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## THE RITUAL FESTIVAL OF THE MEITEIS WITH REFERENCE TO *LAI HARAObA*

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**Abstract:** The paper is a humble attempt to look into the *Lai Haraoba* festival of Meiteis of Manipur and its socio-cultural significance. It also deals with the role of *Maiba* (priest) and *Maibi* (priestess) in the celebration of the festival. The main philosophy of the festival is to make happy their *Lais* (traditional deities) through rites and rituals, dance and music, games for blessing unity, wellbeing and prosperity of the community. Usually, the festival observes in the Manipuri lunar month of *Kalen* which falls in April/May every year and it lasts even for about one month. The data are based on available primary and secondary sources.

**Key words:** Manipur, Meiteis, *Lai Haraoba*, *Maiba* and *Maibi*,

### Introduction

Manipur, once an Asiatic country is located at the extreme eastern corner of India. With an area of 22, 327 sq. km, today of Manipur is bounded in the north by Nagaland, in the east and south by Myanmar (Burma), in the south-west by Mizoram and in the west by Assam. In the past, Kabaw valley was also a part of Manipur. A very charming hilly state, which had once separated Assam and Myanmar before the creation of present Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Mizoram out of Assam. Manipur had enjoyed the fortune and glory in the past and experienced sorrow and vicissitudes of her long history. It had been witnessed the transformation from a primitive tribal state to an independent kingdom and later on from native state of British India to a state of the Indian union. The Meiteis in the valley and the Naga and Kuki tribes at the surrounding hills occupy the state. The article is a humble attempt to delve into the *Lai Haraoba* festival of the Meiteis and its socio-cultural significance.

### Methods and Materials

The study has adopted ethno-historical approach. The necessary data have been collected from available primary and secondary sources. Primary sources consist of historical texts, chronicles and secondary sources cover the colonial accounts, seminar papers, edited volumes etc.

*Lai Haraoba*, the great traditional ritual festival of the Meiteis is observed annually in honour of their deities. It has been interpreted as pleasing the god,<sup>1</sup> the rejoicing of the god; (*Lai* means deity and *Haraoba*, to be merry or to make merry). According to Moirangthem Chandrasing,<sup>2</sup> *Lai Haraoba* is the happiness of the *Lai* (god) or to make the *Lai* happy. He<sup>3</sup> further states that the term *Lai Haraoba* is derived from *Lai Hoi Laoba* in the creation myth of the Meiteis. In the myth, after creation of the whole world *Asheeba* (Sanamahee) was in the thought how to create human beings, *Taibangpanba Mapu*, the Lord of the Universe did open His mouth and showed all that to be created. At this, *Asheeba* was very happy and shouted *Hoi*

expressing his happiness. This *Hoi Laoba*, the exclamation of *Hoi* was the origin of the religious festival *Lai Haraoba*. Elangbam Nilakenta Singh<sup>4</sup> has stated that the origin of *Lai Haraoba* in the imitation of the religious festival carried out by the gods. Rajkumar Achouba Singh<sup>5</sup> has given a slightly different version which tells that after the creation of the whole world, *Atiya Sidaba*, as He has in his mind to make the *Chakpas* to imitate the religious festival performed by the *Lais* (gods), transformed Himself into a deer and appeared before the *Chakpas*. At the sight of the deer, the *Chakpas* were very happy in the hope of having a grand feast in which the whole community would enjoy the meat. They pursued the deer which ran up the top of the hill. Suddenly, the deer disappeared. There the *Chakpas* saw the religious festival performed by the gods in which they were making themselves happy. At the sight of the festival, the *Chakpas* were very happy. When they returned, they performed a festival in the same way as the gods did on the top of the hill. The imitation of the festival was known as *Lai Haraoba*. In *Panthoibi Khongkul*,<sup>6</sup> it is stated that *Khaba* and *Nganba Salais* worshipped *Panthoibi* and *Nongpok Ningthou* offering food and flowers with joy and happiness as their great god and goddess. On this basis, some scholars<sup>7</sup> are given opinions that the *Lai Haraoba* ritual festival had its origin in the worship of *Panthoibi* and *Nongpok Ningthou* by the two *Salais* namely *Khaba* and *Nganba* in the period before Christ.

S.N. Parratt writes,<sup>8</sup> “As it stands the *Lai Haraoba* is evidently a composite festival and consists of diverse origins. It is possible that it was originally an ancestral ritual.” She<sup>9</sup> further states that as the term *Lai* is not limited to gods in the formal sense, and could apply to the *Apokpa*, the ancestors of the clans, the possibility of *Lai Haraoba* being an ancestral ritual could not be ruled out. Besides, as stated above, if *Lai Haraoba* traces its origin in the worship of *Panthoibi* and *Nongpok Ningthou*. It is possibly an ancestral ritual in its original form because *Nongpok Ningthou* who was worshipped along with his consort *Panthoibi* by the *Khaba* and *Nganba Salais* due to some political reason was the ancestor of the *Angom Salai*. He was identified with *Puleiroma* and also with *Sanamahee*.<sup>10</sup> However, the most important items on the programme of *Lai Haraoba* namely, *Laibou Jagoi*, *Lairen Mathek* and *Ougri Hangel* itself explained the origin of *Lai Haraoba*. *Laibou Jagoi* which portrayed the building of human body was a part of the Meitei creation myth. *Lairen Mathek* was a depiction of *Pakhangba*, the founder ancestor of the ruling *Ningthouja Salai* in his snake form. Lastly, *Ougri Hangel Chongba* was also a part of the Meitei creation myth. Thus, *Lai Haraoba* of the Meiteis, though ancestral ritual in its original form might have probably been carried out in honour of only two deities, *Sanamahee* and *Pakhangba* because these two cults of *Sanamahee* and *Pakhangba* gave the land of the Meiteis a kind of cultural unity and succeeded in establishing the same kind of social structure all over the Manipur valley. The development of *Lai Haraoba* should be connected with the establishment of the Meitei kingdom in the valley of Manipur from the influence that it exerted in the *Haraoba* of the various communities in the valley.

In the opinion of S.N. Parratt,<sup>11</sup> *Lai Haraoba* ritual takes place in the month of *Kalen* (April-May). However, the commencement of *Lai Haraoba* might have depended largely upon the season. It must be at the moment when the good season seems to be close at hand that *Haraoba* was celebrated. Thus, the *Lai Haraoba* ritual

might have been carried out after the harvest and before the wet monsoon set in Manipur where the main occupation of the people is rice cultivation. While fixing the first and the last day of *Lai Haraoba*, it should not fall on the following days of the Meitei lunar month – 4<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup>.<sup>12</sup> O. Bhogeshore Singh<sup>13</sup> has advocated that the *Lai Haraoba* ritual continued even for one month.

The preparation for the *Haraoba* at the *Laipham* or shrine was very elaborate. One day before the commencement of *Haraoba*, the images of the *Lais* were made knitting pieces of bamboo strips in human form. They were put on *Laiphi*, clothes and their faces were covered with masks.<sup>14</sup> Parratt<sup>15</sup> opines that the gods or *Lais* were originally represented by a pair of bamboo tubes, never by images, but at a later stage of development, by brass or wooden masks with clothes placed below and above as though they were dressed. J. In the words of Shakespeare,<sup>16</sup> “as a rite there is no sacred image, but at a pleasing a brass mask draped with cloth is used to visualize the god to his worshippers” with the representations of the *Lais* (gods) by masks, the idea of building temples permanently came up in the minds of the people. A reference in *Cheitharol Kumbaba*<sup>17</sup> to the burning of the *Laishang* (temple) in the year 1726 A.D. indicates that in the later period temples were constructed permanently. In the earlier period, the temples of the *Lais* were built temporarily for the purpose of the ritual. Every temple built temporarily or permanently had a cross (*Chirong*) on its frontal ridge in the likeness of horns of animals. The clothing of the gods or *Lais* at the *Laipham* is known as *Lai fi shetpa*.<sup>18</sup> The images thus adorned were placed on a seat specially prepared in the temple.

On the following day the *Lais* (gods) were called up from the water. The calling up of the *Lais* from the water is known as *Lai Ikouba*. O. Bhogeshore Singh states, “*Ikouba* is a prayer to the Almighty to send up His supreme soul.”<sup>19</sup> *Lai Ikouba* was the first day ritual of *Lai Haraoba* festival. *Ikouba* was variously interpreted as the calling up of the *Lai* from the water<sup>20</sup> and the bringing up of the spirit of the *Lai* from the water.<sup>21</sup> The object of the *Ikouba* ceremony is to bring the god into a state of activity.<sup>22</sup> The enticing of the spirit of the god from some streams or lakes might suggest that water was the abode of the gods. In the observation of J. Shakespeare, “As most of the gods are hill deities, it struck me as curious that they should have to be enticed from water, my enquiries only elicited the reply that, of course, all *Umanglais* (traditional deities) came from water.”<sup>23</sup>

The important ritual items used in the *Ikouba* consist of *Ihaifu* or *Ishaifu*, *Konyai* and *Khayom*. *Ihaifu* or *Ishaifu* is an earthen pot. The purpose of this pot is to carry the spirit or the soul of the *Lais* to the shrine. The pots are tied with threads. The thread which is of nine strands is meant for the *Lainingthou* (male deity) and that of seven strands for *Lairembi* (female deity). S.N. Parratt<sup>24</sup> has given the significance of the number. In the beginning, nine gods brought earth from heaven and seven goddesses took it and threw it upon the water where they danced. These deities were the offspring of the original *Laiyingthou* (*Lainingthou*) and *Lairema* (*Lairembi*) and they were the begetters of the *Umanglai*. *Konyai* is two pieces of gold and silver. *Khayom* is seven layers of plantain leaves on which rice, duck’s egg and *Langthrei* buds as offerings to the deities are placed.

The congregation proceeded from the *Laishang* to the edge of the water. It was arranged in procession by the *Maibi* (priestess) with two bachelors holding swords in the front, next girls carrying fans and wine goblets and then the *Lai Pubas* (the persons who would be bearers of the god and goddess). The *Chong Paibas*, the holders of large white umbrellas and so and so forth. Then, the *Maibi* walked forward leading the procession along with *Pena khongba*.

The procession began from the temple-shrine arrived near the stream or lake. The *Maibi* carried out the preliminary rite called *Leirai Yukhangba*. This is the offering of *Yu* (wine) in sixteen bamboo tubes stuck in the ground<sup>25</sup> (nine for the *Lainingthou* and seven for the *Lairembi*). This was followed by *Konyai-Thaba*, the throwing of the two pieces of gold and silver into the water as offering to the god.<sup>26</sup> *Konyai thaba* signifies calling upon God to come up.<sup>27</sup> While offering the gold and silver pieces, the *Maiba*, the priest did recite a hymn called *Kontharol*. Ng. Kulachandra<sup>28</sup> says, if the gold and silver pieces float on water, this is not a good sign. Next comes the offering of *Khayom* a banana leaves packets tied with *Paya*, bamboo strips. This was two in number - one for the *Lainingthou* and the other for the *Lairembi*; it contained rice, egg of duck, *Langthrei* leaves or *Langtharei* buds. The *Maibi* held the packet of *Lainingthou* in her right hand and that of the *Lairembi* in the left hand. She cast them into the waters. After the offering of *Khayom*, the *Maibi* took the two *Ikouphu* or *Ihaiphu* (earthen pots) from the bearers of *Lai*. Then she performed a dance holding the *Ikouphu* beginning from the south-west direction. She dedicated her dance to the *Maikei-ngakpas*, guardian gods in the four directions namely, *Thangjing* of the south-west, *Marjing* of the north-east, *Wangbren* of the south-east and *Koubru* of the north-west. S.N. Parratt<sup>29</sup> writes, the homage to the *Maikei-ngakpas* is performed with the minimum of steps but with graceful hand movements. After the dance she returned the *Ikouphus* to the *Lai pubas* (the bearers of the gods) standing on plantain leaves on which were also placed coins. From the *Ikouphu* the *Maibi* took out two lines of thread and tied the *Leiyom* with it to a stick called *Hirichei*; the bundles of *Langthrei* buds were fourteen buds for the *Lainingthou* and seven for the *Lairembi*. It may be noted that the bundle of fourteen buds faced downwards and that of the seven upwards. While holding the thread, precaution was taken not to fall it to the ground. Holding the *Leiyom* with the right hand, she went up to the edge of the water and dipped it into the water ringing a hand bell with her left hand.<sup>30</sup> J. Shakespeare<sup>31</sup> opines that the threads are roads to facilitate the god's passage from the water to the pots. When immersing the *Leiyom* into the water, she did chant *Leikourol*, a creation hymn. The *Penakhongba* played his *Pena*.<sup>32</sup> Suddenly, the *Maibi* went into a trance locally known as *Laitongba*. *Laitongba* is described by J. Shakespeare<sup>33</sup> as the god mounting on the head. In *Laitongba*, the *Maibi* uttered the *Oracle* or *Laipao*. After the oracular utterance, she wrapped the *Leiyom* in the thread and placed it in the *Ikouphus*. The thread in the left hand was put in *Lainingthou's* *Ikouphu*. With it, the first day ritual of *Ikouba* of *Lai Loukhatpa* was completed and the *Lai* was brought to the *Laishang* or shrine.

The coming of the *Lai* from the water to the *Laishang* is called *Higaba*. According to S.N. Parratt,<sup>34</sup> this title is significant in view of the corresponding title *Nongkharol* where the *Lai* returns to its original place symbolically in a boat. On the

way back, the leading *Maibi* performed a dance called *Khunjao Leichao-Jagoi* for the growth and prosperity of the community which carried out the *Lai Haraoba*. Before reaching the shrine or the temple, the procession stepped over the trays set out containing dried fish, duck's egg, salt, a basket of paddy, pigeon and *Sel* (indigenous bell metal coin). This was done in midst of the ringing of the bell by the *Maibi* and playing of the *Pena* in the tune of *Higarol*. Then the *Maibi* took the *Ikouphus* inside the shrine. There the threads were taken out of the *Ikouphus* and placed at the navel of the images. This is called *Hiriphanba*. Ng. Kulachandra Singh<sup>35</sup> has maintained the thread carrying the *Lainingthou* will be placed by a *Maiba* (priest) assisted by three men, and that of the *Lairembi* by a *Maibi* (priestess) helped by three women. The threads were then placed in the *Ikouphus*. Then the *Maibi* opened the *Leiyom* of the *Lainingthou* which contained fourteen *Langthrei* leaves or buds. Five of the buds were placed in between the *Lainingthou* and *Lairembi* and the remaining nine before the *Lainingthou*. The *Leiyom* of the *Lairembi* contained only seven buds and these were placed before her. The offering of *Langthrei* leaves is termed as *Lei-hunba*.

In the shrine, under the bench in between the *Lainingthou* and *Lairembi* a plantain leaf was laid. This is called *Chaning-thaba*. In the four corners of the bench, on which the *Lais* were placed, a plantain leaf was placed and another plantain leaf was placed face up. Three plantain leaves which were joined together were placed in front of the *Lais*. This is known as *Lukmang-thaba*. On the right side of the *Luklen*, nine small plantain leaves for the *Laibungthous* (great god) were placed and on the left seven leaves for the *Lairembi*. On these leaves offerings were laid. Then the *Maibi* performed *Anam athou*. This was meant to keep away the evil influence by sprinkling water with *Tairen* leaves dipped into the pot containing the water brought from the stream or lakes where the *Ikouba* took place.<sup>36</sup> This was followed by *Laipao* (oracle). The *Maibi* delivered the oracle. The first day ritual of *Lai Haraoba* was closed with *Saroi Khangba*. This was the offering of food at the four corners of the temple yard to appease the evil spirits.<sup>37</sup>

Every morning during *Haraoba*, before the proceeding of the different items, the *Lai* was awakened with the singing of *Yakairol* and the playing of *Penakhongba*. After the awakening of the *Lai*, the most important daily items on the programme of the *Haraoba* are (1) *Laibou Jagoi*, (2) *Yumsarol Jagoi*, (3) *Panthoibi Jagoi*, (4) *Long-Khonba*, (5) *Phibul Habi*, (6) *Chongkhong Litpa*, (7) *Lairen Mathek* and (8) *Hongri Hangel* respectively.<sup>38</sup>

### ***Laibou Jagoi***

*Laibou Jagoi* is the depiction of the creation of human being in dance from the conception to the birth of the child. This is also known as *Laibou khuthek*. S.N. Parratt interprets *Laibou* as a corruption of *Lai pou*, birth of the *Lai*. But *Pou* does not carry the meaning of birth. In Meitei language, the word for birth is *Pokpa*. Then, on the basis of the interpretation of S.N. Parratt, *Laibou*, birth of the *Lai* might have probably been a corruption of *Laipok*. *Khuthek* means the movements or gestures of the hands and its meaning is equivalent to *Jagoi*, a Meitei word for dance.<sup>39</sup>

*Laibou Jagoi* was preceded by *Laiboula thaba*, the laying of offerings on plantain leaves in front of the *Lai*. This is done by the *Maibi*, the priestess. The offerings were made first to the *Maikei-ngakpas*, the guardian gods in the four

directions namely, (1) *Thangjing* of the south-west, (2) *Marjing* of the north-east, (3) *Wangbren* of the south-east and (4) *Koubru* of the north-west and then to the *Lai* in whose honour the *Haraoba* was carried out (after the making of offerings). Now, the *Maibi* arranged the congregation participating in the *Laibou jagoi* in two queues - one of the male participants and another of the female and asked them (the participants) to stand quite and rest till the singing of *Hoirou haya* was over. This is done by the *Penakhongba* putting on his *Pena*.<sup>40</sup>

In the words of S.N. Parratt,<sup>41</sup> *Hoirou* is properly the rectum, but here it presumably means vagina, the first line O *hoirou*, O *nage* means let me have intercourse. The same writer further explains that the words express the desire of the *Lai* for intercourse. But according to O. Bhogeshore Singh,<sup>42</sup> “the Supreme God of the Universe, having wished to create the world, commanded his son *Asheeba* to create the world. Being at a loss how to carry out his father’s order he asked his father how to create the world. At this the supreme Father opened His mouth and showed the design in which He wished the world to be created. On seeing that, *Asheeba* went inside the belly of his father and called out all the objects from inside by shouting *Hoi*. From this *Hoi* the term *Hoirou* was derived.

His Mother *Leimaren Shidabi* received all those objects that *Asheeba* brought out from inside the entrails of his Father by shouting *Hoi*. From this incident the term *Haya* came into use. The singing of *Hoirou-haya* was followed by *Laibou jagoi*.

*Laibou jagoi* portrayed the building of various parts of human body. The formation of the child, the growth of the various parts/organs of the body in the womb of the mother and the infusion of soul into the body were represented by the *Maibi* and the congregation in sixty-four movements performed with specific hand gestures. After each stage in the creation of various parts of the body, the *Maibi* and the congregation performed *Lishi jagoi*, a short dance step turning to each of the four directions. The various parts of the body described in order in sixty-four gestures<sup>43</sup> are as follows: (1) female sex (2) the upper part of the head, (3) two sides of the front part of the head, (4) two upper sides of the front part of the head (portions from which the horns grew in the case of cattle) 5) forehead, 6) eyebrows, 7) corners of the eyes, 8) eyes, 9) the portion of the nose in between the eyes, 10) nose 11) nostrils, 12) cheeks, 13) the front part of the nostrils, 14) lips, 15) teeth, 16) chin, 17) ears, 18) ear holes 19) back of the head, 20) throat, 21) shoulder, 22) back of the shoulder, 23) entire shoulder, 24) arms, 25) elbows, 26) inner forearms, 27) wrists, 28) tops of the palm, 29) palms, 30) fingers, 31) nails, 32) lines of palm, 33) circular lines on the tips of the fingers, 34) backbone, 35) pulse at the breast (heart), 36) breast, 37) *Nganpham* (?) (touching the *nganpham* (?) with the two middle and ring fingers of the right hand and touching the wrist of the right hand with the middle finger of the left hand), 38) lower part of the breast, 39) heart, 40) abdomen, 41) waist, 42) buttocks, 43) anus, 44) birth passage (vagina) 45) sacrum 46) lower thighs, 47) groin, 48) upper thighs, 49) knees, 50) skin, 51) calves, 52) ankle, 53) ankle bones, 54) heels, 55) tops of the feet, 56) soles of the feet, 57) points of the toes, 58) toes, 59) toenails, 60) lines on the tips of the toes, 61) the middle portions of the soles, 62) whole body, 63) praying to *Atiya Sidaba* (the Supreme Being) for the soul or the body, 64) infusion of soul into the body.

After the making of child in the womb of the mother and the infusion of soul into the body, here followed a dialogue between the *Maibi* and the congregation. The following is the dialogue:

*Maibi* : Oh servants of *Lainingthou* and *Lairemma*.

Congregation : Yes.

*Maibi* : Now the putting of the soul into the body is completed. The period of gestation is completed. The child is about to come out. You build a birth house (*Wangol-shang*).

Congregation : We have built. (The congregation performed the *Lishi Jagoi*)

The *Maibi* and the congregation portrayed the building of the birth house (*Wangol-shang*) or delivery room, the labour pain, the actual birth (holding their scarves and touching their buttock), cutting of the umbilical cord, bathing the baby (child), wiping the child, covering of the child with a cloth, the feeding at the mother's breast, growing of the child up (singing a song - *Ting ting chaoro*, which literally means 'grow up, with bouncing gestures), and the dressing of the child.

The child as referred to in the song of the *Maibi*, "*Ting ting chao-ro...*"<sup>44</sup> is the son of the god called *Soraren*. As he has grown up, he requires a house. The building of the house as an important item of *Lai Haraoba* is portrayed in the dance of the *Maibi* and the congregation. This form of dance is known as *Yumsharol Jagoi*. The choosing of suitable plot, leveling the ground, making a design of a room, measuring with thread, digging the pillar-holes, erecting of pillars, roofing of the house, plastering of the walls, the fixing of crossed beams on the frontal ridge of the house are danced out. Then she portrayed the oblation of the house to the *Lai*. Playing of *Pena* was also stopped with the offering of the house.

#### ***Panthoibi Jagoi***

This is a portrayal of romantic dance of *Nongpok Ningthou* and *Panthoibi*. *Nongpok Ningthou* (*Lainingthou*), *Panthoibi* (*Lairembi*) singing erotic songs (*Paosha ishei*)<sup>45</sup> in the accompaniment of *Pena* music.

Women: "The horns of the deer have not come out yet, they are only seen a bit on the surface."

Men: "The *Ngamu* fish has not become mature yet, there is not enough hair ...."

The *Paosha ishei* are sung like rhymes and language is in riddles.

This was followed by the dance of enactment of slash and burn cultivation (*Pam-hai Jagoi*). In the clearing of the ground, the slashing of the weeds and making of fire by friction of a band of cane drawn across a piece of dry wood for burning of the dry weeds were enacted. Then the digging and sowing of the cotton seeds, planting of cotton, germination of the seeds, growth of the plant, harvesting and collection of cotton into the baskets were also represented.

The cotton thus collected was dried, clean, spinned and clothe was made. This is called *Phisharol Jagoi*, dance of weaving clothe. Then the *Maibi* offered the garments and prayed to the *Lai* for the growth and expansion of the village or community and the long life of the king.<sup>46</sup>

After the offering of the cloth to the *Lai*, except on the first day of *Haraoba*, after the *Laibou jagoi*, *Long Khonba*, fishing with a *fishing basket* was portrayed as it symbolized the gathering of the spirit of the *Lai*.<sup>47</sup> The *Maibi* commences this section with the following words:

‘Now that the weaving of cloth is complete and has been offered, let us gather the spirit of the *Lai* (Congregational response). Now the *Long* made of bamboo, grand mother *Laisana’s Long*, grand father’s *Long*, let us hold this chief *Long*, let us chase away evil spirits, let us take in the five spirits, and six with the shadow.’<sup>48</sup>

The fishing with the *Long*, the chasing of evil spirits away, the bringing of the spirits of the *Lai* was all represented by dance.

#### ***Lairen Mathek***

It is a depiction of the coiling design of *Pakhangba* in dance by the group, (participating in the service of the *Lai*) in single line led by the *Maibi*. The group ran in and out beneath a cloth of white cotton held by four men at four corners. Each of the four men held a *Chong* (huge white umbrella) on a pole on the ground. The coiling pattern of the *Lairen* (python) was beautifully curved, twisting above and below, foreword and backward. As the coiling pattern of *Pakhangba* created a complex movement, every care was taken to avoid mistake and breaking of the line of participants in tracing it out. This pattern is known as *Yumjao pafal*.<sup>49</sup> The performance of *Mathek* must be limited to the *Ningthouja Salai* because the snake is the totem of the *Ningthouja Salai*, the ruling dynasty.

#### ***Ougri Hangel Chongba***

*Ougri Hangel Chongba* was a part of the creation myth of the Meiteis. *Cheitharol Kumbaba* records that it was introduced during the reign of king Loiyamba in 1074-1122 A.D.<sup>50</sup> To N. Khelchandra Singh, *Ougri* was known from the time immemorial, but there was some modification during the reign of Loiyamba.<sup>51</sup> In *Naothingkhong Phambal Kaba*,<sup>52</sup> it is stated that king Naothingkhong before his accession to the throne, was taught *Ougri* by Luwang Ningthou Punshiba, the scholar chieftain of the *Luwang Salai*. This suggests the introduction of *Ougri* as a part of *Lai Haraoba* ritual festival from the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

In *Lai Haraoba*, men and women of same numbers formed a circle and held the ropes which were previously dedicated to the *Lai*. The *Maibi*, who was in centre of the circle, tied the ends of the ropes and also fastened a bell at the point of the knot. Every precaution is taken to prevent the ropes falling to the ground, as there is a belief that it may cause chaos and disorder in the community.<sup>53</sup> Holding the ropes in their hands, the participants dance and sang “*Ke kre ke mo mo .....*”. “The present *Thabal Chongba* dance was derived from the dance of ‘*Ke Kre Ke*’.

The *Lai Haraoba* ritual concluded with the sending of the *Lai* to the heaven (*Lai Nongkaba*) in the same manner it was done in the procession of *Lai Ikouba* (calling of the *Lai* up from the water). In *Laishang* (temple) the *Maibi* chanted and the *Maiba* sang the *Nonggarol*, a lyric for sending the *Lai* to heaven in the accompaniment of *Pena*. The day following the sending of the *Lai* back to the heaven was the occasion for performance of sports like *Lamjen tanaba* (foot race), *Mukna* (indigenous wrestling), *Mukna kangjei* (a peculiar style of hockey) and *Sagol Kangjei*

(polo). With it, the annual *Lai Haraoba* was closed and the people were engrossed in other activities.

### Conclusion

To conclude, *Lai Haraoba* is the great ritual festival of the Meiteis of Manipur. They observe various rites and rituals in pleasing their deities with the help of *Maiba* and *Maibi* and at the same time these rituals are meant for safety and prosperity of the community. The role of women in the economic activities of the society is also reflected in the festival. In fact, throughout *Lai Haraoba*, “the wife’s role is presented of sexual partner as well as an economic contributor.”<sup>54</sup> It is believed that dances have been born of the festival of *Lai Haraoba* and so also the games. The festival also promotes social solidarity. In short, *Lai Haraoba* serves as a key to the understanding of the culture of Meiteis and their history.

### Notes and References

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