



Women In Meitei Belief System waith Reference to Umang Lai Haraoba

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Introduction:

The Meitei Belief system is deeply rooted in the cultural and spiritual traditions of Manipur inhabiting in the north eastern region of India. Despite being a tiny state, its culture is eclectic and culturally abundant. At its heart, lies a fascinating practice which gives a unique age old tradition to the Meitei people living in Manipur which is known as *Umang Lai Haraoba* or simply put as *Lai Haraoba* celebration where women play a pivotal character and represent as a central figure by actively engaging themselves in rituals, offerings, prayers, ceremonies, dances, songs etc. which embody a spiritual interconnectedness with the *Umang lai* deities. Their involvement is not merely a ceremonial act or gesture but a meaningful and tangible expression of devotion, commitment etc. showcasing and emphasizing their crucial and primary role in fostering a connection between the earthly realm and the divine or a connection between the physical world and the transcendental world. This ritualistic engagement underscores the belief in the unique spiritual energy that women bring to this celebration. Taking a limelight stand, they not only convey cultural richness and values but also become a dynamic expression of spirituality and identity. Through their energetic and lively involvements, the essence they hold during this celebration feature them as the heart and soul of the whole performance.

Beyond this aspects, the *Umang lai Haraoba* fosters as a pedestal for preservation and safeguarding of Meitei culture, with women at its forefront. By associating and engrossing themselves, they contribute or pitch in to pass down cultural practices, myths and traditions to subsequent generations to sustain and to upkeep their very own unique culture and traditions illuminating their responsibility in ensuring the endurance and legacy of Meitei cultural heritage.

Symbolically, *Umang lai Haraoba* encapsulates the representation or manifestation of feminine energy through multifaceted forms. Women, both as active participants and embodiments of goddesses, symbolize qualities such as fertility, nurturing and wisdom etc. This symbolism aligns with a deeper philosophical essence of women in the Meitei belief system enhancing their significance, weight and value in maintaining the balance of cosmos. This paper stresses on women's role by focusing on their accomplishment and performances in the three main rituals or events of the *Umang lai Haraoba* namely *lai-Ikouba*, *laipou* and *lairoi* which will be discussed below for which without them would be considered a barren, incomplete, vacuous, fruitless and purposeless celebration. In addition, this will enlighten to cultivate substantial awareness of women in the Meitei belief system enriching one's astute perception, empowering a more profound, insightful assimilation of their cultural resonance and societal responsibility.

Umang lai Haraoba

The *Umang lai Haraoba* is considered as a vivid, spiritual, cultural tapestry, deeply intertwined with the traditions and spirituality of the Meitei people residing in Manipur. It embodies the legacy to our identity which is apparent in the traditions passed down across generations (Danisana, 2012). It highlights the indissoluble link between the community and the mystical forces believed to administer, control, and regulate their lives. It is a celebration of merriment of gods and goddesses (Elangbam, 1961). Majority of the Meitei villages or localities have their own God or Goddesses fundamentally or primarily to protect and safeguard them from evil, sins and unwanted fortunes falling on the people. Most of these Gods or Goddesses are being worshipped in small forest. Therefore, these Gods or Goddesses are also known as "*Umang Lai*" which can be translated as "The God of Forest" as the forest is considered to be their dwelling place. Another reason for calling as *Umang Lai* according to some scholars is because Manipur was mainly covered with thick lushy green forest. Hence, due to their confinement, people called these Gods as "*Umang Lai*" (The God of Forest). Furthermore, the term *Umang lai* means deities of the forest (Hodson, 1908).

Indubitably, the *Lai haraoba* fulfils as a genuine, authentic, reliable, valid, genesis which most closely sustains the ancient Meitei culture (Saroj, 1980). Also another one in which one Manipuri writer put it as:

The *Lai Haraoba* mirrors the entire culture of the Manipur people. It reveals its strength and weaknesses, the belief and superstitions and perhaps also the charm and happiness of the Manipuri people. It reflects the people at their intensest (Elangbam, 1961)

The *Lai Haraoba* has three main forms, nonetheless the differences in observance between them are of subtle variations (Parratt, 1980) keeping the the core element and fundamental theme of celebration intact. They are as follows:

1. The *Kanglei* (2) The *Moirang* (3) The *Chakpa*

Lai haraoba is the re-enactment of the creation of the Universe by gods through hand movement, dance, songs and incantations, which have become the language of *Lai Haraoba* (Moirangthem, 1973). It is an ongoing process which takes place within a chronological framework. It can be categorised into three major structural divisions such as *lai Ikouba*, *laipou* and *lairoi* (Premchand, 2020) in which we can observe women taking pivotal and prominent role in this three events marking the beginning, middle and the end of the whole celebration.

Women as spiritual empowerment and as an emissary

In *Lai Ikouba* process, where *lai Ikouba* means calling up of the *lai* (deity) from the water (Parratt, 1980). This marks the beginning of the ritual which is performed one day prior before the inception of the main daily rituals. The main functions of this ritual are the calling up of the spirit of the deity from the water and infusing to the objects representing the deities placed in the shrine or temple accordingly (Premchand, 2020). It is believed that the meticulously structured ritual of the *lai Ikouba* is anchored on the Meitei's myth of creation of the Universe showing an aspiration to emulate the mythical creation. Through this philosophical lens, the primordial life force is awoken from the water (Premchand, 2020). This awakening of the *lai* symbolizes the most crucial element of this ritual. This ritual is performed by *maibis* (priestess). They occupy a spotlight figure emphasizing their significant and substantive role in the belief system. For this ritual to be performed, people carried out procession in a systematic way dividing into two lines. It is led by the women having good background by way of proper marriage, birth of a son as her first born and should not be a widow. She will carry the ceremonial earthen pitcher called *ihai fu*. Also, another two maiden for carrying ceremonial brass plates called *shemkha* and another two more maiden for carrying a fan and ceremonial brass container called *Kokshel*. These earthen pots called *ishai fu* is the one used for carrying the spirits of deities to be called upon from the water (Premchand, 2020)

Before the procession, *maibis* perform an important act called *laihou jagoi*, which is some kind of an invocation dance in front of the two deities. Later, an act called *khayom lakpa* was held. A *khayom* is composed of an egg with a thin price of gold and thin price of silver, three shoots with the leaves of an indigenous plant called *langthrei*, some uncooked rice. All these components are wrapped and thrown into the water which is known as *khayom lakpa* where the silver and gold represent father principle and mother principle respectively (Moirangthem, 1984) and uncooked rice signifying the heavenly bodies (Moirangthem, 1963). After this, the *maibis* with the two *ihai fuses* containing two *laiyoms* tied by *hiri* in her hands dance in order to seek divine favour from the four guardian deities namely *Thangjing*, *Kouburu*, *Wangbren* and *Marjing* for performing the ritual (Premchand, 2020). Gradually, in this act, the *maibi* is possessed with the spirit of the deities. This is a captivating, spellbinding, alluring and mesmerizing act which can only be accomplished and enacted by the *maibis* herself. This possession is so profound that if a *maibas* (priest) is happened to be possessed, he has to be adorned himself with the costumes of *maibis* illuminating women's gravity and admiration to their position in this spiritual performance. During the possession she acts as a medium, agent, messenger, intermediary between the divine and the human realm relaying oracle, prophesy of the community as a whole. This condition is known as *laitongba* (Premchand, 2020). Additionally, this very act portrays women as a pioneer character in this celebration.

Women as genesis of civilization

Laipou is yet another main ritual showcasing the enactment of whole creation on the earth initiating from the mystery of existential entanglement to the mundane existence of menfolk and womenfolk (Premchand, 2020). In short, it is an enactment of the sexual union between *Lainingthou*, father principle and *Lairembi*, mother principle (Premchand, 2020). Within this framework, the *maibis* shines as a protagonist performing certain dance movement representing the mother receiving the germ of life from the father embarking the genesis of life on the Earth. Later, the *maibis* carried out rhythmic dance steps accompanied by the song sung by the *penakhongba* (musical instrument) depicting the formation of human body inside mother's womb called as *hakchangshaba* on the melody of the song called *anoirol* rendered by the *penakhongba*. There are as many as sixty-four dance sequences in which the sixty-fourth is the infusion of the soul term as *thawaihappa* enacting by pressing both the hands on the navel with the right hand above the left demonstrating the inception of a child. After this, the *maibis* perform *panthoibijagoi* (dance) for the welfare of the community. This dance is accompanied by a romantic song sung by the *maibis* and *penakhongba* depicting the growth of the child from adulthood to manhood and now has a house to thrive and find a spouse in order to precede the procreative activity. Subsequently, the *maibis* with the series of gestures, dance and dialogues paints the whole process of plantation, agriculture which is to be offered to the gods (Premchand, 2020). This whole process of *maibis*

emphasized their indispensable, vital, notable and remarkable position in laying the foundation for enrichment and progression of civilization.

Women's versatile role in ritual leadership

Their significant and essential position is not seen just in the main three rituals or events but it can also be recognise and witness in *lairoi*, the final ritual performance of *Lai* haraoba and some key items such as *louyanba*, *Ougri*, *hijanherao* etc. These are performed after the *laipou* has been concluded (Premchand, 2020). In *Louyanba*, the mythical romance of lovers *Nongpok Ningthou* and *Panthoibi* is played by the *penakhongba* and the *maibis* respectively is enacted. Likewise, in *Ougri*, the fabled story of the way in which seven *lainuras* (female dieties) growing out of the system of *Leimarel* (diety) protecting the newly created Mother Earth from the destruction is replicated by the participants. Moreover, in *hijanharao*, yet another important component is a ritual which imitates the imaginary story of making boat which is an essential element of transport is ordained by the participants including *maibis* and *maibas* as a whole (Premchand, 2020). Considering all this images of the women, it is evident that women play an exceptional figure from the day of commencement to the completion of this celebration shedding light on their position in Meitei belief system.

Furthermore, besides the above stated events there are few particular special rituals which are worth mentioning where they hold centre stage in carrying out the rituals in certain specific days (Radhamani, 2018). They are *Saroi Khangba* (appeasement of the evil spirit), *Kanglei Thokpa* (finding of bride for the diety) where the *maibis* goes in trance and communicate with the diety), *Nongkarol* (where the *maibis* request the diety to return to their heavenly abode concluding the *Umang lai haraoba*).

Conclusion:

The *Lai Haraoba* is like an odyssey inherited and entrusted by our forefather or ancestors to impart timeless knowledge, wisdom and cultural legacy portraying as a living embodiment and testament of own unique culture shaping our civilization endowing with its bountiful artistic and philosophical essence. It is an amalgamation of many activities such as dance, songs, lyrical hymns etc. fabricating an intriguing and an unparallel culture of its own. The rituals involved in this celebration are often in the form of expressing gratitude and reverence for crafting the World and providing life on this Earth and to continue to endow this civilization with peace, prosperity, fertility, free from diseases, unwanted fortunes and also for the welfare of the society as a whole.

Within this extraordinary and significant unparallel culture, women in the midst of the Meitei belief system hold a prominent and outstanding status where they are frequently marginalized in the patriarchy system. But, on the contrary, women in this religious festival conduct themselves as a psychic, medium, channeler, spirit communicator, fortune teller relaying prophecy between the divine and human realm or between the mundane and the transcendental world which is the very crux and main fundamental notion of celebrating the *Umang lai haraoba* which is passed down to subsequent generations.

From all of the above-stated, we may conclude that the position and functions of women in the *Umang lai haraoba* are paramount and crucial, placing them at the apex and prime position. And in the absence of women's participation or involvement, the celebration becomes impractical and unfulfilled, thus rendering it infeasible and in vain. This gives prominence to women, drawing attention to their core role in its success and value. Consequently, this whole paradigm embodies and exemplifies women as an Integral, Guardians, Preservers, Protectors and Curators, contribute to cultural richness, nurture the passage of cultural values, and uplift their position in the religious, spiritual and cultural forefront, kindling deep reverence for women within the structure of the Meitei Belief System.

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