

*Creating/Affirming the 'safe space': Women in Manipur and the  
ritual-performance of Lai Haraoba*

Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the award of the degree of  
**Master of Philosophy**

DEBANJALI BISWAS



Theatre and Performance Studies  
School of Arts and Aesthetics  
Jawaharlal Nehru University  
New Delhi 110067  
India  
2009



School of Arts & Aesthetics  
**JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY**  
New Delhi - 110067, India

Telephone: 26742976, 26704177  
Telefax : 91-11-26742976  
E-mail : aesthete@mail.jnu.ac.in

September 15, 2009

### DECLARATION

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled "*Creating/ Affirming the 'safe space': Manipuri women and the ritual-performance of Lai Haraoba*" is being submitted for partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy of this university

This dissertation has not been submitted for the award of any other degree in this university or any other university and is my own work.

I would like to accept that the omissions and commissions are all mine.

*Debanjali Biswas*

Debanjali Biswas  
Theatre and Performance Studies  
School of Arts and Aesthetics  
Jawaharlal Nehru University  
New Delhi 110067  
India



School of Arts & Aesthetics  
**JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY**  
New Delhi - 110067, India

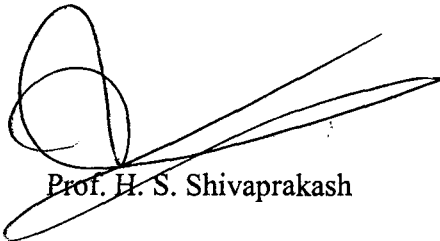
Telephone: 26742976, 26704177  
Telefax : 91-11-26742976  
E-mail : aesthete@mail.jnu.ac.in

**CERTIFICATE**

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We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.



Prof. H. S. Shivaprakash

Supervisor

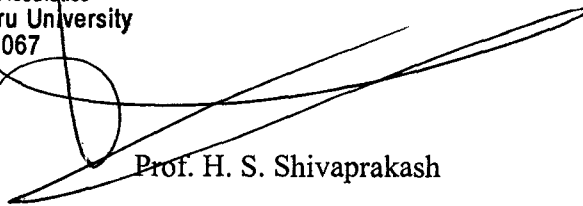
**Prof. H. S. Shiva Prakash**

 Dean  
School of Arts & Aesthetics  
Jawaharlal Nehru University  
New Delhi - 110067



Dr. Urmimala Sarkar


Co-supervisor



Prof. H. S. Shivaprakash

Dean

**Prof. H. S. Shiva Prakash**

 Dean  
School of Arts & Aesthetics  
Jawaharlal Nehru University  
New Delhi - 110067

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# Introduction

## Matter and methodologies

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### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

Performances are seen as elementary constituents of culture and ultimate units of observations. It has been postulated that cultural performances attempt to communicate meaning, has the potential to change society, offer critique and can stand where different versions of culture<sup>1</sup> can be negotiated. Through performances life is introspected, identity is created and individual crises is explained and mastered. It also acts as redressive mechanisms for the tensions seen in the secular order.

Communities not only live their culture but they consciously use culture as a sign of identity where they interweave nationalism, tradition and regional identity. The community of Meiteis of Manipur<sup>2</sup>, cultural representations and body processes are deeply enmeshed into each other. The representation, through the enactment of an ageless ritual, transports the performers and the audience into a recreated scheme of existence. This ritual ensures social gathering, distillation of culture and religious sentiments. It is their purest institution to which the Meiteis have clung despite threats from Burmese, British and Indian rulers and the forces of acculturation. Celebrated in the harvest season, the inhabitants associate these traditions with their oldest myths; Lai Haraoba not only describes the cosmology and the history of the region but also subtly and intricately indicates how the ritual is related to the history of dance and the distribution of political power in this region. Lai Haraoba reaffirms the worldviews of the community for whom it is mandatory to observe the ritual every year.

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<sup>1</sup> By culture, I understand the arts, customs and institutions on which the nation, people and community thrive. Culture also means a refined understanding and appreciation of this.

<sup>2</sup>According to T.C.Hodson, Manipur was known as *Meithei Lei-pak*, roughly meaning the broad land of the Meiteis. Of a population of about 1.9 million, Meiteis comprise almost two-third of the ethnic distribution of Manipur. Many tribes like the Hmar, Zomi, Kukte, Pangal Muslims, non-tribals also make up the population of Manipur. The limitations of a Meitei identity and the Manipuri identity are often correlated or seen in parts. For to be a Meitei is to be a part of a community in which Lai Haraoba is important; to be a Manipuri is to be a part of the activities of the state.



The Meiteis try to reach the unseen powers through the ritual performances of the Lai Haraoba. The cosmology is reenacted through a series of dance movements, like formation of the universe, worshipping of the gods of nature, formation of the human body, the clans and the regional occupations like weaving, fishing, tilling the ground and more. It assumes the form of a living dance-theatre developed through long processes of evolution cherishing their oral traditions for generations. Lai Haraoba is a built in structure where there is a living transaction between the audience, the performers and the worshipped. The ritual however lends divine charisma to the mortals ranked higher in the (ritual) hierarchy, i.e. the Maibis or the priestesses who are in charge of narrating the sequences through simple choreography. They are midwives, herbalists, clairvoyants and spiritual leaders. But it is as dancers that they are most well known; their dancing is at once a fulfillment of a religious duty to the community and an expression of the Maibi's inner dedication.

This brings us to survey the status of ordinary women in comparison to these women who occupy a special position in the society. The women of the Manipur Valley have been able to preserve their collective identity as a powerful social force, in a society where Brahminical Hinduism has been the royally- patronized religion for the last four centuries. Despite the conscious attempt of the Hindu culture to erode the traditional base of women's social position in Manipur, the Meitei<sup>3</sup> women have, to a large extent, succeeded in holding their own against the forces of an alien culture. Their strength comes from an economic set-up which is a remnant of an ancient tradition when men used to be engaged in hunting and martial affairs and women in agriculture, trade and commerce. Women, however, wield considerable political force in the State by virtue of their collective entity in the economic sphere. In the recent history a series of women's movements have occurred. In 1925 against the British policy of exporting rice from the region, in the 1970s protests against the sale of liquor, against the establishment of 'urban banks' in Imphal, in 2004 against the rape and murder of innocent women by the military forces deployed by the Government of India.

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<sup>3</sup> The ritual self and the social self of a Maibi, a Meitei, lends to the construction of identity of a woman of Manipur as whole.

This mode of mass protest (mostly non-violent) by women called Nupi-Lan or women's war seems to have gained a special potency in the present century in struggles against oppression and corruption as compared with the militant or 'terrorist' label of the men of the region. There is a new kind of effectiveness to this struggle when we see it coupled with the importance of the Maibis and the other women performers in the Lai Haraoba festival, an obvious remnant of pre-Vaishnavite tradition. Lai Haraoba is a non-violent voice of solidarity. The participation of women and on the whole the survival of community dancing itself is the indication of certain liberation, within the social structure, from a segregational ethos. The active and a conscious effort of public dancing has been important in analyzing the importance of the performance in the Meitei society.

Dancing is an essential aspect of Lai Haraoba. The performers affirm the identity of the community by recreating a utopic, ideal space and time in the current space and time. Lai Haraoba works as a unit of constancy in the current times and in times of strife. Every hand gesture of the Hakchang Sagatpa ensures the promise of the well being of an individual and the community as a whole. Every oracle delivered by the Maibis ensures a reinforcement of ideal state at the backdrop of a volatile state of Manipur.

Lai Haraoba is the performance of shared experiences that allow a community to come into existence that inspired a communal experience to emerge. It is a fertility ritual, a celebration for the abundance of harvest and a safe space where the society ensconces itself during times of strife. Through this ritual, the audience and the performers trod familiar regions with the knowledge and that no external forces can warp their present and futures. Currently the region faces not only the insurgency problem but also witnesses inter-ethnic conflicts often backed by their respective insurgency groups at a daily basis. The emergence of ethnic assertion and contest for social and political control pose serious political problems. This assertion is based on 'fears' of assimilation especially by the dominant groups and the need at the same time to protect their ethnic territoriality and natural resources.

The ritual system compensates to some extent for the limited range of effective political control and for the instability of kinship and affinal ties to which political value is attached.

Lai Haraoba is a protected space – conceptually as well as territorially; the different versions of Haraobas, namely the Kakching, Chakpa, Kanglei and Moirang, sees a varied ethnic distribution participating in each. Therefore it is a structure which has witnessed almost the entire history of Manipur. The whole process possesses a high degree of autonomy and consistency throughout the Meitei symbolic system. It is a largely attended festival, though some claim that participation of the youth has dwindled over the years. But a Haraoba is a suitable space for associating with traditions, meeting clan members and even meeting a prospective suitor. So the old as well as the young throng the festival in varied numbers throughout the season – many a times moving from one location to the other to be a part of the ceremony in multiple sites. The Meitei community thrives on total incorporation of its members as they function as a harmonious collective during the two months of the festival throughout Manipur.

This performance is also significant as Lai Haraoba is a storehouse of meaningful symbols by which information is revealed and regarded as authoritative, dealing with the crucial values of the community. Not only do symbols reveal crucial social and religious values; they are also (precisely because of their reference to the supernatural) transformative for human attitudes and behavior. The handling of symbols in ritual exposes their powers to act upon and change the persons involved in ritual performance. Within the enactment, energies are released through rhythmic movements and rhythmical speaking among the performers, thus a collective action against the individual crises is offered in this ritual.

The space offers a partial seclusion from the daily lives in which the people have to live with conflicts everyday. The space speaks of resistance through solidarity, maintenance of boundaries and resting on traditions in changing times. The ritual creates an ambivalent space of a second world which is in a constant state of *becoming* where a bond is temporarily established within the safe space. Each individual and the conformists participate equally by sharing specific experiences. Lai Haraoba characterises the sacred, mythic, numinous, even 'supernatural' character of celebration or commemoration of transcendent powers of religious as well as secular action.

## **METHODOLOGY:**

Dance remains an obvious topic for curiosity in most cultures and yet it is a largely unresearched territory. It is against the background of some recent writings that have simulated some interest that I would want to posit my work. A balance has been maintained in drawing in matter from primary as well as secondary sources. The methodologies applied in this research will be primary sources of information in the form of interviews and participant observation. Since there is a language barrier and as I am not familiar with the vocabulary outside the terminology of Lai Haraoba, I have to greatly depend on the archival materials. A major part of the work had been done with the help of anthropological and ethnographic accounts by various people who have worked on different aspects of Manipur, for example history, community practices, social organizations, art practices, religious discourses and folk stories.

Each of the methods here sets parameters suitable to the construction of the study. The dismissal of any method would have caused imbalance and difficulty in obtaining the necessary information in the study.

The theoretical aspects of the dissertation have been obtained through an extensive survey of literature. A major part of secondary sources is being formed by studying and reviewing books, articles, journals and dissertation works in the areas of performance, dance, ritual and women's studies, ethnography, social and cultural anthropology. Broadly and functionally, my methodology refers to the rationale and the philosophical assumptions that underlie in, historiography, ethnography and feminist research.

i) Historiography or historical approaches have long been a part of ethnography and consequently dance research. Historical facts were taken to make the core concept of the research and contemporaneous folklore practices provided a pattern for fragmentary historical data. This approach began a new wave of collection and interpretation of archival materials, and thus began a new correlation between historical and folklore facts. Folklore offered a comparatively wide range of usable concepts concerning the significance of social context, interrelation of folklore and community and individuality. Systematic explorations

of numerous ethnic groups and ethnographic regions were gradually created. Historiography had looked towards the history of Manipur, the nature and diversities of performances, the aspects of Manipuri identity and revivalism, all of which has been connected to the inimitable quest for maintaining the boundaries of their ethnicity.

ii) A focus on formal, morphological, and structural approaches had come up rather than the improvised individual approach. Through ethnography culture is studied and interpreted, its universalities and its variations are understood through ethnographic study based on fieldwork. Fieldwork forms a level of congruency in dance research; it cannot be conducted in isolation. Field experience, methodological and theoretical orientations are necessary to form on the concepts of current research. I have followed Clifford Geertz's approaches to fieldwork, tracing not just what people do, but the cultural elements themselves. The cultural boundaries of communication have been explored. Like, Geertz, I have tried to adhere to a traditional ethnographic outline, while moving outside that outline to talk about "webs" instead of "outlines" of culture. I have analyzed and drawn analogies constantly, with the aid of ethnographic tools, most of which has been applied during a one-and-half month stay in Manipur in summer, 2008.

Primary sources are those that came to existence from/during that period which is being studied; thus they are first-hand and contemporary and provided raw materials for the performance study. Information includes interviews with selected informants and watching the rituals and live performances on site. Interviews were carried out with key informants who were dancers themselves, Maibis and people at the helm of dance and performance institutions. The local people of several areas like Imphal, Nambol, Moirang, Kakching, Samuron gave me an insight of the local legends and the performed aspects of the rituals.

Secondary sources of information which will be vital to the study includes watching and analyzing recorded performances taken by me and those which had been recorded in the past five decades and photographs and studying the ways and techniques through which the dance is taught in institutions

In understanding the interstices between performance, ritual, performance space and the ritual space, Turner saw rituals (along with political and legal-judicial processes) as mere compensations, or redressive mechanisms for the tensions produced in the secular order. "I do not intend here to make a cultural analysis of a ritual but simply to isolate from the ritual complex those sociological features which are relevant ". Rituals, performed by cult-associations cross-cutting the boundaries of lineages and villages, creating wider networks of association, were treated by Turner as merely the "social glue" that holds the society together. Ritual has a function to fulfill: "The ritual system compensates to some extent for the limited range of effective political control and for the instability of kinship and affinal ties to which political value is attached"<sup>4</sup>.

The role of rituals is to sustain a society's equilibrium and secure solidarity among its members. Rituals are looked upon as mechanisms to ensure societal unity, although this unity may be achieved in spite of social conflicts and competing social norms and values. What many rituals (of rebellion) often do is precisely to enact social conflicts. Turner also adopted the insight of stressing the dynamic processes of conflicts in societies. Turner developed the social drama approach to transgress the static framework of classical structural- functional analyses and to reveal "social structure in action". Turner defined ritual as "prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings and powers." Likewise, a symbol is the smallest unit of ritual which still retains the specific proper- ties of ritual behavior. Symbols can be objects, activities, words, relationships, events, gestures, or spatial units Ritual, religious beliefs, and symbols are in Turner's perspective essentially related. Ritual is "a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests". Rituals are storehouses of meaningful symbols by which information is revealed and regarded as authoritative, as dealing with the crucial values of the community Not only do symbols reveal crucial social and religious values; they are also transformative for human

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<sup>4</sup> Victor Turner, *The Politically Integrative Function Of Ritual: Schism and Continuity in an African Society*, Manchester University Press, 1968

attitudes and behavior. The handling of symbols in ritual exposes their powers to act upon and change the persons involved in ritual performance.

Therefore in Lai Haraoba, by following Turner's classification we find three major empirical properties of dominant symbols: condensation, when one single dominant symbol represents many different things and actions;) unification of disparate materials, where the significant (the underlying meanings of the symbol) are interconnected by virtue of their common analogous qualities, or by association in fact or thought; and polarization of meaning or bipolarity, in which dominant symbols possess two distinct poles of meaning; at the ideological or normative pole."<sup>5</sup>

iii) Feminist performance ethnography consists of diverse but continual gendered encounters. "Feminist researches in dance have taken several approaches: the de-codification of images of women, the celebration of single individualities, the construction of sexuality in discourses on dance and analysis of fragmentary and contradictory identities"<sup>6</sup>. I have looked at the role of Maibi from two angles- as a representative of the Manipuri women and as a central facilitator to the ritual-performance of Lai Haraoba. I have also looked into the role of women in performance and resistance in Manipur, which has helped in defining their socio-economic and political space as well. The women stand in between the conventions and history on one side and deep social fissures created by political problems on the other. In a Manipuri community performance space, whether in Lai Haraoba or Raas Lila, the performative power and decisions seem to be balanced between the two sexes. But the social status and the power which the Maibis enjoy through the ritual-performance of a Haraoba puts them in the role of the protector of the consecrated space and therefore the mythical world of Meiteis. The Maibis project the dual personae which constitutes every woman, to possess and to express. They speak about an affirmative yet malleable identity.

I have aimed to mark shifts in the pulse of the audience. A live audience, at any point of time, share experiences while making meaning out of the performance. They develop a sense of

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>6</sup> C Brown, *Re-tracing Our Steps: The Possibilities for Feminist Dance Histories*, in Janet Lansdale, J Layson (ed), *Dance History, An Introduction*, Routledge, London, New York, 1994, pp 205

connectivity with the imaginative, and the real world together. It is but a common sociological trope to find commonalities in behaviour which members of the community impart as they face similar stimulus. Through my dissertation I have aimed to find moments and responses to such stimulus, as acceptable under the bricolage of the feminist and gendered critiques.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW:**

My dissertation has been structured with materials on history of the region, understanding the social organizations and the status of gender in the society, the cultural and the political scenario of the society as an independent tribal organization, as a Hindu state, as colonized under the British and as a part of the socialist secular state of India post independence. Therefore a series of articles from the Economic and Political Weekly has been read to understand the basic nature of the state. There are also many important articles which speak about the women's struggles in the past few decades, the status of women in the social organizations, the economic and the cultural development as garnered by the women. It was also important to understand the ethnic distribution of the region as it consists of numerous tribes and Vaishnav Brahmins, Pangal Muslims and Presbyterian Christians among others. Most materials which speak about the Meitei culture are translated works by several authors originally written in native language. Some books about the performative aspects are written in Bengali as Bengal and Manipur has a shared history, similar linguistics and the same script.

Majority of the work has been fuelled by ethnographic accounts of scholars like T C Hodson, Sir Robert Reid, Manjushri Chaki Sircar, Somorendra Arambam.

*Feminist Futures*, a compilation of articles on women, culture and development has given interesting analysis; the essays speak about sexuality and gendered body, on how women have contributed to environment and ecology and most importantly how essential it is for women to represent themselves in the cultural politics. Several authors have focused on key conversations towards empowerment and feminist futures. *Gender and Power in Affluent*



*Asia* by Krishna Sen and Maila Stevens, focuses on showing the importance of women's agencies in transforming economies and ideologies in countries undergoing modernization. Women need to see themselves how they are placed on the global map. The authors argue on the emphasis of working of private and public sphere in order to understand the new affluence, the old traditions of the economic system of the Meiteis. The book also helps in understanding the complex system of women's autonomy in reference with political action and domestic and market space. Similarly, *Some Questions on Feminism and its Relevance in South Asia* by Kamla Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan gives an alternative view of feminism in South Asian societies. Feminism, in this book, is not seen as a wave of movement but a part of a daily lived culture, which is indispensable to the study of Manipuri women. Grimshaw, Ollwnburger and Moore's study in 1995 developed a study on women's writing so that a more pertinent discussion can be cultivated on gender issues. *What is Gender* comprises of sociological approaches towards deciphering politics of sexuality, gender, gaze and class as understood by Mary Holmes. Gender inequalities, gender and possibilities of change, queer theories, repetition of gender display, symbolic and performative reality have been dealt deftly which provided me the foundation for understanding a woman's position in Meitei culture. I will be drawing from Johannes Fabian, Erika Fischer-Lichte, Jill Dolan, Lizbeth Goodman to understand the concept of performance space. I will be dependent on Adrienne Kaeppler, Joan D. Frosch, Diedre Sklar, and Theresa Buckland's *Dancing in the Fields* for understanding the process of ethnography and how it is important for the fulfillment of a detailed study of a region. Adrienne Kaeppler, influenced by Franz Boas and Malinowski attempted to locate lores and legends underlying ritual based performances; Lai Haraoba which too is a movement system, can be understood by deconstructing the movement as motifs, imagery and meaning-making system using Saussurian techniques. In a Haraoba, Kaeppler's approach to deconstruct the movements into culturally recognized pieces is a key element in relating the movement system with kinship, social structure, material culture and rites. As a dance historian, she speaks about audiences in such a context, who can be gods, involved audience members, or members who are lame bystanders. In places like a Haraoba, the performance (ritual) space may consist all kinds of members. But as always, the supernatural powers which are initiated elevate the status of some of the members, like the Maibis.

Therefore, an oeuvre of information from Manjushri Chaki Sircar's doctoral dissertation *Lai Harouba: the Social Position and the Ritual Status of Meitei Women of Manipur, India* is possibly a predecessor to my work on Meitei women. The earliest written account on the Meitei society is possibly by T C Hodson in 1908. Khungjam Ratan Kumar *Lai-Haraoba of Manipur: Indigenous festival of the Meitei*, Nongthom Premchand's *Rituals and Performances* Nongmaithem Pramodini's *The Cultural History of Early Manipur*, has helped me understand the foundations of the rituals in Manipur. Saryu Doshi and Louise Lightfoot give a pictorial account of the development of performing arts of the Sanamahi and Vaishnav festivals. E Nilkanta Singh, M Kirti Singh, Vijaylakshmi N. Brara gives a basic outline of the fragments of Manipuri culture and politics and religious development of the past two centuries.

But ethnographic accounts of other similar cultures by authors across the world have been significant in understanding the interstices between performance, ritual, performance space and the ritual space. Victor Turner, Erica Fischer-Lichte, Jill Dolan, Jürgen Habermas and their concepts on public sphere and the theatrical space has been a key element in developing the study. In *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre* Erica Fischer-Lichte defines the theatre as a protégé of a sacrificial space and that every performance space has the ability to transform to a spectacle.

Jill Dolan's *Utopia in Performance* is a moment in bliss which describes small profound moments, and each moment is different for each individual and each configuration in the community. A free movement between two bodies or groups of performers or the performer and the audience, is envisioning of utopia. As the minority groups undergo conflict to model their fluid/fragmented ideologies, in her book, Jill Dolan analyses many moments where conventions and uniqueness come together to provide a frame for the multivocal performances. Dolan has tried to find, and succeeded in pin-pointing moments in which audience had felt bound together, and a broader sense of 'capacious' public in which social discourse articulated the possible rather than the inconceivable barriers to human potential.

Lai Haraoba is the name of a complex ritual cycle. Despite the history of contacts between the Meitei and the Burmese neighbours, despite the pervasive influence of Vaishnavism in Manipur, the current intra-state and inter-state political turbulence, this is one performance which has remain absolutely unchanged from the time the thought of it has been conceived. Meiteis observe to religions, Vaishnavism and that of the Sanamahi cult. They also observe many Hindu festivals like the Durga puja, Jhulan, Holi and enmesh some of their own rituals with it. Lai Haraoba gives us an idea how extremely structured the rites are, but it also lends a negotiable space for each social group to follow. The local roots of Lai Haraoba have helped it to flourish in the “local climate of multicultural revivalism and even political separatism” says social scientist, Saroj N Arambam Paratt. In her essays on Meitei culture, *Cheitharol Kumpapa* and *The Pleasing of the Gods: Meitei Lai Haraoba* the social organizations and how the ritual-performance unfolds are explained. Since she herself hails from the Meitei traditions, she explains that almost all of Lai Haraoba is untouched by outsiders’ opinions. She goes on to narrate how the worshippers and the performers immerse themselves into heaps of ritual activities outside the dance and music. The melancholy *pena* is a constant company as the Maibis pray and narrate in lilting movements syncopated with the worship of the deities.

*Wounded Land*, John Paratt’s comprehensive publication speaks largely about the problems of north eastern India, with reference to Manipur. It is vastly different from the growing volume of literature on this area study, as along with stating a detailed timeline of socio-political history of Manipur, it discusses the value, influence and apportion of power and construction of identity in this wounded land. Paratt states that every ruler, be it be a Hindu king, a Sanamahi leader, a Christian missionary, a British agent or the an ignorant elect by the Government of India, has failed to nurture the land and has inflicted several wounds on it. Paratt takes the reader through cultural renaissance, political awakening, colonial rule, coming of Christianity, feudal structures, merger with mainstream Indian politics, militarization, and insurgency groups; this book marks a parallel line alongside the development of performance and participation of the community during the times of strife or freedom. Paratt speaks favorably about the involvement of women at grass root and at high positions of the Meitei society, which forms the base of my study on Meitei women.

Manipur's relation with the neighboring states, with the border and home countries and its discordant inter-clan, inter-tribe, heterogeneous ethnic distribution is deliberated by Paratt, only to conclude that the current state of politics has etiolated the vibrant land.

For theoretical aspects on dance and performance, *The Anthropology of Dance* by Anna Peterson Royce, Ann Cooper Albright's *Choreographing Difference*, *The Routledge Reader in Politics and Performance* compiled by Lizbeth Goodman and Jane De Gay, Mark Franko, Susanne Franco, Marina Nordera edited book, *Dance Discourses*, *Dance Transcending Borders* edited by Urmimala Sarkar has been key to interpret movements, sexuality in performance, corporeality in live and mediated performance, performances in cross-cultural contexts. It is imperative that interpreting dance, moreover performance needs transdisciplinary application of theories. Therefore journals of sociology, history and anthropology have been consulted along with dance and performance studies.

#### **CHAPTERISATION:**

The first chapter looks at the kind and nature of ritual and performance space viz. the evolution of Lai Haraoba in such a space. For Manipur, the concept of space is marked by the people; some spaces affirm their customary practices on ritual occasions which ensures social gathering, distillation of culture and religious sentiments. The cosmology and the history of the region are also narrated in this space making this a haven for Meiteis. Subtly and intricately the space of a Haraoba indicates how the ritual is related to the history of dance, performances and the distribution of political power in this region. The next part of the chapter describes instances where Lai Haraoba has gone through change in the face of acculturation, colonization, spread of Vaishnavism, Meiteisation and under Indian Union. The chapter describes how Lai Haraoba is a ritual-performance which ensconces multiple meanings, making it a dynamic social process of Manipur.

The second chapter explains the exchange of movements in the space where Lai Haraoba is performed and how it has come to represent duality of the lived existence of the Meiteis. The first part of the chapter discusses how I have envisioned Lai Haraoba as an ideal utopic space

at the backdrop of a very violent history and current politics. The performance of a Haraoba circulates in two spheres. One is the area of the performance and one is the scope of the performance. Both spaces negotiate civil liberties and have pedagogical functions; the rituals and performances of a Haraoba has been discussed thoroughly in the second half of the chapters, including the nature of performances, the roles of Maibis in these performances and the genesis and typology of a Lai Haraoba practice.

The third chapter speaks about Manipuri women who through performance and politics have managed to project images of colonized identity, national identity, gendered identity, regional identity and ritualized identity. The chapter traces the evolution of a sacred body, that of a Maibi, in a Lai Haraoba; it traces the nature of Manipuri dance through Tagore's aesthetics, Raas Lila and Lai Haraoba. It discusses the history of resistance in which Manipuri women have been involved in. The chapter also ponders on the nature and security of a woman in the domestic, economic and political space. Women in every sphere have been dominant in contributing towards the formation of a safe space; the enactment or the performance of a Lai Haraoba affirms her as a protector of consecrated and secular spaces of Manipur.

In Manipur, for the Meiteis, Lai Haraoba is a way of life, more than a festival. A month long celebration and rejoicing ends, but the customs, the faith, the values imbibed in them pass down across generation. The performative aspect may differ across the Haraoba-s, but the content i.e. the enactment of the cosmology remains the same. Manipur, a sequestered land locked by the hills speak of grit, zest for life, need for solidarity through their observing of the ritual. Lai Haraoba is an actualisation, at the level of reality as well as a mystical one. In it, something invisible, inactual, takes a beautiful, actual, holy form.

It has been necessary to use Manipuri terminology for the nature, process and description of rituals and performance of Lai Haraoba and other social organizations of Manipur. A glossary has been provided in the end.

#### The Reality of the actual practice and evolution of the Haraoba

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##### 1.1 Ritual space

Lai Haraoba is a kind of ancestor worship, i.e. “a variety of religious beliefs and practices concerned with the spirits of dead persons regarded as relatives, some of whom may be mythical. Although far from the universal, ancestor worship exists or formally existed in societies at every level of cultural development<sup>7</sup>. In pre Hinduised times Lai Haraoba was a supervised ritual directly under the king’s domain. “Originally, the Maibis and the *loishangs*<sup>8</sup> were summoned by the kings and protected by the state. The powers of the Maibis made the king live long and they were allowed to perform special rituals by the king”<sup>9</sup>. Lai Haraoba has evolved to be an amalgamation of politics, societal performances and cosmology of the Meitei society. A.M. Hocart observes as long as ritual retains their meaning, there is cooperation for life.<sup>10</sup>. He asserts saying rituals are the nervous system of a social organization and it is from rituals that a government or modern society is formed. Most ritual themes are built around the fertility principle, which signifies the emergence of contemporaneous societies from simple and basic organizations.

Ritual according to MacIver and Page is a formal rhythmic procedure controlling a succession of acts directed to the same end and repeated without variation on appropriate

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<sup>7</sup> The New Encyclopedia Britannica pp835

<sup>8</sup> *Loishang*- council

<sup>9</sup> Personal interview with Mangangsena, Manipur, May, 2008

<sup>10</sup> A M Hocart, *Kings and Councilors: An essay in the comparative Anatomy of Human Society*, University of Chicago Press, 1970

occasions<sup>11</sup>. Just as a system of language is based upon rules, ritual may be viewed as a system of symbolic acts that is also based upon rules. According to the New Encyclopedia Britannica, ritual is the language of myth<sup>12</sup>. A ritual process is a complex performative act with a specific, observable kind of behaviour based upon traditional or established rules. A diverse group such as the Meiteis, affirm their customary practices on ritual occasions when they intend to celebrate practices already associated with the sacred. Lai Haraoba<sup>13</sup> ensures social gathering, distillation of culture and religious sentiments. Lai Haraoba not only describes the cosmology and the history of the region but also subtly and intricately indicates how the ritual is related to the history of dance, performances and the distribution of political power in this region.

Most sociological and anthropological studies of ritual emphasize separation from customary group practices on ritual occasions. Some rituals function in marking either a transition from one state to another or a temporary suspension of regular activities. In order for groups to know themselves and others, they must "announce" their identities.<sup>14</sup>. They do this by engaging in social practices that highlight their symbolic place in the world. This may be especially true among groups who are closest to one another in status<sup>15</sup>; differences between distant groups are self-exemplifying. The process of identity announcement is itself a means of refining an identity over time or "finding" it at any one point in time. The identity may have a long evolving history or a relatively short and perhaps struggling one. But identity often is constructed through a series of ritual practices.

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<sup>11</sup> MacIver R M and Page Charles , *Society: An Introductory Analysis*, New Delhi, MacMillan, 2004

<sup>12</sup> The New Encyclopedia Britannica. 1987, vol 26 pp824

<sup>13</sup> Lai Haraoba, when roughly translated means 'merriment of the Gods'

<sup>14</sup> Erving Goffman,, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, New York, Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1959  
McCall, George J, *Identities and Interactions: An Examination of Human Associations in Everyday Life*, New York, The Free Press, 1978

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Abbott,, *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988

Ritualizing the performances call attention to group attributes and to the sacred essence of the group itself. What use do rituals have for collective identity? The literature has followed two main approaches. The first, drawing on Durkheim (1915/ 1965) theorist Barry Schwartz emphasizes the integrative functions that rituals serve for members of societies by revitalizing shared sentiments and beliefs or emphasizing common ground where disagreement also exists.<sup>16</sup> Writers like Edward Shils emphasize the role of ritual in maintaining social cohesion and preventing conflict<sup>17</sup>. The Durkheimian perspective stress how ritual is directed by a group at the group itself, ritual is used by groups to control them and hence a space is created where the ritual serves several functions. For example, the ritual helps to sustain the vitality of [common] beliefs, to keep them from being effaced from memory and the most essential elements of the collective consciousness are reinvigorated. Through it, the group periodically renews the sentiments which it has of itself and of its unity; at the same time, individuals are strengthened in their social natures. (Durkheim, 1915/1965:420)

The second approach emphasizes power and conflict rather than unity, arguing that ritual can be used in conflict as well as to prevent conflict. Kertzer, Paige and Paige notes that ritual can sanction deviants, support shifts in political power, and allow parties in a dispute to claim positions of dominance<sup>18</sup>. These two approaches need not be mutually exclusive. Kunda observes that a third perspective views ritual as a dramatic form that can contain processes of both social cohesion and conflict<sup>19</sup>. Ritual can mark distinctions and promote unity, sometimes within a single space. In the arena of performance, theorists

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<sup>16</sup> Barry Schwartz, "Mourning and the making of a sacred symbol." *Social Forces* 70:343-364, 1991

<sup>17</sup> Edward Shils, "Ritual and crisis", *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, Series B, 251:447-450, 1966

<sup>18</sup> David I Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1988  
Paige, Karen Ericksen, and Jeffery M. Paige, *The Politics of Reproductive Ritual*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1981

<sup>19</sup> Gideon Kunda, *Engineering Culture: Control and Commitment in a High-Tech Corporation*. Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1992



adopt a liberal definition of ritual: it is a staged communicative dimension of social activity, both sacred and secular.<sup>20</sup>

The additional materials enable the moulding of the mythical body into a single sequential whole. The composite myth is shown to be related to spatial and temporal concepts and to the ritual cycle of the research area. Myths and their ritual reenactments promote and perpetuate the divine nature of the Maibis by identifying them with organic powers of reproduction and by suggesting that the hierarchical system in which the society functioned was part of a natural order established at the beginning of human history. It has been widely discussed across the world that myths were used to foster the development and perpetuation of social hierarchies by providing elites access to powers beyond the realm of ordinary individuals. For the ritual of Lai Haraoba, right after the kings and the courtiers, the Maibis occupied the place in the social hierarchy. They have an access to the supernatural realm which is established in the mythical past and reiterated in the present through rituals, legitimizing the classification of the priests as separate and superior social beings.

Myths provide a way of seeing the existing social order as the product of events that occurred outside it, frequently in a primordial setting of time or space.<sup>21</sup>

Ritual actions and origin myths do not simply occur as isolated institutions in societies; they can be understood as precipitates of broader social processes. Origin myths in ancient stratified societies functioned as important means to support the privileges of the rulers. The source of social inequality is defined and justified through the primordial actions of cultural heroes. The reenactment of those actions, within the codified contexts of rituals, reestablished the ruling elites' ancestral linkages with mythical personages and events as well as their access to universal forces.

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<sup>20</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, New York, Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1959

<sup>21</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, "Myth in Primitive Psychology" in *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*, Doubleday Anchor Books, New York, 1926, 1954.

The corn rituals of the Inca were performed with the elite draped in their finest war regalia with joyous songs of agriculture and warfare. As studied by Brian Bauer, the elite and the members of the court of Cusco valley reinstated and redefined their right to rule through their control of rituals and their dominant position in the state cosmology not only in corn-planting and harvest ceremonies but in most, if not all, state-sponsored celebrations of the imperial city. Like the Inca rituals, Lai Haraoba, a celebration during the harvest season, also suggests how intimately the agricultural cycle is related to the ritual.

Origin myths reveal not only expressions of basic social relationships but also endorsements of present-day social arrangements. Within complex societies, and especially chiefdoms and states with semi-divine rulers, this takes on a particularly recognizable form. The mythic heroes are not vague primogenitors of the past but the direct ancestors of the ruling elite. It is the actions of the elite in the mythic past that bring about the current social order, and those actions are repeated in rituals by individuals perceived to be their descendants. Thus, within the general confines of state ideologies, rituals and myths are used to support the ruling elites' privileged positions, and through them the powers of the state become inextricably mixed with the maintenance of the social order.<sup>22</sup>

Rituals like the corn-harvesting rituals of the Incas and Lai Haraoba of the Meiteis can be seen as expressing publicly articulated consensus, but the embodiment of the ruling elite consolidating its ideological or political dominance. David Kertzer believes that ritual will always continue to be an essential part of a political life and will be used to symbolize simplify and enhance political messages. Ritual helps in building political organizations, maintaining political legacy/legitimate relationships, foster solidarity in absence of political consensus and how it can be used for inciting and defusing political conflicts.

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<sup>22</sup> Brian S Bauer, "Legitimization of the State in Inca Myth and Ritual", *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 98, No. 2 (Jun., 1996), pp. 327-337

Geertz is convinced that the principle instrumentalities of rule lie less in the techniques of administration and more in the arts of theatre<sup>23</sup>. As the king was the ritual head and the political actor in Bali, Manipur can speak of a similar history. It was the king's cult and the myths of origin that had created him, raised him to a status equivalent to the progeny of gods. V N Brara states that the rituals in Manipur are ceremonial in enactment, grandiose in appearance. It is not just the Haraobas, but every ritual, be it be Meitei or Vaishnavite, transform into a huge theatrical performance which establishes the people's perception of their relationship with their ancestors, their gods, their rulers and themselves. The god and the ancestors are equal participants in the functioning of the state, along with the live audience<sup>24</sup>.

Apart from organizing the social order, another concern has been the place of emotion in ritual performance which signifies the nature of the space the ritual is being enacted in. Drawing on depth psychology, Victor Turner, for example, argues that ritual action is a means of, and space for, channeling and divesting the antisocial qualities of powerful emotions.<sup>25</sup> Stanley Tambiah, on the other hand, contends that ritual as conventionalized behavior is not meant to "express intentions, emotions, and states of mind of individuals in a direct, spontaneous, and 'natural way.'" Rather, according to Tambiah, ritual distances individuals from "spontaneous and intentional expressions because spontaneity and intentionality are, or can be, contingent, labile, circumstantial, even incoherent or disordered"<sup>26</sup>. Following this line of thought, other anthropologists have suggested that ritual is a space of "conventional" and not "genuine" (i.e., personal or individual) emotions

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<sup>23</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State In The Nineteenth Century Bali*, Princeton University Press, 1980

<sup>24</sup> Even in the *Maharaas Lila*, a Vaishnav ceremony, celebrated on the *Kartik Purnima* or the full moon of the month of *Kartik*, it is said that Govindaji himself comes down to dance among the Gopis played by dancers. The idol at the Shri Shri Govindaji Temple in Imphal is treated as an anthropomorphic figure. Tales of Bhagavata are often associated to give Govindaji a part-human and fully divine disposition

<sup>25</sup> According to Victor Turner, "powerful drives and emotions associated with human physiology, especially the physiology of reproduction, are divested in the ritual process of their antisocial quality and attached to components of the normative order, energizing the latter with a borrowed vitality, and thus making the Durkheimian 'obligatory' desirable" (1969:52-53).  
Turner, Victor, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Aldine Publishing Company, Chicago, 1969

<sup>26</sup> Stanley Tambiah, *Culture, Thought and Social Action*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1985

(Kapferer 1979). Notably, despite some obvious differences, these contrasting conceptions of the role emotions play in ritual performance share a view of ritual as socially prescribed and formal behavior and, therefore, opposed to routine and pragmatic action. Ritual space, in these views, is understood to be the space where individual psychic drives are either channeled into conventional patterns of expression or temporarily suspended so that a conventional social function may be enacted. Common to both these positions is the understanding that ritual activity is where emotional spontaneity comes to be controlled.

The co-participation of the performers of Lai Haraoba shapes the consciousness of each. The performers interact using symbolic representations and emotional displays to signify a common commitment to an idealized image of social structure.

In nineteenth century, it was a common belief in religious studies that there was a clear hierarchy between myth and ritual. Myth was regarded the most important and ritual, a mere illustration. But William Herbert Smith argues that myth serves as the interpretation of a ritual.<sup>27</sup>

“So far as the myths consist of explanations of the ritual, their value is altogether secondary, and it may be affirmed with confidence that in almost every case the myth was derived from the ritual and not the ritual from the myth; for the ritual was fixed and the myth was the variable, the ritual was obligatory and faith in the myth was at the discretion of the worshipper”.

Practice or action is considered to be a fundamental feature of religion along with theological doctrines and scriptures. Allegiance to myths and texts are found in individuals and ritual ensures social bondage in the society. Rituals, as Durkheim suggested could be studied in order to gain insight into the unconscious world of the collective. The shift from myth to rituals corresponds to the shift from the text to the performance.

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<sup>27</sup> William Herbert Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, 1889



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There are two sides to every ritual. In certain societies, ritual is an assemblage of symbolic actions and objects in all sensory codes (taken after Freud); visual, auditory, kinesthetic, gustatory, olfactory and full of music, play and entertainment. Rituals are also forms of authority, litigation, feud, prayer, conflict and sacrifice. At this particular time of the year, every individual, through pre determined actions co ordinates to augment the orchestrated mechanism.

It can be stated that a live performance provides a place to come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world. It is a space to reinvest the contained energies to envision a different future, one full of hope and reanimated with optimism. In a climate under the dictates of the Indian state and the AFSPA, a virulent war wages on in the state. The intangible notion of 'humanity' seems to be reflected in conservative spaces where the entire community comes together.

Lai Haraoba enacts beliefs, while generating and sustaining cordial commitments in the name of Meitei ideology. Durkheim held that religious impulses appear in all societies, but that their nature changes with societal structure<sup>28</sup>. A Meitei society, where social differentiation is advanced as contrasted to a society with a restricted field of interpersonal relationships, religious beliefs take on a universal character. Social relations are more diffused and tentative; the shared experiences of society's members are less constant and consistent. As a consequence, the religious only cannot perform the function of promoting solidarity if it is grounded in specific spheres of localized social experience. The conscience collective must be transformed: It must rise above all local diversities and become sufficiently universal to adopt all members of society without distinction. Since the cognitive, emotional, and moral experiences of the individual derive from social relations in groups, Lai Haraoba creates the space for such interactions.

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<sup>28</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms Of The Religious Life*, Free Press, New York 1912,1965

Kertzer speaks of ritual as an analytical category that helps us deal with the chapters of human experience and puts it into coherent framework. He further asserts that what is important about rituals is not that they deal with supernatural beings, but rather that they provide a powerful way in which people's social dependence can be expressed. A framework such as this is understandably passed down via generations serve as the perimeter of the sanctified space of Lai Haraoba. In a community as diverse and stratified, it is difficult to expect concordance at every level. But every Meitei clan shares a common history of land, migration, acculturation, religious stratification, colonization and undercurrents of living through terrorism. The coherent framework of common human experience continues to exist. Kertzer rightfully defines ritual as an action wrapped in a web of symbolism<sup>29</sup>.

The most important tradition of the Meiteis stresses the integrative force of such ritual and the way it upholds and reinforces the significant cultural values. The same ritual can be seen as expressing publicly articulated consensus, but the embodiment of the ruling *loishang* consolidates its ideological or political dominance. Kertzer believes that ritual will always continue to be an essential part of a political life and will be used to symbolize simplify and enhance political messages. Ritual helps in building political organizations, maintaining political legacy/legitimate relationships, foster solidarity in absence of political consensus and how it can be used for inciting and defusing political conflicts. But Lai Haraoba which by nature speaks about the evolution of the land and people of Manipur has been unwilling to transform itself with changes in the political scenarios. On the contrary, the socio-ritual space which had been provided to the community remains deliberate and unaltered. In the past decade, Manipur has been a volatile backdrop to bombings, mass killings, social injustice, military brutality, rise of grave social issues and pure unbridled terrorist activities. It is said that political reality is defined for us in the first place through ritual, and our beliefs are subsequently reaffirmed through the regular collective expression<sup>30</sup>. But in reality, Manipur has not integrated the collective expression

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<sup>29</sup>David I, Kertzer , *Ritual, Politics, and Power*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT,1988

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*

of anguish, mortification and rage in the current practices of Lai Haraoba. They still follow the *Cheitharol kumbaba*<sup>31</sup>, *puya*<sup>32</sup>, indigenous archaic literature, ancient traditional myths as foundations for conducting the *Haraobas*.

If the text of a repeated ritual like a coronation remains unaltered over time its meaning may change profoundly depending on the nature of the context. In an essentially static age, unchanging ritual might be a genuine reflection and reinforcement to stability and consensus. But in a period of change, conflict and crisis it might be deliberately unaltered so as to give an impression of continuity, community and comfort despite the overwhelming contextual evidence to the contrary<sup>33</sup>. Eric Hobsbawm however remarks that there are traditions which appear or claim to be old but are often quite recent or sometimes invented.

It is significant to notice how powerful a social transformation can be brought about once myths grip the imagination of the masses. When the myths are collectively appropriated then they are definitely more powerful than when they are lodged in disaggregated individual consciousness.<sup>34</sup>

## 1.2 Changes through the ages

It is significant to notice how myths are powerful in bringing about social transformation once they grip the imagination of the masses. Collectively appropriated myths are definitely more powerful than when they are lodged in disaggregated individual consciousness.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *Chitharol kumbaba*- name of the royal chronicles, which serve as guidelines for organization of rituals

<sup>32</sup> A *Puya* is an indigenous manuscript, which contains mythical and divine stories. It is read or enacted by the Maibis during a Haraoba.

<sup>33</sup> David Cannadine in Eric Hobsbawm & Terence Ranger ed, *The Invention Of Tradition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994

<sup>34</sup> Dipankar Gupta, *Political Sociology in India: Contemporary Trends*, New Delhi, Orient Longman, 1995

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*

Though revivalist movements in Manipur is very apparent today, the movement had come into being from the reign of King Garib Nawaza (1709-48), and is believed to have reached a different height in the time of King Bhagyachandra's second reign (1763-1798). In the time of Bhagyachandra, most of the Meitei culture and tradition were on the brink of being destroyed at the king's own command and by then, Vaishnavism had already started spreading over the lives, racial profiling, professions, practices and observing of rituals. Many people opposed the Hindu approach and the policy of the king. Within a few years, Vaishnavism was declared the state religion.

Revivalism took a significant development in the 1930s when the Meiteis started to re-worshipping their ancient gods through the rituals. The movement was called Sanamahism or Meiteism, started by a young boy, Naoria Phullo from Cachar, a district of Assam. Many Meiteis who had settled here were the descendants of the immigrants from Manipur who came during the Seven Years Devastation<sup>36</sup>, between 1819 and 1825.

In order to investigate the lost rituals of the Meiteis Phullo found an organization called the Apokpa Marup in Cachar in 1930. After Phullo's death the followers continued with this movement still calling it 'Sanamahi' named after a Meitei household deity. Revivalist agendas and strategies took a leap in 1945 when Pukhrambam Surchand became the president of this organization. The resolutions of the organization were manifold;

- to revive the cultural heritage to the Meiteis
- to conduct research in the ancient history and other literary sources of the Meiteis
- to revive the Meitei scripts to worship and chant in Meiteilon<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> The period of Seven Years devastation is known in history as *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa* during which the Burmese troops conquered the Meitei kingdom for about seven years. The population of the kingdom decreased during and after the devastation. It was recorded in 1820 AD that about 30,000 subjects of the kingdom were taken away as war captives by the Burmese troops under Commander Pakhan Woon. Thousands of Meiteis fled to Sylhet and elsewhere. Many died of starvation due to serious famines during 1821-23 AD

<sup>37</sup> Meiteilon is the original dialect of the Meiteis. The script in which the Meiteis wrote is known as Meitei Mayek. After Vaishnavism changed the cultural practices of the valley, the people started writing in the Bengali script.



- to strengthen the unity between the hill and the plain people do that they stay as brothers
- to strengthen a bond between the Meiteis staying inside and outside the territory of Manipur
- to let the world know that a community known as Meitei has been in the existence with their old and distinct identity in the North Eastern part of India.

The Sanamahi revivalists believed in *Atiya Mapu Sidaba*, *Pakhangba*, *Leimaren* and other host of the Umanglais. However the sentiment of the movement seemed indicative of more of a political trend rather than regeneration of religious belief. Several educated Meiteis have denied calling the Sanamahi movement revivalist. They believe that Manipur has been a culture based on religious syncretism where the Brahmins and Meiteis worship Hindu and Meitei gods. The two religious systems bound to coexist. On the other hand the Sanamahi followers assert that they have stopped following Hindu customs and purely follow the Meitei system<sup>38</sup>.

The movement was gearing towards an extremist attempt getting nearer to desanskritizing the ongoing Meitei cultural practices and reviving of the Meitei heritage. The movement strongly opposed the Meitei identification with the *Kshatriya* caste and denied link with any Indo Aryan heritage.<sup>39</sup> It is necessary to primarily practice what is considered purely indigenous Meitei religion, culture, custom and way of life. They wanted a *maiba* and *maibi* to perform all the rituals and the other socio religious functions in the Meitei language. Brahmins, Bengali and Sanskrit languages would have ceased to function in their socio-religious lives. They asserted that they were not against any particular religious community. There had been no instance of communal violence and hatred activity against

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<sup>38</sup> G. Kabui , *Social and Religious Movement in Manipur in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries*, Bulletin of the division of History, Centre for the Post Graduate Studies, Imphal, 1974

<sup>39</sup> Manjushri Chaki-Sircar, *Feminism in a Traditional Society*, Delhi, Shakti Books, 1984

any group as they appreciated peace. They also intended to bring about a closer and understanding relation between the Nagas and the Kuki tribes.<sup>40</sup>

The ritual Lai Haraoba explains the build-up of all the social organizations through metaphors. The ritual shows the relationship between the hill and the plain when the creator god comes dressed as a Naga boy and meets the girl of the valley. There are numerous instances in history where Meitei kings married women from the hill tribes<sup>41</sup>. Some gods are commonly acknowledged by the hill people as well as the Meiteis. They abide by the *Sanamahi*, *Leimarel* and *Soraren*. The offerings consisted of meat, fish and wine, a ritual which was gradually done away with as Hinduised practice of vegetarianism. This practice along with a few others left the Hindus feeling ritually superior and categorized all tribes as untouchables. The two groups further got alienated from each other when the hill people adopted Christianity in the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>42</sup> A major example of social stratification came into Manipur. Social distance increased but apparently there was no racial difference between the valley and the hill dwellers.<sup>43</sup> Many of the British anthropologists found a lot of evidence which claims that the Meitei are descendants of the Naga tribes. But the successive influence from the mainland of India and the West has left a permanent impact on the Meiteis. They had adopted a coping mechanism which would continuously keep benefiting the population. The cultural and linguistic differences coupled with geographical isolations and political conditions determining the relationship between the groups were responsible for a distance wider than when hill people became Christians and the valley became Vaishnavised.

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<sup>40</sup> The branches of this organization were scattered all over the valley. According to the Lainingthou Sanamahi Temple Board, Brochure, Imphal, 25<sup>th</sup> September, 1981, the number of members have crossed 85,000

<sup>41</sup> An account of the Manipur chronicle *Poireiton Khunthoklon* records the first king of Manipur Nongda Lairen Pakhangba marrying a tribal girl called Laisana

<sup>42</sup> Vijaylaxmi N Brara, *Politics, Society and Cosmology in India's North East*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1998

<sup>43</sup> K B Singh, *Social Stratification and Mobility in Manipur*, in S M Dubey ed *North East India: A Sociological Study*, Concept Publishing House, Delhi, 1978

The tribals were not thoroughly isolated. The original distance between the two which was ingrained for a few centuries remained unbridgeable to a certain extent today. There has been a rise in the Naga and the Kuki population, and their demands for a separate land has transformed into a known and establishment movement today. There have been demands for a separate Kuki land and the consolidation of all Naga tribes inhabiting in Manipur, Assam and AP. The NSCN (I-M)<sup>44</sup>, other underground Naga organizations, claims that those Nagas inhabiting the areas in these states should be integrated into Nagaland, the neighbour state. The Government of India and NSCN (I-M) signed a ceasefire agreement on this condition. Reacting to this there was a mass protest in Manipur on June 18, 2001, in 18 innocent lives were lost to army bullets. There arose a constant need to revive the affinal ties amongst the various populaces who have made Manipur their residence. One of the original objectives of the Lainingthou Sanamahi movement or the revivalist movement was to strengthen the unity between the two groups.

Bringing unity amongst the diversified and heterogeneous ethnic minorities of this region had been an ineluctable function of the Haraoba organizers. According to Manipuri historian Nongmaithem Pramodini there are multiple factors which had led to the rise in the numbers of Haraobas in Manipur.<sup>45</sup> The expansion of the population led to the development of a productive force and this had spurred the growth of cultural activities. With these the number of ancestral deities who are associated with the daily lives of the people, have increased manifold. The growth of population has expectantly spread out lineages. Every deity had one deity and has led to the rise in the number of Umanglais the number of which was originally 378. The Meitei social structure has seven *salais*<sup>46</sup> or clans which were large exogamous units tracing to a common ancestor. *Salais* are subdivided into *yumnaks* (maximal lineage) and then to *sageis* (major lineage) with the

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<sup>44</sup> National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah faction). The figures given by Nepam in the year 2002 showed 2500 fighters for this organization whereas National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Kaplan faction) had around 1250 fighters.

<sup>45</sup> Nongmaithem Pramodini, *The Cultural History of Early Manipur*, unpublished Phd thesis to the Department of History, Manipur University, Imphal, 1987

<sup>46</sup> *Salais* are identified with the Hindu *Gotra* system - Khungjam Ratan, *Lai-Haraoba of Manipur: Indigenous festival of the Meitei (A Socio-Historical Perspective)*, PhD thesis, Imphal, 2001, pp 4

total reaching 636<sup>47</sup>. Traditionally a particular *sagei* used to settle in a particular *leikai* or locality and so they organized the Lai Haraoba of their *sagei* deity collectively. But in the contemporaneous times, especially in the Imphal area, due to urbanization, migration and other processes of acculturation and social change, each Leikai has a heterogeneous composition consisting of various *sageis*. With the changing socio-cultural pattern the people become more conscious of their identities and group consolidation of the organisation of the Lai Haraoba plays a significant role. It has become a matter of prestige to organize a Haraoba. Therefore there has been a growing trend of increase of new deities under the capable care of an individual. In a research conducted by Otojit Kshetrimayum, it was found that the Uripok Ward 5 in Imphal municipality, amidst a population of 6000, the number of deities to have come up since 1978 is eleven. The number is thus higher if we take the whole state into consideration.<sup>48</sup>

Sometimes new villages were established by the migrating and exile groups who were turned out for committing anti social/ anti state activities (which was a common occurrence, during monarchy as well as during the British rule). It was very difficult for them to come back to the established Haraobas, hence they worshipped the descendants of the former deities as new Umanglais. For example, certain communities worship Khoriphaba was the son of Soraren and Konthoujam Lairembi. Previously there were a number of Umanglai shrines in different parts of Manipur. The numbers of local deities that protect the Meiteis from supernatural forces were also limited. Now almost every locality seems to have a Umanglai.

Significant developments took place in the observance of religious functions from the time of Loiyamba (1074-1122). The religious functions changed. The worship of a number of deities and performances of religious functions became an important aspect. Records state that deities were distributed among a vast number of lineages.<sup>49</sup> 45 families

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<sup>47</sup> Manihar N Irabot, 2000, *Sagei Salai Apoklon*, Laihou Nunghou Shanglen, Imphal

<sup>48</sup> Otojit Kshetrimayum Singh, *The Dynamics of a Ritual: The Case of Lai Haraoba in Manipur*, MPhil dissertation, JNU, 2005

<sup>49</sup> Kh. Chandrashekhar ed. *Loiyamba Shilyen*, (*Loiyamba's Distribution of Duties*) Imphal, 1975.

were assigned to look after 45 abodes of Umanglais scattered all over the kingdom of Manipur. The edicts record the name of forty deities worshipped by Meiteis in the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD. The names of these deities included both historical and mythical personalities including kings and queens, thus the ancestor worship was in full development during Loiyamba's time<sup>50</sup>

The years when Khagemba reigned (1597-1652) were the heyday of Meitei religion. During his rule, the Meiteis worshipped *Pakhangba, Sanamahi Koubru, Thengjing, Marching, Wangbren, Pisumalai, Soraren, Arepa, Khamlangba, Thongalen, Panthoibi, Yumchaoleima* and more<sup>51</sup> *Lai Haraoba* was regularly performed. He adopted the title *Laiyingthou* or the godly king which asserted the divine status of the king.<sup>52</sup> In 1717 during his reign, Garib Nawaza was initiated into Vaishnavism by Guru Gopal Das<sup>53</sup>. Vaishnavism became the state religion. By 1726, the king was engaged in constructing temples for Krishna and Kali and simultaneous fanatic destruction of images of Umanglais like *Sanamahi, Panthoibi, Soraren, Moidonpokpi*. Bhagyachandra's rule of forty years in between 1759-1798 saw the fervour of the Bengal school of Vaishnavism, where Raas Lila performances were introduced as the performative principle to please the gods of the land, i.e. Krishna. But opposition from the indigenous faith continued as they worshipped the Umanglais. A religious syncretism, a synthesis gradually occurred. Then the indigenous gods were identified with the Hindu pantheon, their counterparts marked, their religious practice melded.

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<sup>50</sup> G. Kabui, *Social and Religious Movement in Manipur in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries*, Bulletin of the division of History, Centre for the Post Graduate Studies, Imphal, 1974

<sup>51</sup> Nongmaithem Pramodini, *The Cultural History of Early Manipur*, unpublished Phd thesis to the Department of History, Manipur University, Imphal, 1987

<sup>52</sup> G.Kabui, *Social and Religious Movement in Manipur in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries*, Bulletin of the division of History, Centre for the Post Graduate Studies, Imphal, 1974

<sup>53</sup> S.N. Arambam Paratt, *Cheitharol Kumpapa: The Court history of the Kings of Manipur*, Original text, translation, and Notes. Vol 1, London, 2005  
N Khelachandra and L Ibungohal Singh, *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, Manipur Sahitya Parishad, Imphal, second ed, 1989

Haraobas under the aegis of the Meitei kings had assumed a prominence in the public sphere. The link between royalty and Lai Haraoba is strongly marked by a special prayer *Ningthourol Lambuba*<sup>54</sup> which was observed only in the presence of king. This is a prayer for the well being of the village, countrymen and king. It was believed to be introduced by the King Loiyamba, the lyrics of the prayer changes according to the demands and needs of the king.<sup>55</sup> Through the rituals there are particular references to prosperity of the king's land. Lai Haraoba can be seen as a way to legitimize the authority on which the institution of kingship lies. The issues pertaining to a Haraoba was under the king's jurisdiction through the *Pandit Loishang*. Prior permission from the council is sought to observe the rituals. Paratt and Paratt remarked at the text of the Lai Haraoba have been revised in the interests of the Ningthouja dominance. This in turn raises the question how far had the king's influence acted on the Lai Haraoba as rituals on kingship had been incorporated into the Haraoba festivities.

According to Chei.Kum the use of multistoried umbrellas banners and elaborate processions had been probably introduced from South East Asia during the times of the King Khagemba. It may be assumed that at the king's instructions, the ceremonies around the ritual of Lai Haraoba were observed either elaborately or subtly. On the other hand it may also be that the rituals applying only to the *Lais* had been seldom appropriated by the kings to have an enhanced status. Most practitioners state that the Maharaja of Manipur had been regarded by his subjects as a divine incarnation and thus enjoyed an even more special position in the state rituals. The king's role in the state ritual had a direct correlation with his identity and exercise of power in the state politics.

However due to changes in the political and social system after the monarchical system was abolished and Manipur was merged with the Indian Union in 1949, the control of the *Pandit Loishang* over religious matters have greatly diminished. Whatever little privileges were left was completely withdrawn with the premiership of Mrs. Indira Gandhi in 1972. Manipur became a full-fledged state under the democratic Republic of India. Under this

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<sup>54</sup> *Ningthourol Lambuba* is a court chronicle; O Bhogeshwar, 1967

<sup>55</sup> S.N, Paratt , and J. Paratt, *The Pleasing of the Gods: Meitei Lai Haraoba*, New Delhi, 1997

changed political and social system the king of Manipur lost his say in the religious matters and the same rule took away the powers of the institution of the monarchical system that of the *Pandit Loishang*. Kh.Ratan says this process of democratization in the body polity and society of Manipur in turn affected the social role of Lai Haraoba, which is of course an inseparable part of the traditional religion of the state<sup>56</sup>.

While trying to understand the impact of revivalism on the observance of Lai Haraoba, it had been observed that certain performative elements related to other religions are not performed anymore. But we find records of scenes from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata being performed in front of the Umanglais during Lai Haraoba festivals till a few years back.<sup>57</sup>

A Haraoba nowadays consists of ritualistic as well as recreational elements. The ritualistic elements are those that are performed by the Amaibi, Amaiba<sup>58</sup> and the Penakhomba.<sup>59</sup> They are related to the traditional ritual practices of the Meitei religion, and court chronicles mention their existence for many centuries. Although the recreational items are mainly for the entertainment of the gods, and the audience, it has nothing to do with the ritualistic content, though both are performed in the same space of the central precinct. The recreational items consist of folk dances of Manipur, tribal dances, choreography, ballads, Sumang Lila, dances on taped music of local or Hindi songs. In most places Hindi songs have been banned after 2001 on instructions ensued by several underground organizations and the *Pandit Loishangs*. Most of these recreational items are not performed by local people but professional troupes and school children. Specialized performers from far off places also come to perform and mostly they are a huge crowd

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<sup>56</sup> Kh.Ratan, *Lai Haraoba of Manipur*, Phd thesis, Imphal, 2001.

<sup>57</sup> W Ibemu, *Meitei Revivalism in Manipur*, M Phil dissertation, Department of Political Science, Manipur University, Imphal, 1991

<sup>58</sup> An Amaibi/Maibi and an Amaiba/Maiba are Meitei priestesses and priests respectively, who conduct ceremonies for Umanglais at the little temples-shrines, with which the Brahmin priests of the Hindus have no connection- Louise Lightfoot, *Dance: Rituals of Manipur*, Hong Kong, 1958

<sup>59</sup> A Penakhongba is a singer who sings Meitei ballads while playing the *pena*, a traditional string instrument made of horse hair and wood. Ceremonies in a Haraoba are incomplete without songs being sung along with a *pena*.

puller for the Lai Haraoba festivities. Soon after the recreational pieces, the evening rituals led by the Maibis start off. The audience who had gathered for the performances turned into worshippers of their gods. It is necessary to understand why recreational items have become a part of the Lai Haraoba festivities. One of the main causes maybe the lack of interest which can lead to a dwindling number of people attending the rituals.

Lai Haraoba has always been the most important cultural function of the Meiteis. During the earlier Haraobas, people were free from the practice of *Lallup*<sup>60</sup> In order to be free from the practice, people established new deities and observed the Haraoba. These deities were just figures of their forefathers. Moreover men and women who were made in-charge of one deity had several distinct social and economic facilities and a recognized and respectable status in the society. Therefore the number of deities seemingly increased, as the people stayed away to become more involved with the ceremonies, and not partake in *Lallup* or the services of the state.

After the British took over Manipur in 1891, kingship which used to evoke feelings of awe and reverence in the Meitei people faded in significance. Not only did the British introduce amendments and acts, they also made extra efforts to strip the king and his power bearers of dignity and pride. Brahma Sabha's emergence at this juncture became significantly exploitative, and the king, devoid of his original power, utilized Hinduism to seek acquiescence with the people.

With the merging of the state with the Indian Union on October 15, 1949, Vaishnavism was abolished as the state religion.<sup>61</sup> There was no state control on the religious matters. Everyone had a right to profess and practice whichever religion they wanted to. In urban areas the growing interest in Lai Haraoba created a trend towards secularization. In some places like that of Hiyangthang Lairembi, or Puthiba at Khurai or Laikhurembi at Uripok,

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<sup>60</sup> *Lallup* is the taxation system that was prevalent in Manipur. In this system all male citizens was to work for the state for 2 months in a year. Later on the British abolished this system in late 19th century.

<sup>61</sup> There is also mention of six major Indian religions and other religions in Manipur. Muslim population is has increased to 190,939 in 2001. There had been a significant rise in the Sikh and Jain population of the state.



a carnivalesque atmosphere had taken precedence over the traditional rituals. The secularization of ritual had gone as far as incorporating Maibis for the republic day parade in 1978 where the Maibis had performed *Laiching Jagoi*. Maibis have given several stage performances in the past few decades, a practice which is not in concurrence to the basic norms of Maibis<sup>62</sup>. In the present times many movements have become formalized, technique bound and performance oriented, in which the notion of performativity deals directly with the notion of audience gaze. 'To perform' is not an action only, which can be 'carried out'. Trained instructors who were Maibis before use specialized teaching methodologies to transmit their knowledge. Lai Haraoba consists of prefabricated, complex movements that dancers learn to perform; to perform is to meet the gaze of the audience, and to meet their appraisal and criticism. Benjamin Hunnigher mentioned that people could not conceive of the idealist view of 'art for art's sake' and that ritual performance had always to do with socio-cultural, agrarian and religious life of the people (tribe)<sup>63</sup>. After passing through several conflicts, most performance spaces appropriated both, the conventional and the modern. Technological development, political and industrial organization, resistance have had the cumulative of introducing newer concepts into the culture of the growing mankind (like leisure), and they stood at a threshold between occupational, familial and civic activity. Performance of Lai Haraoba (in whole or in parts), is thus generated in improbable, experimental combinations (in contemporary Manipuri theatre) or in specialized genres but also, and 'not infrequently, models, direct or parabolic or aesopian' highly critical of the whole or the part.<sup>64</sup>

Under Jawaharlal Nehru Manipuri Dance Academy, from 1954, institutionalization had started taking place under the patronage of Sangeet Natak Akademi and the Manipur Government. Till date, Lai Haraoba is taught in 3 courses besides others. Three degrees in 'Foundation', 'Diploma' and 'Advanced Diploma' are offered at the conclusion of the courses which a dancer naturally continues till the age of 27. The academy welcomes

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<sup>62</sup> Explained in more details in Chapter 3

<sup>63</sup> Benjamin Hunnigher, *The Origin of the theatre*, Greenwood Press, USA, 1978

<sup>64</sup> Victor Turner, *Liminal to Liminoid: Play, Flow and Ritual, an essay in Comparative Symbolology*, Performing Arts Journal, New York, 1982

students from any part of the world to join in. Although history is being enacted even while it is 'taught', it is the virtuosity of the body movements or pure dance which is appreciated. The lack of the ritual setting often makes it difficult for an untrained observer to follow a story or even know that one exists. But through many years of a developed and repetitive training process, a formalized and recognized repertoire is performed with technical perfection.

Lai Haraoba has come to ensconce multiple definitions. It demonstrates how Meitei individuals want to present themselves – to themselves and outsiders. Following Roy Rappaport, this ritualistic-practice consists of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not encoded by the performers. That is, these formal acts/utterances/movement patterns are learned/ memorized from the ancestors and are not generated or originated by the performers<sup>65</sup>. Thus, in the face of volatile occurrences, the assurance that comes from seeking refuge in the structured space imparts a notion of safety. "The medium (i.e. the performance) is part of the message; more precisely, it is a metamessage about whatever is encoded in the ritual. The process of performing is primary".<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Roy A Rappaport, *The Obvious Aspects Of Ritual Ecology in Meaning And Religion*, North Atlantic books, Richmond, California, 1979

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*

Chapter 2

Reaffirmation of an ideal space

Mapping metamorphoses in the notions of performativity

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“In this chain and continuum, I am but one link. The story is me, neither me, nor mine. It does not really belong to me, and while I feel greatly responsible for it, I also enjoy the irresponsibility of the pleasure obtained through the process of transferring. Pleasure in the copy, pleasure in the reproduction. No repetition can ever be identical, but my story carries with it their stories, their history, and our story repeat itself endlessly despite our persistence in denying it”.<sup>67</sup>

The exchange of movements in the space where Lai Haraoba is performed has come to represent duality of the lived existence of the Meiteis; the duality of a continual exploration of their past within this utopic space and the denial of their macabre present which they are forced to live beyond their safe haven. The energy, the dancing, the rituals of Lai Haraoba signal a physical and spiritual inter-connectedness with the Maibis and with one another. But it potentially becomes an alternative and ubiquitous space to live the unaltered conventions which steers the community. In the face of strife, which urban as well as rural Manipur experiences, Lai Haraoba provides the people with an ideal and numinous space to soak into their past traditions, perhaps with a promise of fresh beginnings.

### 2.1 Envisioning an ideal space

Victor Turner observes that myths treat origins but derive from transitions. Rituals, which are specific observable kind of behaviour, are based on established or traditional rules. All

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<sup>67</sup> T.Minh-ha Trinh, *Women, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1989, pp122

rituals are dependent on a kind of belief system for justification of their complete meaning. A great many rituals are patterned after myth, and the legends and sacred stories of origin of Manipur are no exception. Lai Haraoba ties the cyclical time with the unchanging time as the performance of the ritual spans the entire history of the Meiteis. Such a forum of movement between two bodies or groups of performers or the performer and the audience, is envisioning of utopia. Lai Haraoba consist of moments where conventions and uniqueness come together to provide a frame for multiple voices through the ritual- performances.

Utopia means, literally, "no-place" and was of course first coined in the sixteenth century by Thomas More as opposed to the common notion of "idealistic place". As political scientist Lyman Sargent says, "Utopian thought construed more widely ... is not restricted to fiction and includes visionary . . . and apocalyptic as well as constitutional writings united by their willingness to envision a dramatically different form of society as either a social ideal-type or its negative inversion."<sup>68</sup> Scholars point out that while a vision of a radically different (and presumptively better) future drives experiments with utopia, something coercive lingers about the term. Utopias can be enforced at the expense of liberty, general consensus achieved by limiting choice.

Dragan Klaic looks at dramatic literature that revives "interest in the future as a dramatic theme and as a chosen time setting of dramatic action."<sup>69</sup> But performance is not just drama; it is one of the few places where a live experience, as well as an expression, through content, of utopia might be possible. There are physical conditions and reception that evoke the sense that it's even possible to imagine a utopia, that boundless "no-place" where the social scourges that currently plague humanity from "poverty, famine, cancer, AIDS, inadequate health care, racial and gender discrimination... the grossly unequal distribution of wealth and resources globally, religious intolerance, xenophobia expressed

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<sup>68</sup> Gregory Claeys and Lyman Tower Sargent, eds., "Introduction," *The Utopia Reader*, New York: New York University Press, 1999

<sup>69</sup> Dragan Klaic, *The Plot of the Future: Utopia and Dystopia in Modern Drama*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991

in anti-immigrant legislation, lack of access for the disabled, pay inequity”,<sup>70</sup> and of course a host of others might be ameliorated, cured, redressed, solved, never to haunt again. The performance of Lai Haraoba gives an apparent faith in the possibility that we can imagine such a place, even though we can only imagine it, that we'll never achieve it in our lifetimes. But that knowledge doesn't prevent the Meiteis from desiring a space in which an image of a better future can be articulated and even embodied, however fleetingly.

Performance ethnography guides one to read the culture on the body; and while history processes it, performance remains the domain of the live, that intimacy and immediacy are possible there in ways unavailable in other media, such as film or television. Taking on Jill Dolan's goal, it is not necessary to propose a "real" utopia, if that's not an oxymoron. She would not want to live in a utopia, a place without conflict or dissension or that there is a possibility to see performance as such a perfect place. Dragan Klaic notes, "Utopia is, by its very nature, without conflict a state of stasis, harmony, and balance. These are not ingredients for exciting theatre, which is always based on conflict, opposition, and contradiction, or at least tension." Klaic says, "Theatre succeeds when it presents its Utopian arguments as a blueprint, open to opposition, rather than depicting the consequences of their implementation."<sup>71</sup> Through the recurring passages in Manipur's social and cultural history, a picture of dissension has already been painted to take the participants – performers as well as the audience to the threshold of utopia and reality. Every performance has a local and a national life. Through the idiom of Lai Haraoba, a collective, metaphorical redemption becomes possible in reproduction, and moments of utopian performance shows the audience that there are possibilities of overcoming degradations of the acts of violence beyond the sanctified space. The performance thus circulates in two spheres. One is the area of the performance and one is the scope of the performance. Both spaces negotiate civil liberties and have pedagogical functions. Perhaps utopia, too, is about relief, presented performatively in gestic moments of clarity.

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<sup>70</sup> Jill Dolan , *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2005

<sup>71</sup> Dragan Klaic, *The Plot of the Future: Utopia and Dystopia in Modern Drama*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991

Composing, enacting and experiencing performance requires social optimism and relies on people's desire of coming together to express a symbolic world which may open the field of the 'possible' beyond the 'actual', a field of alternative fields of living. To achieve utopia, audience needs to fundamentally identify the principles of humanism. Identity politics is based on the idealist abstraction of any particular identity means. Ultimately, any space can be filled with utopic visions.

Performance brings quotidian lives, politics and social practices into a space, literally and metaphorically. The power of utopian performatives is potent. Jill Dolan ends up saying that utopia is always a metaphor, always a wish, a desire which performances often help us to map if not locates. Emotions and affects are performative too, but they cannot be predicted just as the utopian narratives cannot. Performance just constitutes a multiplicity of presence, hoping to be recognized, extended and shared. Performance thus can describe humanity, by its fulsome, hopeful, radically humanist gesture of the utopian performative.

## 2.2 On the threshold of ritual and performance

Performance is derived from the middle English *parfourmen* which is itself derived from old French *parfourmir*; *par* (thoroughly), *fournir* (to furnish), hence performance does not necessarily have the structuralist implication of manifesting form, but rather the processual sense of "bringing to completion" or "accomplishing". To perform is to complete a more or less involved process rather than to do a single deed or act. To perform in ethnography is to bring the available information in their 'fullness, and in plentitude of their action-meaning'.<sup>72</sup> To perform is to 'carry out an action or complete functions', 'do at something to a specific standard', or 'to present entertainment to an audience'.<sup>73</sup> One who carries out these actions is a performer, and the action occurring and recurring in a space is called a performance. The notion of performance is diverse, and across fields of anthropology, philosophy, sociology, and even in the genre of performing

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<sup>72</sup> Victor Turner, *Dramatic Ritual/Ritual Drama*, The Kenyon Review, Vol 1, No.3, 1979

<sup>73</sup> Catherine Soanes ed. Oxford Dictionary, Thesaurus and Word power Guide, OUP, 2001

arts itself. Yi-Fu Tuan uses the term 'performance' in the broadest sense, to include all human acts carried out with a real or notional spectator in mind, and so with an awareness that they are expressive.<sup>74</sup> This self-awareness is nevertheless mobilized in different ways within different cultural scenarios, each performative event providing a unique spectator-performance relationship. But some do not perform. Their self-consciousness and consciousness of others are minimally developed. Performance presupposes the spectator, even when one performs alone, a part of the self stands aside, mainly evaluating and understanding what we are doing. Performance is created and executed in a specific physical environment. The fluidity with which the characters and the actions flow into another distinguishes them from one another as well. A performance interacts with the environment, is influenced by it, in turn influences it and acts together with the environment for the complex history of society. The history of the performance pattern or its evolution is therefore very much a marker of history of that society.

In performance ethnography, one seeks to discover 'why do they move the way they move?' 'How is the move related to the way they live?' 'How and what they believe and value?' Movements as in dance or in rituals is viewed in the same strata as other human behaviours; a deep meaning lies behind every ethnographic dance event. Writing about dance, mentions Diedre Sklar<sup>75</sup> calls upon the local contextual information about the social values, religious beliefs, symbolic codes, historic connections, gender typifications and status and ways of conduct. The relationship among gender, method, theory, description has been an imperative subject across interdisciplinary boundaries.

Lai Haraoba is made up of dance, music and dramatic elements. It has a continuous structure of performance, with a unified configuration and a pattern within a time-space framework. The performer conveys a story orally, usually in rhythmic sung poetry and accompanies the words with actions.

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<sup>74</sup> Colin Counsell and Laurie Wolf, *Performance Analysis* Routledge, London and New York, 2001

<sup>75</sup> Diedre Sklar, *Invigorating Dance Ethnology*, UCLA Journal of Dance Ethnology 15, 1991 4-15

It can be broadly divided into three major structural divisions, *lai ikouba* (the ritual of the calling up of the spirit), *laibou* and *lairoi*. These three divisions mark the beginning, the middle and the end of the ritual. While enacting the myth, a form of living theatre is developed by the Meiteis with incantations along with body movements. Through evolution, through this the foundation of Manipuri dance has been built. The Meiteis have aimed at controlled yet fluid motion. The free and the spontaneous movements of the dancers do not involve any complexities. The seemingly easy rendering and the group character appear to approximate a folk idiom. This is perhaps because all Meiteis can dance and this festival is one place where men, women, child of every age has a role to play. From invoking and establishing the *Umanglai* at the *Laibong* (venue), from performing the *Laibou*, enacting the scenes of *Kanglei Thokpa*, *Tankhul Nurabi* and *Panthoibi Jagoi*, till the *Lairoi*, — everything is symbolized with hand gestures. The Meiteis believe that from Lai Haraoba, their dance and music has had evolved, because this festival dates further than the Vaishnavism-influenced Raas Lila. Through Lai Haraoba one notices several dramatic elements taking place at a daily basis. It is also a visual extension of the *Anoirol*, i.e. the process of a Haraoba has been recorded as a text. But originally, it has been transmitted as an oral tradition through centuries.

Musings on the question of what can be seen and who is seeing in representation embrace the position of the performer and the spectator and are inextricably bound to considerations of the production, modes and venues and a community. The possibilities deepen as different performer/spectator configurations take on the platform, and the ramifications of their meanings become more complex and variable when race, class, gender become a part of the discussion. Jill Dolan marks this shift in the pulse of the audience. She argues that a live audience, at any point of time, share experiences while making meaning out of the performance. They develop a sense of connectivity with the imaginative and the real world together. It is but a common sociological trope to find commonalities amongst behaviour men in the face of one particular stimulus. An audience is always the most decisive inheritance in a space. The audience of Lai Haraoba has witnessed the enactment of the genesis and the entire way of living in a ritual-performance space. What they have learnt to see and respond to, had created the first essential



condition of performance; their action inhabits its own dimension, in a way limiting the perception of the audience. But with the regular performance of Lai Haraoba, the Meitei society has developed a great practical variation in their response to the ritual. One way to defend against the encompassing and at times overbearing global atmosphere was to return to the comfortable symbols of the past.

The audience of Lai Haraoba is an engaged audience. They have deep-rooted knowledge of the traditions on which the rituals are based; hence they understand the performance, the languages of speech and movement. The poetry, stories and the cultural values are conveyed successfully. They have “communicative competence”, which demands a competency in both the aural and the visual. Adrienne Kaeppler mentions that just as there is an aural difference between hearing and listening, there is also a visual difference between observing and seeing.<sup>76</sup> Meitei identity is derived by listening to the myth of creation and witnessing the Maibis lead the congregation through the ritual. The engaged audience deems the performance and the process of the performance to be important, but aims to understand the socio-political discourse enacted through it. The frame of Lai Haraoba has thus become a marker of a sanctified space which binds the Meitei identity.

Edward Said suggests that community feel the need to reaffirm identity – a sameness they share with others through shared cultural values<sup>77</sup>. Some dance pieces problematize notions of identity. They question the normativity of some cultural values and make the comfortable symbols of the past uncanny and disturbing. Dance not only connect with the sameness, but also acknowledges the possibility of differences which maybe invisible but not imperceptible. Dance is omniscpective; it beholds all possibilities within itself. Furthermore, the needs of a community are always explored within their dances. While speaking on *communitas*, Victor Turner, points to the incongruity, the paradox present in any society where alongside social differences and interests which divide people on the basis of some structural premises, a generic human bond, a *communitas* unites them.

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<sup>76</sup> Adrienne Kaeppler, *Festival of Pacific Arts: Venues for Rituals of Identity*, Pacific Arts, The Journal of the Pacific Arts Association, Number 25, December 2002

<sup>77</sup> Edward Said, D Barenboim, *Parallels and Paradoxes: Explorations in Music and Society*, Bloomsbury, London, 2004

Ultimately, political power proves fragile and futile; all humans are mere mortals ground down to a cycle of life, death, fertility and the uncertainties<sup>78</sup>. They are a species in existence regardless of all inequalities. Turner subsumes premises of social interaction under *communitas* in two complementary modes, - the structured aspect that dominates the day to day existence and periods of anxiety which make fissures in that structure. As there is disruption, the boundaries of social interaction shift. The gaps in the structure of the society are laid bare, while the force of the *communitas* pushes them to the surface. The structure is incomplete without the *communitas*.

The relevance of a community exercise - in the case of Lai Haraoba, community dancing is such that it draws people towards solidarity. But it contrasts with the lives of the Meiteis as well. When it contrasts with the normal everyday life, it takes the participants out of their "structured routine and into a realm of timeless charm. In their *ecstasy* they literally *stand outside*"<sup>79</sup>. In this realm, dancers are in a unique position as they share a close association with spirits of another realm. The social interaction thus stretches to another level, where emotive bodies function to unravel the popular cosmology and belief system. This is not a mere recreation. It is a dialectal relationship between structure and *communitas*, specialized gestures and daily lives, inequality and equality, spirituality of the ritual and convivial celebration. The value of Lai Haraoba lies in the way the affective power of the ritual is evoked through the dancing, which is otherwise lost in the usual unfurling of the celebration.

### 2.3 The early gods in the practice of Lai Haraoba:

The worship of the nature and creatures of nature by the ancient Manipuris was a simple practice which did not involve any icons. When they worshipped the sun they worshipped the visible orb of the sun. They worshipped the brightly burning fire. They spread a clean white cloth and invoked the god, and believed that the god would step amidst them and be seated on the cloth. J Shakespeare stated that not only did the Meiteis worship *Umanglais*

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<sup>78</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1967

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*

or the forest gods they also believed in other lesser supernatural beings such as *Sa-roin-ga-roi* (evil spirits), *Helloi* (beautiful female forms who lure) and *Hingchabis* (witches). Originally there were only seven goddesses and nine forest gods. The number of divinities has increased to 364.<sup>80</sup> The scholars claim that each of these 364 divine figures can be traced back to the original sixteen gods and goddesses. Not only did the Meiteis worship sun, moon, stars, sky, darkness, wind, water, fire, lightening, earthquake, they also worshipped mythical and legendary figures, heroes, tribal and clan progenitors and the like. The names of most are mentioned in ancient chronicles like the *Leithak Leikharol*, *Thiren Layat*, *Pudin*, *Sakok Lamlen Ahanba*<sup>81</sup>. According to these, the Meitei believed that the whole universe was created by *Taibangpangba Mapu*<sup>82</sup>. It had been however observed that there were different forms of religion in different eras, namely the Hayi Chak, Haya Chak, Langba Chak and Kona Chak. The religious goal was to know the ultimate creator, but with each of these religions, different deities rose to prominence. *Sanamahi* appears to have been the most important deity to be worshipped in the Hayi Chak. Kh. Ratan mentions that the Meitei were mostly food gatherers. Social organizations and customs had not fully developed. The dead were neither buried nor cremated. King Kangba was the ruler then. As Mariya Phambalcha became the ruler, some religious rites began to be practiced. The dead were buried; *Soraren Achiba* was worshipped and the goal of the worship was 'to realize the soul'. *Koubru*, *Nongpok Ningthou*, *Panthoibi* were other deities who rose significantly; they hold an important position in the rituals and performance of Lai Haraoba even today.

In the times of King Nongda Lairen Pakhangba (Konna Chak tradition), *Atiya Sidaba*, *Asiba* and *Areppa* became important gods. There was a fundamental change in the religious and social lives of the people as the clan system of seven was introduced. The

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<sup>80</sup> J Shakespeare, *The Religion Of Manipur, Folklore, Transactions Of The Folklore Society*, Vol XXIV, No.IV, 1910

But according to Kh.Ratan in *Lai Haraoba of Manipur*, chapter III, the *UmanglaiHaraoba* revolves around 378 divinities as of the year 2001.

<sup>81</sup> Kh.Ratan, *Lai Haraoba of Manipur*, Phd thesis, Imphal, 2001

<sup>82</sup> *Taibangpangba Mapu* created the living organisms including the humans. The ultimate goal of the Meitei religion was therefore to 'know Him' or to know the truth.

chronicles mentions the influence of the settlers who arrived from the east and the west into Manipur and the religious and cultural ideas were absorbed by the existing communities. Kh.Ratan does not rule out an impression of Buddhism on the Meitei culture alongside the Pangans (Muslims)<sup>83</sup>. The first of the religious preachers from Bengal came in during the reigns of King Naophangba and King Irengba marking the route to Manipur via which some of the most influential Vaishnav gurus would enter the territory many centuries later, to change the fate of the kingdom. *Mangang, Luwang, Khuman, Angom, Moirang, Soirang-Leishangthem, Khabanganba* were the seven *yek-salai* (clans) to which the Meiteis belonged now. Each of the *yek-salai* had one ancestor god or an important chieftain who became the presiding deity of the clan, and the most revered deity for the sub-clans. During King Loiyumba's time (1074-1122 A.D), *Loiyumba Shilyen* gives reliable information on the social distribution of administrative, economic and religious functions proclaimed by the king. It also mentions the number of deities worshipped under his time and the *sageis* or the lineage who were to maintain them.<sup>84</sup> Through the monarchical times, the rites of Lai Haraoba were divided into three categories-

- a) The Lai Haraoba sponsored by the villagers if the Lai belongs to the village.
- b) The Lai Haraoba sponsored by the *sagei* if the Lai belongs to the *sagei* concerned
- c) The regal Lai Haraoba sponsored by the state if the Lai belongs to the king<sup>85</sup>

Scholars like L.Ibungohal Singh, S.N.Paratt, R.K.Achouba Singh, O.Bhogeshwar had broadly divided the Umanglais or the deities of Lai Haraoba into many categories. S.N Paratt classifies Umanglais into four kinds,- the ancestral deities who had human existence (*Pakhangba, Poireiton*), Lai associated with one *yek*, the domestic or the clan deities (*Yumjao Lai*) and the tutelary or the guardian deities related with particular areas (*Thangjing* from *Moirang*). O.Bhogeshwar mentions the worship of 'exotic' Umanglais who were brought along with the emigrants and were assimilated with the Meitei culture. *Senku Deva* (*Shankardeva* of *Wangoi*) *Thinunggei* (followers of Ramanandi Hinduism) are some who are worshipped by many during the time of Lai Haraoba.

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<sup>83</sup> Kh.Ratan, *Lai Haraoba of Manipur*, Phd thesis, Imphal, 2001.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*

## 2.4 Genesis and typology of Lai Haraoba

The Meiteis believe that by performing this religious festival, the deities are pleased and they bless the earth with abundance, happiness and prosperity. While E.Nilkanta Singh is of the view that Lai Haraoba means 'the merrymaking of the gods'. S.N.Paratt holds the opinion that it means the 'pleasing of the God'. However all scholars agree that the name of this performative ritual comes from the phrase *Lai Hoi Laoba* in the creation myth of the Meiteis which is an integral part of the unfolding of the Haraoba. According to Ng.Kulachandra, it refers to the shouting or singing of the *Hoi* by the primal elements while coming out of the omnipotent creator *Atingkok Sidaba*. The re-enactment of the divine act of singing of the creation being driven out of *Atingkok Sidaba* by *Atiya Sidaba* by the humans is the practice of the Lai Haraoba.

Through various scholars on Meitei culture it has been arrived at a conclusion that there are four major Haraobas which are observed by the Meitei clans within and outside Manipur, with each clan/sub-clan/community adhering to any one form of practice. Each of the Haraobas has a mythical origin, and most of the gods/goddesses who are worshipped on the occasion of Lai Haraoba are either the clan progenitors or cultural and political heroes. The celebration involves the recounting of each of the nuances of the roles at the time of the creation of the physical and social world, as this event has to be remembered by the future generation.

To quote T.C.Hodson,

“....two hundred years ago in an internal organization, in religion, in habits and manners, the Meitheis were as hill people now are, The successive waves of foreign invasion, Shan, Burmese, English, Hindu have each left permanent marks on the civilization of the people so that they have passed finally away from the stage of relatively primitive culture into one comparative civilization, but their ultimate homogeneity

with the Nagas and Kukis of the hill is undoubted, and in my opinion needs no further insistence.”<sup>86</sup>

However perhaps with the lack of historical materials, explains Kh.Ratan Hodson also remarks that,

“Whether the real nature of the connection between the Manipuris and the hill tribes will ever be traced is doubtful, the place of which cannot be entirely taken by comparative ethnology.”<sup>87</sup>

Within Lai Haraoba, the Kanglei Haraoba perhaps emphasizes the relationship between the hill and the plain. Legends have it, that the creator god comes dressed as a Naga boy meets the girl of the valley. There are numerous instances where Meitei kings married women from the hill tribes. An account of the Manipur chronicle *Poireiton Khunthoklon* records the first king of Manipur Nongda Lairen Pakhangba marrying a tribal girl called Laisana. Some gods are commonly acknowledged by the hill people as well as the Meiteis. They abide by the *Sanamahi*, *Leimarel*, *Soraren*. The offerings consisted of meat, fish and wine, a ritual which was gradually done away with as Hinduised practice of vegetarianism. Lai Haraoba also shows a close relationship between the hill and the plain people. A Meitei man and a Tangkhul woman represent *Nongpok Ningthou* and *Panthoibi* the divine couple without whom the Kanglei Haraoba is seemingly incomplete. On the last day of the Kanglei Haraoba, a ritual known as the Tangkhul Thokpa (appearance of Tangkhul), is generally performed. The Meiteis consider the ritual of Lai Haraoba as a mechanism to conflict resolution between the hill and the valley people. No Lai Haraoba can end without the Tangkhul Thokpa. This is a dramatic ritual enacted by a boy dressed in Tangkhul costume as *Ningpok Ningthiou* and the girl is finely accoutered as *Tangkhul Panthoibi*. According to traditional scholars, the first Kanglei Haraoba was held in the month of *Mera*(October-November), in a shrine on the hills of *Koubru*.

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<sup>86</sup> T C Hodson, *The Meitheis*, London, 1908

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*

The Moirang Haraoba worships the lord *Ibudhou Thangjing*, who is a very revered deity and at present, the central deity of the biggest Lai Haraoba celebrations in and around Imphal. Traditionally the Haraoba is performed in the month of *Sajibu* (March-April) and the maintenance was distributed between eight *leikai* (localities). *Thangjing* is a powerful *lai* and also the directional deity of South-West. He was originally known as the *Ningthou* of *lai* who began to prepare the creation of *tabang* (human world) and who ruled Moirang for countless years.

The Chakpa Haraoba is practiced by the oldest social groups of the Meitei who are settled in many parts of Manipur such as Andro, Sekmai, Phayeng, Khurkhul, Koutruk, Leimram, Tairenpokpi and at all these places they worship their progenitors *Panam Ningthou*, *Puriromba*, *Koubru*, *Loyarakpa* and the omnipotent *Atiya Sidaba*. The settlers even went beyond Manipur, towards Burma (presently Myanmar) and continued the practice of Haraoba there.

*Lainingthou Khamlangba* is the main deity of the Kakching Haraoba whose mythical stories had taken him to his wife, Mayang's lands (non-Manipuri/Cachar) and reached Takhel (presently Tripura, a neighbouring Indian state). The main deity traveled to Uripok and Thoubal within Manipur before settling down at Kakching. Almost six-seven other Umanglais receive homage at this Haraoba and in ways of observance and celebration it is distinctly different from the other three kinds of Haraobas, though the ritual is same.

The most important participants in a Haraoba are the *Amaiba*, *Amaibi* and *Penakhongba*, i.e. priests, priestesses and the pena-players. When kings were the rulers of the valley, the prior permission of the king and the *Pandit Loishang* was sought for the observance of the Haraoba. Nowadays, the prior permission of the *Pandit Loishang* is no more considered essential. Kh. Ratan mentions that the *Loishang* lost its religious control with the abolition of the monarchical system since the October 15, 1949 when Manipur was merged with the Indian Union. But Mangangsen, a celebrated pena player from Imphal stated that the *Loishang* functioned till Maharaja Buddhachandra held office. But then it was absorbed

by Sri Sri Govindajee temple board and they do not look directly into the matters of the *Loishang*.

Manipuris suffer implicit discrimination in the interface of intra-state as well as inter-ethnic politics. They insulate themselves from the excess of this by living predominantly with a Meitei worldview, belonging to typical traditions, customs, local temples and community exercises. Within these insular set-ups there is very little discriminations; maybe because every clan and caste have their roles marked out in the rituals, They connect these performances with an intention of casting a boundary beyond which their ideal world are constantly displaced with the tragedies and realities of loss of identity and loved ones. No society, suggested Victor Turner, is without some mode of metacommentary. It has been further illustrated by Clifford Geertz, that metacommentary is a 'the story a group tells about itself' or in the case of performance an expression of the society about itself<sup>88</sup>. The devotees in Manipur not only narrate their experience but involves in an interpretive reenactment of its experience. The rituals of Lai Haraoba are in fact, initiatory, seasonal, curative and divinatory which are "reanimating sentiments of social solidarity"<sup>89</sup>.

Every Lai Haraoba performance-space marks a temporal and geographical constraint i.e. larger space within which the ritual is scattered. This space assumes an important marker of categorization and knowledge production. The *laibong* is a space of dissent as well as a site of construction of new identities and the reproduction of old ones. It is a bounded yet fluid space in which the ritual is named and mapped. The performed act thus creates a perimeter within which the believers and the followers of the traditional Meitei religion inhabit. The ritual consolidates and accommodates the boundaries as well as space within thus affirming the societal beliefs (in their myths and legends).

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<sup>88</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Blurred Genres : The Refiguration Of Social Thought*, American Scholar, pp 165-179, Spring, 1980

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*



2.5 The unfolding of the ritual within the performance space: Movement practices and metaphors in Lai Haraoba

Haraoba	Name of the Ritual	Performance within the Ritual	Day <sup>90</sup>
Kanglei Haraoba	<i>Lai Phi Shetpa</i> The dressing of the deity	<i>Phamdengba</i> The figures of the gods are placed on the thrones ceremoniously	One day before the festival
	<i>Yathoksangda Lengsinba</i> The figures of the gods are carried in a palanquin in a procession and established in a shrine		Day 1
	<i>Lai ikouba</i> Calling of the spirit	<i>Chumsha</i> is performed by the Maibis	Day 1
		<i>Laihou Jagoi</i> Opening dance while leading the procession to the pond	
		<i>Konyai-hunba and Kontharol</i> It is performed while gold and silver pieces are offered to god	
		<i>Leithak Leikha Lakpa</i> The binding of the heaven and earth takes place, after which one Maibi holds the male principle in her right hand and female	

<sup>90</sup> The ritual-performance chart is based on participant-observation, Manipur, May, 2008  
 Aribam Syam Sharma directed *Kanglei Haraoba*, Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1978  
 Khungjam Ratan Kumar, *Lai-Haraoba of Manipur: Indigenous festival of the Meitei (A Socio-Historical Perspective)*, Phd thesis, Imphal, 2001

	principle on her left hand and dances	
	<i>Chuk Pharon Jagoi</i> is performed by the Maibi to the direction gods of Thangjing, Marjing, Wangbren, Koubru	
<i>Lai-them-gat-pa</i> Calling up of the spirit of the deity, during which the Maibi goes in a trance		Day 1
<i>Lai Higaba</i> Ascending of the deity	<i>Khunjao-leichao-jagoi</i> The dance of prosperity Three dances are performed in dedication to <i>Laibungthou, Lainura,</i> <i>leikanglei</i>	Day 1
<i>Thawai happa</i> The transmission of the soul of the gods into the figures through threads held by the Maibas and Maibis	<i>Anam athou kokpa</i> The rite of purification is performed by the Maibas  <i>Karakpa</i> is sung in praise of virtues of the deity	Day 1
<i>Saroi Khangba</i> Feeding of the evil spirits/rite of appeasement	The Maibis dance to appease the evil spirits	Day 1 Afternoon/ Evening
<i>Yakeiba</i> The deity is awakened by music of the pena		Day 2 Morning <sup>91</sup>
<i>Laimang Phamba/ Laipao</i> One Maibi delivers oracles	<i>Jagoi Okpa</i> Maibis partner with representatives of the council, <i>Phamnaibas</i> and dance in front of the gods	Day 2 onwards

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<sup>91</sup> Day 2 rituals and performances are observed daily

		Day 2 onwards
	<i>Laihou Jagoi</i> It is a dance to begin the ceremonies of the afternoon, performed by the Maibis	
<i>Lei Langba</i> Offering of flowers		Day 2 onwards
	<i>Hoi Laoba</i> Maibas, Maibis, Penakhonbas sing and shout 'hoi'	Day 2 onwards
	<i>Laiching Jagoi</i> Maibis stand together and perform the initial dance explaining the genesis in unison	Day 2 onwards
<i>Laibou</i> This ritual starts by encircling the space thrice before the dance starts	<i>Laibou Khut thek</i> The <i>Leisemlon</i> or the creation myth is performed by Maibis	Day 2 onwards
	<i>Paaton</i> Only the Maibis perform in a circle	Day 2 onwards
	<i>Phibul Jagoi</i> The Maibis encircle and touch a ritual cloth Held by the Maibas	Day 2 onwards
	<i>Yumjao Paphal</i> The Maibis lead the walk within the space drawing a winding serpent on the ground	Day 2 onwards
	<i>Wakol Laoba</i> The Maibas make a circle to sing to the beats of the <i>harao pung</i> as cultic objects are	Day 2 onwards

returned inside the temple

*Saren Khatpa*  
Offering of a sacrifice in the form of fish, rice, rice-beer, cloth and other materials

Day 3  
Morning

*Kanglei Thokpa*  
It is the enactment of a mythical story of a man, Khoriphaba looking for a bride

Day 3,5,7,9,11  
Evening

*Lairoi*

*Thang Thaba*  
One or two Maibi dances with swords in her hand

Last day

*Tangkhul Thokpa*  
This is a form of dance drama where Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi dress as a Tangkhul couple who exchange arguments and romantic words

*Ougri Hangel Chongba*  
*Ougri* is sung for the welfare of the land where men and women hold a piece of rope

*Lairel Mathek*  
The Maibis create serpentine diagrams

*Shannaba* or games and sports are played

Moirang Haraoba  
The three kinds of Moirang Haraoba - *Khongchinba*, *Lamthokpa*, *Yumphamba* are performed every alternate year

<p><i>Lai Ikouba</i>  <i>Thangjing</i> and sixteen other          gods-goddesses,          representatives of clans are          established in the temple<sup>92</sup></p>	<p>Day 1</p>	
<p><i>Yageirol</i>          The song of awakening is          sung with the pena</p>	<p>Day 2 onwards          Morning</p>	
<p><i>Anam Aha Kokpa</i>          The rite of purification takes          place</p>	<p>Day 2 onwards</p>	
<p><i>Laimang Phamba</i>          The oracles are delivered by          the Maibi</p>	<p>Day 2 onwards</p>	
<p><i>Phamnaibas</i> or the          representatives of the          court dance while the  <i>Hoi laoba</i> is sung by the          Maiba</p>	<p>Day 2 onwards          Evening</p>	
<p><i>Leima Jagoi</i>          Any individual can          present a dance of their          choice</p>	<p>Day 2 onwards</p>	
<p><i>Laiching Jagoi</i>          This is performed by the          Maibis while the singers          sing the <i>hoiru</i></p>	<p>Day 2 onwards</p>	
<p><i>Laibou</i>          The evening rituals</p>	<p>The dances of <i>Laibou</i>  <i>Chongba</i>,  <i>Hakchang Saba</i>,  <i>Yumshaba</i>, <i>Pam-yanba</i>,  <i>Lairel Mathek</i>, <i>Phibul</i>  <i>Ahabi</i> are presented          (similar to Kanglei          Haraoba)</p>	<p>Day 2 onwards</p>

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<sup>92</sup> The rituals and performances of *Ikouba* are same as the Kanglei Haraoba

	<i>Shannaba</i> or games and sports are played		A day before the last day
		<i>Chong-Khong Litpa</i> It is performed before a sacrifice is made to Thangjing. A Maibi sings the <i>Lai Waphonba</i> .	Last Day
Kakching Haraoba	<i>Lei Langba</i> The ritual of collecting flowers at Purum		One day before the Haraoba starts
	<i>Lai Ikouba</i> The ritual is observed differently though the pattern of ritual remain same The deities are transferred to main shrine to <i>Yathok Sang</i> , another ritual space where the Maibi delivers oracles <sup>93</sup>	<i>Yakeiron</i> , the song to awaken the gods is sung	Day 1  Day 2
	<i>Lai Lam Thokpa</i> All the villagers gather in front of shrine and deities are taken out in a palanquin procession	<i>Thang Thaba</i> Maibis dance with swords in all four directions	Day 5/7/9
	<i>Laibou</i>	<i>Ngaprum Tanba</i> The gathering of the souls It is performed with bow, arrow and sticks; the sticks symbolizing souls are later offered to the deity	Last day
Chakpa Haraoba <sup>94</sup>	<i>Lai Phi-shuba</i> The village female elders wash the clothes of the deities		One day before the Haraoba starts

<sup>93</sup> The rituals and performances are same as the Kanglei Haraoba

<sup>94</sup> Chakpa Haraoba is observed at Andro, Phayeng, Sekmai, Koudruk, Khukhrul and Tairenpokpi. Certain variations exist in the ritual performance of the festival amongst these places.

*Laigi-yu-shunbagi-thouram*  
A Maibi rings her *seri* as an  
accompaniment to the  
preparation of rice beer

*Lai Thong Hangba*  
The door of the shrine is  
opened while a black dog is  
offered for sacrifice

*Lai Ikouba*  
It is performed at two places  
at the same time – one for  
Lord Koubru and for Lord  
Loyarakpa. The procession is  
received with ritual fire

*Lai Khong Namba*  
the feet of the deities are  
washed

*Chakparol*  
This is sung by the  
village elders

Day 1

*Lai-ok-jagoi*  
The opening dance is  
performed by the Maibis

*Khou-okpa*  
The spear dance is  
presented

Unmarried girls perform  
at the end of the morning

*Lai Thenjao Kaba, Lou  
Kumba* and *Lai Keithel Kaba*  
are rituals which are part of  
the *Lai Lam Thokpa*

*Lai Phagi Tounaba*

It includes a performance  
which is strictly observed  
by men

Except first and  
last day  
Late night

*Lai Saren Chanba*  
Sacrifices are made to the  
gods

Last day

*Lai Thong Thinba*  
The closing of the door of the  
shrine

Andro Chakpa Haraoba	i) In <i>Panam Ningthou Haraoba</i> , <i>Sang Kaba</i> is performed for five days; <i>Chaoren Haraoba</i> is performed for nine days	Eight representatives of Haleng and Hanjok receive the deity in a palanquin to take it to the ritual space	Day1
		In Yakeiba, the deity is awakened with songs	Day 2
		In <i>Humai Chongba</i> seven girls each from Haleng and Hanjok hold hands and dance	
		Then two bachelors dance with hollow bamboo stick	
		<i>Khong Suba</i> , <i>Pao Shonba</i> , <i>Meihouba</i> are performed	
		The dresses of the deities are changed and ritual sacrifices are offered	Day 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
	Two wooden boards are set up for target practice	Day 8	
	There are sports competition before the end of the day	Last day	
	ii) <i>Pureiromba Haraoba</i> The rituals are exactly like that of Kanglei Haraoba	<i>Pam Yanba</i> , <i>Humai Chongba</i> , <i>Chungoi Chongba</i> , <i>Leisem Jagoi</i> and various other dances are performed	Everyday
		<i>Numit Kappa</i> Shooting of the sun It is performed only at the Andro Chakpa Haraoba.	Last day
		During the performance	



of *Numit Kappa*,  
*Chupshaba* is an  
expiatory rite performed  
to prevent to untimely  
death of a member of that  
particular *sagei*

The chart above explains how vivid and vibrant each days ritual and performances are. Each Haraoba has a specific form; the performances of each have similar movements but the execution or the structure and elements of the enactment are distinct. The most common element across Haraobas is the hand gesture which every Maibi, men and women follow in the main events of the Haraoba. Both hands turn inwards and outwards from the wrist in a circle, the index fingers and thumbs briefly touch each other. This movement is easy to emulate, but crucial as the circling and touching of the fingers represent the male and the female principle who take part equally in creating the universe. This hand gesture is seen in every procession of Lai Haraoba, where people follow the Maibis to, fro and within the consecrated spaces. The heads bob from side to side with the syncopation of beats of the drum. The leg movements are simple; one walks forward and backward with alternate toes touching the ground, or they raise the alternate leg in gaiety as they move forward.

#### *Kanglei Haraoba*

The elder women of the village take the initiative in looking after the maintenance of the venue and preparation of the contents and the venue before the actual ritual starts. *Lai phi shetpa* or dressing the deities is a crucial element of the pre-ritual stage. The figures of the deities are clad in Meitei clothes and are made to wear brass masks. They are ceremoniously placed on thrones under the supervision of the village elders which is called *Phamdengba*.

#### *Lai Ikouba*

Before the commencement of the daily rituals, the preliminary ritual of calling the deity from the water or Lai Ikouba takes place only on the first day. This means the calling of the spirits out of a water-body (closest to the venue or the shrine). A Maibi begins the

opening dance of chumsha (as per Ng.Kumar Maibi) while the water-pitcher bearers take their place. The Maibis dance the *Laihou Jagoi* to the tune of pena in front of the deities before calling their spirits; this is the first enactment with numerous hand symbols or gestures. A procession is led by the Maibis to the nearest water-body and spirit of the deity is infused with the structure of the deities in the temples. The water represents the boundless expanse of primeval sea from which the creator rises to create the world. *Konyai-hunba* and *Kontharol* are performed while gold and silver pieces are offered to god. In Leithak Leikha Lakpa, the binding of the heaven and earth takes place, after which one Maibi holds the male principle in her right hand and female principle on her left hand and dances. Soon after through *Khayom Lakpa*, the sky of *Lainingthou* or the male principle and the earth of the *Lairemma* or the female principle are connected with one another. Thus the ritualistic attempt to recreate the myth of creation starts. The Maibis also offer prayers to the directional gods *Thangjing*, *Marjing*, *Wangbren* and *Koubru* while performing *Chuk-Pharon Jagoi* thus sanctifying the space and the elements which are to be the part of the ritual in the coming days. Three dances are performed in dedication to *Laibungthou*, *Lainura*, *Leikanglei* when Maibis perform the *Khunjao-Leichao Jagoi* or the dance of prosperity and peace as the spirit is summoned from the water and ascends amidst the gathering. The priestesses lead the procession back to the courtyard of the shrine and the figures are carefully placed on the seat; in a ritual *Thawai Happa* the spirit of the god is thus transmitted amongst mortals for the length of the Lai Haraoba festival. *Anam Athou Kokpa* or rites of purification take place and the *penakhongba* sings *Karakpa* in praise of the virtues and chivalries of the gods. A very important role of the Maibi is to become the representatives of the divine. They dance the *Saroi-Khangba* to appease the evil spirits and afterwards lull the deities to sleep. The stage is physically and spiritually set for the other rituals to be performed. The principal gods and goddesses along with the evil spirits, charge the consecrated place with energy; the Maibis become the performers in the presence of a mortal and divine audience. The performative space becomes a place of meditation, an area of interaction and a liminal zone where many consciousnesses willfully merge. The cosmic time and space seems to be interacting with the worldly time and space. A ritual space therefore has a mediating role where the world of humans and god, life and death consciousness, and the

unconsciousness meet. The priests and the spectators are dislocated in the consciousness and body from the everyday context and reintegrated in a much wider frame of performance of cosmic reality.<sup>95</sup>

Lai Haraoba is a ritual which unfolds and progresses entirely through dances, either by people with specific status in the society or by the common folk. The most crucial participants of the Lai Haraoba are the performers. Apart from common people who represent the ancestral families, the seven clans of Manipur, the Maibis have the largest role to play in the Haraoba. Their dancing is at once a fulfillment of a religious duty to the community and an expression of the Maibi's inner dedication. Daily, the deity is looked after with care and integrity. The deity is awakened by the Maibi (*yakeiba*) and the afternoon rituals are also initiated by her. Maibis partake in the art of divination and they deliver oracles every morning of the Haraoba; this is called *Laipao*. She covers her head with a white cloth whenever she steps into a trance or is possessed and recites oracles while ringing the *seri*. In Kanglei Haraoba, she dances the *Jagoi Okpa* with *Phamnaibas* or members of the village council. At beginning of any ceremony in the afternoon, the Maibis perform the *Laihou Jagoi* together, as they announce the presence of the gods in the space. She also leads the participating clan members in the *Hoi-Laoba* along with the Maibas where the *Anoirol* is sung. The *Laiching Jagoi* is danced by the Maibis in unison where they begin to narrate the genesis of gods and humans.

### *Laibou*

The most important ritual of the Lai Haraoba is perhaps the *Laibou khu thek* which consist 364 hand gestures or *mudras* or *khut thek*. The Maibis demonstrate the birth of a child, construction of a house, plantation of cotton, weaving and offering the clothes to the deity. The depiction of creation of human anatomy is known as *Hakchang Saba*<sup>96</sup> or *Hakchang*

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<sup>95</sup> Masao Yamaguchi, *Cosmological Dimension of the Japanese Theater: In the Empire of Signs*, Yoshihiko Ikegami ed, 1991

<sup>96</sup> Kh.Ratan, *Lai Haraoba of Manipur*, Phd thesis, Imphal, 2001

*Sagatpa*<sup>97</sup> where through 64 *khut thek* the making of each part of the body is demonstrated skillfully. The Maibis lead the procession thrice in a circle in the arena. They continue a swaying movement which is imitated by the others. They rhythmically step to the music and initiate the hand gestures. Throughout the *Laibou*, the Maibis step forward, backward, sideways and circle in the position while still moving in bigger circle around the space. They begin the movements with a slow cadence, the tempo increases towards the end. Their hands move incessantly, making gestures which make meanings constantly. As they are trained in the Maibi traditions, their gestures are immaculate. But the knowledge bestowed upon the other participants through observation makes it easier for them to follow. At the end of the third circle, the *penakhongba* plays the *Anoirol*, (which describes the origin of dance) to which the Maibi performs the *Hakchang Sagatpa* depicting the formation of the human body limb after limb in the mother's womb. The enactment is accompanied by an exchange of dialogues. The enactment of the formation of each limb is announced by the Maibis.

*Maibi: Lawai Saro (make the vertex)*

*Procession: Sare (yes we have made)*

*Maibi: Chirai Saro (make the temporal area)*

*Procession: Sare (yes we have made)*

*Maibi: Kokchi Saro (make the lateral temporal area)*

*Procession: Sare (yes we have made)*

*Maibi: Laibak Saro (make the forehead)*

*Procession: Sare (yes we have made)*

*Maibi: Phishum Saro (make the eyes)*

*Procession: Sare (yes we have made)*

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<sup>97</sup> R.K. Achoubisana Singh in Saryu Doshi ed. *Dances of Manipur: The Classical Tradition*, Mumbai, Marg Publications, 1989

*Maibi: Mitchi Saro (make the corner of the eyebrows)*

*Procession: Sare (yes we have made)*

*Maibi: Mit Saro (make the eyes)*

*Procession: Sare (yes we have made)*

In this way the Maibi and the members of the procession moves and sways gently in two rings and would go about in circles performing 61 separate parts of the body. In the 62<sup>nd</sup> dance the whole body is depicted, the 63<sup>rd</sup> is a prayer; the 64<sup>th</sup> is the implanting of the soul into the body. The time of depicting procreation comes and ends. The myth which had been an oral tradition is performed in a physical place so that every member of the community can chart the myth in their minds thereby strengthening their beliefs and their roots.

Within *Laibou Khut Thek*, in *Yumsharol Khut Thek* various stages of building a house is performed. The *Panthoibi jagoi* is performed. Panthoibi is the supreme goddess of the Meiteis, the consort of Nongpok Ningthou. An adult man needs a spouse to procreate and that is what this dance symbolizes and various elements of a love story is performed by the Maibis. *Pan-yanba* is a dance where by gestures of hands and fingers the cultivation of land by the people is portrayed. Entire formation of districts, clans and people, to building huts, fishing, plantation of cotton seeds, weaving and other occupational skills are described. In the next few movements, clothes are made. Cotton plantation, *jhoom* cultivation, flowering, plucking, preparation of the thread and the cloth is enacted, and the imaginary cloth is then offered to the deity. The *Laibou* describes the evolution and progression into a civil society. It is significant to see that the audience traces their predecessors and pass the knowledge to their next generations at the same time within the same space. The sacred and the secular, the public and the private space meld into one another. The *Laibou* rides on the shoulders of another important member in the performance arena who is the *penakhongba* or the player of *pena*, a string instrument. Any song or any incantation is incomplete without being accompanied by *pena*. The players

enjoy a high position in the ritual as well as the society. In this way, through hand gestures, dialogues and dance the whole lifetime of an individual and the community is depicted. Almost all the important phases of a life are acted out. Lai Haraoba also has a social function of that of educating the masses. By the process of narration of the myth, the people learn of their lores and mores, which have been derived from the animistic, the pagan as well as from Shaivism and East-Indian Tantrism.

*Paaton* and *Phibul Jagoi* are performed only by the Maibis. In the former one, the Maibis dance in the middle of the sacred space in a circle. In *Phibul Jagoi*, however the Maibas also participate as they hold a white ritual cloth in the centre, around which the Maibis dance. The *Laibou* ends with the ritual of enacting the *Lairen Mathek*; which means the formation of the python curve. The Maibi leads a file by dancing a forming a curve, in the shape of a traditional motif of *Yumjao Paphal*; the coiling snake's tail is inside its own mouth. This shows the mystery of the endless cycle of birth and death. This serpentine movement is also said to represent the process of sexual union of the divine mother and father. Many suggest that the python itself is a symbol of sexual passion for a thousand years across cultures. Manjushri Chaki Sircar draws from old references to state that *Lairel Mathek* is a never ending method of creativity<sup>98</sup>.

After the *Laibou*, important members of the congregation gather together and sing clapping hands. *Wakol Laoba*, the song is sung in the praise of the ancestral deities who have been appeased and entertained through the ritual performances. During this song, the cultic objects are returned within the sanctum sanctorum of the temple. *Laibou* is performed every day. In Kanglei Haraoba, *Kanglei Thokpa* is enacted on the 5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> of the Lai Haraoba, which makes it distinct from the other forms of Haraoba. *Kanglei Thokpa* is an enactment of a mythical story of a man, Khoriphaba looking for a bride. He was an expert in polo and wrestling and had to fight another man to win the girl's hand. A Maibi mimes the actions of the hero after she gets possessed by the presiding deity. Her body shakes as she gives oracles from Khoriphaba. She becomes the

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<sup>98</sup> Manjushri Chaki-Sircar, *Feminism in a Traditional Society*, Delhi, Shakti Books, 1984

medium through which he wants to play polo, wrestle and marry. A white cloth is placed over this Maibi to depersonalize her, and that becomes an abstract form of representing Khoriphaba. Her body language communicates the idea of a victorious hero. Earlier, a Maibi used to choose a young girl of marriageable age to play his partner by hooking in a girl from the crowd<sup>99</sup> with the hooked end of the polo stick in *Lai Nupi Thiba* (searching of the girl); but objections from the authorities have put an end to that tradition. Instead a Maibi dances with Khoriphaba. It is normally assumed, that if a girl dances with a Maibi chances are she would become a Maibi too. Maibis are the most revered people in the state, but easily the most feared too. Their capacity of remaining on the threshold of conscious and unconscious planes is hugely respected. But most Meiteis are afraid of letting their children become a Maibi. The lives of Maibis are often detached from the society, though they take part in all the festivities. Maibis are an inherent part of the Haraobas. It is in possession of a deity as well as in their normal selves that they get to participate in the ritual. They act and dance in the ritual, and perpetuate the activities. They have a fixed yet a flexible role. They endanger the cosmic order through spiritual possession; they announce the causes and effects which are looked upon as divine possession and they enact the history, which is theatrical possession. Therefore we observe the occurrence of plural events under this single concept of performance.

The Maibi executes the movements which she has learnt from her mentor *Ima-guru*<sup>100</sup>; often some of them are polished to perfection by dance institutions. The precise hand gestures along with the poetry are performed in perfection whereas the twin lines behind her plainly follows the rhythm of the movement. Each movement is conjoined with an evocation to a particular fragment. The movements start slowly on the beats of a *harao pung*<sup>101</sup>. The movements are wide and strong, with powerful arm movements and repetitive loops by the legs. The palms and fingers execute direct gestures as elaborated by the *Hakchang Saba*. The Maibi reaches out to embrace the possibilities of the Meitei

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<sup>99</sup> Aribam Syam Sharma directed *Kanglei Haraoba*, Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1978

<sup>100</sup> Explained in details in chapter 3, segment 3.3

<sup>101</sup> *Harao pung* is a percussion instrument which is only played in a Lai Haraoba. It is played with sticks on one side and a hand on the other. It is gradually been replaced and amplified by drums and percussion parties at the recent Haraobas.

world around her. The slow punctuated rhythm gradually spirals towards an upbeat and bouncy one; in the end all the dancers offer prayers to the deity and the sacred space.

Dance does not exist apart from dancers. In Lai Haraoba, the dancing body is the tool via which the movements are mediated. It is also the site where the metaphors are enmeshed with the gestures, making the movements more conclusive. We cannot look only at the form, but consider the meanings it has for the people who create it, perform it and watch it. We have to understand the formal aspects of the dance and the larger context in which they are embedded. Dance may have different functions depending on the cultural context of which it is an integrated part; form and meaning may change and with that response and the stability of the cultural context may change as well.

On the final day, the ritual of *Louyanba* takes place, in which the story of Tangkhul and Nurabi, two Naga youths are enacted. In this ritual drama, the two lovers meet, separate and again meet. The sequence is full of erotic song and dance sequences, sexual innuendoes and advices about leading marital lives. Dance is inextricably bound with individuals and culture in a mutually affecting relationship. The Maibis and *penakhongba* sings the pranks and the riddles; there is an interesting aspect of role diversity and dramatic interplay between the two performers. In *Ougri-Hangel-Chongba*, a mythical story about rescuing the earth from evil spirits is performed where men and women from the audience participate. The metaphoric theme of rescuing the earth is explored through dance. It is believed that ritual is the origin of the collective and the communal dance of *Thabal Chongba*, which is performed by the young Meiteis a day before *Yaosang* (Holi). The re-establishment of collective action in pain, pleasure, fears through different stages of life is explained through the myth of creation. For the Meiteis dance is an integral element of their controlled as well as uncontrolled existence. Through dance, the impassioned spirit connects with the spirits of another realm ensuring a cocoon, a haven in which the cycle of life moves inexorably.



### *Moirang Haraoba*

*Lamthokpa*, *Khongchinba* and *Yumphamba* are three kinds of Moirang Haraoba. In the first year *Khongchinba* is celebrated where seventeen palanquins carrying god *Thangjing*, nine *Laibungthou* and seven *Lainura* are tied with one single rope, and the people of the concern clan move alongside the deity in a procession outside the shrine. The *Ougri* or the song of welfare and prosperity is sung by Maibas. While celebrating *Lamthokpa*, the palanquins are lined up in the procession but they remain untied. The *ougri* is not sung, but other rituals remain same. In *Yumphamba*, the palanquins are not taken outside the shrine, and the rituals are held in the courtyard.

In *Lai Ikouba*, the rituals are same as observed in the Kanglei Haraoba, except that they are performed in the evening. The Moirang Thangjing Haraoba is a site specific ritual-performance; therefore they perform the rituals of *Ikouba* on the bank of river Nunabi. Even the routes of the procession are fixed. The daily rituals are similar to those in Kanglei. Except in the evenings, Moirang Haraoba draws huge crowds from various parts of Manipur, as the Haraoba-committee provides space for many performers to display their dances. The sacred courtyard transforms into a secular performative space. This takes place before the *Laibou*. *Phamnaibas* dance in the courtyard as the *Maiba* and the *Penakhongba* sings the *Hoi Laoba*. In *Leima Jagoi*, any individual can perform in the courtyard after which the *laiching jagoi* and the *hoiru* by the priestesses follow. *Hakchang Saba*, *Yumshaba*, *Pan-Yanba*, *Phibul Ahabi*, *Lairen Mathek* are presented in the *Laibou Chongba* daily. The Moirang Haraoba carries on for almost twenty-nine days<sup>102</sup>. It is a significant change in the pattern of celebration of Haraobas, as Moirang receives high donations to observe the ritual-performance for almost a month. Large number of people throngs to see the rituals here. On the last day of the ritual live fishes are sacrificed after the performance of *Chong-Khong-Litpa*. *Lai Waphongba* is sung by the Maibis, with which the Moirang Haraoba comes to an end.

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<sup>102</sup> A Lai Haraoba must continue for odd number of days; 7/9/11, in this case 29. The dates of each Haraoba differ from one another. They observe the lunar calendar and Meitei months. Mainly, they are celebrated in between *Lamtaa-Shajibu-Kaalen-Ingaa* or the harvest season between March-April-May-June.

### *Chakpa Haraoba*

Chakpa Haraoba is observed with variations at Andro, Phayeng, sekmai, Koudruk, Khurkhul and Tairenpokpi. In Chakpa Haraoba, separate shrines are built for different gods, and multiple performative spaces are created. *Phamnaibas* or the members of the village council are irreplaceable element of this enactment; even the language of the Haraoba i.e. *chakparon* is different from the other Haraobas, and therefore there are Maibis who are bestowed with special skills to lead the Chakpa Haraoba. Unlike other Haraobas, certain rituals are specifically observed in the Chakpa regions. In *Lai-Phi-Shuba*, village female elders wash the clothes of the deities and the Maibi rings her *seri* as the rice-beer is prepared. The Maibi holds an important position in the sanctified space as well as the spaces involving merry-making and pleasure. Even when a black dog is sacrificed when the doors of the shrines are opened during *Lai Thong Hanba*, a Maibi presides over the ritual and declares the commencement of the Chakpa Haraoba.

In the evening, the *Lai Ikouba* is celebrated at two places at the same time in Phayeng, one each for Koubru and Loyarakpa. The procession which comes back to the shrine after *Ikouba* is received with the ritual fire. After the first day, daily, a number of ritual sacrifices are made at the shrine after the Maibis perform the *Lai-Ok-Jagoi*. The sacrifices are made in order to ensure a favorable and fertile environment, with proper ecological balance and a continuous supply of food – all of which are acquired by the blessing of the gods worshipped in the Haraoba. It is followed by the presentation of the spear dance or *Khou-Okpa*. The young unmarried girls also get together to dance together, making it an important vehicle of socialization. Dancing within the sacred space becomes a community activity where everybody joins in whenever they feel like. The girls learn the norms, values, taboos alongside the rituals of Lai Haraoba.

The procession or the enactment of procession has always been related to rituals. A procession symbolizes the journey every individual or a community takes in order to fulfill their role in the weave of the all encompassing tapestry. *Lai Lamthokpa*, *Lai Thenjao Kaba* and *Lai Keithel Kaba* are ritual processions which are taken out on different days; the deities are carried in palanquins away from the *laibung* for sight-

seeing! They arrive at a selected spot and there they resume dances, wrestling and perform martial arts. *Khou Saba*, *Laiching Jagoi* by the Maibi, *Hakchang Saba* and other dances of the *Laibou* are performed in a space away from the shrine, thus making re-establishing sacred sentiment in multiple spaces

The shrine is a space consecrated for the rituals and the performance. After the preliminary ritual, the area becomes a liminal zone where the human beings living in the time-bound world could rejoice the energy of the other temporal zone. Therefore the whole space is activated by an unknown unseen power which releases a new order to govern the whole scenario. This scheme embraces an individual, the community and the supernatural, all together. In Panam Ningthou Haraoba celebrated in *lamta* (February-March), no outsiders or stranger is allowed to witness or participate in the ritual as the people of Andro believe that it will cause harm to their own people. But at Moirang Haraoba, the ritual unfolds more like an event where thousands of worshippers come daily to pay respect to Thangjing. Trained dancers or professional troupes are invited to perform in the courtyard of the shrine as well, and the ritual space turns into a performance space. These performances takes place in the evenings before the *Laibou* is enacted by the Maibis. Lai Haraoba thus consecrates the whole community where the rituals are observed for the solidarity amongst the people and fertility of the region and performances showcase the rich and varied cultural history of Manipur.

A significant performance called the *Numit Kappa* symbolizing the shooting of the sun is performed at the Andro Chakpa Haraoba. The performance follows a traditional text in which one of the two rulers was shot down by the other with arrows. Two painted suns represent the rulers and are shot by arrows by the seven leaders of Ahallup clan. As one of the rulers shot the other, his face remained pale with embarrassment. He was convinced by the others to become the ultimate ruler, and thus a expiatory rite was performed. This expiatory rite is known as *Chupshaba* which the Maiba and Maibi performs, after which the sun is brought up symbolizing harmony and goodwill for years to come. This ritual is still performed, to prevent undesirable deaths in the family. In the performance if this, the text of the *Numit Kappa* is chanted. Legends, lores become performance tools as the

ritual-performances come to embody everlasting harmony, standing unafraid in the face of discordant present (of Manipur). The dances and the rituals share space with one another, to leave on a lingering effect in the mind of the people; the assurance of a safe land lies within the volatile space.

### *Kakching Haraoba*

*Lei Langba* or the ritual of collecting and offering flowers from the village of Puum marks the beginning of the Kakching Haraoba. Khamlangba is worshipped in this Haraoba. The *Lai Ikouba* takes place in the morning, where same rituals are followed but in a different style. Offerings made of wood and threads are important in this ritual of Kakching. The daily rituals, rites of purification, singing of *Yakeirol* are consistent with the other Haraobas, though Maibis of this Haraoba are specially trained. The deity is transferred from the main shrine to *yathok sang* in the mornings and after the *Laibou*, every evening the gods are escorted back to the main shrine. The performances therefore take place within shifting spaces. The procession with Khamlangba is taken out on 5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> or the 9<sup>th</sup> day and most rituals are performed outside in the courtyard. The *Thang Thaba* i.e. the sword dance and the *Konyai Hunba*, is performed in the shrine. The Maibis dance with swords within the shrine and dedicate their dance to the four directional gods. This marks the purification and slaying of evil spirits thus empowering the participants within the space.

On the last day, the *Ngaprum Tanba* is performed where dancers holding bows and arrows and seven sticks symbolizing souls at the end of the *laibou*. Each of the seven sticks is tossed and put inside a bag which is then offered to the deity. The lost souls, the mangled souls, the impoverished souls as well as the content souls are offered to the god for safe keeping, wishing for a safe and favorable future. The souls are gathered to ensure peace and harmony. It is often an irony that at the backdrop of constant conflicts between tribes and states, the ritual performance of *Ngaprum Tanba* is still performed with utmost reverence.

It is thus noticed that Lai Haraoba has continuous structure of performances consisting of musical, dance and dramatic elements starting with the *Lai Ikouba*, *Laibou* and *Lairoi*. These major sections are umbilically connected by mythological stories about creation and the fertility rituals. There is a harmonious blending of dance, movement, gesture, dialogues and incantations, vocal and instrumental music. Lai Haraoba is not only the process of retelling the stories year after year or preaching or educating the populace. The ritual rather the festival aims to revive or establish concurrency with pre-temporal time. That is why we enclose ourselves to the repetition of acts. By transferring the community members beyond the static time, Lai Haraoba also achieves a mystical appearance apart from the living reality. The dances in different spaces at different times are metaphorically appeasing all the elements of fire, earth, water, air and space. Even wood and cotton, representing their agricultural set-up and weaving industry is also included in the purview of ritual and performance. Through Lai Haraoba, the livelihood, body of symbolic and material knowledge, cultural and literary heritage are offered to the 378 gods for safe keeping demonstrably and performatively.

## 2.6 Shifting spaces

Performance in actuality is a site for multiple discursive interjections. The body of a performer is looked at as an agent of transmission, as an object of the racial, sexual gaze, the speaking subject with a moving body, a narrative body, a historical body and moreover a personal body. A performer's body carries meaning beyond the boundaries of it. Through different stages of the Lai Haraoba, the participants create territories, in which the stories of these different bodies can be narrated and historicized. Dance and related actions in Lai Haraoba can be seen as a metaphor for the physical desire to survive and a metaphysical desire to fill that survival with hope. Dancing evokes the elegiac as well as the celebratory spirit of the people wedged in between two worlds<sup>103</sup>. Lai Haraoba is a collective action towards remembering and documenting the oral tradition which acquires shape every year. It also narrates the future possibilities through the ambitious integration

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<sup>103</sup> Ann Cooper Albright, *Embodying History in Choreographing Differences*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, CT, 1997

of dance, song and rituals. The legends of the community are embedded within the ritual, celebrating conquest and the lives of warrior statesmen. But in current times, the celebration honours the legacy of people who have survived the conquest in the world outside the sanctified space. Heroism is not located in the defeater only, but rather in the spirit of those who have refused to be defeated<sup>104</sup>. The violence, the blood of the actual world, becomes the bond in the ideal world; through the redemptive power of rituals. The ordinary is refigured into the spiritual; 'life into history and words into a dance'<sup>105</sup>. The spirit of Lai Haraoba infuses hope into the lives of the people.

“The shape of my life is motion through fields, through time, through blood. Each decade is woven into the nest, embroidered centuries draped across my shoulders, a rainbow of lives, everyone my own. Behind me... years of those I have loved, those I have lost. All taking or giving blood. Dangerous, reviving, vital. The thin red line I follow down one row, up the next. A rhythmic dance draws the attention of the gods...I am enamoured of motion”.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> *ibid*

<sup>105</sup> *ibid*

<sup>106</sup> Jewelle Gomez, Jawole Will Jo Zollar, *Bones and Ash: A Gilda Story*, 1996

Dance frequently attains heightened cultural visibility at certain *conjectural* moments where forms of movement and socio-political life take shape simultaneously if apparently independently<sup>107</sup>. Though dance can also intervene as political considerations in artistic contexts, it is quintessentially invisible in Indian dance forms. Dance has projected images of monarchy, national identity, gendered identity, regional identity and ritualized identity. Even with the evolution of modern dance, classical dance forms have always remained at the helm of construction of a dancer's identity in this country. The classical however was a structured cultural space, borrowed from regional and the literary contexts. A dancer's body represented, enabled and distorted her personal and aesthetic identity, which was an entanglement of the artistic capabilities, the institutional structures, the cultural motives and the personal forces. Each dance form in India which was given an iconic status, had been born out of *conjectural* moments, which chafed and evolved to suit to become a cultural agent in an institutional space.

#### 3.1 The evolution of the dance form called Manipuri

Certain feminists have long been concerned with the processes by which power and visibility have been entwined and allocated to the masculine along with the right to look. However, many anthropologists have implicitly reproduced and extrapolated phallogentric logic by defining visibility and power as synonymous terms rather than historically related positions. This is especially true in the case of public and domestic domains. The anthropology of gender that is emerging under the influence of performance theory resists such confluences. Instead, it is concerned with the relationships and the dissonance between the exclusive categories of normative sex/ gender systems and the actuality,

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<sup>107</sup> Mark Franko, Susanne Franco, Marina Nordera ed, *Dance And The Political: States Of Exception*, in *Dance Discourses*, Routledge, London, New York, 2007

multiplicity and the resistance within the same system. There is an oscillation between a desire to unseat the scope of sexual dichotomies and a yearning to locate the construction of gender in the subtexts of performances. Given, that construction of bodies becomes more visible when it deviates from the expectations of the dominant ideology from where the writer or the performer comes, it is not surprising that Rabindranath Tagore's works on embodiment and performative constitution of gender should focus on cases of seemingly ambiguous characters such as Chitrangada<sup>108</sup>, whether she is an institutionalized, temporary or theatrical body. Tagore wrote Chitrangada in a poetry form in 1892. But he encountered Manipuri Dance in Sylhet in 1918. He took an instant liking to this form. So much so, that he invited teachers from Manipur to teach the dance to the students of Vishwa Bharati University in Shantiniketan. Tagore's collection of songs was the popular mode of expressing the great song-writer's creativity. His poetry and dramas were gripping, but dancing was not a very popular mode of expressivity in early twentieth century, in any part of Bengal. The students encountered stories on performances when the stalwarts, the literary giants and critics like Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, artists like Nandalal Bose and Tagore himself traveled to various parts of South East Asia and Europe. They used to sketch pictures and in verse and brought back costumes, masks and even movements to teach the art of community dance practice. For many years, Tagore scheduled classes on dance activities under the nomenclature of physical training to make it acceptable for the parents and patrons of his institution<sup>109</sup>. Dancing was not deemed

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<sup>108</sup> As Mahabharata takes Arjuna to Manipur during his period of penance in *Aranya Parva*, he meets Chitrangada, who eventually bore him a son, Babhravahana. Arjuna met his son in the *Ashwamedhika Parva*, after the Great War, where he was killed by his son, and was later restored to life with help from Chitrangada and Ulupi. The son, took over the kingdom of Manipur after his maternal grandfather, and subsequently traveled to Hastinapur with his father.

Tagore's drama however traces the intertwining of the lives of Arjuna and Chitrangada and the period of their courtship. The narrative starts with a past when Chitrangada was brought up like one would bring up a prince. She learnt horse riding, archery, swordsmen ship. She comes face to face with Arjuna in the forests of Manipur, and approaches him. He snubs her, which leaves her pride wounded. Along with her friends' help she calls upon *Madandeva* who magically transformed her into an elegant creature, quite unlike the original princess of Manipur. She seduces Arjuna, and they engage in a courtship, till Arjuna realizes that he is more drawn towards the powerful ruler of the state. He quickly realizes the mistaken identity when Chitrangada, the princess of Manipur appears in front of him in the royal regalia and explains the necessity to nurture nuances of a man and a woman within every individual.

<sup>109</sup> Shantideb Ghosh, *Gurudev Rabindranath o Adhunik Bharatiyo Nrityo*, Kolkata, Ananda Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 1983



respectable enough for girls or women. But after women from Tagore family readily participated in theatre and dance, more families urged their girls to join the performing arts. To bring a structure into the curriculum, Kathakali and Manipuri became taught-classes in Vishwa Bharati. The virtues and aesthetics of the Tagore family were considered worth emulating. Women in Manipur, and the history and mythology related to powerful women of the Manipur valley may have prompted a young Tagore to valorize Chitrangada. But in 1936, at the heart of nationalist movement to free the shackled and colonized India, when he set the drama in a dance-drama mode, he was eulogizing powerful women of the country by evoking the image of the strong woman and her attributes.

Tagore achieved numerous goals when he set up Chitrangada and his other plays for public dancing. Social processes and aesthetic percepts are both extremely important; they give an idea about the ideal movement system of the culture. He tried to secure a traditional form of Manipuri (and Kathakali) as heritage and used it to concretize the *Robindro-nrityo* genre.<sup>110</sup> He wanted to draw a representative picture of traditional dancing in general along with its modern forms. Historical facts were taken to make the core of the drama and contemporaneous folklore practices provided to fill in pattern in place of fragmentary historical data. Manipur has an undated history of community dancing and female collective action. It is not surprising to see women dressed as men, hunting at the side of their beloved princess in the opening scene. Tagore's appropriation of his poetry within a dance-drama form was also a key element in marking how local people of Manipur transcribe, describe and commence learning dance in their community and how they assimilate a basic understanding of grammar and vocabulary of dance. If not for Tagore, then Indian mainland would have long deprived of the aesthetics and pleasure of knowing Manipuri as a dance form. If not for the oeuvre of Tagore's works, the landscape of performativity would be very different for Indian women today. His works not only marked a completely new identity of a woman, it also etched out an interesting correspondence between a public sphere and inner, private sphere.

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<sup>110</sup> This genre was popular in Vishwa Bharati University, and later spread in dance centers in Bengal

Foucault observed that discourse produces its own points of resistance, and power is a state immanent to culture<sup>111</sup>. In Manipur, a peculiar balance of pre-Vaishnav matrilineal society and a Brahminical Hinduised patriarchal society exist side by side<sup>112</sup>. In this society ambiguity is not postulated as the ground of sexual and gendered difference. The sex roles are cut clear and Meitei men and women are considered to be equals. The women of the Manipur Valley have been able to preserve their collective identity as a powerful social force, in a society where Brahminical Hinduism has been the royally-patronized religion for the last four centuries. Despite the conscious attempt of the Hindu culture to erode the traditional base of women's social position in Manipur, the Meitei women have, to a large extent, succeeded in holding their own against the forces of an "alien" culture. Their strength comes from an economic set-up which is a remnant of an ancient tradition when men used to be engaged in hunting and martial affairs and women in agriculture, trade and commerce. Women, however, wield considerable political force in the State by virtue of their collective entity in the economic sphere and therefore carve their identity in every space.

Lila Abu-Lughod resists jettisoning the concept of gender in favor of continually deploying it. Indeed, for her, feminist performance ethnography consists of diverse but continual gendered encounters. She fractures the concept of gender in order to reveal its multiplicity. If one identifies with the category "women," what does it mean to forget one's womanhood enough to hear difference while holding to the category to find that difference? Her answer seems to be redefining the meaning of gender rather than abandoning it<sup>113</sup>. In a Manipuri community performance space, whether in Lai Haraoba or Raas Lila, the performative power and decisions seem to be balanced between the two sexes. But the social status and the power which the Maibis enjoy through the ritual-

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<sup>111</sup> Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1977

<sup>112</sup> Vaishnavism was introduced as the state religion in 1777 by king Bhagyachandra. Certain records explained that Vaishnavism had already taken over the kingdom in 1467. Not too surprisingly, Lairenmayum Iboongohal Singh, in *Introduction to Manipur*, (The Saraswati Printing Works, Imphal, 1987) writes "According to Mahabharata (generally undated), Chitrangada and her son Babhrvahana professed Vaishnavism".

<sup>113</sup> Lila, Abu-Lughod, *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories*, Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1993

performance of a Haraoba puts them in the role of the protector of the consecrated space. Karl Miller maintains that 'doubles may appear to come from the outside as a form of possession, or from the inside, 'as a form of projection'<sup>114</sup>. The lived body of a Maibi encounters material facts, has a relation to the environment and exercises a choice.<sup>115</sup> The doubleness of selfhood (Miller) therefore comes from the possession of the environment and the projection of the inner choice. The Maibis project the dual personae which constitutes every woman, to possess and to express. They speak about an affirmative yet malleable identity.

### 3.2 The sacred and the secular performative body

Dance in Indian culture had permeated all facets of life. Its outstanding function was to give symbolic expression to the religious concepts and later to literary contexts. The close relationship between dance and religion, particularly as a philosophical metaphor began very early in the cultural milieu. There are numerous references to dance which include descriptions of its performance in religious as well as secular contexts. Poetry, treatise, songs, architecture commend dance as permeating the sacred and the secular spaces. Even then it has been difficult to ascertain in which milieu dance may have originated. But there seems to be no ambiguity in believing that dance was a form, a medium by which humans communicated to God. Dancers were often given respectable position in the society on the basis of their creative endeavors and their role in shaping the cultural history of their regions. The kinds of dancers however differed from space to space. There was a distinct difference between dancers of the courts, those who performed in secular space with those who were a part of consecrated temple spaces. All dancers had patrons, but those who performed in the temple space were dedicated to dancing and other activities for the temple only. Compositely known as *devadasis*<sup>116</sup>, they had several roles to play within the temple walls and seldom participate in other social activities. Their roles as performers

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<sup>114</sup> Karl Miller. *Doubles : Studies in Literary History*, Oxford University press 1985, pp416

<sup>115</sup> Toril Moi, *What is a woman and other Essays*, Oxford University Press, 2001

<sup>116</sup> *Devadasis* – the servants of the God

and as consorts to rich patrons often concurred, but they were known to have married to the presiding deity of the temple or the cult. The historical evidence of the ritual and artistic purposes of *sadir/dasi attam/ mahari*<sup>117</sup> system indicates ‘that it was a dance style intended to express the *sringara*<sup>118</sup> and to be performed by women (seldom by male dancers of the temple). That means they played with the elements of the *sringara rasa*, that of love in union and love in separation, in their dances. Their traditional repertoire is known to have included praises for the god. It was generally accepted that the underlying aesthetic of the repertoire was to mostly please the patrons, i.e. the rich, the royalty and the god, seldom the common audience. The sexual body of the dancer conformed to the sacred body, and exercising restraint on the erotic content of the dance were credited to the caliber of a good dancer. The recorded history also suggests that there were no cleaves between a *devadasi* and a *nityasumangali*<sup>119</sup>, as the god was her husband. She performed many important duties, though was prohibited to do so in amongst common people. The *devadasis* readily renounced public lives though they were popular public figures; their participation has made enormous impact on the Indian performances.

On the other hand, the figure of a courtesan became of a symbol of royal and Oriental patronized luxury and it lasted till the beginning of twentieth century in India. There was hardly any town in the country which did not have ‘nautch’ to provide entertainment at ceremonial functions, festivities or *baithaks* (cultural evenings) and *mehfils* (audience). the Europeans used the appellation ‘nautch girl’ for all kinds of professional entertainers ranging from the common bazaar prostitutes, strolling dancing girls to the highly accomplished singers and dancers<sup>120</sup>. The dancers at the highest rung of the structure were self-supporting and independent, often demanding large sums of money in return for their services. They were considered an asset to the area in which they lived. The body of a

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<sup>117</sup> *Sadir/ Dasi-attam* are temple dance forms from South India which are understood to be the predecessors of what we know as the classical form, Bharatnatyam today  
*Mahari* is the Oriya word for a *devadasi*. The temple dancers of Orissa have largely constructed and contributed to the classical form of Odissi.

<sup>118</sup> Anne-Marie Gaston, *Bharatnatyam: from Temple to Theatre*, Manohar Publishers, New Delhi, 1996

<sup>119</sup> *Nityasumangali*-always, the auspicious one

<sup>120</sup> Pran Neville, *Nautch Girls of the Raj*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2009

courtesan and the nautch girl belonged to the secular space and was a compelling illusion, for each dancer was a desired body. As Gayle Rubin notes, referring to Foucault, "Desires are not preexisting biological entities, but rather.... they are constituted in the course of historically specific social practices." Desire and sexuality, as cultural constructs, influences gender formation; the body of a courtesan mapped the most exclusive feminine traits. The body turned into an object of gaze on which the performance became inscribed text. Demure, seductive, promiscuous, bold, - sexuality played a big role in performance and the visual representation of women as sexual subjects or objects became a debatable issue in the later times. However, the erotics of communicative gaze entangled with the art of storytelling, music and dance and gradually Kathak<sup>121</sup> had evolved.

Until 1920, dancing was reserved as an exclusive space which was governed by *devadasi* or someone with training in the traditions of nautch. A public agitation centered around the dancer's role within secular society, where dance was identified as a profession associated with either a courtesan or a prostitute. A public campaign broke out which led to the abolition of *devadasi* system. An 'Anti-Nautch' Bill was passed in 1947 which banned dancing in temples of Tamil Nadu, a South Indian state. In those years, the ones who still continued their tradition were reduced to being dregs of the society with minimal support from the Indian Union; the absence of patrons worsened the situations, and ironically most turned to prostitution for livelihood.

### 3.3 Within the body of a Maibi

Gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time through a 'stylized repetition of acts'<sup>122</sup> thereby proving Beauvoir that one 'becomes a woman' and is not born as one. Bodily gestures, movements, speech are fragments which make a gendered self. The conception of gender is constructed socially which is marked as a prerequisite for carving an identity.

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<sup>121</sup> The generic style of Kathak is said to have evolved from the court dances of India. The *gharanas* of Kathak have been named after Lucknow, Rampur and Jaipur, the three capitals of princely states, which also had a history of court dancing since Muslim rulers were on the cultural seats of the country.

<sup>122</sup> Judith Butler, *Performative Acts And Gender Constitution in Performance Studies* edited by Henry Bial Routledge, New York, 2007

In the case of the Maibis and other women performers of the Lai Haraoba, gender is instituted through the acts which are internally continuous; therefore a constructed identity of the performers, a performative accomplishment with social audience, including the performers themselves 'come to believe and perform in the mode of belief'<sup>123</sup>. The stylized repetition of acts through time in the Haraobas has become a seamless activity. This has given a Maibi and a women performer's role more resilience. The identity of a women performer in Manipur is not a compelling illusion, but a reality of the past and present which has been embraced by the society. The identity of the performer is the object of belief and there is substance in what appears in front of us. The appearance of the Maibi and belief in her identity comes through as she performs the corporeal and the virtual enactment of the myth of creation. Phenomenological theories of human embodiment aims to distinguish the physiological and the biological casualties that structure the bodily existence and the meanings that embodied existence assume in the context of lived experience. Merleau-Ponty's contemplations on body being a sexual being, has conjured the idea of body being a "historical idea" rather than being a "natural species".<sup>124</sup> Even Beauvoir claims that a woman, and by extension, any gender, is a historical situation rather than a natural fact. The body of a Maibi is a map of Manipur's socio-cultural history on which the genesis and exegesis has been traced out. The historical body connects with the biological body to shape the ritual body, of which all three, in whole or in parts, are ineluctable in a Lai Haraoba – a space for performing the cultural myth and memory of the Meitei community.

The body comes to bear cultural meanings through a complicated process of appropriation. In order to describe a gendered body, not only are the conventional views of the actions of a body expanded, but the meanings with which the actions are performed or enacted are also considered. Though gender is specified through corporeal acts, the body's expressions are continually realized, or to put it starkly, continually shifted. Cultural expressions and historical facts predetermine the body, not only by concrete expressions but also by some interior essence. The expression and the essence never allow

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<sup>123</sup> *ibid*

<sup>124</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Colin Smith translated *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, London, 2005

the body to exeunt the circle of performativity. The body is therefore an agency, determining the possible ways in which one perform or enact. The body envelopes a grammar or an articulate way-of-doing which is reproduced whenever needed. The body, which is boundless, and has limitless possibilities, is curbed by this grammar, which exercises control over the reproduction of historical or social situations. While performing an 'ageless' ritual, the body can only act as an embodied agent, and not react or respond to the changes which has surfaced in the society.

Butler mentions that the theatrical sense of 'act' within a temporal duration in an entire performance, an 'act' is a shared experience and "collective action". The embodied agents are inasmuch as they dramatically and actively embody and wear certain cultural significations, and are not one's act alone. A Maibi's gendered body is a rehearsed body which has been actualized and reproduced as reality again and again. The act she does, or the act she performs, is, in a sense, "an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene"<sup>125</sup>. Maibi is the central actor in the process of a cultural reproduction. She inhabits the cultural space and becomes a key in preserving parameters - physical and moral- of the community. The space and society are mutually constitutive and the fluidity within the space is generated by the Maibi. She is a non-sexual, metaphoric and revered body the actions of which demands gaze, (here, both male and female). These actions are usually interpreted as expressing her non-sexual core or identity, and they either conform to the nuances attached with becoming a Maibi or contest that expectation in some way.

Leelavati, a young Maibi speaks of herself as a non-sexual body, with no desires of marriage or children. Like all Maibis, she too was subjected to visions in her adolescence. She encountered a beautiful lady in these visions, one who would gesture her to follow her across fields and sing with her. Many such encounters in dreams and daydreams had made Leelavati feel that she had peculiar characteristics, those which lead to socio-psychological isolation. In her ninth-grade in school, recurring visions of a lady in white came to her, and eventually she lost consciousness in school. She had to quit and her

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<sup>125</sup> Judith Butler, Henry Bial (ed), *Performative Acts And Gender Constitution in Performance Studies*, Routledge, New York, 2007

family, worried, performed rituals for Leelavati's health. But she seemed to be possessed by a kind of being, and ran out of her house one night. Her family found her with *Ima-Guru*<sup>126</sup>, babbling in complete trance, and speaking to goddess *Panthoibi*. Eventually, *Ima-Guru* led her through initiation ceremonies and took on to her as her disciple, for Leelavati had found her calling as a Maibi<sup>127</sup>. She stayed with her *Ima-Guru* for over a year to learn the *Hakchang Saba*, the way the rituals are conducted, culinary-social-sexual restrictions, the songs and how to lead this way of life. For a Maibi is not only a priestess, but she is can also be a midwife, herbalist, clairvoyant and spiritual leaders. But it is as dancers that they are most well known; their dancing is at once a fulfillment of a religious duty to the community and an expression of the inner dedication<sup>128</sup>.

Trance, ecstasy and oracles are a part of the spiritual obligations a Maibi has always fulfilled. The kings' chronicles mention an eleven year old, Kumari who predicted that the king's daughter would pass away within ten days. A furious king summoned the child from her village and instructed to her stay within palace walls till the prophecy comes true, else be beheaded. When the princess died on the 10<sup>th</sup> day, the suffering king appointed Kumari as a royal amaibi<sup>129</sup>. She proceeded to train herself under senior Maibis and registered herself under the royal office and became a part of history and various lores. For in becoming Maibi, one must have heightened extra-sensory perceptions and kinesthetic senses. Once they have entered a trance, Maibis deliver oracles at each Haraoba<sup>130</sup>; through them, the community hears the nature of the future of their people, thus playing on with fear and belief. Ecstasy is the inescapable ingredient of spiritual possession or trance. But the meaning ascribed to it is often diffuse and at times

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<sup>126</sup> *Ima Guru* means mother like teacher – usually a senior Maibi who eventually becomes the mentor of the young aspirant Maibis

<sup>127</sup> Personal interview with Leelavati, Imphal, May, 2008

<sup>128</sup> Within the last few years, to meet the demand for performers during the ritual of a Haraoba, a group of women has emerged who are commonly called 'fake' Maibis. True to the term, they are fake as they are only dancers, who are trained to participate in the Haraoba.  
Personal interview with Mangangsena, a Penakhomba, Imphal, May, 2008

<sup>129</sup> *ibid*

<sup>130</sup> The Maibi is linked with goddess *Leimaren* through the navel and it is said that she sits upon the medium as a rider controls a horse. Meiteis believe that possession can be located at the navel, and the pulse of the navel increases during the possession.



contradictory. The elements of volition or control of trance lie in the hands of the Maibi. She also has the ability to maintain contact with ritual participants and spectators which is an important element of ecstasy. Unlike the goal of meditative trance, which is enstasis, the shaman (here, a Maibi) does not usually enter an invulnerable state in which her perception of the external world is absent<sup>131</sup>. She communicates in full awareness. As a characteristic of a shaman has "direct contact with the supernatural world through a personal familiar spirit which can possess his/her body and speak through the mouth to communicate with people who call upon him/her for information."<sup>132</sup> Thus the power of choosing to communicate a particular oracle lies with the Maibi. The Maibi's invocation of the goddess Leimaren and the message she passes through the Maibi is a set formula. It is handed down for generations through the oral traditions of the Maibis. Consequentially, she will speak of the authority of the consecrated space of Haraoba thereby setting the norms to which the Meiteis adhere.

#### 3.4 Transmissions of identity within Meitei society

Feminist theory, in the mid- to late 1970s, looked at gender as a system of signs, or signifiers, assigned to sexually dimorphic bodies, which served to differentiate the social roles and meanings those bodies could have. Feminist theory thus argued that gender was a social construct, something designed and implemented and perpetuated by social organizations and structures, rather than something merely "true," something innate to the ways bodies worked on a biological level. In so doing, feminist theory made two very important contributions. The first is that feminist theory separated the social from the biological, insisting that we see a difference between what is the product of human ideas, hence something mutable and changeable, and what is the product of biology, hence something (relatively) stable and unchangeable. The second contribution is related to the

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<sup>131</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Bollingen Ser. Vol LXXVI, Pantheon Books, New York, 1964

<sup>132</sup> Gerald D. Berreman, "Brahmanism and Shamanism in Pahari Religion," in E. B. Harper (ed.), *Religion in South Asia*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1964, pp 53

first: by separating the social and the biological, the constructed and the innate, feminist theory insisted that gender was not something "essential" to an individual's identity.

Malini Bhattacharya claims that this 'capacity to control their own lives' in the case of Meitei women as explained by Manjushri Chaki-Sircar, is in actuality, greater than in the case of women in other Hinduised societies of Northern India. But Bhattacharya does not stand by an 'absence of actual subordination'. In fact, the Sircar's differentiation between 'ideological' dominance of the male and the 'actual absence of subordination' tends to be simplistic<sup>133</sup>. Bhattacharya continues to say 'one would think that the ideological dominance of the male both presuppose and reinforces modes of subordination in the economic and social sphere'. Empirical evidence shows that working outside the home has always been an extensive practice among Meitei women. While this situation contains the possibility of emancipation, this by itself cannot be an indication of 'female power' it can also be looked at as duplication of labour for women, unless there is a tradition of male participation in house- work and child-rearing. She does have control over her earnings are used for her own upkeep, or to pay for her dowry. If there is a divorce, a woman is entitled to take back her *stridhan*, her own earnings and her dowry with her. A daughter also has a right to her mother's property. But Bhattacharya disagrees with Sircar saying if these rights are taken in their total context then they would appear to be in the nature of special protective measures for safeguarding the interests of a weaker section. A Meitei woman did not have any land rights, nor any claims to paternal property. But observing the system closely Bhattacharya comments that these social customs are but 'remnants of a system that is irrevocably lost'; and they remain only to strengthen the post-colonial socio-economic structure. On the other hand, however, they may also contain incipient elements of contradiction. The terms "Desanskritisation"<sup>134</sup> or

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<sup>133</sup> Malini Bhattacharya, 'Feminism in a Traditional Society?' (Reviewed work) on *Feminism in a Traditional Society: Women of the Manipur Valley* by Manjushri Chaki- Sircar Source: *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 21, No. 43 (Oct. 25, 1986), pp. WS54-WS58

Manjushri Chaki-Sircar, *Feminism in a Traditional Society*, Delhi, Shakti Books, 1984

<sup>134</sup> While using the term Desanskritization, D.N.Majumdar explains it as deritualization where member of high castes abandoned rituals, old ways of life, adopting dress, cuisine, social customs which they traditionally did not subscribe to.

D N Majumdar, *Races and Cultures of India* Asia Publishing House. Bombay, 1965

“Meiteisation”<sup>135</sup> as observed by the author, could be an expression of this contradiction. This quest for identity is of course a healthy sign. But one must be very clear that there cannot be any real 'revival' of a lost socio-economic structure and any revival of indigenous Meitei customs must be perceived against the overall background of a radically-changed socio-economic reality. The revival of the Lai Haraoba for instance, cannot revive the power of the Meitei kings and the pre-colonial system of land-holding. Nor can it add to the existing status of women; at most it supplies a mode of expressing some of their dissatisfactions with the existing status. “The 'feminism' of a traditional society is a thing of the past in the Indian context today; it can only have further development when it recognizes the reality of this change for itself, it is not a sign of women's 'capacity to control their own lives’”<sup>136</sup>. The system tolerates a Maibi's deviation as a deviation of all social customs. But her psychological isolation to maintain her 'alternative status' does not always fall into a congruency in her married life.

Throughout the year, a Maibi may be called perform the yearly functions for the progenitor of the clan by members of the clan; this is called *Sagei Apokpa Khurumba*. Other than that the Maibi may be called during Hindu festivals like Durga Puja to accompany the procession, - *Kwak Jatra*, where the king or his representative rides a mount and leads the people into an open space where martial arts (*Thang Thaba, Khou Okpa*) or *mukna* or wrestling takes place. Otherwise, the Maibis act as advisors to individuals and families by giving predictions or solving problems with practical reason.

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<sup>135</sup> The land was known as Manipur towards the 17th century, and the people were called Manipuris after that time. Formerly, the present Manipur was divided into small territories occupied by different clans, such as, the Khumals, the Moirangs, the Angoms, the Ningthoujas (Meiteis) and the Luangs, and the different territories 'were known by the names of the respective clans. The people of these clans used to identify themselves and their languages by the names of their respective clans. Towards the 15th century A.D, The Meiteis occupied all the territories and established a sovereign kingdom which was known to the Meiteis as 'Meitei Leipik' or 'the land of the Meiteis'. Meiteisation is the term given to this state-building process.  
(Dr. K. P. Sinha, University of Guwahati)

<sup>136</sup> In a society where polygyny has social sanction, the earning power of a woman tends to become the basis of a compromise with a system of sexual liberty which operates in one direction only. The fact that a second wife, who has a full income, does not expect her husband to maintain her, may become an encouragement to polygyny, while, on the other hand, the fact that such a woman consents to be the second wife at all shows how much even an economically self-reliant woman needs the sanction of marriage.

A Maibi is greatly respected in the Meitei society. It is difficult for the family to accept that their daughters turn into Maibis, even more conflicting to accept as a daughter-in-law. They have to perform and travel often and lead a life with innumerable restrictions. They cannot take fire from the hearth; they have to light their fire by friction. Their hair is often matted and knotted<sup>137</sup>. They have fewer choices in food especially fish; a Maibi often has bodily uneasiness if she had not restricted her food habits. Her uneasiness can only be coped with a purification rite, *Lairem Puba* or *Laikhai Taba* which means complete training of the habits of the tradition<sup>138</sup>. V.N. Brara notices two functional categories of Maibis in Manipur. The first is the *Wangong Shan Da Angangbu Ngaibi* or the one who waits in the house for the child. She is the midwife, a healer, herbalist have specialist in some sort of medicinal process. She cuts the umbilical cord of the child when it is born; if not, then the birth is inauspicious and incomplete. The other kind is the *Khabi Shingta Chakpa Larak Phambi* or the one who can stop the god. These Maibis have incredible strength and have the ability to confront the spirits, experience possession. They are good mediums, clairvoyants and participant in the Haraoba, serving in the fertility festivals narrating metaphors. For example, a Maibi sits on a plantain leaf and chants as bananas or growth of banana trees is considered to be fecund. The role of a Maibi continually revolves around the principles of creation, birth, genesis, cosmology, abundance, conjoining male and female elements, worshipping the forces of nature and imposing the metaphors of origin and end of life at every turn. For even in death, Maibas (mostly) are summoned to declare ritually that the soul has left the body.

To dance as a Maibi seems to be a career option in the recent times. To meet the demand for more performers during the ritual of a Haraoba, a group of women has emerged who are commonly called 'fake' Maibis. True to the term, they are only dancers, who are

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<sup>137</sup>Manjushri Chaki-Sircar, *Lai Harouba: The Social Position and the Ritual Status of Meitei Women of Manipur, India* (PhD Dissertation), Columbia University, 1980

<sup>138</sup>Vijaylaxmi N Brara, *Politics, Society and Cosmology in India's North East*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998

trained to participate in the Haraoba<sup>139</sup>. A dancer learns the sequences of a Lai Haraoba performance as a B.A course under Jawaharlal Nehru Manipuri Dance Academy, Imphal. This module is extremely technique oriented, and has a structured syllabus. Teachers from the *Pandit Loishang* teach the performance related rituals to the students<sup>140</sup>. Under an *Ima-Guru*, a Maibi only learns the specific tradition of her teacher; for example, Leelavati's guru Tondon, had belonged to the *Shanglen* tradition. She specifically worships the *Shanglen* deities, the sequence of rituals which has been taught to her have been from the *Shanglen* tradition. Therefore, she can participate in the Kakching and the Chakpa Haraobas as *Shanglen* is a principal tradition and not in the other kinds. This is because traditionally, Maibis belong to three *salais* or clans, namely *Mangang*, *Luwang* and *Khuman*; the traditions of *Shanglen*, *Nongmai* and *Phura* belong to each of these clans respectively. Traditionally, Maibis wear white. But each of these Maibi traditions dons separate clan colours and worships and mediates deities of the same group. They also learn specific *Lairon* or a language in which the prayers, chants and rituals are carried out<sup>141</sup>. At the time of their initiation, the disciples are given a *seri*<sup>142</sup>, a bell, which remains in the hands of a Maibi as she performs the ritual. By the decree of the *Pandit Loishang*, the Maibis receive Rs.250-300 (per day) from the organizers of a Haraoba. They enjoy a respectable position in the society but the economic reliability on this profession varies. The Maibis are mainly active during the harvest months, where presence brings auspiciousness to a ritual. Besides the Haraoba, the Maibis often join JNMDA as teachers. Their participation in a milieu is seldom appreciated<sup>143</sup>. It is through performance, that the Maibis voice their social responsibilities, their talents and the need to hold on to the unchangeable ritual.

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<sup>139</sup> Personal interview with Mangangsen, a Penakhomba, Centre for Research of Traditional and Indigenous Arts, Imphal, May, 2008

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>141</sup> A Maibi cannot change her tradition or her mentor even if she wants to. She is thus trained to speak a *Lairon* and perform ritual distinct to the in-group.

<sup>142</sup> This distinguishes a Maibi from a fake Maibi, who is just a trained dancer.

<sup>143</sup> Maibis are isolated individuals, often deemed unfit for a domestic space. Though an oracle by a Maibi is always respected and welcomed, her status as a woman close to the spirits of a different realm do not bear well within a social gathering.

### 3.5 Transmissions of identity through women in resistance

Lai Haraoba is deeply enmeshed within the Meitei way of life – which serves a niche in the reality of changing and volatile conditions. Any discussion on Lai Haraoba needs to be located within the more omnipresent of the everyday lived realities. On a micro-historical level, dance may perform protest; but a direct and local way of upsetting the power balance is to use the gendered body as a direct agent. Resistance is a trope within which movement and representation are ambiguously articulated. This is because dance is said to absorb and retain the effects of political power as well as resist the very effects it appears to incorporate within the same gesture<sup>144</sup>. This is what makes dance a potent form of expression. But in order to understand a Manipuri dance's social conditions of possibility, it is equally important to deliberate the power structure that encompassed and enabled the cultural policies of the state.

Sir Robert Reid, the Governor of Assam, had once remarked, 'Manipuri women are notorious for their independence and their proneness to take direct action to get their own way'<sup>145</sup>. The high social and economic status of women in Meitei society was frequently remarked upon by British colonial officers.<sup>146</sup> Despite the dominance of Hinduism in the plains of Manipur, Meitei women suffered less humiliation and oppression as they were highly resistant to colonizers and other authority figures.. Above all, the women controlled the food supplies and the markets, and were therefore a dominant economic force. From the beginning of the British rule in India, they had showed themselves capable and organized enough to take mass action when occasion demanded. The first Nupilal<sup>147</sup> or 'Women's War' in 1904 had effectively forced a former Political Agent to rescind his demands he had imposed on the Meiteis. It began as protest by women against the ruling of the Political Agent that the Meitei men should rebuild colonial officers' bungalows

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<sup>144</sup> Mark Franko, Susanne Franco, Marina Nordera ed, *Dance And The Political: States Of Exception*, in *Dance Discourses*, Routledge, London , New York, 2007

<sup>145</sup> Sir Robert Reid. *History of the Frontier Areas bordering Assam*, Shillong, 1942

<sup>146</sup> W. McCulloch, *An Account of the Valley of Munnipore and the Hill Tribes*, Calcutta, 1859

<sup>147</sup> *Nupilal* or *Nupilan* mean's women's (*nupi*) war

destroyed by suspected arson. There is some evidence that this movement was manipulated by the princes of the royal house, who were disgruntled at their loss of privileges after 1891. This had set in a series of women's political protest in the Manipur valley.

The agitation began late in 1939 at the main market in the capital, Imphal. This was situated at Khwairamband within the British Reserve, and therefore technically under the control of the Political Agent rather than the Maharajah or Durbar. It was a market of considerable size. According to the Political Agent, Christopher Gimson, over 2,000 women traded there beneath the covered sheds, and double that number in the open air outside. The British officials had never been very successful in imposing order on the women's market. The bazaar traded in many items, including locally produced fabrics. Most important of all, however, was the sale of rice; the bulk of this trade was in the hands of Marwaris. After the British occupation of Manipur in 1891 the Political Agent alone could authorize the export of rice, and the cart tax provided sizable revenue for the state. During the 1920s, the authorization for export was delegated to a trading company for a fixed payment and this was exploited by the Marwari traders in Manipur, who began to increase the amount of rice exported. This foreign involvement was not a great threat to the women's livelihood in normal times, as there was enough rice to satisfy both local and export demand. Towards the end of 1939, a period of excessive rain-fall affected growth and the standing grain was further damaged by hail and flooding. Prices escalated, and what little rice was available was largely bought up by the Marwari traders for processing in their own mills which was then either immediately exported or hoarded. Christopher Gimson was thus faced with a serious possibility of widespread hunger and the women turned up to them for help. Small groups of women determined to take matters into their own hands and to try to prevent the bullock carts carrying rice from reaching the Marwari storehouses. Anti-Marwari feelings were further inflamed by a report of insulting behaviour. Rajani Devi, one of the women's leaders, was taunted by a Marwari trader Juriya Serogi that Meitei women would have to eat broken rice and *chengup* mixed with the dust from under his feet. This was an appalling insult, for which the Political Officer later made the father of the accused submit an abject written apology. But problems flared

as during the next few days the women took more violent measures. Some carts were seized and others overturned and their loads scattered, and groups of women roamed the streets after dark to try to prevent clandestine deliveries. Some were arrested and briefly jailed. In the early hours of December 12th a large number of women gathered and resolved to appeal to the Political Agent to reintroduce the ban on export, and proceeded on his bungalow. Gimson was on a tour and the women could not be directed towards the Maharaja as he had left the country. This failed to satisfy the women. By early afternoon over a thousand women had assembled in the market, whence they marched out to put pressure on Sharpe (Gimson's assistant) to telegraph the Maharajah. Sharpe agreed and went to the telegraph office, surrounded by over 4,000 women. The telegram was dispatched successfully which described the entire situation. In the meantime Sharpe attempted to leave the office, but found his way blocked by a sea of ladies, who were demanding an immediate answer from the king. Captain Stone, in charge of overlooking the crowd became increasingly worried about the fate of his superior officers and led a platoon of soldiers to the telegraph office to find out what was going on. It was the appearance of the Assam Rifles which caused the crowd to erupt<sup>148</sup>. Some of the soldiers were Kukis and Nepalis, and the sight of hill men and foreigners with fixed bayonets pushing Meitei women aside to make a path for the British officers to escape incensed the bystanders. Many of the women resisted stoutly and a number were severely manhandled. Now the men and children, who had been observers on the fringes of the crowd, joined the fray. Several women were injured by the soldiers, some seriously and others were pitched into the cold waters of a nearby pond. In the following week, Gimson was forewarned about several demonstrations, but decided to take no action to break it up, hoping that the activity would function as safety valve for the women's frustration. Instead he personally went to meet the women's leaders trying to reason with them. He promised that he would make an order banning the use of mills from operating during the crisis. By now the conflict had become polarized and increasingly caught up with deeper political motives. Later on the December 14th the women re- grouped in the Police Bazaar and now, for the first time, the women's movement began to be joined by male political activists. While the

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<sup>148</sup> John Paratt, *Wounded Land- Politics And Identity In Modern Manipur*, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 2005



most dangerous Meitei revolutionary, Hijam Irabot Singh, was outside Manipur, the meeting was addressed by one of his colleagues. Constant reports poured in of women being arrested for rioting.

While there were a few men and boys on the fringes of the riot at the telegraph office on December 12th, it is clear that the protest began as a women's movement, and that its focus was on an issue which affected primarily the Meitei women. This was clearly recognized by Gimson in his report on the events of the 12th: 'this was', he commented, 'wholly a women's affair'. He went on to claim that the women were actually resentful and impatient with men who got involved at this stage. Both in its initial stages and in the demonstrations that continued sporadically for the best part of a year, the bulk of the protesters were women. Though the re-imposition of the ban on rice export and the disabling of the mills meant that the 'women's war' had effectively been won, two other contentious issues resulted. The first was the matter of control of the market, the second complaints against the security forces for action taken against the demonstrators, potentially more damaging to public order, was alleged army and police brutality against the women, especially the Assam Rifles. Gimson investigated the incident several days later, though he failed to appease the women's anger completely. Police violence continued sporadically. Consequently the demonstrations continued for the rest of the year, usually in the Police Bazaar, and the guerilla warfare between people and police were bolstered from time to time by the professional political activists<sup>149</sup>. It had become clear that important as the issues of the rice supply, the market boycott, and the inability of the police to keep order were, they were but symptoms of a much deeper malaise. The 'women's war' had succeeded in opening up to public debate issues which had previously been the concern only of the small emergent political elite, namely the incompetence, nepotism and corruption of the rule of Maharajah Chura Chand and the need for wide constitutional reforms. These were powerful and complex currents and cross-currents in

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<sup>149</sup> 'We begged for rice and in return received bayonet wounds;  
for one handful of rice we paid two handfuls of blood ...  
Let us take revenge for the spilt blood of the bramini.  
The women's work is finished, and now has come the time for the men'  
Hikam Irabot commented in reference to the women who died during the riots on December 12<sup>th</sup>, 1939  
(MSA, Record of Criminal Case 4, 1940: Manipur State vs. Hijam Irabot Singh. The case commented he  
was 'imprisoned for making the women go mad'.)

the political life of the state, but they owe to the Nupilal of 1939-40 an incalculable debt. For the women's war was the event which above all generated popular political awareness and acted as the main catalyst for the movement which, after a protracted struggle, eventually succeeded in displacing the feudal ancient regime and bringing about democratic elections. Those elections were held in June and July 1948-four years before the first democratic elections in India itself-and by November of that year the little state of Manipur had replaced rule by the Maharajah and his appointed Durbar with a form of 'responsible government' elected on the basis of full adult franchise. That democratic government was of course swept away when India absorbed the state in 1949. By then consistent militant stance by women against any kind of implosion had become a norm in Manipur.

Recent mass movements on June 18, 2001 against the NSCN (IM) and Government of India Agreement on the Extension of Ceasefire "without territorial limits" resulted in the death of 18 innocent souls at the hands of the Indian Security Forces. It also resulted in the burning down of the Assembly Building of Manipur, Office buildings of Political Parties, the National Flag of India and big volumes of books on the Constitution of India. The Anti-Ceasefire agitators burned down the residential buildings of the imported colonial politicians frustrated with the role played by these puppets. Through this the tradition of the Nupilal continued to live on. Mass women's protests against atrocities committed by the Indian army in Manipur have taken place from time to time.

In July 2004, the twin killings of Jamkholet, a Christian pastor and Manorama Thangjam by unnamed members of the Assam Rifles infuriated the state even more. Manorama, was tied up and subjected to extreme forms of torture after which she was sexually assaulted by the men. She was found with five bullet wounds in her body, one of which had penetrated the genitals from the back. When her body was discovered with severe bruises, mass fury broke against the members of the 17<sup>th</sup> Assam Rifles because by then the news has spread that Manorama has been taken in for interrogation as a suspected member of People's Liberation Army. The arresting troops issued information that she had been shot while trying to escape, but forensic and ballistic evidence showed that she was clearly shot elsewhere. The outrage was not confined to the Meitei and Nagas and Kukis who had

been subjected to numerous ‘questioning’ over the years over suspected involvement with terrorists, decided to join the agitation. Civil voluntary organizations, later to be collectively called the Apunba Lup, came together to herald the mass towards organized protests and demonstrations. Artists, sportspersons, writers, academics appealed not only for the annulment of the AFSPA<sup>150</sup>, but also for the extreme form of punishment for those who were guilty. A significant and the most principal shift in the movement came on July 15<sup>th</sup>. A group of twelve women gathered in front of Kangla fort, (base of the Assam Rifles battalion since British occupied Manipur in 1891) and stripped themselves naked in protest of torture, sexual assault and cold blooded murder of Manorama. Their banner read ‘Indian Army: Kill Us, Rape Us’. While the killing of Manorama had not made through the international media, this remarkable form of protest by the women of Imphal caught the attention. Though the state reeled under curfew, the women could not contain their anger against the barbaric activities. Through the next few months, clashes became violent; there was wide scale use of rubber bullets, tear gas against the women. Rapid action Police Force, India’s Border security Force and Nagaland police lent support to control the state wide agitation. By mid-August, almost 700 protestors, mostly women were admitted to hospitals after being injured in anti-riot actions. Eight leaders of women’s groups were arrested along side many activists. Manipur rode on public protests, and unelected popular leaders of the mass who mobilized them were mostly women. AFSPA was lifted in some portions of the state<sup>151</sup>.

‘Historical grievances are rarely forgotten as they become a part of people’s collective memory, the narrative the parent tell to their children, the story from which a group draws its sense of identity. A note of injustice

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<sup>150</sup> AFSPA is the abbreviation for the Armed Forces Special Power Act. In 1958, the President of India proclaimed the imposition of the AFSPA over areas designated as ‘disturbed’ like the North-east, Jammu and Kashmir; it gives powers to the military and para-military security forces to detain, question, torture which are rendered unaccountable by the law and ironically results in frequent violations of human rights of the civilian population.

<sup>151</sup>To bring some reconciliation between Indian Government and Manipur, Shivraj Patil, then the Home Minister, announced a financial plan projecting almost Rs. 717 crores; the security forces deployed in Manipur for a population of two million was estimated at 40,000 at the end of 2004.

not yet avenged is written into the script which is reenacted in moments of crises<sup>152</sup>.

The wounds that have been carved on the memory of Manipur have not been rightfully avenged according to the Meitei community. But women's resistance has created historical evidence, and public action has been emulated in performative acts. Several performances have been made to reproduce the systems of oppression, and for majority of these performers, performing these thematic has become an issue of personal and political responsibility. Their political body is responsible for their performative body. The formulation of the body as a mode of dramatizing possibilities offers a way to understand how a performative convention has been embodied and enacted; the relation between the performative acts and the physical conditions are not unilateral or unmediated.

Anger is a common response to the framing of issues and experiences in feminist terms<sup>153</sup>. When emotion is recognized as integral to framing processes, anger emerges as particularly significant. According to William Gamson, a central component of any collective action frame is a sense of injustice, which is not merely a cognitive or intellectual judgment about what is equitable but is what cognitive psychologists call a "hot cognition'-one that is laden with emotion". Thus, collective action not only provide an intellectual account of the injustice of certain situations but they also legitimate the expression of moral indignation and righteous anger directed toward the source of injustice. The centrality of anger to collective action stems from its link with action. Randall Collins states that "the core of anger is the mobilization of energy to overcome an obstacle". In an analysis of class passivity, Lee Harrington and William Flint concur, suggesting that anger, has the "maximum agency and it is an essential component of efficacy. They argue that for efficacy, a belief in the possibility of change is to be achieved, one "must 'know,' one must 'feel,' and one must be aware of the relationship between the two". The same is certainly true for feminist collective action. Skye Fraser discusses the energizing, mobilizing nature of anger, which makes it fundamental to

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<sup>152</sup>Jonathon Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, London, New York, 2002

<sup>153</sup>Cheryl Hercus, Identity, Emotion, and Feminist Collective Action, *Gender and Society*, Special Issue: *Gender and Social Movements*, Vol. 13, No. 1, Part 2 (Feb., 1999), pp. 34-55, Sage Publications, Inc

achieving social change, and suggests that "working with sexual violence involves mobilizing the force of survivors' untapped anger and assisting them to direct it where it belongs, on the perpetrator(s) of sexual violence and on the social forces which shape the existence of perpetrators".

After vociferous protests, for years, women's groups known as *Meira Paibi*<sup>154</sup> patrol the streets and lanes at night with flaming torches, ready to protect those whom the security forces seek to abuse or detain. The *Meira Paibi* began in 1979 after a period of particularly vicious abuse of power by the Indian army forces occupying Manipur, which included several cases of rape and indiscriminate arrest and untamable violence. It is a voluntary vigilante women's movement organized in each locality, which has had some success in protecting citizens' basic rights. The latest women's rallies came out on July 23, 2009 was in the protest of the unjustifiable killing of Chunkham Sanjit, a 'suspected militant' and a passer-by, Rabina Devi. She died in a gun-fire in a crowded market place and later the police killed an innocent Sanjit as a suspect. Scores of women threw their upper garment on the streets as a mark of defiance as police charged on. On the other hand, silence as a mode of resistance had been empathized with, but it had not stirred the conscience of the authority figures in politics. Irom Chanu Sharmila has been continuously on fast for eight long years. She has not taken a morsel of food or a single drop of water on her own during this period. The police had arrested her on the charge of attempting to commit suicide and have been force fed. She demands to repeal of Armed Forces Special Powers Act which has been responsible for human rights violations of citizens of North East (and Jammu and Kashmir). The silent peaceful protest of Sharmila appears to be anachronistic. It is unfortunate that the governments of Manipur or India have not acknowledged this act of resistance.

Besides, mass movements led by women of Manipur, resistance to social atrocities have some through various medium. Through Manipuri proscenium theatre and Sumang Lila, actresses have portrayed powerful characters which have catapulted Manipuri theatre as an exceptional platform, where seeds of protest germinate. One notices the revolutionary

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<sup>154</sup> *Meira Paibi* means women bearing flaming torches

potency and violence of Sabitri Devi's stripping in Kanhailal's *Draupadi*, from Mahasweta Devi's story set in tribal Bengal. Performed in the year 2000, the play deliberated the protagonist's choice of nudity as the ultimate protest against the humiliation of the woman's body against the figures of authority. The body of the community could be read and recognized as the performative body displaying Nupilan. The aversion of one's gaze can take place only when the object being gazed at is rid all erotic or voyeuristic potential. 'Draupadi' represents a body which belongs to the acutely troubled and violence-scarred state, Manipur. Kanhailal directed "Draupadi" which he adapted from a well-known Bengali short story by Mahasweta Devi that describes how, after being gang raped, a girl transforms her naked, violated body into a weapon that, shorn of any kind of clothing could hide her anger; this becomes a source of discomfiture for her assailants. There is nothing remotely erotic about this girl's nakedness, because there is nothing about her that can belong to the realm of the imagination. The naked body is treated as a site by Sabitri Devi (the actress who played Draupadi) and Kanhailal, where preconceived codes, that signify specific political and cultural meaning, have been rendered redundant. Stripped off these signifiers of meaning, the body is exactly what it is and the audience had to gulp the raw relationship with the disturbing reality.

The residue of the ruin speaks for itself. The denied, the ignored, the exploited speak for themselves. Most women find these performances as a stepping stone in addressing the exploitation. The characters speak from a long and lasting experience. They say that their lives are inimitably carved out. Not that there was hope, but the ruin is their reality.

### 3.6 Continuing traditions: Parallel bodies of contrast

The form which we realise as Manipuri had been built on the foundations constructed in Lai Haraoba. Apart from the aesthetic intent, the dance is not only expressed through *tandava* as well as *lasya* movements, but it locates itself continually through history, motivational source and metaphor of the movements. Steeped in Vaishnavite fervour, from 1777AD, Maharaas Lila had become a crucial part of the lives of Meitei people. Every year, women not only participate, but a considerable number dance as Gopis in the

temple premises. Elderly ladies lend hand with the cleaning and decoration at the idols, the *raasmandap* and work to transform the look of the temple into Vrindavan. 'Every soul turns into Gopi' says Tyabji<sup>155</sup> as *madhur bhakti*, seems to reverberate through the body of the dancers and the voice of the singers. Small children play the role of Radha- Krishna, as if dancing is a mere plaything. But the roles of the Gopis are played by much older women, in the age bracket of 25 to sometimes 70. Their roles demand the display of pathos and pangs of separation, just as the devotee feels when she cannot meet her lord. Besides Maharaas, there are six other kinds of Raas, each of which are rigid in its emotional, devotional and performative content. The dancers' bodies exude a natural softness, delicateness, grace; they are meant to be docile, and that reflects in the choreographic content.

Raas Lila is a representation of the emotive body of a woman. Where Lai Haraoba explores the notions of a fertile body through the myth of creations and harvest celebrations, Raas Lila is constructed on notions which are determined by Vaishnavite culture which later associated by reformist forces to Natya Shastric<sup>156</sup> traditions. Raas Lila heralded the renaissance in Manipuri dancing when the kingdom appropriated Vaishnav religion and texts, created signs and codes saliently derived from this religion, and detailed new epistemes of representations. The dance history writing, from this period onwards, was irrevocably entangled with a culture which was rooted elsewhere. But the gendered roles, of women leading the entourage of dancers in a consecrated temple space remained unchanged. For in the first Raas Lila, organized by King Bhagyachandra, his daughter Sija Lai Oibi enacted Radha, and led the Gopis through a virtual environment of the mythical Vrindavan in search of Krishna. Thereafter, in every performance of a Maharaas, the Gopis enact the journey of reaching and communicating with the omnipotent power through poignant dance movements. Even with a shift of cultural priorities, through different allegories and separate approaches, the quest for a protected,

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<sup>155</sup> Raihanna Tyabji, *The Heart of a Gopi*, East-West Publications Fund, England, 1973.

<sup>156</sup> Natya Shastra is a treatise written on performance by Bharata, which became public in 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. It is considered as a canon for classical dance and theatre which discusses various subjects like rhythm, emotions, choreography, stagecraft, emotive intents, structure of dancers and more. Most classical dances of India aim to adhere to the Natya Shastric traditions.

uncontaminated, impregnable space remains at the heart of the dance traditions of Manipur.

Looking at Lai Haraoba, its movements and its effort to create/recreate the mythical and safe world amidst chaos, one realizes that by remaining the unchanged link with the past, this socio-ritualistic performance is in itself and by itself a loud voice of resistance. During this festival, the Maibis create an alternative reality of a safe sane space and an organic picture of the world. A Maibi who performs the mythical reality plays a dual role as she projects the performative reality on her body. She is the spiritual leader, a medium and a clairvoyant, a performer and a de-facto protector of the sacred space. They represent and lead the devotees through a journey, with a fine conviction that humanity can be reborn. Moreover, Meitei women have evinced power and resilience throughout historical, socio-cultural and political narratives. Through them, the truth of this community, the voice of the entire history can be contemplated as a living continuum.

The potency of the image of a woman, in Tagore's words, may come about as,

“I am no goddess but neither someone ordinary,  
I am not to be worshipped or put on a high pedestal  
I am not be pushed away or relegated to a lower stall  
If I walk along your side in the time of fears and abundance,  
If you allow me to cooperate, and give me equal chance  
Then I would say that you have found the woman in me.  
Today, I speak for me”.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Translation mine.

From “*Ami Chitrangada, rajendronondini, nohi devi, nohi samnya nari... ..*” Rabindranath Tagore, *Chitrangada*, Shantiniketan, 1892, 1936



## Conclusion

### Lai Haraoba: The pulse of the people

“There are these rare moments when musicians (or performers) together touch the something sweeter than they have ever found before... .. beyond the merely collaborative or technically proficient, when their expression comes as easy and graceful as friendship or love. This is when they give us a glimpse of what we might be, of our best selves and of an impossible world in which you give everything you have to others, but lose nothing of yourself. Out in the real world there exist detailed plans, visionary projects for peaceable realms, all conflicts resolved, happiness for everyone, for ever – mirages for which people are prepared to die and kill. But only in music, and only on rare occasions, does the curtain actually lift on these dreams of community, and it is tantalizingly conjured, before fading away with the last notes.”<sup>158</sup>

Manipur narrates a situation which Fanon calls ‘amputation, excision, and hemorrhage which has spattered the whole body with blood’<sup>159</sup>. The people are not valorized nor are they put in an ideological situation. The everyday realities are witnessed by the rest while matters containing crises of identity and an entire spectrum of emotions are spelt out. The reticent members of the audience are provoked to respond, the loopholes and the flaws in the mechanism of the social structure are pointed out and hence the audience engages with their reality through many dialogues. Marvin Carlson mentions,

“I also have now and then experienced moments of such intensity that they might be called epiphanies... .. art generates such moments as it constantly oscillates between the fleeting present and the stillness of the infinity. Such moments will be different to every audience, but I feel

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<sup>158</sup> Ian McEwan, *Saturday*, Jonathan Cape, London, 2005

<sup>159</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Paladin, London, 1970

certain that we have all had them and treasure them. In an art that lives by, and survives largely in, the memory, such experiences have served me as touchstones, as permanent reminders.....”

Lai Haraoba has survived in the cultural memory and cultural history as a permanent reminder of their mythical past. Over the years, scholars as well as the people of the Meitei community have been noticeably conscious about reminding themselves (and in turn, the outsiders), that the structure of the Lai Haraoba has remained unchanged. One obviously questions this apparent fact, because we tend to think that change is a part of the historic context and natural, temporal time. In rest of Manipur, protest has been a prominent form of resistance. In contrast to that turbulence, Lai Haraoba seems to offer a ideal space and a path towards tranquility. The conscious declaration that the ritual as well as the performances within them has remained unchanged is indicative of the faith the Meiteis have in their mythical past. The collective ability towards making the movements and transposing assurance through gestures and symbols are necessary elements to ensure a state of stasis, harmony, and balance, or a utopia.

Lai Haraoba remains the domain of the live and catharsis; that intimacy and immediacy within this ritual are unavailable in other performance practices. In fact, Lai Haraoba can be seen as essentially oppositional, standing in the dialectical relation to mainstream performance practices; practices like Sumang Lila evolves directly around anti-violence, pro-revolution theme. Through the long history, Manipur has developed through naturally powerful socio-cultural forces like acculturation and revivalism. These forces have created and strengthened the cultural memory. But the forces have directly contributed into contents of proscenium theatre and Sumang Lila. h are a result of a highly politicized activity; that is why we relate activism and awareness so closely with Manipuri theatre. That is why theatre directors explore poverty, famine, violence, AIDS, revolution, racial and gender discrimination in their plays, constantly drawing materials, meanings and metaphors from the cultural memory.

But in a larger historical and cultural context, Lai Haraoba occupies a space which does not permit skepticism and questioning, but demand a tacit involvement from the people for a few days every year. Lai Haraoba does not push the community towards direct acts of resistance, as Sumang Lila aims to achieve. Certain entrenched features of a given society's social structure influence both the course of conduct in observable social events and the scenarios of its genres of cultural performance - ranging from ritual to social plays. To complete the picture of Meitei social structure, Manipuri plays enact the daily lives of the people of this region. They confront their lives in the performance they see, they vigorously voice their demands and protests through the performance they enact. The space of Sumang Lila is flexible enough to allow the performers and the audience to resent, resist and express solidarity against forces which harm their community.

The participants and the audience in Lai Haraoba engage fundamentally in the active construction of meaning as the performance proceeds. There is an interesting sense of unity, intimacy and continuity between the audience and the performer. The ritual augments the cultural formations of the community, thereby assisting it to construct a space where the community gathers to commemorate solidarity. But the space does not nurture an individual perspective or a personal story. The performance space resonates with elements from the cultural memory. For, Lai Haraoba is a way of life, more than a festival. A month long celebration and rejoicing ends, but the customs, the faith, the values imbibed in them pass down across generation. The performative aspect may differ across the Haraoba-s, but the content, for example, the enactment of the cosmology remains the same. Manipur, a sequestered land locked by the hills speak of grit, zest for life, need for solidarity through their observance of the ritual. Lai Haraoba is an actualisation, at the level of reality as well as a mystical one. In it, something invisible, inactual, takes a beautiful, actual, holy form.

Therefore in Lai Haraoba, by following Turner's classification we find three major empirical properties of dominant symbols: condensation, when one single dominant symbol represents many different things and actions;) unification of disparate materials, where the significant (the underlying meanings of the symbol) are interconnected by virtue of their common analogous qualities, or by association in fact or thought; and polarization of meaning or

bipolarity, in which dominant symbols possess two distinct poles of meaning; at the ideological or normative pole, One single dominant symbol comprises both a natural necessity and a social need or desire; it "represents both the obligatory and the desirable. Here we have an intimate union of the material and the moral"<sup>160</sup>.

The last one decade will probably be remembered as one of the most violent decades in Manipuri history. The growing ethnic tension that had flared into a civil war and the escalating fear and terror caused by the underground organizations, military and paramilitary forces have resulted in a climate which will not be easily forgotten by those who have lived through it. The civilian population has been subjected to insensitivity at the hands of the government as well. Manipur has learnt to live in fear of arbitrary arrests, abductions, murder and crises of identity. Resistance against newer possibilities has grown. Lai Haraoba is free from military and governmental control; therefore the Meitei community gets one chance to breathe freely, to move freely and reconnect with their past and fully live their present. Lai Haraoba provides the physical conditions which evoke the sense that it is possible to imagine a utopia, an ideal space. A Haraoba is structured after myth, and the legends and sacred stories of origin of Manipur. Lai Haraoba ties the cyclical time with the un-changing time as the performance of the ritual spans the entire history of the Meiteis. Such a forum of movement between the facilitator of the performance and the audience, expresses the vision of utopia. Lai Haraoba thus consists of moments where conventions resist activities beyond the boundaries and come together to provide a frame for multiple voices through the ritual-performances. Every individual is given assurance by the culture memory as the enactment of the evolution of the mythical land obliterates fears, trauma and apprehensions with which the community lives. The recurrence of the same ritual and performances every year reaffirms people's faith in the concept of an ideal space, which is otherwise lost during rest of the year.

There is a constant interplay between the physical body of the Maibis and the social body of the masses that such interfacing inevitably consigns to creating oneself anew every day. The Meitei audience is not a passive observer. Lai Haraoba is an interactive, forceful energy

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<sup>160</sup> Victor Turner, *The Politically Integrative Function Of Ritual: Schism and Continuity in an African Society*, Manchester University Press, 1968

which reestablishes the sheath which binds the people, and liberates them momentarily by affirming a safe space for them within the performance space of the Haraoba. At every subjective level, there is a possibility or an occurrence of a resurrection. The resurrection is not only at a societal, community but also at individual level; it's not in fragments but in totality.

In a typical Meitei space, like in some other matrilineal communities, women dominate fertility rituals. So have the women of Manipur. A Maibi is the primary religious functionary who has a pre-eminent role in Meitei religion. The shamanistic tradition of Maibis has even lived through patriarchal religious movements and has survived till date. Female devotionism and rituals centering on a woman had been maintained, as she is the fertile body. She embodies the principles of creation, birth, genesis, cosmology, abundance and imposing the metaphors of origin and end of life at every turn. A Maibi is the central actor in the process of a cultural reproduction. The spoken liturgy, the spontaneous oracle, songs and hymns are the prerogative of a Maibi. The oracles may be for the benefit of the individual or the people who are performing the Haraoba or the whole nation and may come in the form of a blessing or a warning. Therefore she inhabits the cultural space and becomes a key in preserving parameters - physical and moral- of the community. The space and society are mutually constitutive and the fluidity within the space is generated by the Maibi. So much so that originally if any priest wore the costume of the Maibi, was called a male Maibi<sup>161</sup>. A Maibi represents and communicates in full awareness. The sacred words of *Leimaren*, the supreme goddess of creation are mediated through the Maibi's oracles. Consequentially, she also becomes authority of the consecrated space of Haraoba thereby setting the norms to which the Meiteis adhere.

Besides Maibis, women's resistance and performances have created historical evidence, and public action has been emulated in performative acts. For many women belonging to Manipur, performing these thematic has become an issue of personal and political

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<sup>161</sup> In this case, he must wear the female dress of the Maibi, should speak and act as a female. The essential femaleness of the mediumship is not compromised. The Maibas are male priests and they do not cross dress. S.N Paratt and J. Paratt, *The Pleasing of the Gods: Meitei Lai Haraoba*, New Delhi, 1997

responsibility. Not only have the women ensured the creation and maintenance of a fecund and safe space, they have mobilized the nature of their traditions as well as anger (against state, bureaucracy, military forces), which can be fundamental to achieving social change. The figure of Maibi is that of a strong woman; one who can communicate with the supernatural forces, one who can confront the realities in the state and is also the representative of the resilient women of the community. The Maibi holds an important position in the sanctified space as well as the spaces involving merry-making and pleasure. Lai Haraoba consecrates the whole community where the rituals are observed for the solidarity amongst the people and fertility of the region and performances showcase the rich and varied cultural history of Manipur. Lai Haraoba also achieves a mystical appearance apart from the living reality. The spirit of Lai Haraoba thus infuses hope into the lives of the people, thereby promising to create a 'safe space'.

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Figures 11, 12, 13: Dr. Urmimala Sarkar

Figures 26, 27: *The Sangai Express*, Imphal, July 15, 2004



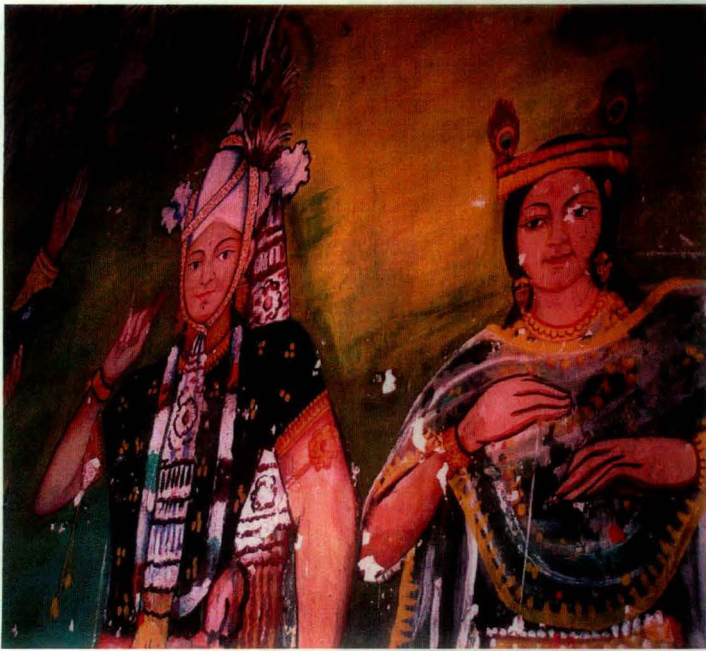


Fig 1



Fig2



Fig 3



Fig 4



Fig 5



Fig 6



Fig 7



Fig 8



Fig 9



Fig 10



Fig 11

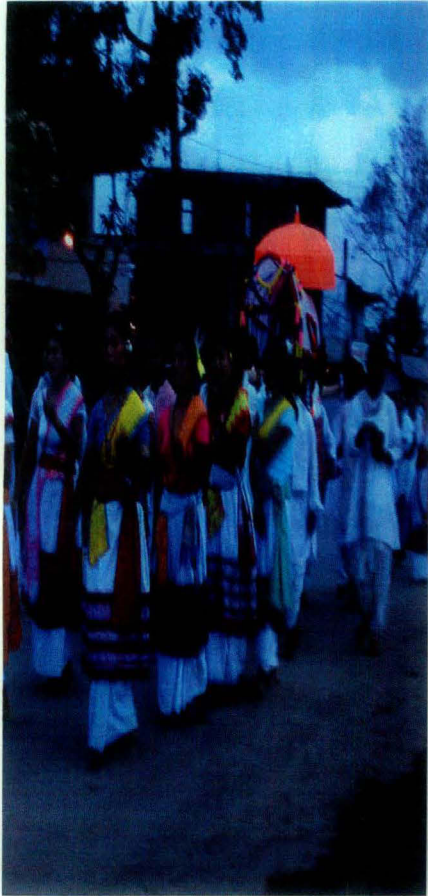


Fig 12



Fig 13



Fig 14



Fig 15



Fig 16



Fig 17

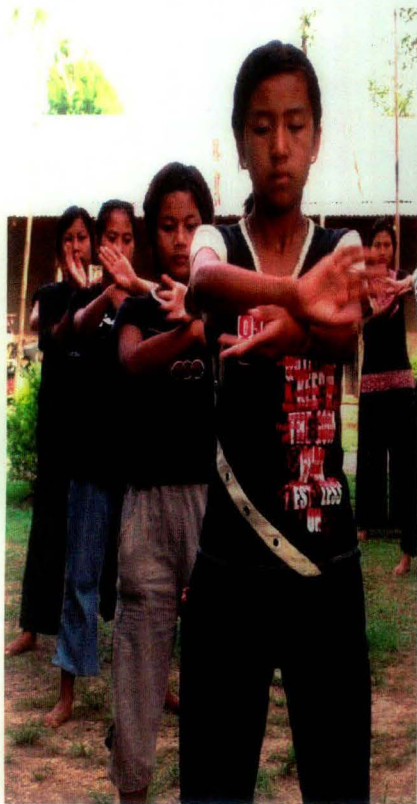


Fig 18

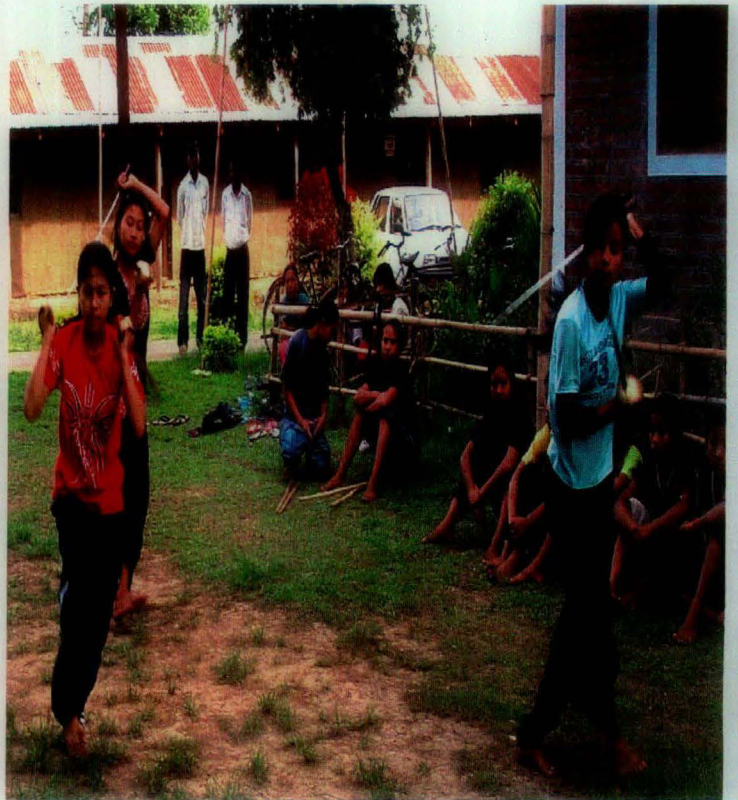


Fig 19



Fig 20



Fig 21



Fig 22





Fig 23



Fig 24

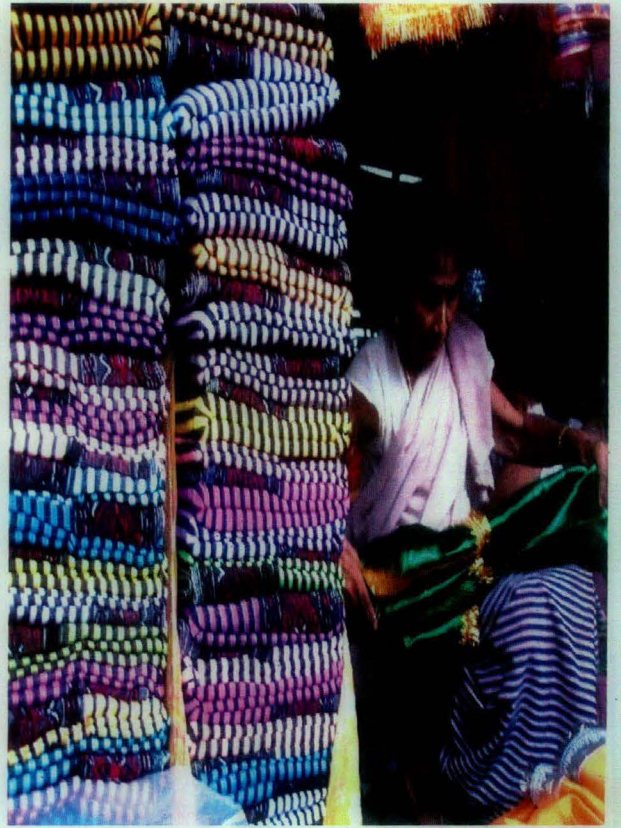


Fig 25



Fig 26

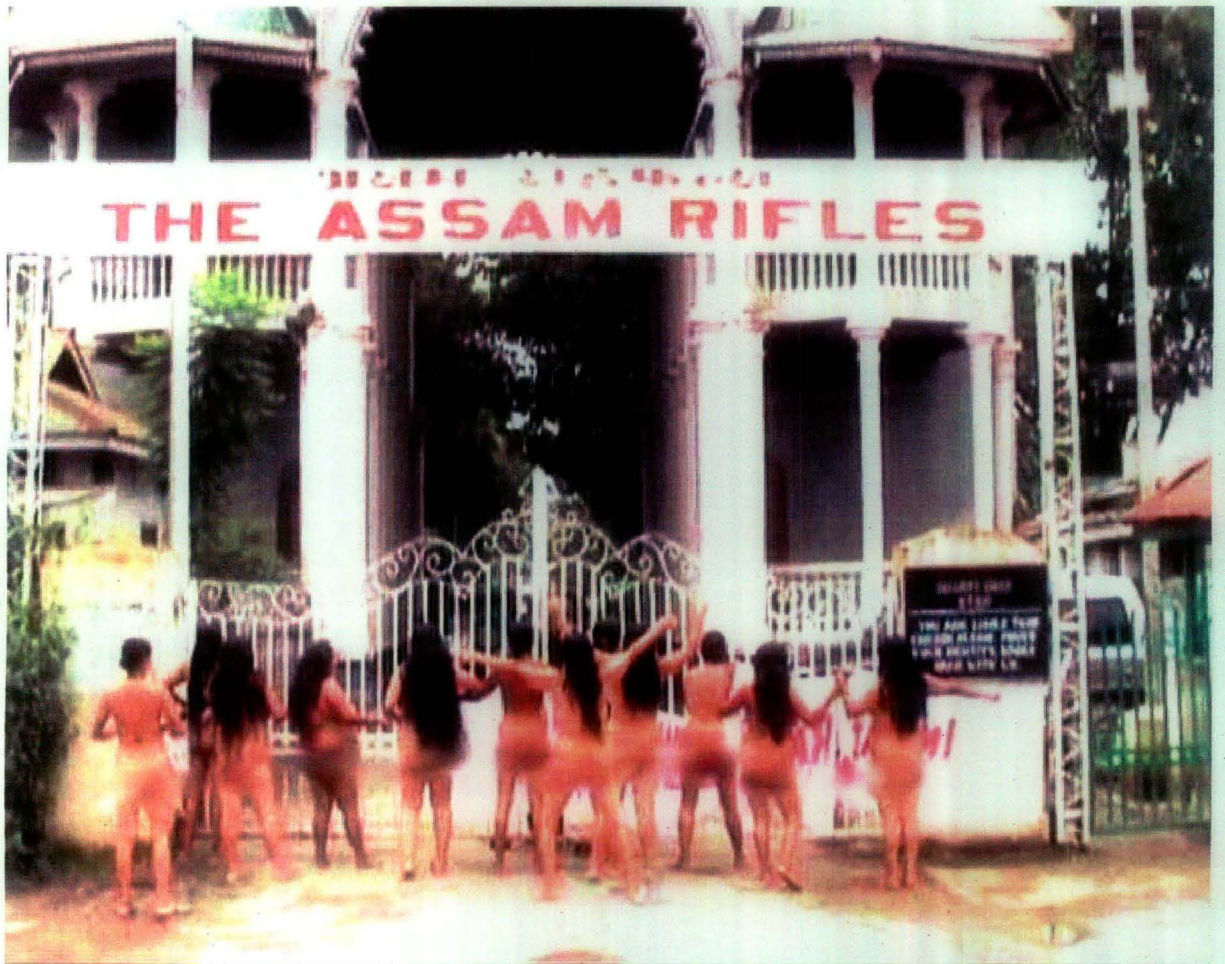


Fig 27

## GLOSSARY OF RECURRING MEITEI TERMS IN THE DISSERTATION

*Amaiba/Maiba* -Meitei priests

*Amaibi/Maibi*- Meitei priestess

*Chakpa* – indigenous inhabitants of Manipur, a kind of Haraoba

*Chitharol Kumbaba*- name of the royal chronicles

*Hakchang Saba/Sagatpa* – hand gestures depicting the formation of the human body

*Hoi Laoba* - Maibas, Maibis, Penakhonbas sing and shout ‘hoi’

*Hongpa* – to dedicate

*Jagoi* – dance

*Kangjei* – hockey, but also used for polo

*Kangleipak* – the ancient name for Manipur

*Khumpham/laipham* – sacred place, a place dedicated to a god

*Khut Thek*- gestures by hands

*Lai Ikouba* - calling of the spirit

*Lai Lam Thokpa* – ritual processions

*Lai Phi Shetpa* -The dressing of the deity

*Laibong*- venue of a Lai Haraoba

*Laibou* - ritual and performance which takes place in the evenings

*Laibou Khut thek* - the *Leisemlon* or the creation myth is performed by Maibis

*Laiching Jagoi* - Maibis stand together and perform the initial dance explaining the genesis in unison

*Laihou Jagoi* - opening dance while leading the procession to the pond

*Laikhai Taba* - complete training of the habits of the Maibi tradition

*Laimang Phamba/Laipao*- ritual with a Maibi delivers oracles

*Lakpa* – chief

*Lallup* - the taxation system that was prevalent in Manipur

*Leima Jagoi* – a performance in which any individual can present a dance of their choice

*Leisemlon* - the creation myth

*Loishang*- council

*Maharaas Lila* - a Vaishnav ceremony, celebrated on the *Kartik Purnima*

*Meiteilon* - it has been recognized as "Manipuri" by the Indian Union and has been included in the list of scheduled languages in 1992

*Mukna* – wrestling

*Ningthem* – king mother

*Ningthou* – king

*Ningthourol Lambuba* - a court chronicle

*Nupi lal/lan*- women's wars

*Nurabi* – peasant woman

*Ougri* – lyrics

*Pakhangba* – the founder ancestor of the Meitei dynasty

*Pangal* – name of Manipuri Muslims who after being settled in Manipur integrated into the culture

*Paphal* – the forms of *Pakhangba*, the ancestral snake deity, which is followed in a dance in the Haraoba

*Pena*- a traditional string instrument made of horse hair and wood.

*Penakhongba*- a singer who sings Meitei ballads while playing the *pena*

*Phamdengba* –the figures of the gods are placed on the thrones ceremoniously

*Phamnaibas* – courtiers

*Puya* - an indigenous manuscript, which contains mythical and divine stories

*Sagei* – extended family

*Salai yek* – clan; *Salais* are also identified with the Hindu *Gotra* system

*Saroi Khangba* - feeding of the evil spirits/rite of appeasement

*Umanglai* – ancestral or sylvan deities of Meitei religion

*Yakeiba*- aubade sung on waking of the god or king

*Yathoksangda Lengsinba* - The figures of the gods are carried in a palanquin in a procession and established in a shrine

*Yumjao Paphal* - the Maibis lead the walk within the space drawing a winding serpent on the ground

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