



Cheiraoba: Exploring the Spiritual Dimensions and Holistic Well-Being in Meitei Cultural Tradition

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ABSTRACT

Cheiraoba, the Meitei New Year festival, is a significant cultural and spiritual event that symbolizes renewal, purification, and the aspiration for prosperity. Rooted in ancient traditions, the festival encompasses rituals such as household cleansing, ancestral offerings, communal feasting, and hill climbing, each carries profound spiritual and psychological significance. This study explores how these rituals contribute to holistic well-being by fostering physical health, mental clarity, emotional resilience, and social cohesion. The research employs a qualitative approach, integrating ethnographic fieldwork, in-depth interviews, and document analysis to examine the cultural dimensions of Cheiraoba and their impact on individual and collective well-being. Findings indicate that the festival's purification rituals promote psychological renewal, while ancestral worship strengthens intergenerational bonds and emotional security. The communal feast, featuring nutrient-rich traditional foods, reinforces both cultural identity and nutritional well-being. Additionally, the symbolic act of hill climbing not only signifies personal and spiritual elevation but also serves as a form of physical exercise, enhancing cardiovascular health and resilience. Furthermore, gratitude practices embedded within the festival foster positivity and social harmony. By bridging indigenous traditions with contemporary wellness models, this study highlights the relevance of Cheiraoba in promoting sustainable well-being. The findings suggest that traditional cultural practices hold valuable insights for modern health frameworks, emphasizing the integration of spirituality, community engagement, and physical activity. In an era of increasing stress and social isolation, understanding and preserving such traditions can offer holistic pathways to health, happiness, and cultural continuity.

Keywords: Cheiraoba, Spirituality, Cultural Heritage, Well-being, Rituals

Introduction

Cheiraoba, also known as Meitei Cheiraoba or Sajibu Cheiraoba, is a significant lunar New Year festival celebrated by the Meitei community of Manipur, India. This festival is observed on the first day of the lunar month of Sajibu, which typically falls in April according to the Gregorian calendar. Cheiraoba marks the beginning of a new year and is deeply embedded in the cultural and spiritual traditions of the Meitei people. More than just a timekeeping event, it is a sacred occasion that symbolizes renewal, purification, and the aspiration for prosperity, happiness, and overall well-being in the coming year. Rooted in ancient customs, Cheiraoba is not merely a celebration but a holistic practice that integrates spiritual, social, and physical elements. It embodies rituals and traditions that reflect the Meitei worldview, emphasizing balance and harmony with nature, ancestors, and the divine. Key activities of the festival include ritualistic offerings to deities and ancestors, household purification, the preparation of special festive dishes, and the custom of climbing nearby hills as a symbolic gesture of overcoming obstacles and achieving spiritual elevation. These practices collectively contribute to a deep sense of cultural identity, familial bonding, and community cohesion. Beyond its religious and cultural significance, Cheiraoba promotes holistic well-being by fostering a balance between physical activity, mental clarity, and spiritual fulfillment. The customs associated with the festival encourage self-reflection, gratitude, and mindfulness, all of which are essential for emotional resilience and psychological well-being. In an era marked by increasing stress and social disconnection, the traditional wisdom of Cheiraoba offers valuable insights into sustainable wellness practices. This study

explores the spiritual dimensions of Cheiraoba and their influence on health and happiness, shedding light on how indigenous traditions contribute to overall well-being. By examining the festival's rituals, this research aims to bridge the gap between cultural heritage and contemporary wellness models, demonstrating the enduring relevance of traditional practices in modern life.

Review of Literatures

Festivals have long been recognized as essential components of cultural identity, social cohesion, and spiritual well-being. Anthropologist Victor Turner (1969) describes rituals and festivals as "social dramas" that reinforce communal values and create a sense of belonging. More recent studies (Smith and Peterson, 2021) reaffirm that cultural festivals serve as platforms for the preservation of traditions, while also adapting to modern contexts to maintain their relevance. Cheiraoba, as a festival that embodies cultural preservation and spiritual renewal, aligns with Turner's theory that festivals strengthen communal bonds and foster individual identity. The role of spirituality in enhancing mental and emotional well-being has been extensively studied. Research by Koenig et al. (2012) highlights a strong correlation between spirituality and mental health, demonstrating that spiritual rituals, meditation, and prayer significantly reduce stress, anxiety, and depression. More recently, Johnson et al. (2020) have expanded on this by emphasizing that cultural spirituality, when practiced in a communal setting, further enhances emotional resilience and personal fulfillment. Cheiraoba's rituals, including purification rites, hill climbing, and ancestral worship, exemplify these findings, providing a culturally specific perspective on the link between spirituality and holistic well-being.

Ancestral worship, which is a fundamental component of many indigenous cultures, is also central to Cheiraoba. Steadman et al. (1996) assert that ancestral rituals contribute to emotional security, continuity, and psychological support within communities. More recently, Lee and Kim (2019) have suggested that the practice of honouring ancestors fosters intergenerational bonding and reinforces cultural identity. During Cheiraoba, offerings to ancestors reflect the Meitei belief in their protective and guiding role, thereby strengthening emotional well-being and family connections. A unique aspect of Cheiraoba is the tradition of hill climbing, known as Cheira-chingkaba. This ritual carries both symbolic and practical significance, as it represents an ascent toward spiritual elevation while also serving as a form of physical exercise. Warburton et al. (2006) emphasize the importance of regular physical activity in maintaining cardiovascular health, reducing stress, and enhancing overall well-being. More recently, Patel and Srinivasan (2022) argue that cultural practices that incorporate movement, such as ritualistic walking or climbing, provide sustainable, community-driven methods of promoting physical fitness. The hill-climbing tradition of Cheiraoba aligns with these perspectives, illustrating how traditional customs integrate physical and spiritual health.

Food also plays an essential role in Cheiraoba, with the festival featuring nutrient-rich dishes such as Chak-hao kheer (black rice pudding) and Eromba, a traditional vegetable-based dish. Kuhnlein et al. (2009) underscore the health benefits of traditional diets, which are typically high in antioxidants, fiber, and essential nutrients. More recent nutritional studies (Gupta & Verma, 2021) have emphasized the significance of indigenous diets in promoting metabolic health and longevity. The traditional Meitei cuisine showcased during Cheiraoba thus offers a model for merging cultural heritage with nutritional well-being. Another crucial element of Cheiraoba is the practice of expressing gratitude and setting intentions for the New Year. Emmons and McCullough (2003) demonstrate that gratitude practices enhance emotional well-being, reduce stress, and promote overall happiness. More recent findings by Davidson & Lyubomirsky (2021) reinforce that collective gratitude practices, such as those observed in traditional festivals, further enhance social bonds and contribute to community harmony. The communal prayers and feasting during Cheiraoba exemplify these principles, fostering an atmosphere of gratitude, positivity, and social connection. The literature suggests that cultural festivals like Cheiraoba play a vital role in preserving traditions while also contributing to holistic well-being. By integrating physical, mental, and spiritual elements, the festival offers insights into how traditional customs can inform modern health and wellness practices. The review of existing studies underscores the relevance of Cheiraoba's rituals in promoting individual and communal well-being, reinforcing the importance of cultural heritage in contemporary society.

Aims of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to examine the spiritual practices embedded within the Cheiraoba festival and their impact on holistic well-being. By analysing the festival's rituals, this research aims to understand how traditional customs contribute to physical health, mental clarity, and emotional stability. Many cultural festivals are often perceived as mere social gatherings, yet they carry profound spiritual and psychological significance. Cheiraoba, in particular, integrates symbolic acts such as purification ceremonies, hill climbing, ancestral worship, and communal feasting, all of which foster a sense of renewal, gratitude, and interconnectedness. Through this exploration, the study seeks to highlight the deeper role that cultural traditions play in promoting well-being beyond their celebratory aspects. In a time when rising stress levels, social isolation, and modern lifestyle diseases are becoming increasingly prevalent, this study aspires to demonstrate how traditional cultural practices can be integrated into contemporary wellness frameworks. By

documenting and analysing Cheiraoba's rituals, the research aims to present a replicable and inclusive model of holistic well-being that transcends cultural boundaries. Furthermore, it seeks to offer insights into how indigenous wisdom can inform modern approaches to health and happiness, reinforcing the relevance of cultural heritage in fostering personal and collective wellness.

Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design, integrating ethnographic fieldwork, in-depth interviews, and document analysis to examine the spiritual and well-being dimensions of Cheiraoba. Fieldwork is conducted in Imphal and nearby villages in Manipur during the festival, allowing for direct engagement with the rituals, traditions, and communal participation. Observations focus on the lived experiences of participants, capturing the cultural expressions and symbolic meanings embedded in the festivities. Semi-structured interviews are conducted with Meitei community members, including elders, spiritual leaders, and festival attendees. These interviews aim to elicit insights into the personal and collective significance of Cheiraoba's rituals, exploring themes of spirituality, cultural identity, and well-being. By engaging with diverse perspectives, the study seeks to understand how festival practices influence individual and communal experiences of happiness and spiritual fulfillment. Document analysis complements the primary data collection by examining historical texts, religious scriptures, and academic literature. This approach provides a historical and cultural context for Cheiraoba, tracing its evolution and assessing its continued relevance in contemporary society. By analysing these sources, the study situates the festival within broader cultural and religious traditions, enhancing the understanding of its enduring significance. To ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, data triangulation is employed, cross-verifying information obtained from participant observation, interviews, and document analysis. Thematic analysis is used to identify recurring patterns and interpretations, shedding light on the festival's role in fostering well-being and spiritual enrichment. Through this methodological approach, the study offers a comprehensive perspective on Cheiraoba's cultural significance and its potential contributions to holistic health and wellness in modern contexts.

Analysis and Results

The festival of Cheiraoba embodies deep spiritual and cultural significance for the Meitei community, reflected in its elaborate rituals and customs. The analysis of these practices reveals profound connections between purification, renewal, communal harmony, and spiritual elevation. A fundamental aspect of Cheiraoba is the process of purification and renewal, which begins with thorough cleansing of homes and personal belongings. This ritualistic cleaning is not merely physical but symbolizes the removal of negative energies and past burdens, creating a purified environment for the New Year. Households meticulously wash clothing, mosquito nets, blankets, and utensils, reinforcing a sense of renewal. This act of cleansing fosters mental clarity and emotional balance, reinforcing the idea that a clean space contributes to a healthy mind and spirit. By engaging in this tradition, individuals prepare themselves spiritually and psychologically for the coming year, setting a positive and refreshed tone for new beginnings.

The festival officially commences with the first offering ritual, where families present uncooked food items such as rice, vegetables, and fruits to the deities Sanamahi and Leimarel Sidabi. These offerings seek divine blessings for protection, prosperity, and well-being. Ancestors are also honoured, emphasizing the Meitei belief in ancestral guidance and the continuity of blessings across generations. The food, imbued with divine energy, is then used to prepare traditional dishes, reinforcing the spiritual connection between nourishment and well-being. The symbolism behind these offerings highlights the integral role of food in sustaining both physical and spiritual life, aligning with the Meitei worldview that well-being extends beyond the material realm. The preparation of the feast involves a meticulous and symbolic process. Following divine blessings, an odd number of dishes typically three, five, seven, or nine are prepared using locally sourced ingredients. The involvement of men in cooking, while women assist in preparatory tasks, represents a unique aspect of gender roles in Meitei tradition, where culinary duties are shared as a collective spiritual responsibility. The dishes incorporate a variety of mushrooms, plants, and herbs, including Uyen (similar to shiitake mushrooms), Uchi-na (a black, slime-covered mushroom), and Kanglayen (a lichen variety). Additionally, herbs such as awa phadigom, maroi napakpi, and mayang-ton enhance both flavour and medicinal properties, highlighting the Meitei emphasis on the holistic benefits of food. Indigenous flowers and rare seasonal fruits like Heiri and Heiyai further enrich the offerings, reinforcing the deep connection between nature and spirituality.

A significant culinary element of the festival is Lai-tharoi, a river snail commonly used in Manipuri cuisine. Lai Tharoi Thongba, a dish made from these snails, is a traditional delicacy enjoyed during Cheiraoba, symbolizing prosperity and the harmonious relationship between humans and nature. Additionally, the Usin-Sinba ritual is performed, where families release the Meitei Ngamu (*Channa orientalis*), a freshwater fish, into water bodies as a symbolic wish for longevity and well-being. If the fish is unavailable, the ritual is performed with Thoudu-nung, specially designated stone pebbles thrown into ponds. This ritual underscores the Meitei philosophy of interconnectedness between living beings, reinforcing themes of harmony and

balance in life. Once the feast is prepared, a second offering ritual takes place at the household entrance. A dedicated area cleansed and adorned with mud, flowers, and leaves, serves as the sacred site for presenting the dishes. The eldest son of the family leads this ritual, offering the prepared food to Kumsana Kumliklai, Lamsenba Tusenba, and Lammaba Tumaba, deities associated with the land and the cycles of prosperity. The food is carefully arranged around a mound of steamed rice, accompanied by token currency, flowers, incense, and candles. A ritual prayer is recited, invoking blessings for health, prosperity, and protection in the New Year. This act of offering reinforces the Meitei belief in reciprocity between the divine and human realms, where blessings are sought in exchange for devotion and gratitude.

Following the rituals, the prepared food is exchanged with relatives and neighbours in a practice known as Mathel Laanba. This exchange fosters social bonds and strengthens communal relationships, emphasizing the importance of generosity and collective well-being. The act of sharing extends beyond material sustenance; it represents an expression of goodwill and mutual support that sustains the community's spiritual and emotional fabric. The feast itself, featuring nutrient-rich dishes such as Chak-hao kheer and Eromba, serves as a conduit for reinforcing cultural identity and nutritional well-being. Expressing gratitude during the meal is believed to generate positive energy, attracting good fortune throughout the year. A deeply held belief among the Meitei people is that the experiences and emotions of Cheiraoba set the tone for the rest of the year. The saying, "anything that happens on this day will happen for the rest of the year," underscores the significance of maintaining a joyful and harmonious disposition during the festival. Families strive to cultivate happiness, health, and positivity, ensuring that these attributes carry forward into the coming months.

The concluding ritual of Cheiraoba is Cheirao-Ching Kaba, or hillock climbing. Following the feast, family members ascend a designated hillock, a practice deeply embedded in Meitei tradition. This climb serves as both a physical and symbolic journey, representing an individual's aspiration to overcome life's challenges and reach new heights. In the Imphal region, notable hillocks such as Chin-nga at Singjamei and Cheirao Ching at Chingmeirong are specifically designated for this ritual, while villages across Manipur have their own locally identified hillocks. Participants gather at these sites to pay homage to the hill deity, engaging in prayers and brief Thabal Chongba dances, uniting the community in a celebratory spirit. During this event, roads leading to the hillocks are transformed into vibrant marketplaces lined with toy shops, food stalls, and local vendors offering festive items. The climb, typically undertaken in the afternoon and concluding before sunset, creates a lively atmosphere filled with anticipation and joy. More than just a physical activity, hillock climbing embodies resilience, determination, and spiritual elevation. The act of ascending signifies the pursuit of personal growth and enlightenment, while the communal participation fosters a shared sense of achievement and unity.

To sum up, Cheiraoba's rituals collectively highlight the intricate ways in which tradition, spirituality, and well-being are interwoven in Meitei culture. The emphasis on purification, divine offerings, communal feasting, and symbolic ascension underscores a holistic approach to health encompassing physical vitality, emotional fulfillment, and spiritual enlightenment. By examining these practices, this study provides valuable insights into how traditional festivals contribute to holistic wellness, reinforcing cultural identity while fostering a sense of renewal and interconnectedness in the modern world.

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the profound cultural and spiritual significance of Cheiraoba, illustrating its role as a holistic practice that integrates well-being, community cohesion, and spiritual renewal. The festival embodies the interconnectedness of physical, mental, and spiritual health, offering valuable insights into the ways traditional customs can serve as sustainable wellness practices in contemporary society. A central theme that emerges from this study is the concept of renewal and purification, as reflected in the preparatory cleaning rituals observed before Cheiraoba. This practice aligns with the broader anthropological perspective that rituals serve to mark transitions and reinforce communal values (Turner, 1969). The act of cleansing physical spaces mirrors the psychological process of renewal, fostering mental clarity and emotional stability. This finding supports Koenig et al. (2012), who suggest that spiritual and ritualistic practices contribute to mental well-being by reducing stress and promoting inner peace. The offering rituals performed during Cheiraoba further reinforce the spiritual and emotional dimensions of well-being. The practice of presenting food to deities and ancestors signifies a deeply rooted belief in reciprocal relationships between the human and spiritual realms. This resonates with Steadman et al. (1996), who assert that ancestral worship fosters emotional security and strengthens intergenerational bonds. By incorporating these practices, Meitei traditions reinforce continuity and social cohesion, which Johnson et al. (2020) identify as essential for emotional resilience and personal fulfillment. The communal sharing of food through Mathel Laanba extends this sense of connectedness, highlighting how cultural festivals promote social well-being and collective harmony (Smith and Peterson, 2021).

A particularly unique aspect of Cheiraoba is the tradition of Cheirao-Ching Kaba, or hill climbing. This ritual serves as both a symbolic and practical exercise, encapsulating the Meitei worldview of perseverance and spiritual ascension. As Patel and Srinivasan (2022) observe, cultural traditions that incorporate movement provide sustainable, community-driven methods of promoting physical fitness. Warburton et al. (2006) further emphasize that regular physical activity enhances cardiovascular health, reduces stress, and improves overall well-being. By integrating physical exertion with spiritual practice, Cheiraoba offers a holistic model that balances physical vitality with psychological resilience. The study highlights the nutritional significance of the traditional dishes prepared during Cheiraoba. The inclusion of indigenous ingredients such as black rice, medicinal herbs, and river snails aligns with research by Kuhnlein et al. (2009) and Gupta and Verma (2021), who emphasize the health benefits of traditional diets rich in antioxidants, fiber, and essential nutrients. These findings illustrate how the festival preserves ancestral dietary wisdom while promoting contemporary nutritional well-being. The connection between food and spiritual practice underscores the Meitei belief that nourishment extends beyond the body to encompass the mind and soul. Another critical dimension of the festival is the practice of gratitude and intention-setting for the New Year. Emmons and McCullough (2003) assert that gratitude practices enhance emotional well-being and promote psychological resilience. More recently, Davidson and Lyubomirsky (2021) suggest that collective expressions of gratitude, as seen in traditional festivals, strengthen community ties and contribute to long-term happiness. Cheiraoba's emphasis on beginning the year with positive emotions and harmonious relationships aligns with these perspectives, demonstrating how traditional wisdom can inform contemporary wellness models.

The analysis of Cheiraoba's rituals provides a compelling case for the enduring relevance of indigenous traditions in promoting holistic well-being. By integrating spiritual, physical, and social dimensions, the festival offers a replicable model for sustainable wellness practices. This study contributes to the broader discourse on cultural heritage and health, demonstrating how traditional festivals serve as vital mechanisms for preserving identity, fostering communal harmony, and enhancing overall well-being. As modern lifestyles increasingly prioritize efficiency over tradition, the insights drawn from Cheiraoba emphasize the importance of cultural continuity in maintaining balanced and fulfilling lives. Future research could further explore how similar indigenous festivals across different cultures contribute to well-being, providing comparative perspectives that deepen our understanding of the intersection between tradition and health. Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches incorporating psychology, public health, and anthropology could further validate the therapeutic potential of traditional practices. By bridging cultural heritage with contemporary wellness frameworks, societies can cultivate holistic models that honour the past while addressing the needs of the present and future.

Conclusion

The festival of Cheiraoba exemplifies the enduring significance of traditional rituals in shaping cultural identity, social cohesion, and holistic well-being. Its customs ranging from ritual cleansing and divine offerings to communal feasting and symbolic hill climbing illustrate the interconnectedness of physical, mental, and spiritual health. These practices not only serve symbolic purposes but also promote psychological resilience, emotional stability, and social harmony. Ritual purification fosters mental clarity, while food offerings reinforce intergenerational continuity and reciprocity. The physical act of hill climbing embodies resilience and self-improvement, aligning with contemporary insights on the benefits of movement and traditional nutrition. Beyond its religious and cultural significance, Cheiraoba offers a replicable model for sustainable wellness, demonstrating how indigenous traditions can inform modern well-being frameworks. Future interdisciplinary research can further explore the therapeutic benefits of such rituals across cultures, ensuring their adaptation and preservation in evolving societies while fostering holistic health for future generations.

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