villages like Andro, Kakching and Phāyeng.

It is also important to note that recently Laihui has been active in imparting *pena* music to the young generation in which Mangka is also one of the trainers for young children. The function of Laihui as folk song collectors and promoters seeks to preserve cultural artifacts which they regarded as a legacy that runs the risk of disappearing. While one can regard this mission as a 'revivalist' phenomenon, it is also important to note that Laihui gives more emphasis to the promotion of *pena* music with innovations. Mangangsana himself remarks, "We need to make music in accordance with the time, without compromising the basic ingredients, so that our youngsters can be responsive to it. Then only can we hope for the survival of our traditional music."¹¹¹

Several of the elements of what he refers to as the 'basic ingredients' of music revival are apparent in aspects of his composition. Mangangsana states that a music revival is based on information provided by local revival informants and/or original sources. He also expresses admiration for the work of early folk song collectors at a local level. He emphasizes how meticulously they have retained melodies and texts contained in what they regard as original source versions of folk songs, which are then notated and recorded in their recreations of folk songs.¹¹²

¹¹¹ In a conversation with Manipuri students in Delhi on 19 February 2015 at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, when they performed at the National Book Trust (NBT) Book Fair at Pragati Maiden. They also performed at School of Social Sciences Auditorium in Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, organized by Manipur Research Forum.

¹¹² The same conversation.

From a commercial perspective, there are elements of 'revivalism' through collaborations and festivals, which are commercial enterprises catering to the revivalist market. Both of these characteristics are present in what I regard as a new phase in Meetei folk revivalism. However, it can also be argued that links to commercialization are often contrary to folk revival ideology. While I would consider that the process of commercialization of folk songs has already begun in recent time through audio-visual medium, it would not be appropriate to comment on commercialization at this early stage since the profit-making of the alternative music market in Manipur is still negligible.

Mangka, as a singer, became popular with her contemporary folk song *Tamna Loibi* (Distant Hills) and then *Shamaton*¹¹³ (The Mythical Winged-Horse) in 2014. She performed her debut song *Tamna Loibi* representing India at the ABU Radio Song Festival 2014 in Colombo, Sri Lanka.¹¹⁴ The song, written and composed by her father Mangangsana, describes the plenitude of Nature's resources, a theme which has its source in the Lai Haraoba, both in form and content. The other song *Shamaton* is composed in the fast-paced rhythm of *pena* popularly known as *hepli pabot*. It is about the safeguarding of ponies and the promotion of *sagol kangjei* (polo) in Manipur.¹¹⁵ It was presented for the first time as a theme song of 8th Manipur Polo International and 150th years of modern polo in the year 2014. Captivatingly, the song begins with the reference to the myth of how Shamaton is a loyal companion

¹¹³ Shamaton Ayangba is a mythical winged horse, believed to be the progenitor of the Manipuri pony.

¹¹⁴ The ABU Radio Song Festival 2014 was the second edition of the biennial ABU Radio Song Festivals, organised by the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union (ABU). The festival took place on the 23 May 2014 at Colombo, Sri Lanka. Twelve countries participated in the song festival.

¹¹⁵ The song is written by popular lyricist B. Jayantakumar Sharma and composed by Mayanglambam Mangangsana.

to Lord Marjing, the guardian god of North-East. Lord Marjing, a god of the Meetei pantheon, is believed to have introduced the game of polo to the human world. It is believed that Lord Ashiba sends Shamaton to help in the creation of the earth. After the creation of the earth, gods played *sagol kangjei* (polo) riding on the back of Shamaton. By the use of modern instrumentation and music technology, this song has not only become popular, but through its popularity it has also made the myth familiar in the public domain.

Mangka has also made an audio album *Chingda Satpi* (2015) which has ten Lai Haraoba songs and one video album titled *Nongthang Leima*. *Nongthang Leima* is one of the most popular songs of Lai Haraoba sung in the traditional style popularly known as '*Panthoipi seisak*' during the Panthoipi episode in Kanglei Haraoba as described in Chapter 3. It should be noted, however, that Mangka with her father Mangangsana have made an intervention in the phenomenon of so-called 'modern Manipuri music' which was based primarily on Hindustani classical music and rock music. They called their music 'contemporary folk music.' While these songs not only stimulate new contemporary musical tastes, they also strive to recapture insights into a mythical past in order to communicate them to contemporary audiences.

However, the technique of "fusion" with modern instruments unavoidably results in different performances and interpretations. As the context of the performance changes from the actual Lai Haraoba to a staged performance with modern instruments like electric guitars, bass and acoustic *pena*, the meaning of the musical work is not necessarily that which the audience in the ritualistic ambience of Lai Haraoba receives. In a sense, the staged musical performance, in this case, can be studied as one of the

primary forms of secularizing Lai Haraoba in the context of contemporary entertainment.

In an attempt to create an inter-cultural performance, Laihui has started to explore new collaborations with foreign musicians. In 2015, Laihui organized the Manipur-Myanmar Cultural Heritage Conference in Imphal, with support from Asia Cultural Council (ACC), New York. This conference focused on a discussion of the history and aesthetics of folk music and other traditional art forms. In 2016, Laihui, under the leadership of Mangangsana, experimented with a new musical collaboration titled *Shakuhachi meets Pena* with Mr. Motonaga Hiromu, an internationally celebrated Japanese traditional music *sakuhachi* player, and a music composer in Imphal. *Shakuhachi* is a traditional wind musical instrument made from the root end of a bamboo culm.

As Motonaga Hiromu explains, the *shakuhachi* is an extremely versatile instrument.¹¹⁶ He said that professional players of *shakuhachi* can produce virtually any pitch they wish from the instrument. It is used to perform a wide repertoire of original Zen music, while interacting with other traditional instruments of Japan like *koto* (a stringed instrument), *biwa* (short-necked fretted lute) and *shamisen* (a three stringed traditional instrument), in addition to other modern instruments. *Shakuhachi meets Pena* was jointly conceptualized by Motonaga Hiromu and Mayanglambam Mangangsana. After a five-day rehearsal period in Imphal, it was first performed at The Giving Tree, Imphal on 28 November 2016 and then at the Karnataka Sangha, New Delhi, on 2 December 2016.

¹¹⁶ In a personal interview with Motonaga Hiromu on 3 December 2016 at Japan Foundaton, New Delhi.

While both the artistes accompanied by other artistes of Laihui present their individual performance, the interesting part of the collaboration is the creation of three musical fusion pieces that had developed during their five-day interaction in Imphal based on, as both of them claimed, the “similarities of folk and traditional music of Japan and Manipur.” The first piece is a fusion of the melodies of Japanese and Manipuri lullabies. *Komoriuta* means “lullaby” in the Japanese language. As Motonaga Hiromu narrates, in ancient times, girls were sent to work as baby-sitters, away from their parents, even as they retained a strong desire to return to their home towns and families. The tune on the *shakuhachi*, Motonaga said, is not only about soothing babies, but it also contains melancholy and sadness. This *komoriuta* tune is wonderfully fused with the *chakanpatla* and *naosum*, the lullabies belonging to the Kabui Naga and Meetei communities, respectively. They are beautifully sung by Mangka accompanied with *pena*, *langde* and *pung*. This musical piece of fusion has clear cross-cultural tonalities. As lullabies, they evoke the sense of a gentle swinging rhythm. Almost at a therapeutic level, they evoke a peaceful hypnotic quality.

The second piece is also a fusion of two traditions of lamentation in times of sorrow and death – *tamuke* and *tengthaba* of Japan and Manipur, respectively. *Tamuke*, literally means ‘hand folded together in prayer’ and is a eulogy or requiem for the departed souls of loved ones. As expressed by the musical instrument *shakuhachi*, it represents an offering of flowers on graves, a tribute to the dead, and an expression of the birth of life beyond death. *Tengthaba*, on the other hand, is one of the oldest folk song of the Meetei. It is a lamentation of a mother sung in times of sorrow and death. The fusion of the two melancholic laments creates a theatrical ambience, with Mangka

punctuating the wail with strong gestures, thereby arousing in the audience a heart-wrenching emotion.

The final piece is the most interesting musical fusion creation – the musical fusion of two Lai Haraoba songs – *anoirol* (movement/dance) and *ougri* (a circular dance)¹¹⁷ – with the *shakuhachi* music of *odori* and *kokiriko*. *Kokiriko* is one of the oldest folk songs of the Toyama prefecture in Japan. While *anoirol* has a philosophical conception of dance related to the myth of Meetei creation, *odori* simply means dance in Japanese.¹¹⁸ *Ougri* ritual performance on the last day of Lai Haraoba is the origin of the collective and communal dance called *thabal chongba*, which is performed by the Meetei young men and women annually in the spring season. Like *ougri* of Lai Haraoba, Japanese *kokiriko* is also about singing and dancing together in a circle while holding hands. While Mangka sings, the *anoirol* song seamlessly blends into the *ougri* song to the accompaniment of the *pena* and *langde-pung* percussion. While Motonaga plays the *odori* and *kokiriko* tunes on his *shakuhachi*, Mangka sings the *ougri* while inviting the audience to join her in a circular dance in the auditorium. In the performance that I attended, many spectators entered the performance space and participated in the *thabal chongba*. The audience space became a performative space with the *thabal chongba* fused with the Manipuri *ougri* song and Japanese *kokiriko* tune on *shakuhachi*.

What is interesting in this inter-cultural collaboration is the sharing of folk elements across cultures in terms of mood, rhythm and melody. Both

¹¹⁷ See the detailed descriptions of the two dances and songs in Chapter 3.

¹¹⁸ When I asked Motonaga Hiromu if there is a philosophical conception of *odori* like that which surrounds *anoirol*, he could not provide any information regarding it. He just said that it means dance.

Motonaga and Mangangsana believe that there are certain similarities in diverse musical traditions even as their historical contexts are different.¹¹⁹ This brings into the enigma of how cultures interact and change over time. Traditional songs evolving over time may incorporate and reflect influences from other cultures. Motonaga and Mangangsana both agreed that ‘cultures travel.’¹²⁰ Mangangsana said his idea is not just to visit and perform in foreign countries, but also to host foreign artists in the state and collaborate in order to create new musical journeys and to explore shared musical expressions. He also expressed his desire for the younger generation to understand traditional art forms with some depth in order to create music with appropriate contemporary perspectives.

It is of critical consideration to note that some of the singers in Manipur incorporate Lai Haraoba songs to express social dissent. Two singers should be mentioned here – Loukrakpam Jayenta (popularly known as Tapta) of the Tapta band and Akhu Chingngangbam of the band Imphal Talkies. Social dissent becomes a force in the lyrics of both these singers, whose fundamental purpose is to express social protest. Most of the lyrics of their songs are reflections of the culture of violence in Manipur. Through their words, we can see ourselves and the younger generation in a new light. Popular lyrics sometimes challenge firmly held beliefs. These same lyrics can also help us examine our common social heritage as well as specific events in Manipur history. Some songs are highly philosophical, stressing universal human concerns about war, freedom, equality, brotherhood, love, and justice.

¹¹⁹ In a personal interaction with Mangka, Motonaga and Mangangsana on 2 December 2016 after the performance in Delhi at Karnataka Sangha, R.K. Puram, New Delhi.

¹²⁰ The same interaction above.

Tapta, as a singer, has gone through a number of musical stylistic changes: topical and political songs; symbolic and expressionist songs ranging from folk to Hindustani classical to rock “n” roll and folk rock. This mixing of genres can be said to reflect the plurality and complexity of Manipur society as a whole. Music is a language that becomes significant not only through indigenous cultural initiation, but also through bodily and emotional responses cutting across communities.

One interesting song of Tapta that reflects the present situation of Lai Haraoba is the song “Thangjing Laigi Laimangda” (In Front of Thangjing Lai). The song is sung in dialogue form between a boy and a girl. The conversation is based on their encounter during Thangjing Lai Haraoba. The boy asks boastfully, “Have you forgotten me, the one who offered you a Rs. 50 note, while you were performing the Thoibi dance? I am the handsome guy who entered from the nearby musicians dancing gracefully.” The girl replied, “Oh! Are you the one who was dragged away and thrashed by volunteers? I am surprised that you’re still alive.” In this way, the song continues to narrate the eventful encounter.

In the song there is an announcement (on the microphone) by the Lai committee saying, “Only those who wear traditional *pheijom* (dhoti) can participate. Those who wear trousers are forbidden. Actions shall be taken to those who disrespect the rule.” So, the boy was probably thrashed for disrespecting the norms. As the conversation in the song continues, the boy expresses his discontent of the girl’s failure to recognise his love citing earlier instances. In this manner, the song unfolds the dramaturgy of the contemporary Meetei society participating in the Lai Haraoba.

Tapta's music can be more meaningfully studied through his song writing ability rather than through his prowess as a singer. His lyrics, which are subversive, make his songs unique and thought provocative. Many of Tapta's songs, however, relate directly to specific historical events (murders, massacre, protests, the tsunami and conflicts) or to continuing social and financial problems (economic instability, corruption and irresponsible political leaders) that evoke strong public feelings. Although it may seem obvious that some songs, particularly of Tapta, are retellings of folktales (like *Pebet, Lai Khutsangbi*), Tapta's narratives and sources are more ubiquitous and often political; they have the capacity to trouble both our imagination and intellect. The characters from these tales are translated into a story setting that is suitable for a four to five-minute vocal recitation. Once converted, the story is told - not by a loving grandparent, a mother, a father or a baby sitter - but by a commercial recording artist. These narratives are altogether different texts inviting a plurality of readings.

On the other hand, Akhu Chingngangbam classifies his songs as folk rock. He uses *pena* and other modern instruments like drums, cajon and acoustic guitars. One interesting song of Akhu Chingngangbam which connects directly with Lai Haraoba is the song titled as 'Lai Haraoba.' The tune of the song is the recreation of the song sung by *amaibi* and other community participants during the *laipou* possession in Lai Haraoba. What echoes in both the actual Lai Haraoba and Akhu's songs is the celebratory choral responses of the public '*hoo ya ya ho ya.*' Akhu interestingly transforms the song into a transgressive political satire. A rough translation of the song is needed to deepen the discussion:

*Sons and daughters of Lainingthou Lairembi¹²¹/ they are saying that this time
army will swarm into, abundantly/ Tug in your khudei¹²² tightly/ tight your
phanek khwangchet¹²³/ hoo ya ya ho ya*

*Unmarried daughters of Lainingthou Lairembi/ this time many a good
bachelor are being murdered/ cats are sensitive since men are shameless/ crows
sing since men are dumb/ hoo ya ya ho ya*

*Farmers of Lainingthou Lairembi/ men (licentious) wearing neck-tie,
having many wives/ who are sitting in assembly are saying/ that this time we
will have good harvest/ hoo ya ya ho ya*

*Naharol¹²⁴ of Lainingthou Lairembi/ have you mistaken 'demand
letter'¹²⁵ for a love letter/ that you have distributed in thick bundles?/ It is the
light of podon (kerosene lamp) not glitter of gold/ It is a langjamfi phanek, not
a fige fanek¹²⁶/ hoo ya ya ho ya*

*Drivers of Lainingthou Lairembi/ smart and handsome men in neck-tei/
sitting in Bangkok are saying/ that economic blockade will be frequent this
year/ hoo ya ya ho ya*

*Not a place to live, not a place to live, where bomb blasts/explosions are
frequent*

*Not a place to live, not a place to live, where bomb blasts/explosions are
frequent*

(translation mine)

While the actual song of Lai Haraoba talks about the 'prosperity' of the community, this reinvented song questions the idea of 'prosperity' in a conflict-ridden state of Manipur. In considering the presentation and performance of such protest songs, one has to take note of the ritual nature of music, and the effect of this ritual in creating feelings of identification and solidarity in the audience. Such musical activities can be considered as constituting a social movement. Once an individual has been brought into the sphere of movement activities, the use of music in gatherings can,

¹²¹ Gods and goddesses.

¹²² A traditional piece of lower cloth, smaller than dhoti, worn by men.

¹²³ *Phanek* is the Meetei sarong worn by women and the *khwangchet* serves the function of a belt to tie the *phanek* by using a piece of cloth around the waist.

¹²⁴ *Naharol* literally means 'youth.' It is also understood as 'insurgents' in common parlance.

¹²⁵ 'Demand letter' in Manipuri, as used in everyday communication, is the letter meant for extortion by the insurgents.

¹²⁶ *Langjamphi phanek* is the sarong worn by ordinary women. Whereas *fige phanek* is the fancy and costly *sarong*, often worn by rich people.

unquestionably, reinforce the feelings of communal belonging and social solidarity.

This function of emotionally charging the interests of audience is more effectively achieved by using the familiar tunes and melodies of songs from the Lai Haraoba, in this case. Thus, as Emile Durkheim (1912) has suggested in the context of religion, musical events can provide the sort of emotional, euphoric, vitalizing and integrative experiences that more rationalistic appeals cannot. In this regard, one could say that popular music in Manipur has become an especially unique and effective opinion formation device. Its function and social effect have stimulated considerable attention across diverse sectors of society and its role in conscientizing the public about social and political matters cannot be underestimated.

As we come to the end of this chapter, it becomes obvious that the techniques and modalities of re-invention vary considerably in relation to different artistic sensibilities and socio-political agendas. We have studied in this chapter how the Lai Haraoba has inspired the earliest reinventions through the creation of Vaishnavite forms like the Ras Leela; reinvention of Lai Haraoba in modern theatre like Ratan Thiyam's predominantly spectacular and exotic use of the Lai Haraoba, Kanhailal's subtle adaptation of its psycho-physical principles and Mangangsana's staging of Lai Haraoba. We also discuss the adaptation of Lai Haraoba songs and music for performance in popular music contexts - Mangka Mayanglambam who popularize the *pena seisak* (the singing style of *pena*), Tapta (Loukrakpam Jayenta) and Akhu Chingngangbam, both of them incorporate Lai Haraoba songs to express social dissent.

Conclusion

In this conclusion to my dissertation, I will attempt to provide some tentative reflections on the future of Lai Haraoba in the context of a changing economy, continued political disturbances and the clash of different belief systems. It will be significant to reflect on how the Lai Haraoba has survived decades of insurgency and inter/intra-ethnic tensions in the state of Manipur.

Let me begin with a personal anecdote. On a pleasant night of February 2016, the third day of Chakpa Phāyeng Haraoba, I was coming back home on my scooter after attending the Lai Haraoba. It was only around 9 pm. In Manipur, it was a late night because every night seems like a curfew. Near the Lamsang police station in Imphal West, there were some policemen frisking commuters on the road. From a little distance, they flashed their torchlights on my face. They asked me to stop with their rough voices. I slowed down my scooter, stopped and parked at a corner. Two of them approached me. One of them asked in a rough and rude tone, "Where are you going?" I humbly replied, "I came back from Phāyeng Lai Haraoba."

While he asked me to open my bag and scooter tool-box, the other policeman rudely questioned me, "Where are you from?" Opening my bag and tool-box, I replied, "Thangmeiband." He asked me again, "What were you then doing at Phāyeng Lai Haraoba?" I told them in a modest tone, "Actually, I am a research student doing research on Lai Haraoba." They then asked me somewhat less modestly, "In Manipur University?" I replied,

“JNU, Delhi.” Suddenly, one of them said coarsely, “What is happening there? Anti-national slogans...”¹²⁷

While opening my bag, I found the poly-bag with *heiruk*¹²⁸ (*prasad*) of salted soybean (*nunghawai*) seasoned with black sesame (*thoiding*) and ginger, some small pieces of sugarcane and oranges. Without giving much attention to his question, I offered them the *heiruk*, “I have some *heiruk* from the Haraoba. Please have it.” They took out their hand gloves, repositioned their AK-47 guns, which they were holding tightly, by letting it hang freely on the back of the shoulder and beautifully stretched out their palms with a little prostration and received the *heiruk* modestly. While eating the *heiruk*, one of them said, “Our Sekmai Haraoba¹²⁹ has also started. But I have not been able to attend it because of my duty here.” The other policeman enviously asked me, “Where do you get funding?” I smiled and replied, “No I didn’t get any. I am a student and definitely I get some scholarship for my survival.” They smiled and then they asked me to leave.

What is important in this brief encounter is the dramaturgy which reveals the present habitus of everyday life in Manipur. While frisking on the street is a common occurrence of everyday life in Manipur, it is important to note in this encounter how the harsh and insolent voice of the policemen got instantly transformed to a modest tone when I offered them the *heiruk* of Lai Haraoba. At a performative level, one could say that the policemen changed their gestures when the *heiruk* was offered to them. They received the *heiruk* in a religious manner.

¹²⁷ This incident took place during those days when three JNU students Kanhaiya Kumar, Anirban Bhattacharya and Umar Khalid were in police custody on charges of sedition after the 8th February 2016 incident in JNU.

¹²⁸ It denotes anything, typically edible foods, mainly fruits and vegetables that are first offered to a deity, and then distributed to worshippers, followers or to others as a good sign.

¹²⁹ Sekmai Haraoba is also one of the Chakpa Haraoba. Sekmai is a Chakpa/Loi village in Imphal East.

While early works on the Lai Haraoba have made references to the shrinking of Lai Haraoba spaces and the growing secularization of the festival (Sircar 1984), the above dramaturgical encounter conveys a complex political orientation as well as an 'extension' of ritual space into public life. Despite all the rudeness and insolent nature of policemen, given the political complexities in Manipur, the policemen honoured the sacred and social values of the Lai Haraoba unhesitatingly by showing reverence to the *lai*. One policeman also expressed his inability to attend Lai Haraoba in his locality because of his duty. In a sense, one can assume that he continues to be closely connected to his local deity.

At another level, this association can also be connected to the larger landscape of fear in disobeying the *lai*. Today, it seems that this fear of the *lai* is coupled with the larger apprehension and fear of the nature of political violence and impunity in Manipur. There is so much uncertainty in Manipur today encompassing life and death, peace and violence, coercion and benevolence. Each peaceful moment carries the apprehension of imminent violence. These apprehensions are so intricately woven into the everyday fabric of life in Manipur that it has become difficult to see things for what they really are.

During my fieldwork in Phāyeng Chakpa Haraoba, near the *laibung* (the premise of the *lai*), there were temporary tea stalls run by women of the village. While I was having tea in the stall, I had an informal conversation with some women of the village who were also having tea and *bora*¹³⁰ after they came to offer fruits and vegetables to the *lai*. While we were chatting on several issues, I asked them what they pray for. One of them replied,

¹³⁰ *Bora* is a fried snack (fritter) of vegetables wrapped in *besan* (gram flour) batter. It is popularly known as *pakora* in other parts of the Indian subcontinent.

"Ibungo, houjikkan se mee nongmeina pallaga aduda adu sirammega, nupimacha izaat manghallaga hatlaga hundoklamle... masi chatnabi oire... masi mayamse eikhoi imungda leikai da thokpidaba...masini eina laida nijabase (These days, every day you hear news of murder, someone shot or dead, a young girl raped and murdered...these things have become a norm... I pray that such incidents do not happen in my family, in our locality... this is what I pray for)." Another lady lightened up the conversation saying, *"eidi eigi icha nupidu matric examse wangna pass tounaba khurumme* (I pray for my daughter to pass her matric exam with flying colours) (laughs)." During the conversation, it became clear to me that people pray for a wide range of reasons. But almost all the prayers address the apprehensions related to the culture of violence in Manipur.

Apparently, the brunt of this troubled state and the consequent violence is borne by the common people, who seem to have slowly begun to accept victimhood with a sense of catharsis through prayers, with no visible way out from this everyday life of violence. As the state and non-state actors (insurgent groups) continue to enjoy impunity in the state, people in turn become immune to the violence they witness and experience. What complicates matters is the murkiness of the situation in which the common people have the most to lose. In this situation, religious spaces like Lai Haraoba serve as safe shelters for facile celebration and romantic nostalgia.

Another aspect relating to the current situation of Lai Haraoba can be linked to the revivalism of the Sanamahi religion or Meeteism, which seems to be very strong today. As discussed in Chapter 4 in detail, revivalism began in 1930 by a young Meetei from Cachar (now in Assam) named Naoria Phullo. The 1970s came across as a time when there was a rejuvenation of pre-Hindu aspects of the Meetei culture in Manipur. Since then there has

been a mushrooming of Lai Haraoba festivals across Manipur. Today there are more than 400 Lai Haraoba sites. While this resurgence or revival of Lai Haraoba can be seen as an articulation of the Meetei cultural identity, today there are organisations like Umanglai Kanba Apunba Lup (UKAL) which function as a taskforce to police the conduct of the festival. According to some of my informants, the UKAL is backed by some insurgent groups. UKAL functions to censor and regulate Lai Haraoba prescribing specific rules and regulations; they have even issued a CD with the dances and songs of Lai Haraoba whose protocols are prescribed. In this articulation, it is not so much a question of what constitutes Lai Haraoba but, significantly, what does not constitute it.

In all these developments, the Lai Haraoba today can be described as a space for the execution of the 'art of impression management,' to use Erving Goffman's (1959) phrase, by asserting one's *status quo* through monetary contributions and their presence. In most of the Lai Haraoba, the performative presence of rich people of the locality, performing the role of benefactors, is almost like the staging of characters in a play. In 2016, one of the political aspirants of the 2017 Assembly Election in my constituency contributed a huge amount of money for the local Lai Haraoba. On hearing this, the standing MLA came the next day and contributed more amount than what the other candidate had contributed the previous day. These patrons also demand a space in the Lai Haraoba seating, so that they can be regarded as *phamnaiba* (noble) for a day, a practice which is traditionally attributed to the elders of the locality. By asserting their monetary power, the two contesting ministers clearly demonstrated that what mattered to them was social recognition and not any genuine concern of the locality in terms of the development of the community.

Manipur has multiple problems today. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), 1958, has continued to alienate the local population from the Indian state, and has been acting as a deterrent in modernizing the state police and counter-insurgency forces. The existing tensions between the Meetei and hill tribes like the Kukis and Nagas have added to the troubled narrative within the state. In many of the narratives of ethnic tribes in Manipur, land is intrinsically tied to the idea of nationhood. Their claims for land are often conflicting and contentious. Control over their land and, by extension, their identity has become a point of confrontation for many of these groups in Manipur. Recently, the vested interests on land issues within the state have intensified existing tensions, resulting in demands for a stricter definition of who can be designated as a resident. Inevitably, this has resulted in restrictions for the entry of outsiders (*mayang*) into the state with the demand of the Inner Line Permit (ILP) system, and, on the other hand, greater autonomy for the hill districts.

Another apprehension of the Meetei people, which I have mentioned earlier in the dissertation, is the signing of the Naga framework accord between the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah) (NSCN-IM) and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in 2015. This has also increased speculation about the territorial disintegration of Manipur. Manipur's northern districts have long been claimed by Nagas as part of the greater Nagalim territory. Disputes over these lands in the 1990s have resulted in targeted attacks against Kukis and tensions between Nagas and other tribes. The creation of the seven new districts (on 9 December 2016), with at least three districts dividing the Naga-dominated areas in northern Manipur, has given new life to these tensions, resulting in the

continuation of a two-month economic blockade and curfew. These protests can be observed as the manifestations of their political apprehensions.

Another apprehension of the people of Manipur is India's 'Look East Policy.' The Look East Policy (LEP) has emerged as one of the prominent foreign policy initiatives that India has undertaken in the post-Cold War period. It was launched in the year 1991 by the then Prime Minister Narasimha Rao with the aim of developing multifaceted relations with Southeast Asian countries. Recently India's "Look East policy" has been modified into "Act East" in 2014 by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. While the objectives are similar, this new policy has been promoted as a means to reorient foreign policy, and to act purposefully towards creating a better relationship with Southeast Asian countries. The policy at its core claims to focus on improving trade relations with Southeast Asia by activating links on India's eastern borderland. The objective of 'Act East Policy' is to promote economic cooperation, cultural ties and develop strategic relationship with countries in the Asia-Pacific region through continuous engagement at bilateral, regional and multilateral levels, thereby providing enhanced connectivity to the states of North Eastern region including Arunachal Pradesh with other countries in the neighbourhood (Ministry of External Affairs 2015).

The weakest spot in this grand strategy, however, is the North-Eastern border. Manipur, which shares 355 km of its border with Myanmar, remains India's most economically viable border for Southeast Asia, and therefore necessitates a special focus. While Manipur's contentious merger with India and subsequent land and identity issues have resulted in a cycle of violence and insurgency movements within the state, the lack of competent

governance, infrastructure and economic growth has further intensified the inadequacies within the state. Bhagat Oinam (2005) expresses that the policy may be seen more accurately as a desperate attempt on the part of India to have friendly neighbours in order to strategically counter Chinese dominance in the Southeast Asian region.

Many scholars from Northeast India have expressed that the initiative seems to have more political and security concerns rather than cultural and economic concerns with the border trade (Kishan 2009: 177). They are also apprehensive of the high-pitched form of consumerism that a Look East Policy phenomenon is likely to engender, thereby endangering the cultural life of people in the Northeast (Kishan 2009: 197). Konthoujam Indrakumar (2009: 58-60) contends that a persistent concept of being a frontier region inherited from the British colonial legacy continues to dominate the overall attitude towards this region on the part of the ruling class of the post-colonial Indian state.

As such for the Indian state, the priority is not economic but political and strategic compulsions that compel it to pay attention to the Northeast. Indrakumar (2009: 69-72) argues that there exists a sense of 'otherness' both in historical and cultural terms from the rest of India accompanied by a high degree of alienation and that this policy seems to further strengthen the alienation. Kangujam Sanatomba (2015: 124) also expresses "India's Look East Policy is apparently a part of the larger capitalist strategy of containing China and capturing the Southeast Asian markets while simultaneously extracting raw-material from the region and exploiting the cheaper labour force. Sanatomba (2015) also condemns India alleigning with America in this policy. He asserts, "America is not a reliable ally and it may soon reverse its

attitude towards India with the changing international situation” (ibid: 124). He suggests rather that, “India should join hands with the Asian countries in checking the expansion of American hegemony in the region” (ibid: 124).

Sucheta De (2015: 41-57) argues that the export-led growth model of the policy does not hold potential for generating dynamism for the economy of the region as claimed because of huge disjuncture between the productive economic structure and livelihood of people and the structure of the commercial market in Southeast Asia. Rather than being a policy departure in terms of its approach towards Northeast India, the policy seems to be a continuation of the Indian state’s approach to the Northeast region. Nongthombam Jiten (2015: 58-72) has also strongly argued that any issues related with security and development should understand the region and its people from within its boundaries and the cartographic lenses should also be from the region’s canvas.

Against the background of the “Look East”/“Act East” policies, it is clear that the mantra of “development” is being used to assuage the political tensions of the Northeast. As part of the larger state propaganda around ‘development’, Manipur is likely to see the introduction of a new railway system (under this ‘Look/Act East Policy’) initiated by the Government of India, connecting eastern and northeastern states of India to Southeast Asia. As I have mentioned earlier in my introduction, “Is this likely to have an impact on tourism? We need to keep in mind that despite the incursions of a neo-liberal economy in Manipur that there is almost no touristic marketing of the Lai Haraoba to date. Will this change in the future enable the Lai Haraoba to be more accessible to larger audiences? Or will the Lai Haraoba

continue to perform for its local audiences with the participation of Manipuri men significantly on the decline?"

As yet, it would be accurate to say that with or without the implementation of Central Government policies that the Lai Haraoba will continue to be sustained by local communities and a growing number of impresarios and entrepreneurs. The Lai Haraoba will be sustained precisely because it provides a cultural need that cannot be readily subsumed within larger economic and developmental agendas. If government agencies were seriously concerned about turning the local population into important stakeholders, there is a need to recognize the significance of ethnic cultures that represent the border states of the region. The apprehension of minoritization is represented through popular sayings like "*eikhoidi minority oirani Tripura da Tripuri yelhoumi na oibagum* (Our community will become minority like the indigenous Tripuri in Tripura)." This apprehension is intensified by the increasing influx of outsiders (*mayang*) like Bihari, Marwari, Punjabi, Nepali, Bengali as well as Bangladeshi migrants.

In contrast, it is also interesting to note that during my fieldwork in Imphal, I have seen non-Manipuri Indian communities from the Northern belt incorporated into the Lai Haraoba as participants even as they may not accept the Meetei belief system. These incorporations need to be kept in mind, alongside the apprehensions surrounding the disintegration of Meetei cultural identity, as well as the fear of becoming minority with the increasing influx of outsiders in the state. In addition, one should also keep in mind the increasing number of practices of Hindu revivalism whereby Hindu gods like *Shankardeva* in Wangoi and *Ramachandra* in Thinunggei are also celebrated in the Lai Haraoba mode. Given all these complexities and

contradictions, it is challenging to comment on the future of Lai Haraoba in Manipur, but one can be confident that its practice will not diminish but rather continue to grow in new and unprecedented ways.

Glossary

<i>agaru/agar</i>	tree, scientific name <i>aquilaria agallocha</i>
<i>amaiba</i>	priest
<i>amaibi</i>	priestess
<i>anam athou</i>	evil spirits
<i>apokpa</i>	ancestor, progenitor
<i>chaboksang</i>	traditional hut erected for child delivery
<i>chak</i>	cycle of great time orders; aeons; age
<i>chayom</i>	food particularly rice packed in a bundle of leaves
<i>chei</i>	sticks
<i>cheithaba</i>	the person appointed by the king to bear all the calamities of the year; the man after whom the year is named
<i>chenba</i>	elopement
<i>chengluk nungsang</i>	basketful of rice offered to ancestral deities
<i>chingghi</i>	traditional herbal shampoo made of solution of rice and other herbs
<i>chupsaba</i>	rite observed for those who died in unnatural circumstances; also for the death of issueless couple
<i>EEKouba</i>	the process of calling up the spirit from the water body
<i>hainaba</i>	marriage engagement
<i>heibi</i>	medlar, tree with a small fruit resembling an apple
<i>heijingpot</i>	ritual signifying formal announcement of marriage
<i>heikru</i>	(<i>amla</i>) a small edible fruit, scientific name is <i>emblica officialis</i>

<i>hei-lei</i>	flowers and fruits
<i>heining</i>	a small edible fruit, scientific name is <i>spondias magnifera</i>
<i>heiruk</i>	fruit offering consisting of banana, sugarcane, <i>kabok</i> and flowers
<i>heloi</i>	witch
<i>hiri</i>	threads attached to the <i>ihaihus</i>
<i>hiyang tannaba</i>	boat race
<i>ihaihu</i>	the earthen pot used in the process of calling up the spirit (<i>EEKOUBA</i>) in which a thread is attached to the <i>leiyom</i>
<i>Ima</i>	mother
<i>innaphi</i>	a traditional shawl of fine cloths use by women
<i>isei</i>	song
<i>kabok</i>	parched rice
<i>khayom</i>	banana leaf packet containing eggs, rice and langthrei buds, tied with bamboo strips
<i>khudeisel-kausel</i>	cultic vessels used in the <i>laipou</i> for the personal possessions of <i>lai</i>
<i>khullakpa</i>	head of a village
<i>khurumba</i>	to bow down; to prostrate; worship
<i>konyai hunba</i>	the ritual of telling fortune by throwing of coins and observing the signs of the coins (mainly performed by <i>amaibi</i>)
<i>konyai</i>	gold and silver coins or pieces
<i>lai sanaba</i>	playing the gods and goddesses
<i>lai</i>	deity; god
<i>laibung</i>	premise of the <i>lai</i> ; courtyard of the shrine
<i>laibungthou</i>	divine youths
<i>laining</i>	ways of worship

<i>lainingthou</i>	god king, used for both gods and kings
<i>lainura</i>	divine girls
<i>laipham</i>	place of <i>lai</i>
<i>laiphi</i>	garments for the deity
<i>laipoula</i>	the plantain leaf which is placed in the centre at the beginning of the <i>laipou</i> cycle
<i>lairembi/laiemma</i>	goddess; female <i>lai</i>
<i>lairup</i>	community of gods and goddesses
<i>laitongba</i>	possessed by god; act of divination
<i>lakpa</i>	divisional officer
<i>lallup kaba</i>	to attend <i>lallup</i> (forced labour)
<i>lamjel</i>	foot race
<i>lamlai</i>	<i>lais</i> of the locality or area
<i>langthrei</i>	plant, scientific name is <i>eupatorium birminiacium</i>
<i>lap</i>	a bamboo rack
<i>laplakpa</i>	leader of younger village folk
<i>leishabi</i>	young unmarried girl
<i>leiyom</i>	banana leaf packet containing <i>langthrei</i> buds
<i>long</i>	fishing basket
<i>lubak</i>	bamboo basket
<i>lukmai</i>	round basket with short legs
<i>maiba</i>	traditional physician
<i>maibi</i>	midwife
<i>maichou</i>	traditional scholars; high priest
<i>maigei ngakpa</i>	guardians of directions
<i>malem</i>	mother earth

<i>mangba</i>	impure, unclean
<i>mayek naiba</i>	striped colourful sarong worn by women
<i>mee</i>	human
<i>mi</i>	shadow/image
<i>mukna</i>	Manipuri style of wrestling
<i>ngaprum</i>	eel
<i>ningsa</i>	a breathing method
<i>ougri</i>	an archaic song sung for the prosperity of the land
<i>pana</i>	territorial division
<i>pandit loishang</i>	a council of traditional Meetei literati
<i>paphal</i>	symbolic diagram of coiling serpent forms representing Pakhangba
<i>paya</i>	a strip of bamboo
<i>pe</i>	traditional umbrella
<i>pena</i>	traditional one-stringed fiddle
<i>penakhongba</i> called <i>pena</i>	balladeer who play the traditional string instrument
<i>phamnaiba</i>	a person honoured with a title by the king
<i>phanek</i>	sarong worn by Meetei women
<i>phibul</i>	cloth balls containing <i>langthrei</i> buds used in the performance of <i>lai sanaba</i>
<i>phida</i>	a piece of cloth used for sitting on it
<i>phijang</i>	canopy
<i>phijet</i>	costume
<i>phungga</i>	hearth
<i>phura</i>	shrine
<i>piba</i>	male head of a <i>sagei</i> or <i>salai</i>

<i>pokpa</i>	to be born
<i>puya</i>	Meetei indigenous literature
<i>sagei</i>	sub-clan, group bearing the family name
<i>sagol kangjei</i>	traditional polo; it is believed that the game polo was originated from <i>sagol kangjei</i> of Manipur
<i>salai</i>	clan
<i>samei</i>	the <i>pena</i> string made of horse hairs
<i>sarik</i>	brass metal bell
<i>saroi</i>	evil spirits
<i>sel</i>	a bell metal coin
<i>senkhai</i>	an ancient coin
<i>shing</i>	firewood
<i>siba</i>	to die
<i>sidaba</i>	immortal
<i>tairen</i>	a plant used for purification; scientific name is <i>cedrela toona</i>
<i>thawai</i>	soul; life-essence
<i>thongra</i>	place of embarkation
<i>u-hongba</i>	initiation or inauguration ritual of a tree
<i>umanglai</i>	literally forest deities, used for ancestral deities in wider context
<i>wangonsang</i>	hut erected for the delivery of child
<i>yangkok</i>	winnowing fan
<i>yek</i>	name of the <i>salai</i>
<i>yumlai</i>	household deity
<i>yumnak</i>	name of the family
<i>yuu</i>	rice brew; rice beer

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