



Engelei

## Part 14

# Lai Harauba Celebration



Lai and Lairembi (male & female diety) symbolic representation with brass masks. There is no English equivalent of the word 'Lai'. The nearest is deity.

I have so far mustered in the previous chapters, a spartan testament of a bit of myself, and a study of Imphal and its people, during my growing up in Imphal. They were gleeful days of my youth, which have worked their way into my present memory.

Writing an essay, a bit about myself and some of my experiences, is not as simple as it looks. It is quite challenging. I am not weaving about my life and I am not penning all my experiences. Besides, I don't want the book too bulky as it might become as dull as ditchwater. Sometimes, I feel as if I was dismissing some portions of myself into the shadowy world. Still life ticks on.

Now, back to Imphal in those yonder days. It is just to give the reader a glimpse of that era when the Imphal town unlike the present urban concrete jungle, was an idyllic and bucolic small town with thatched-roofed and mud-walled dwelling houses known as *Yumjao* with its surroundings - *ingkhols* that were integrated into the town.

For aeons, the sleepy Imphal town remained unaffected by new events, progresses or new ideas. It remained nestled quietly in a truly picturesque valley of Manipur. Imphalites lived together in peace, accepting differences and listening to each other with respect and appreciation until April 27 1891 when the British hoisted the Union Jack at Kangla, after their decisive victory at the battle of Khongjom.

The British administration did nothing to educate the Manipuris or improve the economy of Manipur. There had been some half-hearted efforts by a few earlier political Agents, such as the first Political Agent Capt Gordon and later, Maj Gen Nathal in 1872, to establish an English school.

All their efforts were nipped in the bud as the ruling king of Manipur, who had no desire to educate himself and his subjects. It was only in 1885 when the Political Agent Johnstone succeeded in establishing a Johnstone Middle School after he bribed Majors Thangal and Sougaijam to flummox Chanrdakirti Maharaj.

While Chandrakirti was a boy, he was awarded ₹ 50 every month by the British Administration to be educated in English. Instead, his carers and courtiers organised a Manipuri man to teach Manipuri and Bengali.

During the British occupation, there were no job creations, or establishment of factories of any sort. It was because of the principle of 'non interference' in the internal matters of the state, and Paramountcy.

The non interference policy of British in India, was adopted in order that the princes would willingly serve as allies while the British kept away from their domestic affairs. In practice such intervention was reduced to an absolute minimum and would only be contemplated in cases of gross misgovernment.

The principle of British Paramountcy required that British supremacy had to be accepted over all the native rulers in India. The essence of the system to begin with, was that the East India Company during the time of Lord Harding, undertook to protect a state from external attack in return for its foreign relations and for the responsibility of tax collection.

As a ramification of the introduction of the systems in Manipur, able-bodied Meitei men of military age, were released from the king's obligatory and traditional services of lallupkaba. This caused an upheaval for them in the Imphal town. They were unemployed and had a lot of free and boring time. There were no jobs for them.

In order to engage their leisure time, and to break the monotony, they began to indulge in a variety of sports, gambling and other social events like Durga Puja and Lai Haraouba, which they celebrated with verve and gratification, and with quick pitch up and party. That how Meiteis became very fond of joyful celebrations of festivals and merrymaking.

To an outsider they looked like lazy husbands while their wives were industrious. Indeed, someone once compared Meitei men as drones and their wives as working bees.

This bit of dislocation in history give me the opportunity to write about the festivals of *Lai Harauba* (Pleasing of Deities) that I referred to in Part 10.

Laiharauba is a great Meitei culture, indigenous in nature. First, as an opening, I will sum up the thoughts that I had about Lai Haraouba celebration when I was a boy studying in a Middle School. It could be

described in a very short sentence. It amounted to little more than the square root of 'get lost'. It was an annual affair for our Khoisnam Leikai Lairembi.

At about this time of my young life, reinforced by its sense of unreality, and believing that it was all humbug of traipsing in a metaphysical jungle, I kept myself away from the celebrations. Unreality is a state of things that do not exist. It is a feeling that, one is out of touch with things.

For me, Lai Harauba was a customary belief system that started during the period before the organised religions came to Manipur. It was really a tradition or a celebration of an ignorant belief system that had not been affected by the advent of modern science. By modern, I am referring to the last quarter of the 20th century when many informations on many subjects were easily available.

Meiteis were people among all the indigenous peoples of the world that had their own mythology of their origin, as Lai Harauba was for Meiteis. There are five thousand indigenous communities in the world. I use the word indigenous for people who maintain their culture and traditions that is associated with the first inhabitants like the Meiteis in Manipur.

My intuitions apart, from the scientific facts I have accumulated over the years, it is definite that Meiteis are the autochthonous in Manipur (cf. The origin of Meiteis in Manipur *only*. New & Revised Edition, 2022).

Late in my life, when I was researching in organised religions with their belief in a creator God, I had the pleasure of studying the event of the concept of Meitei Lai Harauba. It repeats Meitei landscape.

My understanding of Lai Harauba encapsulates the premise that it is an ancient Meitei culture and tradition. They were rooted in their pre-modern beliefs which our indigenous ancestors entertained when they tried to interpret their biophysical environment. It was like ancient

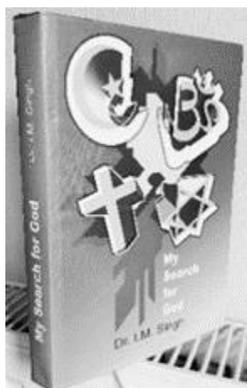
Hindus who believed the Sun as a living Sun god. Many Hindus still pray to the Sun god in the morning offering water to him, while having a bath in a river in the morning (*praptsnanam, Suryanamaskar*).

By culture I mean certain shared beliefs and values, while tradition is this culture that has been passed down the generations. Literature has been using the word culture since the term was introduced by an English anthropologist, B Taylor in 1871.

In Meitei culture, the word “lai” is an ambiguous one. It has no equivalent in English. It is not a monotheistic God or a polytheistic god. It is an indigenous god or our long-dead ancestors. It practises polygamy as in the celebration of Lai Harauba when the male Lai seeks a new wife.

In contrast, Gods of modern smart book religions are single, replacing the old concept of polythism as in Hinduism. Religion connotes the existence of a God as a creator, a male person (now disputed by feminists and transgender people) who hand made human beings in his own image (as if anyone saw him do it).

God had always been assumed to be a male because of the male-oriented society. And the writers of religious books were all men. Further more, in Islam, God is formless. Neither he or she (cf. Author’s book *My Search for God*, 2003).



Author’s books: My Search for God.



Release of my book, My search for God in 2003 at India International, Delhi.  
(L-R) Margaret, author, MK Kaw, Education Secy, Govt of India &  
G Subramaniam, Solicitor General of Supreme Court, New Delhi.

Religion and culture may overlap as in the case of Meitei Lai Harauba and Sanamahism. Lai Harauba proscribes the creation of Meiteis as in other religions of the world. The most important belief they shared was the mythological creation of Meiteis as narrated in Lai Haraoba.

Every community in the world, however primitive it may be, has a myth about its creation. A myth is a traditional story in which main characters are non-humans, such as demigods, deities and other supernatural figures like Atiya Kuru Sidaba for Meitei communities.

Our hinduism is full of myths, as is in Christianity, such as Jesus walking on water, changing water to red wine and curing lepers, or the Raising of Lazarus from the dead. The Old Testament or the Hebrew Bible is all myths, such as the story of Elohim – the Hebrew generic word for God, who created Heaven and Earth in six days and then rested on the seventh. That is why Sunday is holiday in Christian countries and in the erstwhile British Empire. This is the biblical mythology of the origin of mankind.

After studying Lai Harauba, a celebration of Shamanism, I have struck a more meaningful chord with it, especially after its resurgence in Imphal like mushrooms in spring. It The proliferation of the vocation of maibis (priestesses) and many maibi schools that turn out maibis is self-evident.

While searching for a clue as to why this has been happening, I had an epiphany. Without regard for peripheral details, the de novo emergence of Lai Harauba at a time when most Meiteis are secular, is because Meiteis are fond of rituals that entails merrymaking. Nothing to do with piety, the reverence for god, ang god.

It is partly due to the rise of Sanamahism and also because Lai Harauba is a Meitei tradition that has been in existence since the beginning of Meitei time, half-believing and half-disbelieving. All said, it must be granted that Meiteis were not the only people that practised Shamanism, which was spread around the globe, more so in Siberia in North Asia.

I have now ceased to vituperate against the Lai Harauba celebration, which I accept as a rich ancient culture of Meiteis. It was a zeigeist of that ancient period when Meiteis were lacking in modern scientific knowledge.

Among the indigenous socio-cultural rituals of Meiteis, *Lai Harauba* is the most important event. It embodies the entire pre-literate Meitei culture. Its ritual texts are very complicated and are beyond the comprehension of Joe public. You have got to take it with a pinch of salt.

There are no written texts. They are passed on by word of mouth among the professional practitioners known as *maibas* (male priests), *maibis* (female priests) and *Penakhongbas* (male *pena* players). *Pena* is an ancient Manipuri musical instrument, a bit like a violin in its simplest

form. The celebration was always followed by some sports and games like *Mukna sanaba* and *Thang Jagoi*, especially in the villages.

Lai Harauba is now a ritualistic pastime, rather than a deep demonstration of old Meitei faith. We humans are stubbornly attached to rituals, far more than to our beliefs. In years gone by, during the time of Meitei conversion to Hinduism, the Hindu missionaries realised that asking the Meiteis to abandon their popular Lai Harauba ritual, was not an effective way to convert them to Hinduism.

So, those proselytisers took the easier path: 'co-opt – instead of condemn'. Meiteis were allowed to keep some part of their old religion of *Sanamahism*, while changing them to the new religion of Hinduism. As a result, Hindu Meiteis have been taking part in Lai Harauba as a sort of cultural event. Nothing spiritual.

The interminable daily rituals of prayers, hymns, dances, and oracles during the festival, are unintelligible to them. Nor do they arouse any divine piety in their hearts. Still, Lai Harauba has now become an important ancient festival for Meiteis, an embodiment of primordial Meitei culture relating to their ancient concept of the cosmos. A mixture of religion and culture.



My son Neil and

Pratibha dancing at Lai Harauba.

granddaughter

Lai Harauba has been celebrated from the beginning of Meitei history. The festival starts in the beginning of the Meitei month of summer or April/May. It lasts about ten days.

Only recently, I had another inspiration though rather late in life. I have come to realise that it is a quintessential encyclopaedia of Meitei culture, with their hypotheses of the construction of the human body and evolution of human beings, and their perception of the structure of the cosmos.

The jamboree of Lai Harauba has increased in the last few years, as mentioned earlier. It was initially motivated as a politico-religious tool by several Meitei militant revivalists who wanted to revert Hinduism to the indigenous faith of *Sanamahism*. They regard Hinduism as a foreign religion. It is a way of putting it off. Christianity that started in Jerusalem in the Roman province of Judea, is now practised worldwide. It is not a foreign religion in its context.

Lt Col John Shakespear, the Political Agent of Manipur (1905-1914), translated Lai Harauba literally as 'Pleasing the gods.' It was short for *Umang lai Harauba* (Pleasing the woodland gods).



More recent costumes of Maibis and penakhongba.  
(Photo credit: E-Pao).

These lais live in the woods, known as *laipham*. They are male and female at each *laipham* and they are often symbolised by two brass face masks. They are housed in a *laishang* (hut of the lai). The *laishangs* used

to be thatched huts. Now, many are accommodated in small brick buildings, such as our Khoisnam lairembi at Uripok, Imphal.

The centrepiece of Lai Harouba is to invoke the male and female lais to come up from water (*Lai ikouba Khayamlon*) and to entertain them (Harouba) with various rituals, to bring good fortune to the communities to which the lais belong. At the end of the ritual celebration, they are sent back to heaven (*Nongarol*) by means of a boat (*Hijing Hirao*).

There are three main forms of Lai Harauba that differ in certain aspects of the rituals that were customary to some of the Meitei *Salais* (clans): (1) *Kanglei Harouba* with Pakhangba as the chief deity (Ningthouja Clan); (2) *Moirang Lai Harauba* with Thangjing as the main lai (Moirang Clan); and the *Chakpa loi Harauba* (autochthones).

The latter is unique in that they continued to celebrate it in the ancient Meitei dialect with their sing-song accent, as I saw them during the WWII, while residing at Senjam-Chirang village.

A fascinating cultural aspect of Lai Harauba is the *maibi Jagoi* (maibi dance) that are classical Manipuri folk dance especially the *khutleiba*, wrist movements.



Penakhongba in old costumes. Old days' Lai Harauba dance.  
(Photo credit. E-Pao)

There are various classical Manipuri dances but, some dances are restricted to Maibis only. These dances have patterns, such as moving in a circle, in curves (*lairen laithek*) representing the Lairen deity or Python Pakhangba). The pena player plays to the tune of the Maibi Jagoi. He also chants equally unintelligible hymns.

Two aspects of Lai Harauba that had bugged me during my youth, can now be explained from my observation and inference. The first one is Maibi's role as medium and oracle. This feature is very remarkable and quite a convincing performance of the possession of the maibi by the living lai.



Maibi goes in a trance with the hand bell in her right hand.  
They utter many words that do not compute.

The maibi's oracles seem to relate to some individuals and/or the whole community. The spotlight is called *laimang phamba* (sitting in front of the lai).

In this act, the maibi goes into a state of trance (as all shamans do elsewhere, such as among the Alaskan and Siberian natives), with her head covered with a thin headdress and one hand ringing a hand bell (*sharik khingba*) to the tune of a *pena*. She shakes violently and rambles after she gets blended with the lai (possessed).

After a while her heebie-jeebies calm down, sometimes helped physically by the Pena-player. She then, sits down in a state of trance,

and begins the oracle, which may last about half an hour. The words and phrases she uses in the oracle are in beautiful classical Meitei literature, delivered in abstruseness.

The core of these practices is 'altered states of consciousness (trance) during which the shaman is able to perceive and interact with the spirit world'. It is possible because of human neurology and physiology. Many shamans worldwide, were in the habit of using certain native psychoactive plants to enable them to enter the state of altered consciousness.

The oracles are directed to individuals in the village who went to ask for a blessing or for the protection of the whole community. It must be assumed that the Maibi has some prior information about these individuals or the welfare or a calamity of the community or the village and how it could be mitigated.

The words she utters are mostly garbled and ambiguous. Sometimes she will utter a particular admonition that could apply to many in that community, showing the lai's displeasure. You must make your own interpretations.

If the cap fits, then you wear it. The lai speaks in the first person. Sometimes, the lai would condescend to mend matters and order him/her in a stentorian tone – *Katchouhai*, 'to bring certain presents as offerings to her or him as offerings. This is to show that the Lai is 'real' and actively concerned to help the person.

The maibis can go into a self-induced singular state of hypnosis, which is called 'trance', in which she can move and speak, but she is not conscious in the normal way. The practice seems to occur among many long-distance lorry drivers, who during a part of the journey, drive in a trance. It is known as 'highway hypnosis' or 'white line fever'.

As not everybody can be hypnotised, everybody cannot become a maibi.

Those who are eligible, must undergo specific training under a senior maibi. It is a bit like a performing hypnotist on a stage. Before he begins, he would pick a handful of people from the audience and test if they are receptive to hypnosis. He would discard those who are not receptive. Once I volunteered to be hypnotised, but I couldn't be induced however hard the hypnotist tried.

The training of a maibi is like the conditioning of girls who enter a cloistered Roman Catholic Convent, to become a nun. For the nunnery, they have an initiation period of three years. At the end of which, those who have the right disposition would be selected for serious training that involves hard discipline.

At the end of their training, they are primed to get married to Jesus Christ after taking a final vow of (1) chastity, (2) celibacy and (3) obedience (to Christ and the Church). Even then, some of them would eventually get disillusioned and leave the nunnery. We are familiar with the French writer Balzac's droll stories of nuns from the Paris Convents.

For the passing out parade, they get dressed as brides and married to Jesus Christ. They receive a ring to wear on the right-hand ring finger. In most European countries a wedding ring is worn on the right ring finger. Then they become "Sisters" or Nuns.

The psyche of a married maibi can also be so conditioned that she believes she is married to a lai as well as her husband if she has one. A concept of polyandry. The married maibi sleeps on the outer side of the bed that is normally the place for her husband. On a particular night, she sleeps alone, when the lai visits her and she can feel the lai entering her. A dream world. An idealised view of life.

The other matter that has been troubling me is *the Naga (Tangkhul) dress* that is worn by a couple during Lai Harauba (cf. Author's book, *The Origins of Meiteis* (2009, p50). It has forever, been falsely credited with

a seemingly limitless imagination for attributing Meitei origin from the Tangkhul Nagas and thus a symbolic representation of the Naga dress. A swallow does not make as summer. We cannot rely on it. Though we lived cheek by jowl with each other, we were never very close to each other.

The evidence is simply based on a flimsy account of **Lt Col William McCulloch**, the Political Agent of Manipur (1845-1867), who wrote in his ethnography: *An Account of the Valley of Munnipore and the Hill Tribes*, published in Calcutta in 1859. McCulloch however, did not say that the Meiteis originated from the Nagas. He simply mentioned as '**the ritual clothing of a former time**'. Meaning it could be an old Meitei costume.

I cannot imagine how more civilised Meiteis would have borrowed Tangkhul dress, whose men were conspicuous by the absence of any attire apart from a ring for their manhood, whenever they came down to our house and elsewhere in Imphal, for digging trenches during their post-harvest season.

The Naga dresses were most probably the ancient outfit of Meiteis, which the Tangkhuls adopted, long before they changed to more modern costumes. Anatomically also, the Tangkhul physiognomy shows a separate ethnicity.

Another classical association with lai Harauba is the use of *Langthrei leaves* and *Langthrei* buds as a holy plant. I often wondered why. Langthrei, a balsam like *Tulsi* plant, was sacred to ancient Meiteis! My educated guess is that what Tulsi is to modern Meiteis, Langthrei was to ancient Meiteis for its invaluable medicinal properties.

Langthrei with its botanical name of *Blumea balsanifera*, is a perennial herb about 1-3 metres tall that has been used as medicine for a variety of illnesses in South-East Asia and in Manipur. It is rich in a various chemical medicinal compound. That explains the sacredness of this herb

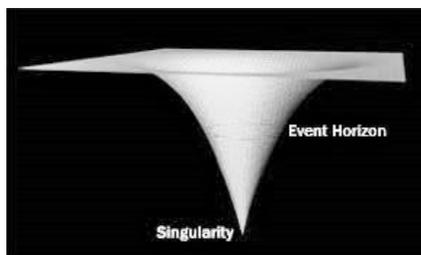
for its protection and preservation.



Langthrei (*Blumea balsanifera*).

The best part of Lai Harauba for me, is the closing day. On this last day, the maibis do a lot of singing and dancing in which and the local folks take part in singing antiphonally.

That is, two groups sing alternately, to represent the gathering of the universe into a 'Singularity'. I find this Meiteis concept great as the modern physics regard a point of infinite density and gravity, from which the Universe began to expand incrementally, and is still expanding (Stephen Hawking).



Singularity/Cosmos. (Photo credit: astronomy.swim.edu.au).

This is also the day of the male Lai to seek a new wife (*lai nupithiba*). Again, the maibi goes into a trance. After undergoing a few rituals, she would wander off in the arena, with her head covered with a see-

through veil and holding a polo stick, to find the right girl on behalf of the Lai. She chooses a girl ,apparently, at random. But usually, it is the prettiest one of the whole lots taking part in the Harauba. She would hook the girl on her shoulder with the two-ended end of the polo stick.



Maibi seeking a new wife for the Lai.

I remember such wife-seeking performance at the Keisampat Leikai Lai Harauba festival after the War. I went there as I knew a schoolgirl called Manmohini from that Leikai, who was participating in the festival. Because she was handsome rather than pretty, I thought she was a likely choice.

Indeed, she was plucked from the crowd, and I was chuffed. Years later, I asked her about her feelings on that day. She said she was surprised and elated. Nothing else. She had quite a lot of presents afterwards.

There is evidence from *Cheitharol Kumbaba* that, before Hinduisation, when Meiteis used to drink *yu* (alcohol) and ate *sha* (meat), *yu* was offered as libation as in *Leirai yukhangba*, and *sha* as in *sharen katpa*.

The offerings are now all fruits (*heirukkatpa*), as the lais have also become vegetarian since the Meitei conversion to Hinduism. They have also become teetotallers as Meiteis have been on the wagon since.

I am now quite positive that Lai Harauba celebration as a tradition will continue forever. Meiteis are not a disappearing race. Nor is Meiteilon.

