



Women In Meitei Belief System with Reference To Umang Lai Haraoba

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ABSTRACT

The paper delves into the profound role that women occupy within the Meitei belief system with a specific focus on their integral contributions to the Umang lai Haraoba festival in Manipur. As a cultural lens into the intricate tapestry of Meitei spirituality, this festival unveils the multifaceted roles of women emphasizing their significance in rituals, dance, cultural preservation and community dynamics. Umang lai Haraoba stands as a testament to the deep intertwining of women and spirituality. This belief system highlights the active engagement of women in rituals such as offerings, prayers and ceremonies. Beyond symbolism, women's involvement in these practices reflects a tangible expression of devotion and spiritual interconnectedness. The festival's vibrant traditional dances, often led by women, serve as dynamic expression of spirituality, embodying cultural richness and transmitting spiritual energy. Moreover, Umang lai Haraoba becomes a living repository for the preservation of the Meitei culture, with women at its forefront. Their active engagement in the festival becomes a conduit for passing down cultural practices, myths and traditions portraying them as pivotal torchbearers of cultural continuity. The symbolism of feminine energy within the festival becomes evident through the roles women assume as both participants and embodiment of goddesses. These roles represent qualities such as fertility, nurturing and wisdom aligning with the broader philosophical essence of women in the Meitei Belief System. The festival, therefore, becomes a canvas where women symbolically contribute to the maintenance of the cosmic balance, reinforcing by both genders. Their collective efforts in organizing and participating in the festival contribute significantly to the cohesion of the community, underscoring the importance of interconnectedness within the Meitei cultural and religious context. In essence, this paper paints a comprehensive picture of the dynamic and integral roles that women play in shaping and preserving the spiritual and cultural identity of the Meitei, particularly within the framework of Umang lai Haraoba. It explores the intricate connections between women, spirituality and community dynamics thereby providing a richer understanding, deeper appreciation and a holistic perspective featuring the integral nature of women within this vibrant tapestry of Meitei beliefs and practices.

Keywords: Women, Umang Lai Haraoba, Belief System, Goddess, Symbolism, spiritual engagement.

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

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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 embodiment 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 worshiped 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 lushly 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* fulfil as a genuine, authentic, reliable, valid, genesis which most closely sustains the ancient *Meitei* culture (Saroj, 1980). Also another 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 core element and fundamental theme of celebration intact. They are the *Kanglei haraoba*, the *Moirang haraoba* and the *Chakpa haraoba*.

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 categorized 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 awakened 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 *ishaifu*. 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*. This earthen pot called *ishaifu* 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 *laihoujagoi*, which is some kind of an invocation dance in front of the two deities. Later, an act called *khayomlakpa* was held. A *khayom* is composed of an egg with a thin piece of gold and thin piece 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 *khayomlakpa* 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 *ishaifus* 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 *maiba* (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

Laiyou 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* shine 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 known 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 termed 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

The significant and essential position of women is not seen just in the main three rituals or events but it can also be witnessed in *lairoi*, the final ritual performance of *Lai haraoba* and some key items such as *louyanba*, *Ougri*, *hijanherao* etc. These are performed after the *laiyou* has been concluded (Premchand,2020). In *Louyanba*, the mythical romance of lovers *Nongpok Ningthou* and *Panthoibi* being played by the *penakhongba* and the *maibis* respectively are enacted. Likewise, in *Ougri*, the fabled story of the way in which seven *lainuras* (female deities) growing out of the system of *Leimarel* (deity) 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 these diverse roles 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 deity) where the *maibis* go in trance and communicate with the deity), *Nongkarol* (where the *maibis* request the deity 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

unparalleled 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 community as a whole.

Within this extraordinary and significant unparalleled 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, 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* passing down to subsequent generations.

From all of the above-stated, we may conclude that the role 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 integral, guardians, preservers, protectors and curators, contributing in the cultural richness, nurturing the passage of cultural values, and uplifting their position in the religious, spiritual and cultural forefront, within the structure of the *Meitei* Belief System.

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