



## **LAI HARA OBA: AN ART OF LIVING CULTURE**

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**“Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”**

*(Edward Burnett Taylor, 1871)*

Culture is the only one of its kind which is unique to Man as a social being. It reveals the nature of individual, group or community. As a result, arts, day today happenings, the modes of behaviour, morals, beliefs, customs and traditions, religious and other types of activities include the culture of human beings. It provides our behaviour pattern, way of living, our common dream, aspiration and work, merry and cultural expectations. It influences how people interact with each other. It also guides in our decision making, instilling values and behaviour. Culture can be viewed in different levels. But whatever the nature of culture is, it always affects the society as a whole. So, the term culture can be seen in the forms of behaviourist, functionalist, cognitive and symbolic.

Art is communication. It allows people from different cultures and different times to communicate with each other through arts culture. Art is often a vehicle for social change. It can give voice to the politically or socially disenfranchised. Every community, society at large has its own art traditions, in the form of folk art or classical art. They are the part and parcel of their life. Our own art traditions should be given first priority to easily know and

understand other art traditions. As a result, we need to have a clear knowledge of our own art traditions.

Arts culture is an important component in our society. It makes people conscious of the good and the beautiful culture of their community. The best way to learn about any culture is through arts. The arts are the universal language spoken and understood by everyone. They blur the boundaries between individuals from different cultural, economic and educational backgrounds.

The word **Culture** is derived from the Latin root **cultura** or **cultus** meaning **to inhabit, cultivate or honour**. In general, culture refers to human activity.

According to MacIver and Page, culture is the realms of style, of values, of emotional attachment and of intellectual adventures which are received from the group or the social heritage. It can be said that culture reflects the language we speak, the beliefs we hold, the values and virtues, the rituals and practice, the habits we follow, the customs and food habits, the way of acting, feeling and thinking. It includes diffusion which means borrowing the elements from other society or groups. Thus, culture is

1. learned
2. social
3. shared
4. transmissive
5. growing, continuous and integrated
6. dynamic and adaptive

So, culture varies from place to place and society to society but having a common platform in general.

Culture indicates the soul of human. In order to understand people's culture, we need to travel with the trends of our heritage. So, Lai Haraoba of the Meitei Community clearly signifies the different stages of life of the people from birth to death, the means and ways of living, its culture, belief, custom, tradition and social status of life. It mirrors the entire culture of the Manipuri people particularly the Meiteis. It also reveals the strength and

weakness, the beliefs and superstitions and perhaps also the charm and happiness of the Manipuri people. It reflects people at their intense, a higher degree.

Lai Haraoba is a seasonal ritual festival of the Meitei community of the Manipuri people with lots of rituals, dance and music. The celebrations are held once in a year and the number of days for its celebration depends on the decision of the local people. **Lai Haraoba literally means the merry-making of the gods and goddesses.** It is not merely a dance but a drama, a Natya performed against the background of songs, of haunting melodies, a series of dances in which the old and the young participate. Without Lai Haraoba, the Manipuri art and culture is like a flower without smell. **Lai Haraoba is a derivative from the origin Lai Hoi Laoba.** Explicitly, **Lai** stands for **deity**, **Hoi** stands for **the inner vibration** and **Laoba** means **a loud utterance**. So, the term means the utterance of inner vibration by the deities and also the utterance of inner vibration by human beings for showing their appreciation of the deities. Generally, both meanings are relevant with respect to Lai Haraoba.

Let us now analyse the different parts and sequence of the Lai Haraoba festival to clearly understand the arts culture of Manipuri society.

### 1. Ekouba

It is the first part of Lai Haraoba. **E** denotes **water** and **Kouba**, **to call out or extract**. So, it means to call out or extract the super soul from water, shown in fig No.1. Every ritual done here is in relation to the creation of universe. This extraction can be related to the concept that the first living organism originates from water.



Photo: Tomba Thangjam

Fig.No.1. Ekouba

## 2. Eheiphu

It is an earthen pot used in Ekouba. It signifies the universe. Two pots are used one denoting Lainingthou (Guru Sidaba), a male sex and the other Lairembi (Leimaren Sidabi), a female sex.

## 3. Khayom

It is prepared by using seven layers of banana leaves, some quantity of rice, egg, a piece of gold and silver (Fig.No.2). The egg indicates the supreme Lord, gold and silver pieces the male and female sexes. The rice denotes the different universes. The seven layers of the banana leaves represent the elements which sustain the universe or the seven days of a week leading to a month and a year signifying the rotation and the revolution of the earth.



**Photo: Shanker Khangembam**

**Fig.No.2: Eheiphu and Khayom carried by two men in Ekouba**

## 4. Laibou Sequence

This is one of the important parts of Lai Haraoba which clearly gives us the vivid picture of the growth and development of human body from the womb of the mother till it is born through elaborate hand and finger gestures of the Maibis (the female Devadasis), shown in Fig No 3. The different parts of creation of man are the hand, the fingers, the palms, the arms, the head, the neck, the eyes, the body, the thigh, the feet, the toes and remaining others using the hymns and hand movements. After making this earth, laibou sequence shows the creation of all beings. In this first episode of Laibou, there are 64 different hand gestures involving other parts of the body too.

The second episode indicates the growth and development from childhood to adulthood when he is able to build a house for living. There are also episodes of marriage, having a family and all those activities involved in building a society.



Photo: Deepak Oinam

Fig No.3: Laibou Sequence

## 5. Lai Lamthokpa

It is the outing of the deities. There is a day during Lai Haraoba festival when the deities go out from the shrine to other place carried in a palanquin (Fig.No.4). It signifies the time of enjoyment during different stages of human life.



Photo: N. Amarnath

Fig No.4: Lai Lamthokpa

## 6. Pamyamba or Cultivation

Food, cloth and shelter are the basic needs of every human being. This is the episode to show the earning and working to get the basic needs. So, the construction of house and cultivation of the land are the beginning of civilization according to the Lai Haraoba tradition. This idea holds true to every civilization around the world. The cultivation culture starts with the preparation of the ground, the sowing of cotton seeds upto the production of cloth. The clothes are weaved in loin loom which is a unique style of weaving in Manipur. The process of cultivation also includes a crude device to extract fire by striking two stones or other similar methods. Fire is needed for preparing a suitable ground or field for cultivation by burning the weeds and unwanted plants. So, agriculture becomes the main occupation of the people.

## 7. Long Khonba (a way of fishing)

It is the ritual of calling the souls of deities or human alive/death. The Supreme enjoys the mundane world in different disguises and in different moods and situations. While doing so, he sometimes forgets to return to his original form. In this episode, the Maibas (male priests) and Maibis (the Manipuri Devadasis) call back the souls in its own place. So, it represents the gathering of the souls using Long (Fig No.5). In human society, its meaning is to catch fishes by using an apparatus (Long) made from bamboo in the shape of a basket. This clearly shows the various means of livelihood or earning of the people of Manipur in the ancient times.



**Photo: David M Mayum**      **Fig No.5: Long Khonba in Laibou Sequence**

Manipuri culture is relevant not only to the majority Meitei community but also to the other communities, as this is a unique incredible place of unity in diversity since time immemorial. This is truly indicated in the Lai Haraoba festival too. There is a tale in the Lai

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Haraoba festival where Nongpok Ningthou comes in disguise of a Tangkhul youth (another community of Manipur) to see his lover Panthoibi who is also disguised as a Tangkhul Nurabi (Tangkhul woman), (Fig No.6). This shows the true bond of love, communication and mutual cooperation between the hills and valley communities of Manipur. There is also the cultural exchange among different communities.



**Photo: Binoy Konthoujam**

**Fig No.6: Tangkhul Youth and Tangkhul Nurabi**

The Lai Haraoba festival of Manipur represents what is finest and best of the ancient Manipuri culture. The whole of Lai Haraoba is a creative work through the vision of our progenitors who transformed the pastimes of the Supreme Godhead and kept it alive as the principle of their mood of worship in practice. It is the enactment of the whole process of creation in practice in the form of a composite performing art, filling the whole concept with musical melodies and enchanting dance, and transmitting it to all the organs of social life. It has the dimension of an epic which our early forefathers thoughtfully summarized for the future generations in a simple yet philosophical way in order to streamline our civilization as a living art and culture. It is a tradition and heritage left by our forefathers since the creation of this land and we are still following it. So, the Lai Haraoba festival of spring-summer represents the very soul of the arts culture of the fine moments of life of the people of Manipur, particularly the Meitei community.

Society really needs to focus on the world of arts culture as a vital source for not only solutions, but also ways of finding solutions. Arts culture influences society by changing opinions, instilling values and translating experiences across space and time. It has the power to change society. Every art culture has a story to tell in the society. The story is the lives and times of the people in the moment in which such culture was created. People are attempting to justify and explain the values that they put on what they are doing with their lives. Thus, Lai Haraoba festival of Manipur is the store house of art and culture of the Manipuri people,

particularly the Meiteis. Here the art and culture of different sections of society where they belong to are clearly shown.

### **References**

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