



Relationship between Manipuri Culture and Kanglei Haraoba

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Abstract

Manipur which lies in the Indo Myanmar Border was a small kingdom for centuries before the British occupation. It has its own distinct culture and tradition since time immemorial. The people of Manipur follow a strict rule of maintaining its customs, tradition, and culture. From birth till death, they are bound with different cultural activities. One such activity is celebration of the ritualistic festival ‘Laiharaoba’. Laiharaoba which literally means the merry making of God and Goddess is an indigenous festival of the Meiteis, a festival where the culture of the people can be seen. It is believed that the celebration of this festival brings prosperity and development in the state so the celebration is been continuing for ages annually. There are four types of Laiharaoba celebrated across Manipur which differs in rituals, dances and songs, though the philosophy behind the celebration remains the same. Among the different kinds of Laiharaoba, Kanglei Haraoba which is celebrated in Imphal and its adjoining areas is considered to be the main Laiharaoba owing to its celebration by large population of Meiteis. The unique feature of this festival is the performance of the ritual dance known as ‘Kangleileithokpa’. Kanglei Haraoba celebration starts on an auspicious day with the consent of the authority. It is mainly celebrated in the month of April, May and June. The main participants of the festival Maiba(priest), Maibi(priestess) and Pena Khongba (the indigenous instrument ‘Pena’ player) performed the whole process of Laiharaoba. From the beginning till the end of this festival, the beliefs of Manipuris and the human life cycle’s formation processes are performed. Laiharaoba as a whole depicts the re-enactment of the creation of Earth by the Almighty God. Therefore, it is worthwhile to study Kanglei Haraoba for understanding the culture and tradition of Manipur.

Key words: Manipur, Meities, Lai Haraoba, Culture and tradition, Kanglei Haraoba.



Defining culture and the Meitei society

Culture can be defined as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of a social group, that encompasses art and literature but also lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs (UNESCO, 2003). Therefore, a culturally similar group is identified by their behaviours and practices which result from their beliefs and values. It is a lifelong social belief which is carried on for generation to generation by a distinct community within their social structure. Nevertheless, it is an everchanging phenomena which existed from the time of human civilization. In earlier time, when human started to make houses and settle in group, they developed certain behaviour and belief in their own group. This particular lifestyle followed by a social group since the time of settlement but not inherited from birth can be called culture.

Some of the definition of culture by famous Anthropologist is quoted as below –

John J. Honigmann stated that culture is one of the unique forms of living style.

*"When I speak of a culture I mean a way of life belonging to a designated aggregate of people, ... Every culture is a unique constellation of traits, even though some of the traits are very widespread in human society"*²

Melville J. Herskovits opined that culture is the particular life style of a group of people.

*"The culture is the way of life of people; while a society is an organized, interacting aggregate of individuals who follow a given way of life. In still simpler terms a society is composed of people; the way they behave is their culture."*³

The Meities, who are the original settler and main population of the state of Manipur, north east India are a unique ethnic group, who are of Mongoloid origin and share many characteristics with people who lived during Asia's massive prehistoric migration and settling in the South and South-East. (Iboton, 2014). The Meitei society is interwoven into a socio-religious fabric with essential religious values as redolent of the creator's moral and ethical concerns and preferences, which also serve as the guiding principles of their social structure. This social behaviour is clearly define in the festival of Laiharaoba which is celebrated annually by the Meiteis. The word "Laiharaoba" literally means "merry making of Gods and Goddesses." It is a kind of festival associated with the religious prayer of Meiteis. Lai



Haraoba is a fertility ceremony in which the prehistoric Meiteis sought the blessing of local gods and goddesses in order to increase biological procreation in the society. It is believed that a successful performance of this ceremony would result in human and animal fertility, as well as a prosperous crop. They also believe that the rituals may lead to a healthy community existence devoid of sickness, epidemics, and war and wild animal crimes. Laiharaoba is a representation of the birth and death process in the Meitei society. The fundamental ritual element called Laibou, for example, is based on the basic notion of gradually building up the human body part by part during the duration of a Laiharaoba performance. It also depicts numerous operations such as childbirth, home construction, seed sowing, harvesting, and fabric production, among others (Premchand, 2005).

The Laiharaoba is Manipur's sole alive ceremonial festival, where every kind of art, livelihood, and image of Manipuri heritage has been practiced for centuries with an annual event. Before the arrival of Hinduism and the installation of contemporary British institutions in Manipur, the Laiharaoba was a prominent institution for the Manipuri people. It is the sole ritual which retains the authenticity of Manipuri treasures and have been practiced from the early days of Manipur civilization. **Kanglei Haraoba**

Kanglei Haraoba is one of the main types of Laiharaoba celebrated by Meities residing in Imphal valley. Kanglei Haraoba performed a dance ritual called the Kangleithokpa. It is also known as Lai NupiThiba that is seeking God's consort. Lai Ekouba, the invocation of the soul of the deity from water is done on the bank of the river or pond, LairenMathek (a serpent move) known as Yumjao Paphal is performed. Lai Lamthokpa, a kind of ritual in which god and goddess are carried on the palanquin and Laibou (series of evening rituals perform on daily basis) process is done on a selected spot far from the shrine. On the day of Lairoi (last day of Laiharaoba festival) ritual song known as Ougri Hangel is sung and after Laiharaoba, MuknaLamjel, a kind of sport is performed.

The process of Kanglei Haraoba.

Lai-Haraoba honours the sylvan deities known as Umang-Lais, which means "*deities of calm and quiet environment in beautiful forests.*" The festival represents the worship of traditional deities and ancestors of the Manipuri society. It is usually observed during the summer season (Kalentha) at the sacred places of Umang Lai (God/Goddess) in the Manipur valley.



Here it is desirable and suitable to note the importance and significance of the month of Kalantha according to ancient Puya (ancient manuscripts of the Meities).

In these months, Nongda Lairen Pakhangha (supreme God of the Meities) is said to come down to the peaceful and rare place of Kangla and stays with all beings. At that time, the whole earth became peaceful. Lainingthou, King of Gods, came down on earth, the Rain God arrived and Gods and Goddesses met together. All the people of four panas, i.e., Ahallup, Nahalup, Khabam, and Laipham, prayed to the Almighty God for long life. All different kinds of flowers bloomed in these months and people admired the beauty of the flowers that were distributed to the people of four Panas and offered them to God. With this idea of praying to God, the Meities started observing and celebration of Laiharaoba at every locality where Umanglais are worshipped in Kalantha.

Musical instruments in any traditional music are the precious inheritance of the people concerned. A number of musical instruments are being used in Kanglei Haraoba. In the book "Meitei Laiharaoba", it is mentioned that pung (drum), Moibung (conch), Sarik (hand-bell), etc. are used in dances of Laiharaoba (Singh, 1998).

Of all the instruments used in Laiharaoba, Langde Pung, Sarik and Pena occupy the most important places because of their substantial and important roles. The Meitei community gives due attention to the use of dress and costume in their traditional dances of Laiharaoba by following certain conventions. In fact, they have different dresses and costumes for each performer or participant according to his or her position, status, and age. Dress and costume in the Lai Haraoba festival is generally differentiated among the following categories of participants:

- i) The people in charge of looking after the deity are called Lai Tainabasing.
- ii) Individuals taking part in the festival as devotees are called Thougalloising or thougal touribasing.
- iii) The people in charge of looking after the deity, called Lai Tainabsing, Maibi, The Asheiba or the Pena-player, the Maiba, and the Lai Selungba or the Piba are the people, authorise to look after the deity.



Kanglei Lai Haraoba dances are the precious wealth passed down from the ancestors from the ancient period, which is being practiced without much change with strict rules and can be depicted as cultural legacy of the Meities.

Changes in process of Kanglei Haraoba

Kangle Haraoba, its basic form has been safeguarded by the concerned authority for ages to maintain the culture and tradition followed by our ancestors. Nevertheless, due to the changes in cultural characteristics in the society, it also has changed in its outlook in course of time even though the basic structure remains the same. As for instance till recent time, the Pandit Loishang was consulted to fix days and time for the celebration to start. Laiharaoba was done only with proper consultation and guidance by Pandit but in present days, this practice is seen to be faded away, instead selected people of the community, village or clan gather and set a date to start the festival. Lai-phi-setpa, one of the preliminary programme of Laiharaoba in which dressing up of God and Goddess is done was carried out one day before the celebration start in earlier days but in present time it is carried out on the first day of Laiharaoba. Kangleithokpa is a ritual performed on odd days near to Lairoi (ending day of Laiharaoba festival) or on Lairoi but nowadays it is found to be performed on a day before Lairoi. The afternoon Laibou session is also seen to perform in the evening these days. Though the main ritual processes are still performed, the significances of the festival seems to be swayed away with the changing time. In every bit of dance movements, songs etc, changes can be seen. A thorough discussion with intellectuals, scholars' needs to be carried out in order to revive the essence of Kanglei Haraoba.

Conclusion

The Meities people took the celebration extremely seriously, believing that if any errors in the right order of the event occurred, it would be a negative omen for the society. Laiharaoba is highly-structured; with pre-determined ceremonial sequences that are carried out flawlessly under the supervision of skilled and trained functionaries known as Amaiba, Amaibi, and Pena Asheiba, as well as local festival committee members. LaiHaraoba is a type of ceremonial rite that imparts knowledge from the forefathers' period to subsequent generations through a variety of performance characteristics. It is a type of cultural education in which the descendants of Meitei society could learn and understand their forefathers' traditions under the supervision of the three main functionaries mentioned and the elderly senior citizens of



the community who had experience and participated over a period of time. Nonetheless, from the culturally perspectives it cannot be ruled out that no changes have happened till date. Certain changes are taking place with the influence of changing lifestyle, belief and religious inclination. This is definitely a wide subject to be research and an never ending process till human civilization keeps on evolving. The study is an endeavour to understand the process of cultural and religious development, unique social conventions, powerful cultural trends, and religious attitudes among the Manipuris more specifically the Meities.

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