



Ritual Performance of Amaibi as an act of Cultural Expression: A Study of Lai Haraoba

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Abstract

Magical flight and medium possession are two crucial experiences in the realm of Amaibis (Shamanism). While the former speaks of imagined and visual experiences of events occurring in other realms, the latter speaks of embodied experiences of giving up one's identity and mental control to an otherworldly entity. During rituals of Lai tongba (shamanic possession) in Umang Lai Haraoba¹, spirits take on human form so they can manifest and interact with the human world. Performing arts is seen as indispensable part of worship among the Meitei community. Amaibis are engaged in the interactional creation of what can be called a performance reality which simultaneously is and is not a state outside time. In any ethnic community's ceremonial space, dances, music, and other performing arts are important means of expressing cultural tradition. In a similar vein, Manipur's Umang lai haraoba has had immense significance and relevance throughout history. The Amaibis use traditional songs and dances to describe and act out the many creation tales as part of oral ceremonies at the Umang Lai Haraoba. In addition to expressing our culture, it emphasizes the significance of dance and music. The space of Laipung (temple) is used as a part of education and a cultural expression through the performance by the amaibis and is handed over from generation to generation till date. The paper attempts to explore these experiences as evidenced in oral performances and specific ritual shamanic dance practiced by the Amaibis. Ethnographically, it focuses on the performance and analysis of body transformation during the enactment of rituals in which Amaibis lose connection to and reconnect with various facets of their identities. It also delves into a performance of how the cosmos was created and how Amaibis express this ritual in the Laibung (temple space) by turning it into a site/centre for art expressions.

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Introduction

Temple dance culture is a potent kind of cultural expression that is intricately linked to religious rituals and plays a crucial role in maintaining and passing down cultural heritage. These dances, which have their roots in ancient customs, developed from temple rites to become intricate theatrical performances. Mythology, spirituality, and cultural traditions are all included into the rituals that are performed throughout religious ceremonies, festivals, and life events. Additionally, throughout human history, dance has been a basic and universal means of communication. It holds a significant position in the nation's cultural framework since it reflects its wide range of traditions and beliefs. Dance has a significant influence on the traditions of the community. The Meitei regard the performing arts as an essential component of worship. The key dancer expresses the creation of the universe, the creation of the human body, and other forms of ritual dance during the *Lai haraoba* rites. The *Laibung* (temple) where *Lai Haraoba* resides is where this dance style is observed. Dances, songs and various performing arts play a prominent role in expressing cultural tradition in the ceremonial space of any ethnic communities. Similarly, the *Umang Lai Haraoba* has had such significance and importance ever since time immemorial in Manipur.



Fig 1: Lai Haraoba

The space for temple dance *Laipung* is a place for cultural expression handed over from generation to generation till dated. Various ethical knowledge such as *Yumballon* (Household traditional), *Punshiol* (Traditions of Life), *Yumsharol* (House Building knowledge) etc. are taught through performances performed by the *Amaibis* in the *Laibou* Sequences. As part of oral rituals during the Umang Lai haraoba, the *Amaibis* speak of and enact the various episodes of creation through folk songs and dances. It expresses the culture of our people and also highlights the importance of music and dance in it.

As dances and songs are acts of cultural expression for any community across the world, various unique attributes of social dynamics of the Meitei community are expressed through folk dances and songs during Lai Haraoba. The various forms of dances shown or presented in Laipung (temple) signify various aspects of human life according to Meitei's culture, ranging from belief to tradition, from the creation of the human body to the agricultural practices, all are depicted in these dances. The beauty of Love and its essence along with the various forms of love are expressed vividly through these dances; at times it becomes a place where love can blossom. It acts as a place for the partners/lovers to take part in the dances. It is not only the act of cultural expression; it is also the act through which we are able to express our unique identity and culture at the center stage of the world. From not just playing an important act of cultural expression it has gone beyond the idea of cultural expression to representing our state, the community and our nation as a whole.

Such dances, songs and Lai Haraoba in general which are of high cultural, ethical value are preserved, transmitted forward from generations to generation and its traditions are carried forth by the *Amaibas*, *Amaibis* and *Pena Khongbas*. From the performer's and performance's basis, the *Amaibis* takes up a greater role of preserving this culture. Their contribution towards this culture has had a significant role in preserving it. All the above mention rituals is seen in the entire structure of Umang Lai Haraoba.

Umang Lai Haraoba

Umang Lai-Haraoba is a communal religious rite made up of social behavior events that are thought to have their origins in ancient times. In their community, it is believed to bring

prosperity, long life, health, and wealth. It is believed that the ritual ceremony is based on the gods' creations from mythical times. The god's actions during the mythological era are identical to those carried out in the modern world. It tells the story of how life began and how the land formed from a vast, formless water-based universe. The universe and humans were created by the Supreme God, and many lesser deities coexist peacefully with humans. When the living world was separated from the divine, humans experienced chronic sickness, death, and problems. For their defaults, they apologized to the divine creatures that protected and guided them and started engaging in mandatory activities toward them. The Umang Lai-Haraoba rituals depict a multitude of cultural practices that create a complicated web of relationships between people, deities, evil spirits, and ancestors in order to promote harmony in society. Although the actual origin of the Lai Haraoba is difficult to determine, various folktales were used to explain the practice.

The worship of Umanglai started under the reign of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba, during his rule, the Umanglais, the native gods who were initially ancestors, were revered religiously. Numerous interpretations have been offered on the significance of the Umanglai. Umanglai are "forest deities," according to T.C. Hodson, whereas Col.J. Shakespeare called them "forest gods." Louis Lightfoot adds that "U" stands for "tree," "Lai" for "spirit," and "Umang" for "forest". Ancient scripts only used the word "lai"; today, they are called "forest spirits" maybe because the woodland where they once resided has been maintained. However, according to Saroj Nalini Parratt, "the Umanglai" were never thought to be restricted to certain forested locations, even though the term's true etymology suggests that they are a "forest deity." Indeed, certain Meitei deities have been referred to as Umanglais due to the custom of keeping a grove, forest area, or location adorned with trees and flora as the residence of a specific deity outside the people's residential complex. It would be inappropriate, however, to lower Tengbanba Mapu, the master of the cosmos, to the status of a forest spirit. According to Anoi Lol, human perspective and behavior were distorted in an attempt to outsmart one another, which caused God to gradually distance himself from humanity. This same divine process of disappearing from human perception and experience is emphasized by the term Umang Lai (or U-rambadagi + Mangkhiba Lai), which refers to deities at the

village level.

I agree that Umanglai cannot be the forest deity. The Meeteis celebrate the Lai Haraoba for the benefit of Umanglai and firmly trust in their heavenly abilities. It is similar to the notion that the performance ought to take place in a sacred, celestial, and hallowed space where heavenly gods and goddesses would participate. During the celebration of the festival, bad spirits are purified through a variety of rituals and procedures. Additionally, addressing with Guru R.K. Achoubisa Singh, God is represented by Lai, trees by U, vision or sight by Uba, dream by Mang, and disappear, hazy, or misty by Mangba. Therefore, it can be U+Mang+Lai or Umang+Lai; nevertheless, we did not locate these Umanglais temples amid the dense forest that is Umang in this instance. There are about 364 umanglais in Meitei community. If we enquire about these 364 Umanglais, each is fostered by particular communities. Only one community with a particular genealogy is permitted to take part in the Lai Haraoba ceremony.

Umang Lais is divided into four categories namely

- Primeval umanglai
- Ancestral umanglai
- Sagei Nandabi umanglai
- Exotic umanglai.

Interpretations of Lai Haraoba

The etymology of Lai Haraoba is interpreted differently by different academics. E. Nilakanta Singh defines "Lai Haraoba" as "Merrymaking of gods and goddesses." Saroj Nalini Parratt, on the other hand, prefers over Shakespear's rendition of "The pleasing of the God." R.K. Achoubisana's "The Gods Rejoice" There is varying opinions regarding the etymological meaning of Lai Haraoba, however there is only one opinion of how the term came to be from the Lai Hoi Laoba phrase in the Meeteis creation myth. Lai Haraoba is the primary and most important ceremonial observance for the Meeteis. During the pre- agricultural season (Feb to June) and in certain communities, the pre-harvest winter months, the whole community takes part. The ceremonial functionaries of the Yoirel/Amaiba, Amaibi(shaman), and Pena (minstrel), who represent the fire, wind, and water that are the foundational elements of creation mediate the entire ritual ceremonies. Furthermore, the origins of this incredibly ancient art form can be traced back to the universe's creation. It shows the creation theory of the world, human reproduction, and the pursuit of food and sustenance by humans.

The Lai Haraoba of Manipur is the reenactment of the universe's creation by the gods and goddesses at the sacred site of Koubru Hill's Harao thel. There is a strong conviction that the divine beings are going to bless society and the persons being honored with blessings in all facets of life in the future. The definition and genesis of Lai Haraoba, according to the Meetei belief system, may be traced back to the time when the physical universe and all of its beings were created out of "space" by the supreme creator, "Kuru".

On an auspicious day, God Koubru once invited gods and goddesses to a lavish feast in the leveled area on the southern slope of the Koubru peak. Later that same evening, gods and goddesses celebrated "Hoi Laoba," which marked the

beginning of the Lai Haraoba rite². At Koubru Hills, Lai Haraoba was initially established. The Koubru Hill celebrations were considered incomplete as all of the gods and goddesses of the Meetei belief system, including Goddess Panthoibi and God Nongpok Ningthou, had never accomplished it.³ However, Selloi Langmai Ching commemorates the whole Lai Hoi Laoba event, where Ashiba created the earth and all living creatures. In this instance, Ashiba acquired the appearance of Nongpok and settled with Panthoibi. After the celebration was over, the entire "Lai Hoi Laoba" performance was renamed "Lai Haraoba."

The most genuine and significant text that aids in our search for some of the Hraoaba's original moments is the Panthoibi Khongullon. According to these stories, the ritual has been performed and handed down through the generations as part of specific activities to honor the gods and express appreciation for bestowing upon them longevity, healthy, and prosperous life. Lai Haraoba is the most Meetei of all the traditional festivals since it maintains its dance and oral literary poetry traditions in their most original forms. It mirrors the entire culture of Manipuri people. Ritual, song, dance, prayer, and music are all part of this intricate system. Although the Meitei have a written script that dates back at least a millennium, the Lai haraoba is an oral tradition. This suggests that its fundamental content was sacred tradition transmitted orally from Maibi to Maibi, and that it predates the oldest writing in Manipur.

There are three variants of Lai Haraoba that have developed as a result of geographical variations. They are the Chakpa Haraoba, Kanglei Haraoba and Moirang Haraoba. The Kakching Haraoba, a fourth variety, exemplifies the traits of both Kanglei and Chakpa. though there are differences and variations in the various forms of Lai Haraoba, it is important for us to keep in mind that the core philosophy of these dances are all the same i.e. they are based on the same traditions and rituals.

Entire ritual dance of lai Haraoba play important role in the process of creation. All the rituals were replete with symbolism, ritualistic dance and music meant for the undivided devotion and resurrection of the entire cosmos. Worship of the ancestors involves having faith that their spirits have an impact on modern life. Overall, Amaibi (shamanic) trance and its potential benefits remain and intriguing multifaceted area of prerogative study, offering insights into the intersections of consciousness and spirituality. Amaibi is the key dancer and plays a crucial role in the ritual rites. In our society, Amaibis are regarded as an important figure. She always performs her duty in a religious manner; her service in the function is essentially needed. There is no substitute for her in the function involving ritualistic treatment. The Lai Haraoba text was rarely preserved in recorded form, because most of them were destroyed during war or religious persecution. The majority of the secondary data used in the records was taken from fragments of the surviving puyas in the form of manuscripts. Amaiba, Amaibi, and Pena Khongba/Asheiba were the three primary functionaries who were charged with passing down the oral legacy of Lai Haraoba from generation to generation over all of these years.

Amaibis



Fig 2: Amaibis performing Jagoi Ashangbi

In our society, Amaibis are regarded as an important figure. She always performs her duty in a religious manner; her service in the function is essentially needed. There is no substitute for her in the function involving ritualistic treatment. Amaibis are the Dancing Angels of Lai Haraoba. Amaibi is considered to be the one chosen for the purposed of maintaining a link between the Deity and Devotees. It is presumed that she has enough potential to render relief from the woes and misery of human beings. Amaibi, therefore, takes an important role at the time when sickness and misfortune take place in the family. It is considered that she was created for the benefits of human beings. Amaibi is a trance practitioner - a shaman who deliberately transforms their state of consciousness to communicate with the invisible world. During rituals of shamanic possession, spirits take on personification so they can manifest and interact with the human world. Worship of the ancestors involves having faith that their spirits have an impact on modern life. Entire ritual dance play important role in the process of creation. All the rituals were replete with symbolism, ritualistic dance and music meant for the undivided devotion and resurrection of the entire cosmos.

The process through which one has to be an Amaibi is of immense importance subject to study. To become an Amaibi cannot be the case by choice. It is simply the execution of a predetermined event that transcends human endeavor. It is a characteristic that is ingrained in a mortal creature that is born with the intention of becoming an Amaibi. Her behavior and attitude started to exhibit a symptom that was really unusual for everyone. Ironically, when she sees a fish resembling cat-fish, she becomes disgusted. Among other things, behavioral alterations like humming songs in fanciful tunes, body language that suggests dance, and occasional murmuring are some of the factors that contribute to the phenomena. Unable to bear the pressured heaped on her, living always in a swollen mood, she set herself to the task of finding a Amaibi capable to initiate her in the field she is determined to pursue. Having gone through the grilled process of the system, she is considered fit enough to deliver the message of the deity to the devotees. With her ceremonial apparel only white in color she presented herself in all the occasions involving her

dispensation. Such is the distinctive element that enriches the cultural life of Meities. There are three types of Amaibi such as Sanglen, Langmai(Nongma) and Phura with their own distinctive practice while at work. However the present practice is step beyond that. Any Amaibi well conversant with the method of three types is considered to be qualified to perform the rites and rituals. The same can be said in the rites and rituals of Lai Haraoba. The process of birth and death is observed to be enacted in Lai Haraoba. It is demonstrated in the main portion, known as laipou, which is performed daily throughout the Lai Haraoba performance time. It is based on the primordial idea of the human body's gradual construction. It also depicts a variety of activities, such as giving birth, building a house, sowing seeds, harvesting, and weaving of cloth, etc. Amaibis are crucial to the execution of all this rites and ceremonies; in addition to performing the rites, they are the most animated actors, guiding the celebration in a powerful and compelling way. They capture the spectators' whole attention, and their ecstasy reaches a climax in Lai tongba (trance). Coming to temple space (Laipung), various dance forms are performed by the Amaibis. These dances offer us the vivid representation and knowledge with regards to various traditions and culture. The Amaibis perform a variety of scenes from myths and legends through dancing, singing, and performing. She leads the entire ceremonial processions, such as Ikouba, Laipou and Lamthokpa. These three segments are considered to be the beginning, middle and end of the whole ritual performance. For example the Ihai Jagoi which is performed before the Ikouba session by the amaibis gives us the idea of creation while in Laipou session the deities are invoke to take part in the haraoba. After this, the process of Hakchang Saba begins, which refers to the making of the Human body, through various gestures and movement of the dance, it shows the creation of the human body and many more. In relation to this, the Amaibis are known to take care of the masses during time of sickness, problem and even child birth. The knowledge and science of human body are even depicted in this dance, which shows us how much developed the meetei community were with regards to various knowledge.

Lai Ikouba: Bridging the two world



Fig 3: Lai ikouba: Ikum Itaba

Before the procession of lai ikouba, the laiyou dance is performed by the amaibi. It is performed in front of the two presiding deities at the shrine. After the performance, the amaibi takes up the procession of Lai Ikouba at the nearest water body. Before invoking the deities from the water, she presents the Ihai Jagoi (dance of creation). Using two earthen pots that are representative of the presiding deities, the Ihai Jagoi is performed to venerate and receive the blessing of the deities that guard the four directions (Thangjing, Marjing, Wangbren, Koubru). It is also known as Chaphu Haiba Jagoi/Chukpharol Jagoi which is enacted in a way that requires minimum foot work but is accentuated with graceful hand gestures. After the completion of the dance, the amaibi takes out the leiyom and Hiri lang from the pitchers. Preparing herself and taking seat for the Lai Ikouba session (the act of invoking the deities) she will enter in a trance state by singing Leihourol (Creation Song). Here, the Meitei religious system placed a strong emphasis on the connection between life and water. The universe is the mother, life is water, life originates from water, and life takes place in the womb of the mother. After successfully invoking the deities, she will conduct the rites and rituals required for Lai Ikouba and on her way back to the shrine; she will perform the Jagoi Okpa (Welcome Dance) Thrice, Twice before reaching the shrine, and the third at the Laipung of the

shrine itself.

Before entering the Laipung, the rite of Mei Okpa (greeting the fire) takes place. This is called as the Khoiju lamok and Sana Lamok. Then, the essences of deities so invoked are placed within the images of the deities. This rite is called Thawai Happa. The philosophy of invoking the soul of the deities from the water is deeply related with the ideology of Yin and Yang. The idea and concept where two opposite forces come into play in maintaining the balance of the universe and the entirety of existence. It is seen in the Ikouba segment of Lai Haraoba where the sky is depicted as the physical representation of the Sky Father immortal while the Earth is the physical representation of the ever caring and nurturing Mother. Both of them are the most important of Deities and forces as they are the ones that have created and nurtured every animate and inanimate object, they are opposite in nature to one another, but exist as the parents of the entire existence.

With the exception of the first and last days, the daily routines in the Lai Haraoba are often the same. The core lying concept of every Lai haraoba is the same, despite the fact that some of them differ depending on the region and the Laipou section is also different in some places.

Lai -Pou/Lai- bou (The Backbone of Lai Haraoba)



Fig 4: Hakchang shaba

In the afternoon session of each lai haraoba, a series of the rituals are performed by the Amaiba, Amaibi and Pena khongba with the community participation. The paper will study a part of Kanglei Haraoba laibou sequence. Prior to the lei langba (flower presentation), the Amaibi performed the Laibou La jagoi (laibou dance) in front of the shrine. The new flowers are offered in place of the ones that were previously offered to the gods. Additionally, flowers that have previously been offered are given to the villagers who attended the celebration as spectators. The flowers are presented according to the rules. Following this, the Amaiba and the participating villagers, both men and women, assembled and shouted Lai- Hoi-Laoba. After placing the Laibou la also known as Laibou laa thaba by placing the laibou la (plantain leaf signifying the virtue of creation) on the middle of the ceremonial space symbolizing the supreme creator controlling over the three main elements i.e. water, fire, and air. The ritual of placing the Laibou la is done by the Amaibi and she along with the other Amaibi's danced the Laiching jagoi (Bringing forth the deities at the Ceremonial Space). This dance features significant hand and body movements that illustrate the earth's cosmic creation step-by-step. Following the former placement, the area between the laiboula and shrine is revered. Followed by Hoi Laoba/hoirou haya (Invitation of Lai to Create and Procreate), the laibou dance of the Lai Haraoba is initiated by singing Anoirol (Art of Body movement) by the Pena Khongba and in the meantime the Amaibi will demonstrate and performed the Hakchang Saba (formation of human body), Yumsarol (construction of the House), respectively one after another. Here the most important dance is performed. After its end, the amaibi removes the Kuruk/Khurak Lei which was put in between the fingers and used it during the ritual dances.

The ceremonial rituals that come after these dances are

1. Panthoibi Cycle (the maibi will sung the panthoibi lyrics and perform the dance of panthoibi)
2. Paosa Jagoi (Maibi enacting the love of Panthoibi and Nongpok ningthou through the dance movement)
3. Pamyalon (dances of cultivation)
4. Phisarol (dances of weaving cloths)
5. LongKhonba (dance of gathering souls and driving away spirits)
6. Phibu Ahabi (dances with the Canopy)
7. Chongkhong Yetpa (dances around the canopy)
8. Chongkhong Litpa (dances beneath the canopy)
9. Yumjao Paphal/ Lairen Mathek (procession following the steps of serpent)
10. Wakon Laoba (the last lyrics)
11. Lai Naosumba (lullaby)

In the performances mentioned above, the Paphal is commonly utilized to symbolize the serpent's coiling. The enigma of the never-ending cycle of human birth and death is revealed. The movements beneath the white cloth cover in the four chong post symbolize the divine mother and father's sexual union. A serpent is the universal representation of sexually passionate acts. Thus, the paphal symbolized the never ending process of creation. The wakol laoba, followed by the lai naosumba which is sung at the conclusion of the Laibou session, marks the end of the daylong festival. The deities are symbolically put to sleep until the following early dawn, when the entire ceremony is repeated.

During Lai Haraoba, these are the daily rituals that are carried out. However, on the final day, after Lai Lam Thokpa (the outing of the deities) takes place on an auspicious day, which is the third, fifth, seventh, and so on days of the festival. On the day of Lai Lam Thokpa, kanglei thokpa can also be performed; however, it is not required that the two be done on the same day. On the day of Lai Lam Thokpa, four men carry the deities in a decorated palanquin as they make their way to the chosen location in a procession. After doing the same daily ceremonies there, they returned to the shrine and performed all of the final rites.

One unique aspect of Kanglei Haraoba that is not performed in any other kind of haraoba is Kanglei thokpa/lai nupi thiba, which means

"searching for his beloved bride." Using a kangjei (polo stick), the ritual performance simulates the process of looking for a wife. It is the story of Khoriphaba, son of Lord Soraren (sky father), who descended to earth and discovered the gods celebrating Lai Haraoba, is also known as "Lai Nupi thiba." Khoriphaba was granted permission to attend the celebration if he brought his consort after careful consideration and inquiry. He played mukna and kangjei (polo and wrestling) with Loyarakpa (son of Lord Marjing) while hiding his face with a veil. Finally, he used the hook end of the stick to hook a female from the crowd, making her his consort. The Amaibi, who is thought to have been possessed by Khoriphaba's spirit during the ceremony, performs this part. Placing the Kangjei on her right shoulder, she mimicked the motion of looking for the consort's direction. On the fifth, seventh, ninth, eleventh, and so forth days, Kanglei Thokpa is performed.

On the final day of the celebration, the morning ceremonies are still followed, and the chosen husband and wife of the community or villagers (Selungba and his wife) conduct Phunggarel Jagoi in the afternoon after the Hoi is shouted. The daily Laibou dance ritual is carried out as usual, and after it is over, Thang jagoi (sword dance) is done in all four directions. This day, additional rituals are added. During this rite, fire keeps on burning symbolically to represent the expulsion of evil spirits. After the completion of the Thang Jagoi, LouTaba/Loutarol, a dance drama is performed. It described the encounters between Tangkhul Nurabi, Tangkhul who represented Nongpok Ningthou, and Nurabi, who represented Panthoibi. Both of them were dressed in Tangkhul Tribe costumes. They fought over a plot of land in this episode, and they eventually made up. Exchanges of love words and riddles containing sexual undertones are significant feature of lai Haraoba. The fact that Tangkhul is included here shows how the inhabitants of the hills and valleys had a nice and pure relationship before the introduction of other religions.

Following the tangkhul nurabi, an equal number of men and women hold a rope in a circle as part of the Ougri Hangel (gathering in the universe) rite. The purpose of the ougri lyric is to promote the prosperity and well-being of the people and land. Following Ougri are rituals associated with the birth of the universe, such as Huithi yenthi yeppa, sarit litpa, Khencho, and paosha. Following Hijin Hirao, Uyarol (a song about building boats) represented the building of boats to transport the ruling deities back to their celestial home. Everyone imitated the boats' rowing as the Amaibi sang the lyrics to Hijin Hirao. The Amaibi chanted Nongarol (songs for the ascent of the gods) as she entered the shrine and stretched out a piece of cloth that served as a white curtain. Following this, there is another series of rituals, including Saroi Khangba (appeasement of the spirits) and Lai Tethaba (dismantling of the gods). Some deities, according to the nongaba, have spirits that stay in the shrine rather than ascending to heaven.

The Lai haraoba tradition predates the earliest examples of archaic written Manipuri because it originated in pre-literary Meitei society. Furthermore, it has been discovered that the current corpus of texts only represents a portion of that oral tradition that existed before literacy. We also discover that, in spite of some notable variations, the four current varieties of Lai Haraoba share a fundamental structure.

The creation of the universe and the way humans settled, cultivated, built houses, started families, and maintained biological continuity are shown in the performing arts as part of the festival sequence. Lai Haraoba also includes our worldview premise, according to which the entire process is constructed by a complex system of relationships between ideas and pictures, content and form, and interdependence. Unfortunately, this celebration has resolutely resisted the materialistic invasion of modern man. These days, the celebration is planned and coordinated by local groups. By raising money through donations, subscriptions, and other means, the festival has seen the intrusion of contemporary politics. The festival's ceremony has changed as a result of each home and laikai(locality) taking the initiative to build their own shrine. The major events become somewhat marketed as the number of festivals rises. However, a few organizations and academics have recently emerged with the aim of defining the Lai Haraoba festival's actual aesthetic character.



Fig 5: Yumsharol



Fig 6: Phibul jagoi



Fig 7: NupaThougalloi (Male dancers/participants)



Fig 8: Thawai mi konba

Conclusion

Since the beginning of time, Manipur has observed Lai Haraoba as one of its most significant ritualistic festivals. Appeasing the ancestor deities by creating the universe and its being and then receiving their blessings is a revered practice. It stops the emergence of life following the universe's cosmic creation. The festival's daily rituals represent the merging of the mother earth and the father sky. In a significant way, various symbolic performances and objects depict the process of creation through sexual intercourse. Procreation energy, abundance, and a healthy community life might be considered the main internal motivations behind this Lai Haraoba event. All these various rites and rituals are performed by the three personalities namely Amaiba, Amaibi and Pena Khongba in the Laipung. However, in the ceremonial space, the performance of all the various rites and rituals are significantly done by the Amaibis. From oral recitations of the various hymns and chants to the performance and presentations of various ritual dances, ritual dances that are acts of cultural expressions and education. Amaibis play a significant and an important role in the Laipung. Through this performance, Amaibi acts as oral historians, ensuring that traditional knowledge is not lost but rather passed down through generations. In addition, they hold a crucial position in preserving the Meitei language, spiritual practices, and ethnic values. By continuing these ritual and performances, they created a bridge between the past and present by offering a living archive of the culture and tradition. Their roles are irreplaceable. Lai Haraoba, which is an act of cultural expression has represented our unique identity of our state, nation at the pedestal of world wouldn't be complete without them. As cultural heritage communicators, the Amaibis embody the spirit of perseverance, preserving a priceless history that shapes Manipur's cultural identity. The sacred key to understanding Manipuri culture and identity will always be Lai Haraoba.

Notes

1. The first written record of Umang Lai-Haraoba in the royal chronicle of Manipur is found during the reign of King Chourajit (Nongchup Wairang Pamheiba) (1803-13 A.D.) In Lm. (L) Ibungohal and N.Khelchandra, Cheitharol Kumbaba (The Royal Chronicle of Manipur) Imphal: Manipuri Sahitya Parishad, 2012, (reprinted) p. 194.
2. Nabindra Singh, Rajkumar, 2008, p.6
3. Lukhohi Singh, Wahengbam, 2008, p.4

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