



Culture Of Manipur Past And Presents As Reflected In *Lai Haraoba*.

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Abstract:

The research paper aims to bring out the cultural significance of Lai Haraoba – an annual ritualistic festival celebrated by the Meitei community. The study also highlights the socio and religious aspect of the festival. The main philosophy or concept of Lai Haraoba is to please the Umang Lai, which is the local deity through religious rituals, dance, music, indigenous games. The community seeks blessing for the community or the particular clan praying for prosperity unity and wellbeing of the community. It also serves to invoke supernatural forces for the fertility and prosperity of the community. The rich cultural heritage of Manipur as reflected in *Lai Haraoba* is discussed in this paper. The festival is usually celebrated in the *Meitei* lunar month of Kalen which falls in April, May before the onset of monsoon.

Keywords; Lai Haraoba, culture, Manipur, Umang Lai, festival.

Introduction;

Culture is the summation of the norms, values and morals implicitly manifested. It helps to establish the identity of the people who live in a particular society. When we talk about culture, we mean the traditions, belief, customs, rituals, social dogmas, the traditionally transmitted principle of faith, observance, rites, morals acquired by the society.

Culture is the very notion of gradual evolution of human society. The present paper demonstrates the culture of Manipur as reflected in *Lai Haraoba* – which is an annual cultural festival celebrated in the Meitei community. Cultural identities as defined by Stuart Hall, ‘reflects the common historical experience and shared cultural role which provide us as “one people” with stable unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting division and vicissitude of our actual history’. The literal meaning of Lai Haraoba is “merry making of Gods and Goddesses as defined by E. Nilakanta Singh.

The term is derived from Lai-- Hoi Laoba. Lai Haraoba has its origin in the tradition of ancestor worship followed by the Meiteis. The Meiteis follow ancestor worship and animism with the central focus of worship to Umang Lai – or local deities. The *Umang Lai* that is the village deities which were believed to be the original ancestor were worshipped.

Each clan or *Sagei* of Manipur community has its own particular deity known as Sagei-Lai or Sagei Apopka who is considered to be the originator of each clan. Manipur has this time immemorial culture of ancestral worship, which is mirrored in the rituals of Lai Haraoba

“U” means “tree”, Umang means “forest”. Lai means spirit or God. Meitei community has the tradition of the preservation of forest or sacred grove. Ancient trees grow at the shrine and the new ones grows up there untouched. Lai Haraoba is the ritual functionaries of Yoiril (priest), is celebrated during the pre- agricultural season (February to May) before the onset of monsoon The ritual last normally 7-9days in the lunar calendar. There are four types of Lai Haraoba-***Moirang Haraoba, kakching haraoba, Chakpa Haraoba, Kanglei Haraoba***. Each variant possess distinct regional practice, honours specific deities and incorporates unique costumes,elements reflecting the cultural tradition. The Moirang principality, which is another type of Lai Haraoba celebrate it for a month in the month of May. It signifies that the people of Manipur main livelihood is dependent on agriculture. Manipur have the Goddess of agriculture or to be precise “Goddess of paddy” called “*Phouibi*”. That’s why people organize Lai Haraoba festival every year from spring till the onset of rainy season. The ritual invokes supernatural forces for fertility and prosperity of the communities. Particular dance forms like *Yumsharol* , *Phisarol* carries the idea of the way in which people in primitive days struggle for a collective life or settled life for the community. Lai Haraoba is the re- enactment of the creation of Universe and evolution of Mankind from nomadic tribe to settled life. *Laibou Jagoi*(hakchang sagatpa) is the depiction of the creation of human being from the conception till the birth of a child. This is also known as *Laibou khuthek*. *Laibou Jagoi* portrays the building of various parts of human being. The present tradition of Thabal Chongba has its origin from *Ougri Hangel Chongba* which is a part of Lai Haraoba since time immemorial. The role of women in the economic activities of the society is also reflected in the festival. Women are reflected in the festival as not just as begetter of progeny but also the role of women in the economic activities of the society is also reflected in the festival. Infact, throughout Lai Haraoba , “the wife’s role is presented as sexual partner as well as economic contributor”. The Lai Haraoba embodeis a unique cultural festival where the composite cultural identity of the Meitie people find its fuller expression by means of re enactment of the Creation myth,ritual invocations and calling upon the divine power to get infused in the diety who stands for two principle- male and female. All Gods and Goddess in the Meitie Pantheon were formless. Lai Haraoba comprises of folk songs,folk dance symbolically expressing the creation of men from conception to his manhood passing through stages of growth till he settles down

Methodology;

The study has adopted ethno-historical approach . The necessary data have been collected from available primary and secondary sources cover the colonial account, seminar paper, edited volumes etc. Since, this festival relies more on oral tradition interviews of local priest(amaiba) and priestest(amaibi) serves as primary source. And also the oral tradition of passing down of rituals , rites and traditional practice through oral methods and folklore.

Findings;

The Lai Haraoba encompasses the hypothesis of Meitei worldview in which the whole process is built through complex system of interconnection ,interdependence and inter relationship of ideas and image content and forms. From the view point of experts Gurus and scholars related to the field of this ritualistic festival, Lai Haraoba will still be sacred key to explore the cultire and identity of Meitei community. The present paper aims to describe the Lai Haraoba – the ritualistic festival of Meitie community It aims to highlight the main rituals involve in Lai Haraoba and elucidate the significance with the Meitie worldview. It explores how the festival acts as a unifying force of the Meitie community or people belonging to that particular clan and also shows how it acts as a cohesive mechanism between intra-ethnic cohesion among the people that is Meitie and tribals. Elangbam Nilakanta Singh has stated that the origin of Lai Haraoba lies in the imitation of the religious festival carried out by the God. The festival actively promotes kindness and harmony within the community, playing a crucial role in perpetuating ancient rituals and cultural practice in modern era. The festival’s narrative is intricately linked with evolution of human being and their fundamental need for food, clothing and shelter highlighting the practical and spiritual interconnectedness of life. A deeper understanding of Lai Haraoba reveals it as a comprehensive cultural and philosophical list. The festival’s repeated re enactment of creation, human

evolution and the establishment of civilization through activities like cultivation, house building and weaving signifies that it is more than a mere celebration it is an active embodied narrative.

Cultural Aspects highlighted in Lai Haraoba ;

The rituals performed in the festival can be said that it is a representation of a connection between divine creature and human being, indeed a cosmic relation. It can further be said that the celebration of Lai Haraoba can be seen as a preservation of ancient tradition of the Meitie community which was prevalent in Manipur during the Pre-Vaishnavite era, that is before the coming of Vaishnavism in Manipur or during the predominance of Sanamahism(religion) in Manipur. And Lai Haraoba serves as a preservation of oral literature, folklore and indigenous art form of Manipur. The role of the Maiba (priest) and maibis (priestess) in the ritual of the festival is of vital importance. They play the lead role in carrying out the main rituals from beginning till the end of the festival. They can be viewed as the spiritual custodian, preserving the ancient oral tradition and mythological belief system of the Meitie community. Lai Haraoba festival can be viewed through the lens of historical and mythological narratives. Stories related to Pakhangba (the serpent God), Panthoibi and Nongpok Ninghou are all mythologies which are deeply connected with history of the land. As mentioned in the paper, the Meities are worshippers of Nature. The Meitie community's deep reverence for Mother Nature can be seen through the act of offering made to Mother Nature specially worship of land and forest shows the eco spiritual aspects.

Significance of the ritual festival

Manipur is home to a plethora of traditions, and culture , the tradition of celebrating Lai Haraoba other than its legacies also serves as a medium of preserving the rituals, folk dance ,music and also a way of promoting it. The celebration of this festival makes the younger generation make them aware about the ancestral worship, which is hardly found or known to the world. The beauty lies in the various art forms that is performed during this festival. The worship of Umang Lai reminds the people of its origin and the mythical belief about the creation of the Universe by the Supreme Lord (Atiya Sidaba). Among the different types of Lai Haraoba, the Moirang Thangjing Lai Haraoba which is one of the biggest one has been celebrated since time immemorial. The festival continues for one month. The festival provides an opportunity to visit the holy site located at Bishenpur. It gives a platform to share the knowledge about the history of Moirang Kngleiro. And also the history of land worship practiced by the elders since time immemorial. The Thangjing Haraoba also opens up avenue for social cohesion among different communities and further opens up tourism avenue ,as it is celebrated in the vicinity of the only floating lake in India.

Conclusion:

To conclude, Lai Haraoba is one of the biggest ritual festival celebrated by the Meitei community of Manipur. They observe various rites and rituals to please the village deities with the help of the so called Amaiba , Amaibis and at the same time, the rituals so performed are meant for safety and prosperity of the community. This festival also promotes social solidarity among the people living together in the society. Other communities like Nagas also take part in the festival, their traditional handloom dresses are worn by some people in the rituals .The "Tangkhul costumes" worn during the reenactment of Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi's story for instance highlights the incorporation of specific tribal aesthetics into the festival's narrative, even if the primary performers are Meities. With the advancement of modernity and its materialistic view, the original tradition of Lai Haraoba are to some extend misrepresented or has become a bit commercialised. Various other amusement and entertainment programmes have been added up which in turn defile the sacred aspect of the festival. However, few organisations and scholars have now come up recently with the objective of prescribing the true aesthetic essence of Lai Haraoba festival. The festival is both a mirror and a bridge, reflecting Manipur's past culture while sustaining its present identity and tradition. It embodies the Meitie tradition that celebrates life, fertility of crops,

Nature and Divinity in unified harmony. Despite external religious and cultural influence, the festival has preserved its authentic spiritual essence. Today, it stands not only as a sacred ritual but also a living archive of Manipuri civilization, linking generations through shared belief and artistic expressions. The continuity of Lai Haraoba thus re affirms that the culture of Manipur -its past and present and future beats in the rhythm with the movement of body in the folkdance. To sum up, Lai Haraoba serves as a key to the understanding of the culture of Meities and their history of past and also of present. Lai Haraoba is the collective Meitie identities is the complete folk tradition within which the Meitie pulse and heart beats.

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BIO NOTE

Chelsea Chandam holds a Master's degree from Manipur University', Manipur.. She has qualified UGC-NET and SLET-NE conducted by SLET Commission Assam. She also holds a Diploma Degree in Manipuri Dance. She has participated in numerous national and international seminars and conference, ,presented papers in some international conference. Presently, she is serving as an Assistant Professor at Maharaja Bodhchandra College, MU. She is also a research scholar at Dhanamanjuri university, Department of English